

Week 12 – Mind Your Motives – Matthew 6:1-8; 16-18

Scripture Reading: James 4:1-10

Introduction

Ask someone who doesn't attend church why they don't and you will likely hear one of a number of common answers Church is boring, church lasts too long, Sunday is the only day I have to sleep in, all they really want is my money, I can worship God anywhere; I don't need to go to church...

But, perhaps the answer that you will hear most often, is that the people in the churches are nothing but hypocrites

And, if by calling Christians hypocrites, they mean that we often say one thing and do another then they are right

Hypocrisy is not exactly an unknown commodity within Christianity

As I closed out last week's sermon I mentioned that the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we find in Matthew 5 doesn't exactly make us feel good about ourselves when we rightly understand what it says

In that chapter, Jesus defines the character of one of his true followers and as we look at it and see our own hearts exposed we can't help but realize that none of us completely measures up –

We all fall short of the perfect standard spelled out in Matthew 5 even as we recognize and affirm that it is the standard that God requires of us

Still, we have to admit that the church is full of sinners who sin in all sorts of ways, including the sin of hypocrisy

But we also know that we have been forgiven and that, as true believers, we have something of the character of the kingdom present in our lives and that we are striving to practice the type of righteousness that Jesus has laid out

At least that should be true of each of us

However, as soon as we recognize what righteous living looks like, we are in danger of falling prey to the temptation to be seen as spiritual by openly practicing our acts of righteousness before other people

There are two things we really prefer not to do quietly – suffer and succeed

We really don't want to suffer in silence and we definitely don't want to succeed in silence

And as much as we'd like to protest, we know deep down that both suffering and success are more rewarding when others know about them

So, after several weeks of learning what perfect righteousness looks like, we are going to turn our attention to Jesus' warning against playing to the wrong audience

And how our desire to be known for our righteousness can lead us to do what we shouldn't and cause us to miss out on reward from God

We are going to be looking at Matthew 6:1-8 and then skipping over verses 9-15 and looking at verses 16-18

We will pick up on the skipped verses – which contain what we call the Lord's Prayer – next week

First, we will take a look at the warning that encompasses this entire passage – mind your motives

Then we will look at the three examples of spiritual activities that Jesus uses to illustrate how we can go astray, what we should do, and what we should expect relative to the path we choose

Lastly, we'll consider some important tempering truths regarding this teaching

So, join me in your Bible in Matthew 6 where we will begin by looking at verse 1 [**Matthew 6:1**] where Jesus says:

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.

I. The Warning – Mind Your Motives

New Testament Theologian D.A. Carson said it well when he said:

We human beings are a strange lot. We hear high moral injunctions and glimpse just a little the genuine beauty of perfect holiness, and then prostitute the vision by dreaming about the way others would hold us in high esteem if we were like that.

We are very quick to forget that what Jesus reveals in Matthew 5 is not another form of legalism, another way of performing righteousness outwardly

Rather, he was describing the internal, heart attitude that defines those who are worthy of the kingdom of heaven – or, to put it another way, the character of the kingdom

But instead of striving toward the standard Jesus revealed, we are prone to settle for the lesser goal of outward demonstrations of piety and rather than seeking to please our heavenly Father we settle for impressing other people

Generally speaking, in most aspects of life, we know image matters and, if we are savvy, we will work to cultivate a proper image

Image is such a big deal that a whole industry of image consultants and experts exists to do nothing more than help professional people and organizations develop and maintain their image

Image matters in everyday life as well

For example, when you meet someone who looks you in the eye and greets you with a firm handshake you assume they are confident, assured, and perhaps even trustworthy

And we make decisions about others based on how they dress, their grooming, their posture, their facial expressions, and all sorts of image criteria

That's why job placement counsellors help their clients polish their resumes and coach them as to how to dress and how to present themselves to prospective employers

In most areas of life, image matters

So it's no surprise that we can fall into the same mode of operation when it comes to our spiritual image leading us to fall into the subtle trap of faking it, of acting in certain ways so as to cultivate an image, and hoping no one catches on

But it's nothing more than play acting or spiritual mask wearing which is where the term "hypocrite" comes from

