

Matthew 6:1-18

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[0 : 00] The highest compliment that my grandfather would pay someone wasn't that they were a good guy or decent person but that they were honest.

! That was the highest compliment he could pay. Not just that they told the truth but that they were the kind of person where there was no pretense in the way they could pay. In the way they went about their life. When I brought my friends around or when my parents had friends around interestingly I would sometimes ask his opinion.

Honest, that was good. But the opposite of an honest person however was a hypocrite. There were only two types of people in my grandfather's world. Honest ones and hypocrites.

It's a very simple way of viewing life. This evening it seems that Jesus says that the same is true in the church. So he's called his followers to this life of greater righteousness than that that was embodied by the scribes and the Pharisees.

That is, he was calling them to a whole hearted, whole life, undivided righteousness. A heart that was singly focused and not divided.

[1 : 22] And Jesus now moves to explain practically what this should look like. Particularly in terms of personal piety. Particularly in terms of spiritual disciplines as we often call them.

He draws attention to three of those. Giving to the poor, verse 2. Prayer, verse 5. And fasting, verse 16. And in each case, he warns them against doing these things like hypocrites.

Verse 2. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues. Verse 5. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.

16. When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. You probably know the word hypocrite comes from the world of theater. Where the hypocrites was the one who wore a mask.

In ancient drama, they didn't wear makeup. So the hypocrite was the one who wore a mask. And also, the role in the drama was to answer to the chorus.

[2 : 30] The chorus provided commentary on the play. And so there was a back and forth between this character who was hidden behind a mask and who was really kind of engaging with the chorus. The chorus's opinion was the thing that controlled them.

So this character was both hidden behind a mask and they did all that they did in response to other people. The chorus in this case. And Jesus says, probably with an eye firmly on the Pharisees, that this is not the way that it should be in his kingdom.

Now we know it is possible to put on a mask in life and to appear to be someone that you aren't. There's a real sense in which we do this a lot in different situations at a fairly low level in lots of cases.

And of course, the whole thing has been ramped up by our good friend social media, hasn't it?

Social media whispers to us encouragement to do this all the time.

Your life can be falling apart, but the picture on Instagram? Perfect. Makes it look like you're doing great. And of course, the reason that we do this is because we have our eyes fixed on the chorus.

[3 : 39] We have our eyes fixed on social opinion. The opinion of the group that is shaping the way we live our lives. And it's not just on social media, is it?

It's in all kinds of different areas. The idea, the fear of man, as it has become known, determines how we live. We care deeply about the opinions of others to the degree that it affects the way that we present ourselves.

And Jesus is warning about the dangers of doing this when it comes to the Christian life. Verse 1, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

For then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. It may have been that as hearers heard Jesus teaching about how the law demanded this righteousness that is not external

and superficial, but goes to the center of who we are.

It goes to our hearts. It's possible that they heard this and they thought, oh great, an inward righteousness. So a righteousness that's hidden and secret. Oh, I can do that.

[4 : 41] I can do secret righteousness. But that's not, of course, what Jesus means. True righteousness is seen in lived out behavior. How do you know that somebody is following the Lord Jesus Christ consistently?

Well, the way that they live their life tells that story. And so it is with giving to the poor, prayer and fasting. Jesus says, don't do these activities in a way that is putting on a front or playing to the crowd or seeking to present yourself as more righteous than you are because that's the way a hypocrite goes.

Now, he doesn't say, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people. You notice that. There isn't a problem with other people seeing you do these things. It'd be hard not to have other people see or hear you pray at the church prayer meeting, for example.

He goes after the motive. It's not the doing of it. It's the why of it. It's why you're doing the thing you're doing. And he's saying, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

It is possible to do the right things for the wrong reasons. That's what he's saying. And it is this that we need to unpick. The two things to note at this point.

[6 : 00] Firstly, Jesus presumes that these disciplines are present in the lives of his people. So in each case, it isn't a case of if you give, pray and fast, but when.

Do you notice that? Jesus assumes that the sort of sacrifice and self-denial, the sort of self-mastery that these disciplines require will be present in our lives. So how are we doing?

Is any of our giving, any of our serving, directed towards helping people who can't make ends meet? Do they even factor in our thinking? Do we dedicate time to prayer?

