

Series: Teachings of Jesus Practicing Authentic Service Matthew 6:1-18

Introduction

In Matthew Chapter 5 we studied the first three themes of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The first theme emphasized the character of authentic disciples in the teaching of the beatitudes. The second theme highlighted the influence of authentic disciples in the teaching about salt and light. The third theme centered around the conduct of authentic disciples in life situations which Jesus addressed in the six examples murder, adultery, divorce, keeping your word, retaliation, and showing love even for enemies.

Matthew Chapter 6 contains the fourth major theme in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus zeroes in on building a relationship with God that focuses on serving Him - not for praise from others but for the commendation by God Himself. For many people 'show' is everything but for the follower of Jesus public recognition is superficial and meaningless. But in a quiet place where no one can see you and where the troubles of the world weigh heavy on another person's life - and you have the opportunity to do a good deed that *will not be seen by anyone* - that's where the follower of Christ shines. The emphasis in Chapter 5 is on our relationship with other people. The emphasis in Chapter 6 is on our relationship to God.

Chapter 6 can be divided into two major sections. Verses 1-18 is concerned with sensitivity to serving God and can be divided into three specific parts - almsgiving (6:2-4), prayer (6:5-15) and fasting (6:16-18) - each of which was a necessary part of first century religious life. Verses 19-34 deal with how to develop a relationship with God even through the mundane thoughts and duties of life. Today we'll look at the first 18 verses and how they affect our authentic spiritual service. Jesus gives us two principles right off the bat: 1) Do not practice your piety before men and 2) Seek the favor of God not the reward of men. Jesus clearly teaches that we must live a life not to be seen of men, but to be seen of the Father.

Martyn Lloyd Jones suggests that we pray this prayer when we wake up in the morning: "Throughout the whole of this day, everything I do and say and attempt and think and imagine is going to be under the eye of God. He is going to be with me. He sees everything. He knows everything. There is nothing I can do or attempt but God is fully aware of it all. "Thou God, seest me!"

In each of the three illustrations Jesus uses in these first 18 verses a reoccurring sentence is used. "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. V2; v5; v16. Jesus uses these three examples to summarize the difference between true spiritual service and what it means to offer false service to God. Jesus also associates the word "hypocrite" with all three of these examples. If we practice our religion simply for personal reasons our reward will correspond to our motivation. If our serving is not authentic and genuine, the only reward we will receive is the applause we get from those who see us do it! God only rewards people for the service that they do only for Him- regardless of whether anyone sees them do it or not.

The first example he mentions: Almsgiving

I. Almsgiving from the Heart

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

The Greek word translated 'alms' or 'piety' here occurs thirteen times in the NT. To us, 'alms' may be an archaic word but the concept is still practiced in our society. We might define it as showing 'mercy, or having pity on someone. It's a feeling of compassion, the giving of certain gifts or blessings to someone in need. Zondervan's bible dictionary renders the word as 'benevolent giving'. Almsgiving is any act of giving to those in need or less fortunate based on a feeling of compassion, pity or mercy by the bestower of the gift.

In the OT, Deut 15:11 - says that '...the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.'

The Law also commanded an annual provision for the poor from the extra yield of the fields that the farmers were forbidden to collect according to Lev 23:22. In fact, throughout the Law, abundant provision was made by God to command His people to look after their own, not only on a yearly and sabbatical basis but by the command, that they were forbidden to turn a blind eye to those among them who were materially poor.

The almsgiver was also considered to be righteous. But how is it possible to feel compassion and pity 'by commandment'? Although the feeling was not necessary for the Jew to obey God and take care of the less fortunate, giving a gift could easily have been wholly devoid of emotion. Prov 19:17 'He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed'

Over time Judaism turned almsgiving, into a self-serving outward form of righteousness that they used to distinguish themselves as pious and holy in the sight of God. Even their salvation came to be based not upon the mercy of God but on their own actions. Almsgiving became uprooted from a reliance upon the necessary emotions of compassion and mercy and, rather became a religious duty that was beneficial and a source of immediate praise and gratification to the person who performed it.

In time, righteousness and almsgiving came to be regarded as synonymous terms. The Talmud even stated that, 'The performance of works of mercy is set forth as a means whereby man may be accounted righteous in the sight of God, like the fulfillment of the commandments of the Law.'

Judaism, by the time of Christ, had taken the giving of alms to the point of being an act of devout piety which was regarded as having a greater benefit for the person who performed the acts than the blessing it provided for the recipient! In the NT, there appears to have been an abundance of poor who gathered at certain points in the land looking for alms to be given by the religious Jews. Almsgiving had almost become an industry where some people had become professional alms-receivers -who earned a living off the sympathy of others.

In Matthew 26 Judas complained that the precious ointment was not sold and the proceeds given to the poor. But Jesus' reply is significant because He rebukes Judas and offers the explanation that it was a prophetic act symbolizing His burial, saying in verse 11 that '...you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me'

This giving to the poor or 'almsgiving' was also a significant trait of the early Church (Gal 2:9-10, I John 3:17). They even contributed to the welfare of fellowships that resided in poor areas or which had specific material needs at certain times (Rom 15:26, II Cor 8:10-11).