See, unlike today when actors wear often sophisticated makeup to transform them for a role, in ancient times the actors simply wore masks or held masks in front of their faces to illustrate the characters they were playing

And those actors were called "hypocrites" or "one who pretends to be other than he really is"

We are rightly cautioned against resorting to absolute statements such as "you *always*" or "you *never*" because those kinds of statements can lead us into trouble

Likewise, we need to be very careful when studying the Bible to not read a statement as an absolute when it isn't

Quite often what we see in the pages of Scripture is situational and not universal and we dare not confuse the two

However, what we read in Matthew 6:1 is absolute

Jesus very plainly states that motive matters and anyone who does a good deed in order to have people notice forfeit any reward they might otherwise have received from God – no exceptions

It is possible to serve the poor like Mother Theresa, to give to charity like Bill Gates, to preach like Billy Graham and still not receive any reward from God because all those things can be done for the applause of men and not of God

Motive matters and, I don't know about you, but it scares me to know that it's possible to have a life that is ostensibly devoted to God count for nothing in the end

The word Jesus uses that is translated into English as “reward” is a term used in commercial transactions that refers to wages earned or payment in full for services rendered

So Jesus is basically saying that if we act to receive man’s approval; that approval will represent payment in full according to the bargain we struck and since payment has already been made in full there is absolutely no chance of reward from God

At the end of the last chapter Jesus said “be perfect” and now he says but “be careful” whose approval you are seeking and don’t fall into the trap of performing outwardly for the applause of men because motive determines reward

Then, in verses 2-8 and 16-18, Jesus gives three examples of the kind of righteousness he is talking about and they happen to be the fundamental acts of Jewish piety – the giving of alms, prayer, and fasting

II. Three Examples

And he treats each of them according to the same formula of stating the external form of piety which he then denounces as he tells what the reward will be for acting in that way then he describes the contrasting practice of true piety and its results

So let’s consider each of the examples in turn according to that formula starting with giving in verses 2-4

A. When Giving

Jesus introduces the topic of giving in verse 2 [**Matthew 6:2**] –

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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

The importance of giving to the needy is well-attested in the Bible

Deuteronomy 15:11 says – *For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’*

Psalms 41:1 says – *Blessed is the one who considers the poor. In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him*

And **Proverbs 19:17** says – *Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.*

Clearly, taking care of the poor and needy is commanded and commended but in Jesus’ day the practice had turned into an opportunity for self-promotion

It’s unclear whether the trumpet Jesus mentions being sounded is a literal or metaphorical trumpet

Jesus could be referring to the practice of the temple trumpets calling the faithful to come and give to some particularly urgent need and the image of someone positioning themselves to be seen purposely hurrying to the temple

Or he could be describing the disgusting tendency of some philanthropist blowing his own horn and boasting as he gave

Either way, Jesus says they are merely actors who are pretending to care about taking care of the needy or pleasing God

They are hypocrites because their true desire is the praise of their fellow citizens

One very big problem with this type of hypocrisy is that the hypocrite has likely convinced himself that he is doing well and is unaware of what he’s doing

Although that isn’t always the case as we see with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 1 – they so coveted the praise of their fellow believers they planned their hypocrisy

And whether it’s intentional or unintentional some believers still give their gifts hypocritically today relishing the splash they make with their gifts and the recognition and praise they receive from those around them for their generosity

It should be hoped that they truly appreciate that applause because Jesus says that is all the reward they will receive

Then in verses 3-4 [**Matthew 6:3-4**] Jesus shows how his followers should give –

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus says we should give our gifts secretly – quietly and without fanfare

And he uses an almost absurd metaphor of our left hand not being aware of what our right hand is doing to describe just how private our giving ought to be

But what Jesus is also saying with this metaphor is that we mustn't even give in order to pat ourselves on the back

Think about it, if we refuse to even internally make a big deal our own personal acts of righteousness we are not going to concern ourselves with seeking the acclaim of others

And that brings up another aspect that we need to address

I once knew a woman who gave in amounts that were well beyond her ability to give and she actually put her family in a financial bind because of her excessive giving