In order to dedicate time to prayer, we have to not dedicate time to other things. So are we giving up certain things in order that we can devote ourselves to prayer?

Fasting. When did you last go without something? Something that you were free to enjoy. God gives us all good things to enjoy, so there's nothing wrong with enjoying the things that he gives us.

[7 : 04] But do we go without those things willingly in order to teach ourselves and teach our appetites that they are not in control of us? Or perhaps as a way of expressing our dependence on the Lord for some breakthrough in prayer.

Giving, prayer, fasting. Jesus does not assume that these instincts to do these things will come naturally, but he does expect that they will be present in the lives of his disciples. How are we doing?

The second thing to say is that requiring this kind of discipleship is not legalism. Insisting that certain behaviors are an integral part of the Christian life is not the same as saying that these things are required for salvation.

Nor is it adding unnecessary burdens to someone's discipleship. That's the definition of legalism.

Adding unnecessary burdens to someone's discipleship. Rather, calling people to set aside money for the poor, to give time in the day to prayer, or to go without food or drink, or other things, for that matter, in order to seek the Lord's face, is just a part of ordinary Christian living.

That's the first part of the challenge this evening. Some of us will need to start or restart embracing these disciplines in the rhythm of our lives. But we must do it for the right reason.

[8 : 29] With the right motives. That's Jesus' concern in this section. And he describes the behavior of the religious hypocrite so that we might assess ourselves.

It's as if he's holding up the mirror. He's saying, have a look at yourself in light of this religious hypocrite and see where things need to be fixed. But not only does he do that, he exposes the problem, he also shows us the remedy.

So, two points this evening. The first is the religious hypocrite and the praise of the crowd. The religious hypocrite and the praise of the crowd. So, first of all, with regards to giving, verse 2.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. It's often taken that regular tithing or giving to gospel ministry is what's in view here, but that's not the case.

The issue is a more specific kind of giving to the poor that was more common in a culture that didn't have a welfare state. And it wasn't just a custom, but the scriptures demanded it. So, for example,

Deuteronomy 15 talks about this.

[9 : 44] And in the New Testament, James chapter 1, he says this, verse 27, religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

I don't think he has in mind there that you just go around to their house and visit them. You're there to provide care and to help if you're at all able to do that. So, it is likely that people are giving to the poor in this way, but there are some who adopt a particular approach to this.

A man plans to give his gift, but he gets someone to announce it with a blast of the trumpet. It's important that people see this act of charity, and he doesn't want it to go unnoticed.

So, you see what happens in that situation? He wants to give a gift. He wants people to notice that he's giving a gift and think very highly of them as a result.

In that case, he's not really giving the gift to those who need it, or even giving the gift to God, because that's what we do when we give a cup of water to someone in Jesus' name. Ultimately, we're giving to God.

[10 : 47] And ultimately, here, this man's giving to himself. What he's doing is using the poor person to benefit himself. This is everywhere in our culture.

If you don't believe me, look at the number of charitable foundations that exist that bear the name of the wealthy donor that sets them up. Philanthropy and charitable giving is great.

Those that do it, praise God for them, whatever they believe about the world. But so much of it in our day comes with name plaques, press conferences, names and brochures, and the amount people have given alongside, and lots of self-serving fanfare.

It's all just modern-day versions of the trumpeter out front. Oh, look. Look, sir, such and such has given this amount of money to the school. Isn't sir, such and such wonderful?

Now, I'm not sure that Christians are quite as crass when it comes to charitable giving, but you do see a version of the same thing when mercy ministries put their service of the poor in brochures and on social media.

[11 : 55] Why do other people need to know this if it isn't to reflect well on the person that's doing the work? Jesus says, verse 3, do it in secret. Do it in secret.

Forget about yourself. Forget about others. Do it for the needy person and for the Lord. Giving. Jesus turns down, secondly, to praying.

And he describes two mistaken approaches. First, verse 5, when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

What is the motivation? That people see them praying. There's no problem with praying out loud. There's no problem with praying out loud even in public, if that's something that would be appropriate in a particular context.

The problem is praying for show. Praying in order to be seen by others, in order to impress other people. That's the first problem. The second one, verse 7, is praying for attention.