Almsgiving was something that was expected of Jesus followers. Notice that Mtw 6:2 states 'when you give alms' not 'if you give alms'! For the early church almsgiving was a matter of personal commitment. It was allowing God to direct your heart as He so chose to do. They saw almsgiving as a response to their love for God and not as an act which won the love of God

for themselves. They saw in Christ everything that they needed and, as a response to the total provision of God, they felt the need to reach out to others and reflect the Father's work of love.

Jesus' command to the disciples in Mt 6:2-4 emphasizes the way alms are to be given to the poor. Almsgiving was to be an action which pleased God, not one that found acceptance and praise from others. It was only necessary for God to witness your charitable acts, the same being true for both prayer in Mt 6:5-6 and fasting in Mt 6:16-18.

Finally, the saying of Jesus that the disciple Mt 6:3-4 should be concerned to '...not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret' is probably meant to be taken that the person who gives alms should not dwell on the goodness of His deed but should instantly forget what he has just done. In other words, don't slap yourself on the back for being such a great person just because you saw a need and met it. When you give, says Jesus, don't let it even so much as be acknowledged by other areas of your life. That doesn't mean you deny you did it. Just don't allow your life to become consumed by having to let other people know how generous you are!

John Stott writes, 'Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation'

The reward a disciple should be striving for through the distribution of his possessions to the poor, then, is not an earthly one but from God Himself in Heaven. It is an eternal and everlasting reward! Prayer is the next example used by Jesus.

II. Praying from the Heart

Verse 5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine

is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Verse 5 and 6 address where we should pray.

And when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. ⁶But when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you have shut the door, pray to the Father which is in secret; and the Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly.

We must be careful to avoid two mistakes in looking at this paragraph. First, Jesus is not condemning public prayer or Christians praying in groups. He is not saying that prayer must be silent. The church described in Acts was noted for its vocal prayer meetings. Second, Jesus is not ruling out the use of repetition in prayer. The scriptures specifically teach us about intercessory prayer which is certainly more than just hurriedly skipping through a shopping list we read off to God.

James says that the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much." Jesus' concern is for those who pray for the purpose of being seen as devout by others. I think every believer should be able to pray publically. But I don't think public praying has to be grandiose to be effective praying! Neither does God take delight in those who pride themselves on not being hypocritical like those who love to pray out loud!

Jesus tells the story about a Pharisee and a publican in Luke 18:9-14 who went to pray. The Pharisee stood there and thanked God for all that he was not, and how much better he was than others. The publican just bowed his head and beat his breast and cried, "Lord, be merciful to me for I am a sinful man." Jesus said, I tell you, the publican went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Hypocrisy can infect anyone. That's why we must pay attention to Jesus' words, "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret." It is in the private place that we are to avoid vain repetition. Don't fall asleep mentally as you pray and begin mumbling the trivialities to God. The heathen worshipped many deities. They weren't sure which ones were best qualified to help them so they kept invoking names of various gods in a torrent of repetitious prayer hoping to get through to the right one. Jesus said our praying should not be like that. We to impress know who we are praying too! We know our heavenly Father always hears us when we pray and it is not necessary to impress Him with our volume or length of prayer.

The third illustration Jesus uses to make his point about practicing authentic devotion concerns fasting.

III. Fasting that involves the Heart

Have you ever tried fasting for a spiritual reason? Could it be that the absence of fasting in our life may be an indication that we are not really desperate for God to be at work in us? Are we really so content with our life and experience in Christ that our praying really costs us nothing – no self-denial, no seeking desperately after God, no missed meals to spend time in prayer?

You don't have to look gloomy, or put ashes on your face appear holy and pious. The self-righteous in Jesus day decorated themselves in ashes and sackcloth so they could impress everyone with their pious prayer life. Jesus told his disciples that when they fast they were to "anoint your head and wash your face." In other words, don't call attention to your devotion to prayer. If the Father sees all things, then an outward display before men is not necessary. Therefore even if you're fasting you should go about your normal business and make no provision for other people to find out.

You don't have to deny you're fasting, but you don't have to call attention to it either. The point of fasting is to focus your time and energy in prayer. It is intended for God not to impress other people. That's why there doesn't need to be any outward demonstration of the fast which is taking place within.

Conclusion

In Chapter 5 Jesus exhorts his followers to invest themselves in doing good deeds. But in Chapter 6 he cautions us not to make a show of them.

The teaching of almsgiving, prayer and fasting provides a clear warning for us that sin is so powerful and deceptive that it can infiltrate even the noblest of deeds. Sin can even follow you into the presence of God through your prayers. That's why we must resist the temptation to think sin is low-life living. Even the saints on their knees can have it!

We need to carefully examine our motives and consistently and consciously submit our lives to God. Remember as followers of Christ, we live our lives under the watchful eye of God – not people. While it's nice to be recognized for your accomplishments, we do not live for the recognition and praise of men. The reward of God's approval and provision is enough. We live to please God. The peace and joy we receive through practicing authentic devotion to Him is enough reward in itself.