

Secret Piety

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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So far, in unpacking the righteousness that must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus has focused on the moral life of the believer in engaging the Torah. He is still doing that, but here, in our text, from Matthew chapter 6, he turns to what surpassing righteousness looks like in the realm of personal piety.

Now, the gospel calls us to the doing of good works, to works of piety. And it's important to remember – it is believers, the followers of Jesus, that are being addressing here. And, because the human heart is what it is, because the web of sin is so deep and insidious in us, it turns out that doing good is itself fraught with danger and spiritual peril. It is a bracing reality to think that it is not sinful activities which are in view here. It is devout, religious practice. It is activities that are at the summit of Christian piety which are – it appears – occasions for great spiritual defilement and even judgment. Precisely in the realm of the holy things, sin intrudes and profanes.

What kind of a world is it, what kind of people must we be, that the doing of the good, of the highest and noblest things, can be the gateway to judgment? And it is just this dynamic, this terrifying reality, that Jesus addresses in our text. We will make four points. The General Principle (v.1), Almsgiving (vv.2-4), Prayer (vv. 5-6) and Fasting (vv. 16-18).

I. The General Principle

First, then the general principle. Matthew chapter 6, verse 1. Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Practicing our righteousness refers to the deeds of practical piety that the gospel calls us to. If we are *to be* zealous for good works, and we are, then, Jesus says, we better be careful, for dangers lurk.

We need to be careful of the manner in which we do things, and the motive with which we do them. As to the manner (way), we are not to do them in front of others. Now, some amount of visibility by others, for some deeds, is inescapable. (Jesus is not abolishing all public piety). But we are to seek obscurity and anonymity wherever possible.

Of course, we often do things in a certain way, precisely because our motives are corrupt. And what is the motive exposed here? *To be seen by men*. Christianity, like religion in general, can be, and has been, fertile ground for this sort of subtle (and not so subtle) self-promotion. We want people to think we are pious, so we make sure we let them know about our charity (often incidentally, not, of course, with the ostentation of the Pharisees. But, you know, without really making a big deal out of it).

Beloved, being (seen, noticed and) praised for one's piety is a powerful drug. And devout people, like the Pharisees (Bible believing conservatives), can become addicted to it. And assuming that it is NOT a problem for us, is a major part of the problem. One of the many ironies that sin produces is that: We are obsessed with what others think, because we are obsessed with ourselves. Jesus says: be careful, if you behave this way you will have NO reward, not a diminished reward, but NO reward from your Father in heaven. Implied, of course, is that one will instead face judgment. One can have a life totally given over to the service of God – as say a leader or a missionary – and in the end, all can be lost. No reward. The whole edifice can be a façade of self-aggrandizement, of spiritual pride, and the subtle stroking of one's ego. Often unbeknownst to the person themselves.

Now, before we move to the three examples our Lord gives, we need to state that this is not a contradiction with what Jesus has said just prior to this in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5 he says: Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. The difference is that in Matthew five we are seeking the glory of our Father in our public behavior, and here, in Matthew 6, we are doing deeds in public which should, (not totally, but) for the most part be private, and in so doing, we are seeking our own glory.

The sin that Matthew 5 is warning against is cowardice. Not letting our light shine. The sin that our text is warning against is vanity. According to John Stott, a good rule of thumb is: we should *show* when we are tempted to *hide*, and we should *hide* when we are tempted to *show*. That is the General principle.

II. Almsgiving

Our second point, the first example of practicing our righteousness, is charity for the poor. Almsgiving. Matthew 6, verse 2: So when you give to the needy. *Deeds of mercy toward the poor, commanded repeatedly in both the OT and NT, are in view*. Notice that here, as will be the case with prayer and fasting, Jesus assumes we will be active in giving to the needy. It's WHEN you give, not IF you give. The dangers involved never justify abandoning the works.

WHEN you give to the needy, do NOT announce it with trumpets. It's not clear that this was literally done by first century Jews, so this is probably a metaphor. Jesus is saying: don't blow your own horn. Don't have your gifts announced. Don't broadcast them. Don't publish your list of donors. Don't enjoy seeing your name in print. Don't put your name on buildings or streets. Not while you're living. Give anonymously.

And we should not think, as apparently the people Jesus has in mind did, that we can cover this over with the pious excuse that it is, after all, for the poor. This is what, the text continues, the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets. Hypocrite is the word used of actors in the ancient world. It means to wear a mask. It speaks of insincerity. It is assuming a false identity. These people give to impress, to deceive others about their (non-existent, or anemic) piety. They seek, the text says, to be honored – praised and applauded – by others.

We are prone to seek glory from men under the mask of piety. And Jesus makes it clear in John 5 that one cannot seek glory from men and glory from God at the same time. A check – or a good deed - in one hand and trumpet (real or figurative) in the other is the outfit of a hypocrite. (Spurgeon)

Jesus then soberly adds: Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. These are dreadful words. The language (from the commercial, business world) means that the transaction is finished. The applause and honor of men is the *only reward* they will get. But they have not been cheated for, in fact, it is the only reward they were looking for.

In contrast, v.3 says: when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. This is a call, as the first part of v.4 indicates, to give to the needy, as much as possible, in secret. Hide, don't broadcast. This secrecy not only excludes others, but the language of your left hand not knowing what your right hand is doing, indicates that, in some sense, our charity is to be hidden even from ourselves.