And she complained that "it didn't work" because she believed that giving should result in God's even greater financial blessing so to her mind, when the money didn't come pouring in, "it didn't work"

But what we should understand from this passage is not that the Christ-follower gives secretly *in order* to receive a heavenly reward – that would also be a self-centered, mercenary activity

He gives secretly to avoid the recognition and applause of men, to meet real needs, and to thereby please God

And the *result* of that kind of giving is spiritual reward

Next, in verses 5-8, Jesus turns from phony giving to phony praying

B. When Praying

Look with me at verse 5 where Jesus describes the undesirable activity [**Matthew 6:5**] –

And 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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

I should mention that Jesus presumes that his followers will engage in the activities of giving, praying, and fasting because he uses the condition "when" and not "if"

The whole problem is with the motive behind those activities and here he says that the problem is with those who love to pray publicly so that they will be seen by others

Jesus isn't disapproving of public prayer here – if he were then we have ample evidence that the early church didn't understand what he was saying because they often prayed together publicly

But the reality is that there is a temptation when praying publicly to pray to the wrong audience

True prayer is a conversation between a child of God and his heavenly Father but when praying publicly we can fall prey to pleasing the people who are before us by seeking to strike a proper tone and level of fervor and with finding the right words and expressing just the right sentiments – all in the hope of winning the approval of our fellow man

And when we succumb to that temptation, whatever approval we receive will be our payment in full

Again, Jesus was not condemning public prayer – he was condemning the desire to be seen praying publicly and being praised for it – for engaging in formal, ritualistic, insincere prayer

Since prayer is at its most basic level a conversation between a believer and God, it is essentially a private practice and Jesus reveals that in verse 6 [**Matthew 6:6**] –

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Public prayer, essential and normal as it is, should never serve as a substitute for private, individual prayer

So Jesus says, the typical way to pray – the way that results in the pleasure and approval of God and that he will reward – is to find a private place to pray and actually converse with your heavenly Father

The second aspect of prayer that Jesus says should be our practice is to pray succinctly and specifically

Look with me at verses 7-8 [**Matthew 6:7-8**] –

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus says his followers are not to babble on and on in prayer thinking that their prayers are more meaningful if they are filled with vain repetition

When I read this verse the image of a Tibetan Buddhist prayer wheel automatically pops into my mind [**wheel 1**]

As you can see, a prayer wheel is typically a cylinder on an axle that has a mantra or phrase carved around it

And when the faithful spin the cylinder [**wheel 2**] they believe it is the same as reciting the mantra or prayer for as long as the wheel spins

Sometimes, the Buddhists set up the prayer wheels so that they are turned by the wind or by water power [**wheel 3**] ensuring that their prayers are perpetually offered even if no one manually gives the wheel a spin

That's about as clear an image of pagan repetition of prayer that I can think of

We also see in 1Kings 18 how the prophets of Baal prayed from morning until noon and even beyond causing Elijah to mock them saying that maybe Baal was musing, or relieving himself, or on a journey, or perhaps asleep

And Jesus says we don't need to impress God with our many words or engage in idle repetitions thinking that the odds of having him answer our prayers are proportional to the number of words we use

Believe it or not, God is more eager to answer your prayers than you are to pray them so he doesn't need to be hounded

Isaiah 65:24 speaks powerfully to this truth –

Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.

And, as Jesus put it, he "knows what you need before you ask him"

We don't pray in order to inform God but to make us mindful of our relationship to our heavenly Father and to tune our hearts to his will

To sum up this section, our prayers should generally be personal and private and we should talk to God as a beloved child would talk to a parent who always responds with perfect righteousness and benevolence

Next, Jesus addresses a topic that is, frankly, rather foreign in most churches today - fasting

C. When Fasting

No doubt there are some folks today who fast but it is a discipline that is probably under-practiced for the most part

But in Jesus' day, fasting was a regular practice for the devout

Skip down a bit to verse 16 where we read [**Matthew 6:16**] –

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Fasting can take many forms but in general it refers to abstaining from certain things like food, drink, or even sexual activity for a time for various spiritual purposes and fasting can be either an individual or corporate endeavor