[12 : 58] When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they'll be heard for their many words. Do not be like them. Piling up words in prayer as Gentiles, that is, those who do not know God, thinking that if they use certain words in a certain way, with a certain level of repetition, that they'll get God's attention.

That's what those who don't know God do. He's getting again at this lack of heart connection with God that the sermon is pushing for, the whole sermon is pushing for.

So don't do it for show, and don't do it because you think your particular eloquence or your performance is going to get God's attention. Now there's an obvious gap, isn't there, between the first century context and London today.

I doubt many people will be impressed if you go to Ealing Broadway and stand outside the tube with your arms aloft, heaping up high-sounding phrases to the Lord. But it is certainly possible that when you pray around others, you pray differently because of what those people will think of you.

And you use holy-sounding words. Because they're the ones that God prefers. Those are the ones that people in this prayer meeting will be impressed by, and no doubt God will be impressed by them as well.

[14 : 19] Now let me say, please don't let me put you off praying in the prayer meeting. It's wonderful when everybody gets involved, praying short prayers, praying long prayers, praying from

the heart.

That's great. There is all the difference in the world between genuinely calling on the Lord and performing for the praise of others. Jesus says, pray, but forget about yourself.

Forget about others. Do it in the private place, verse 6, and do it for the Lord. And 30, the final example, fasting, verse 16.

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others. So there's a crowd of really pious people.

They're very pious. They fast regularly and with tremendous self-discipline. How do we know that? It's written all over their gloomy faces. Oh, it's easy to let it be known how demanding it is.

[15:23] You look a bit pale today. Yes, I'm fasting. Just really pursuing the Lord. It's very easy to talk about how hard it is, how hard we're working, how hard we're going after the Lord, the things that we're doing to serve Him.

But Jesus says this is the demeanor of the religious performer, wanting others to see, wanting others to know, wanting others to be impressed. Jesus says, yes, fast.

This sort of discipline is a vital part of your discipleship, but no one should notice. Forget about others. Forget about yourself. Do it before the Lord. Now, in each case, the thing that causes the hypocrisy is the desire for the praise of the crowd.

And if you are part of a community of people where these things are valued, you know, like a church, the desire to have others reward your piety with praise is a powerful drug. To have people say, you're a very impressive Christian.

The world sees this kind of behavior and isn't impressed. There is a saying a guy that I used to work for used to say, he said, there's no hypocrite like a religious hypocrite.

[16:40] He's right. There is nothing attractive. There is nothing that says this person's life is flourishing about this kind of pretense. It is repellent, actually, to people outside the church.

And it pushes people out from within the church, actually, as well. I'm sorry to say I've met plenty of people who have walked away from the church and have become cynical about the Christian faith because they saw so much insincere religious pretense.

If that's not bad enough, here's the real madness of it all. The real madness hits us in the phrase Jesus repeats in each case. Do you notice? He says, truly, truly, I say to you, truly, he says that word as a way of emphasizing.

He's like, listen, I say to you, they have received their reward. You know that? You are so generous. You're a very, very godly man. You are such a faithful Christian sister. In the end, that's all it is. The fleeting well done is the extent of the reward.

[17:48] I have a friend who works at a Cambridge college. He's the bursar at a Cambridge college. And a few years ago, he invited me to an event where they were opening a new facility as part of the college.

And we were ushered around, those that were invited. It was a very fancy thing. And I got in because I knew him.

It was quite funny. But we were all ushered around with the donor who had paid for this new facility. And his name was over the door. It was a gym, actually, that they built. And his name was over the door.

And after a speech from the college master of probably no more than two minutes, there was a round of applause for this man. Maybe 20 people.

20 people don't make a lot of noise when they clap. That's his reward. That's it. A few nice words, two minutes, a name on a building, and a few people that he doesn't know clapping.

[18:52] He will have paid a fortune for that praise. And it's passed. The praise of the crowd is so fleeting.

No matter how well meant or sincere it is at the time when it's done, it's done. And that is Jesus' point. When it comes to our practice of the spiritual disciplines, he's saying it is absurd to practice the spiritual disciplines for the sake of others, motivated by the desire for their praise because it is such a scant reward.