Now, of course, this does not mean that you don't know what is in your checkbook. But it speaks of a kind of self-forgetfulness, which is to replace self-congratulation. This type of giver does not secretly pat themselves on the back for their charity. For you CAN give anonymously, and avoid seeking the praise of men, all the time quietly congratulating yourself on how wonderful you are. (Quite a show for ourselves even in private) Such is the slippery nature, the labyrinth of the human heart. It is able to take a deed of mercy and turn it into vanity. A deed of altruism and turn it into egoism. An apparent deed of self-consecration and instantly turn it into self-congratulations.

Remember the righteous in Mt. 25, at the great judgment of the sheep and goats? They are an extraordinary example of the kind of giving in view here. When told that they had fed and clothed and visited Jesus, they asked: Lord,

when did we do these things? And Jesus had to remind them that what they did to the least of these, they did to him. They were completely uncalculating and self-forgetting in their generosity. Write the check, feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe the naked, get in your car, turn on the radio, and forget about it before you get home. This manner of giving is the death knell of the old man (Bonhoeffer), for it refuses to stroke his ego, for this is a charity which is content with God alone for a witness.

Then, Jesus concludes, your Father. Notice, again, these are always deeds done by justified people, people who already have God as Father, people who are not seeking merit or a place in the household of God. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. God is the all-seeing God, whose presence penetrates down into the secret places, the secrets, the thoughts and intents of the heart. The realm of true righteousness, the realm where the Kingdom of God operates through the Spirit. And while this can be unnerving, since he is our loving Father, this is comfort and not a threat to us. It means that in our Father we have the only audience our deeds require.

This text is in many ways about choosing the audience for your piety. For we cannot have both God and men (even ourselves) as the primary audience for our charity. And note well, our Father will reward us. And while true charity has its present rewards, here the verb is future. Our Father IN HEAVEN, the one who, in Christ, bids us to lay up treasures in HEAVEN, will reward us in the coming kingdom. Charity is oriented toward the End and it is content to wait for its reward then.

III. Prayer

Our third point is prayer. Verse 5: When, not if, but when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Now, there is no banning of public prayer here. The Lord's Prayer (which, DV, we will look at starting next week) is a prayer to OUR Father and is clearly to be prayed with others. Jesus himself prayed in public.

Again, the issue is our motivation. If we pray more in public than we do in private, it is probably a sign that we have chosen the wrong audience. These hypocrites love to be conspicuous, to be seen by others. For them prayer is a form of theatre. For them as well, the transaction is over – they have already received their reward IN FULL. We are to go into our room, our inner, secret place, close the door so that we cannot be seen or heard and pray to our Father.

We pray, the text says, to our Father who is unseen, who literally, is in secret. God is the invisible One, the One in secret, the One who works incognito, behind the scenes, in contrast to his fraudulent worshippers who seek to make themselves visible to men. We must believe, and act like we believe, that our

Father is palpably present to us in secret. Present to see, and present to reward. For the kingdom of God is within you, in your midst – with its beginning, its roots, in secret.

IV. Fasting

Finally, fasting. Verse 16: When, not if, but when you fast. Jesus' disciples didn't fast while he was with them, but he promised that they would when he was taken away. We evangelicals have virtually abandoned this discipline, but the Pharisees (other Jews) of Jesus day fasted two days a week (Mon and Thursday).

And not fasting, is not the way to avoid Jesus' instruction and rebuke here. Nor is moving the fast days, as the Didache (2nd c. document) did, to Wed and Friday. We need to, in Paul's words, pummel and discipline our bodies lest we run in vain. Bonhoeffer again: Satiated flesh is unwilling to pray and is unfit for self-sacrificing service.

And when we fast, we are not to look the part, to look somber as the play-acting hypocrites do. For they disfigure their faces, literally, they hide or make invisible their faces. Possibly with a veil, or with some other sign of mourning. Here Jesus is being ironic. They make their *face* invisible so that *they* can be visible, so that they can show others they are fasting. They too have received their full reward. But we, when we fast, v. 17 says, are to put oil on our heads and wash our faces. This is simply ordinary hygiene. It would often be set aside by those who fasted. Jesus says: when you fast all should be outwardly normal... So that, as v.18 says, it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your unseen, inconspicuous Father.

Notice, again, there can only be one audience the fasting person is trying to please. The One who sees in secret and will reward our secret fasting. And we should note here that the Isa. 58 text, which was read earlier, calls us to tie our fasting to sharing our bread, the food we save by fasting, with the needy. Fasting should lead to almsgiving and the promised reward from our Father, in Isaiah 58, is the glorification and restoration of the Zion of God.

Let us conclude. True piety is tricky, dangerous, because the human heart is deceitful and slippery. Thus, there is often too great a dissonance between our inward state and our pious outward appearance.

Too often, Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees (Mt. 23) could be applied to us: Woe to us, we are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones. Let us embrace a serious and holy re-examination of our motives – for the secret to true piety is in the secret

place. The heart of the matter here is a matter of the heart. For the theatre of God, Calvin says, is in the hidden corners of our lives.

But – and this is critical -- this re-examination and repentance must occur in the joyful light of the gospel. IN the light of the One whose obedience, whose prayer, and charity, and fasting cleanses our defective piety at every point. (holy, not morbid self-examination) This gospel calls for deep motive-cleansing by the blood of Christ, and a deep renewal of intentions in the Spirit. This gospel continually reminds us to choose our audience carefully. For one cannot serve God and the crowd or God and ourselves. Let us serve our Father in heaven, by discreetly giving to the needy, by private prayer, and by hidden fasting. He who sees in secret will reward us in his good time. Amen.

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