

Lesson 6: Acts of Piety and Charity

Theme: This lesson continues the contrast of outward behavior versus inward attitude, with an emphasis on cultivating authentic piety (i.e., reverence or righteousness).

Introduction. The Matthew 5 text studied in the previous lessons of this series has emphasized the importance of letting our Christian lights shine. (Review . . . how?)

Beginning in Matthew 6, Jesus urges us to serve Him in secret, seeming to indicate a difference in motive. Randy Harris, in *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* (2012), describes “wanting to be seen” as “a deeply ingrained human desire” (p. 100) and further states that “who we are when people aren’t watching is who we really are” (p. 103).

Keep this apparent contrast in mind as we begin Matthew 6 and consider common Christian acts of righteousness: giving, prayer, and fasting.

Text: Matthew 6:1-18

Giving to the Needy

¹ “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Prayer

⁵ “And 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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Fasting

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Discussion outline.

I. Matthew 6:1-4. Jesus warns that our acts of charity should not bring attention to ourselves. He presents an almost-comical view of the Pharisees announcing their giving with trumpets (tooting their own horns?).

A. Contrast Matthew 5:16 (“Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good deeds.”) with 6:1.

1. Do these verses contradict each other? How can they be reconciled?

John Stott in *Sermon on the Mount* writes (p. 69): “The discrepancy is only verbal, not substantial. The clue lies in the fact that Jesus is speaking against different sins. It is our human cowardice which made him say, ‘Let your light shine before men,’ and our human vanity which made him tell us to beware of practicing our piety before men.” He continues, “Our good works must be public so that our light shines; our religious devotions must be secret lest we boast about them.”

2. Who are we protecting when we attempt to conceal our light? And when we tell others of our good deeds, who are we hoping will receive the praise?

[If the answer to either of these questions is *myself* or *us*, then Jesus is probably addressing you.]

B. How do faith in God and belief in His existence play roles in our willingness to do good works in private?

1. What does Jesus mean in verses 2-3 when he says “do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing”, and do your giving “in secret”?

[This could refer to keeping behaviors so secret that even someone close to you (on your left hand?) doesn’t know what you are doing.]

2. In what ways are we tempted to be hypocritical in our giving?

II. Matthew 6:5-15. Jesus offers this prayer as a model of what genuine Christian prayer should be like, in contrast to mindless prayers (“babbling like pagans”) and the prayers of hypocrites.

A. What was wrong with the way hypocrites prayed in Jesus’ day, and how does Jesus’ warning about it apply to us today? What contrasts do you see between Jesus’ model prayer and the prayers of hypocrites and pagans?

(The prayers of hypocrites may have been intended to manipulate God into bestowing favor; Jesus’ prayer begins by emphasizing that God is “our Father”, placing focus on God rather than on our own desires; etc.)

B. Is the reference to “our daily bread” literal, or metaphorical? Why is it appropriate to pray for “our daily bread”?

C. If God knows what we need before we ask Him, why do we need to pray at all?

D. What is the difference between *divine* forgiveness, and *human* forgiveness?

III. Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus teaches that fasting should be a private, inward religious exercise. In contrast, the Jewish people announced their fasting to make sure others knew what they were doing.

A. Jesus assumes Christians will fast, although few of us do. Why and how should we fast?

[The Bible offers at least **three reasons for fasting**:

1. **Repentance and contrition.** (1 Samuel 7:6) “When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.”

2. **Mourning.** (2 Samuel 1:12) “They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.”

3. **Guidance.** (2 Chronicles 20:2-4) “Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, ‘A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar (that is, En Gedi).’ Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.]

B. In what situations do you think fasting might be a proper spiritual activity in your life? Share about times when you have you fasted as a mark of repentance or for spiritual direction.

C. How can we purify our motives so we are not like the hypocrites?

[John Stott in *Sermon on the Mount* writes: “Although one of the refrains of this passage is ‘before men in order to be seen and praised by men,’ it is not men with whom the hypocrite is obsessed, but himself. ‘Ultimately,’ writes Dr. Lloyd-Jones, ‘our only reason for pleasing men around us is that we may please ourselves.’ (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977], p. 330.) The remedy then is obvious. We have to become so conscious of God that we cease to be self-conscious.” (p. 71)]

In conclusion:

- Jesus taught that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. In this text, He contrasts aspects of *outward actions* and *inward attitude*. There is nothing wrong with giving, praying, or fasting; in fact, Jesus commands us to do these acts. The primary teaching of this lesson is that there are *right*, and *wrong*, ways to perform acts of righteousness.
- Randy Harris, in *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* (2012), writes “Righteous acts are not about being seen by people but about establishing a close relationship with God . . .” (p. 103). However, we can be encouraged in our own service by seeing or hearing about the righteous acts of others.
- Our genuine love for God and a desire to please Him must motivate our acts of righteousness, rather than our desire to please or promote ourselves in front of other people.