When they say, well done, we have received our reward in full. Surely that is to sell ourselves too cheaply. There is, however, a better way.

A better way to give to the poor, to pray, and to fast. And that is with sincerity, with honesty. Not for the praise of others, but unto God with a wholehearted devotion. And the incentive that Jesus

provides throughout is that we have God as our Father.

We have God as our Father. So here's the second point. The honest disciple and the love of the Father. The honest disciple and the love of the Father. It is a lovely refrain full of reassurance.

[20 : 04] And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. Doesn't that stir your faith?

In these 18 verses, God is called Father no less than 10 times. It is the big point that Jesus wants to get across. When you have God as your Father, you don't need to seek out the flimsy and fleeting reward of the praise of others.

In fact, the trouble with the heart of the hypocrite is that he doesn't know God as his Heavenly Father. Sinclair Ferguson puts it well when he says this, He is insecure before God, and therefore seeks security in what his fellow men think about him.

He is unreal in his activities before men, because he has no real relationship with God. That's the heart of the issue, isn't it? He is unreal in his activities before men.

He's faking it. He's putting it on, because he has no real relationship with God. Now this is really important. None of us like hypocrisy when we see it in others.

[21 : 05] And it is particularly galling when we see it in the church. And we don't want to be associated with that label. But while we can identify with it, we don't know how to change. We identify with this tension that we feel about this whole issue, and yet we don't know how to change.

I came across an article recently, 20 Ways You're Being a Total Hypocrite. And the examples were all very familiar. So, quote, incensed about people using mobile phones in cars while doing it yourself.

Complaining about the government, but not voting. And so on and so on. But the last line of the article was very telling. It said this, quote, Now with all these in mind, go, do better, be better, and live better.

That's absolutely no help at all. No help at all. In fact, it is crushing and debilitating. We can't. We can't.

At least not for any length of time. We can't go and do and be or live better in our own strength. But the truth is that's all we're left with if we don't know God as our Father. And it's because people miss this fact about the fatherhood of God that they misunderstand how He operates.

[22 : 12] People who understand the Christian message is this. Stop being bad and go and be good. So many people around you in your life think that that's what Christianity is all about. Stop being bad and go and be good.

If that's how you perceive the Christian faith, if that's how you understand it, you have completely missed what it means to have God as your Father. When Jesus went to the cross, when He poured out His life for the sins of His people, His death accomplished something.

He didn't just make salvation possible. No, He redeemed a people. He purchased a people from their slavery to sin. And He purchased us into the family of God.

What that means is that now through faith in this Jesus, we can come to God 9, verse 9, as our Father in heaven. We have a relationship with the God of the ages.

And when we pray, we pray as members of His family. We can know His provision, verse 11, His pardon, verse 12, His protection, verse 13, because He is our gracious Heavenly Father.

[23 : 24] This is what liberates us to be honest disciples, to pursue virtue apart from the need to be praised by others for it.

This fatherhood of God is where we find the security that enables us to reject the sort of hypocrisy that comes from being enslaved to the opinion of others.

When you know God as your Father, the one who went to the lengths that He went to in order to save you, the one who sees in secret and knows the truth about your heart, you know that His reward is certain.

And as we'll see in a couple of weeks' time, it is a reward that can't be lost, verse 20. When you know that, we can have confidence that sincere, non-self-promoting spirituality will receive a reward that far outstrips the fleeting praise of men.

Hypocrites are seeking a reward, and they find security in the knowledge that others think highly of them. But that's all they get. The honest disciple seeks a different reward.

[24 : 38] That is the lasting pleasure of the Father. We all do these things imperfectly. We're all at different points along the way. We all stutter and stammer our way forward, but we're in the grip of a Father who loves us.

So we give to the poor because we love our Father who gave everything to rescue us out of spiritual poverty. We pray because we trust our Father's power and ability and His care for our needs.

And we fast because we long to submit our whole selves to our Father's will. He is our Father in heaven. You leave here this evening if you know Jesus Christ in the grip of a Father who loves you and will never let you go.

For my grandfather, there were two kinds of people. It seems actually there's only one kind of disciple. The one who knows God as his Father and who practices His righteousness for His glory and with His reward in mind.

That's the way of freedom. That's the way of joy. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Thank you.