In the Jewish calendar there were special fasts surrounding the high feast days that everyone participated in but many individuals would also fast at other times

Usually, these personal fasts were for reasons of moral and religious self-discipline or as a sign of deep repentance and brokenness before God

People would also fast when making significant request of God or before an important undertaking commenced

But, like with giving and praying, people began to use fasting to bring attention to themselves and some people would behave in such a way so as to let everyone know they were fasting

That way everyone could readily see just how spiritual they were

Some people would simply walk around a morose expression while others would refrain from washing their face and combing their hair and some would wear sackcloth and sprinkle ashes on their heads

Whatever it took to elicit the response they desired from their fellow man – and I would expect there was a fair bit of one-upmanship going on with the practice

Again, they were interested in the applause of men so Jesus says that would be their payment in full

And in verses 17-18 [**Matthew 6:17-18**] we see how Jesus says someone who is fasting should act

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Basically, Jesus says, “Just act normal when you are fasting so that only God knows.”

And, if you do, God promises to notice and reward you accordingly

With those three representative spiritual practices in mind let’s turn our attention quickly to some truths that we need to keep in mind regarding what Jesus teaches us here

III. Tempering Truths

First of all we see the truth that any commendable spiritual activity can be cheapened by the hypocritical display that results from having wrong motives

All three of the examples Jesus uses here are things he expects his followers to be engaging in – again he says “when” you do these things not “if” you do these things

And there are many equally worthy practices we can rightly plug into this same formula with the understanding that they can be engaged in with the wrong motive so as to lose any reward from God for them

D.A. **Carson** tells of a campus group where Christian students were encouraged to carry their Bibles around campus as a sign of their faith and as a witness to others

It was reasoned that, if they weren’t embarrassed to carry their textbooks, they shouldn’t balk at carrying their Bibles

But he says pretty soon he began to notice that some of the ones from that group began carrying bigger Bibles than they had previously used just to establish a reputation for extreme piety

We can corrupt most anything when our motives aren’t right

Jesus spoke of praying on street corners but we can be equally guilty of prominently praying in public over a meal in order to be seen doing so rather than discretely saying our thanks before a solo audience consisting of our Father

We too can be guilty of the sin of pride concerning our giving even if we don’t share our finances with others

And oh, how we like to make sure people know just how busy we are for the Lord and what a toll it takes on us

And the list goes on because the tendency to show off is always present

But here’s the **second** truth we need to be aware of – sometimes, people are going to notice what we are doing even though our motives are correct and that’s okay

Actually, spiritual disciplines rightly practiced will result in lives that are attractive and people are bound to notice – you cannot hide a city on a hill and no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket

But righteousness is always diminished by ostentatiousness so it’s our motive that matters – not whether someone happens to notice and whether the fact that they noticed causes them to applaud us

We cannot control their reaction to what we do only our reason for doing it

So, rather than simply deciding to abstain from these practices to avoid the whole issue, we must instead ask just who my audience for any particular practice is

There is nothing wrong with giving in such a way that the church records your gifts for tax purposes

There is nothing wrong with praying in public settings or with being seen praying at other times

There is nothing wrong with people finding out you are engaging in some spiritual discipline or another

We must just be painfully and perfectly honest in assessing our motives because God knows quite well why we do the things we do

And while our hearts are deceitful, God cannot be fooled and he will always act justly and if our desire is the praise of man that will be our payment in full – without exception

It's important though that we recognize that doing a good thing with the wrong motive is still better than not doing the good thing at all and Jesus doesn't say the believer will be punished for the good that is done wrongly – you just won't receive a reward from God for it

Still, loss of reward should not be a small matter and we should all labor so as to receive a crown because who wouldn't rather hear the words, "Well done good and faithful servant" than have their good works burned up like wood, hay, and stubble?

We tend to believe that we are most in danger when we are far from God but as we have seen today, the tendency to err is always present

Sometimes never more so than when we are seeking to do well by engaging in spiritual activity

So we must rely on God to help us with our motivations that we would not be hypocritical as we pray, give, fast, or whatever else we would do

Let's pray