

The Heart of the Matter
(Matthew 6:1-6, 16-23)
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction

This morning we will continue the series of messages taken from the Sermon on the Mount, picking up at the beginning of Matthew Chapter 6. While you're turning there, let's be reminded that the overall theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the Gospel of the kingdom ó a dominion or reign and (as Romans 5:21 tells us) it is a reign of grace ó grace reigning through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a spiritual kingdom inhabited by spiritually born again children. So to exist in this kingdom is to exist in another realm, based upon having been given another life ó spiritual life.

Now as we begin Chapter 6, it is this reign of righteousness that Christ continues to expound upon. We saw in the latter section of Chapter 5 the extent of the perfect righteousness we must possess ó i.e. ó the absolute perfection that is required for any to enter into the presence of a holy God ó the righteousness which is imputed (or judicially charged to the account of) all the citizens of the kingdom of heaven. They have a perfect righteousness, but one they had no part in producing. Specifically, this righteousness speaks of the finished accomplishment of Christ culminating in His death on the cross as a Substitute and Representative for all those sinners that the Father had chosen and given to Him from eternity past. Their sins were laid upon Him (charged or imputed to His account) and in His death He paid the penalty due for their sins, putting them away for ever. And God judicially reckons (or imputes to them) righteousness ó the perfect satisfaction made before God's law and justice by His perfect obedience, even unto death.

Now in Chapter 5 we saw the extent of the righteousness required for entrance into the kingdom of God, summarized in the last verse, vs. 48, where He says, ***õBe ye therefore perfect...***” This speaks of the perfect righteousness required for entrance into His kingdom. And we sinners can't produce it. Well, that brings us to Chapter 6. And here our Lord continues consistent with the theme of His sermon ó majoring on the Gospel wherein the righteousness of God is revealed. But in this passage, Christ begins to address the area where we are most prone to being deceived.

Am speaking of the deceptiveness of religion, particularly that which comes in the name of Christ, but actually is a denial of Christ in that it denies or perverts God's way of salvation, the Gospel of the kingdom, by its insistence that salvation is not based entirely and solely upon Christ ó upon His person and finished work at the cross of Calvary, but rather involves some contribution from the sinner.

So here Christ begins to discuss religious duties and activities and He sets forth how we are to determine whether or not these, our efforts to obey, are acceptable before God or not. He does this by contrasting, (not the differences in the outward performance of these religious activities ó how much, how often, etc.), but rather by directing our attention to the heart of the matter, to the motive behind that which we do. In these verses we will see Christ expose the sinfulness inherent in the performance of religious activities and duties by all of us prior to God-given spiritual life and conversion. Christ goes to the heart of the matter ó the motive ó as He sets forth in His sermon how we are to examine our own religious motives to see whether our participation springs from the motive of:

- 1) Merit ó finding merit within (characteristic of the religion of works, whether aimed at gaining favor before men, before God, or both)
Or from the motive of í
- 2) Grace and gratitude (characteristic of the Gospel of the Kingdom ó the true religion of grace where all merit is properly assigned to the finished work of Christ).

So this morning, in these verses, we'll see Christ brings our attention right down to the heart of the matter. And that's the title of today's message, "The Heart of the Matter."

Christ penetrates to the heart of the matter, to the motive, here in Chapter 6 by addressing 3 specific religious duties. That is:

- 1) Giving of alms
- 2) Prayer
- 3) Fasting

I think it is useful to consider these 3 specific religious duties in a broader sense, considering how all of our religious duties (or works of religion) might be typified by these 3 areas in that:

- 1) The giving of alms typifies those works that are aimed at our fellow man as it refers to acts of charity outward toward our fellow man.

- 2) Prayer typifies that which is directed God-ward and
- 3) Fasting typifies those acts that are focused inward as it falls into the category of acts of self denial or self sacrifice in devotion to God.

II. Giving of Alms

So now I direct your attention to God's word. I'll simply comment on this passage as we proceed through it. So look with me in Matthew 6, beginning in verse 1 where we read:

“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.”

Here, Christ begins with ***“Take heed...”*** and I think this is applicable to all ó even believers. You see, because of remaining sin, when we get to the heart of the matter and examine our motives, we will see that as sinners, there is no such thing as a pure motive behind anything that we do ó that even our best, well-intentioned efforts are tainted by our remaining sin (and it will be so throughout this lifetime). And when He says ***“Take heed...”*** the suggestion is that as sinners, we all are in great danger of erring in what He is about to say ó so let's ötake heed.ö

Some suggest that in verse 1 the ödoing of almsö is to be considered in a more general sense as meaning the öperforming of any works of righteousnessö in contrast to the same wording used in verse 2 where it is speaking specifically of doing alms as charitable giving to the poor. I share this with you as a matter of interest and that may well be the correct interpretation, but I'm not certain.

But what I am confident is true (in this context) is that, as sinners, we absolutely have reason to apply this command to ötake heedö to any and all of our own acts of religious service. E.g. ó to examine and confront whether or not we do what we do to be seen of men. It's important because as Christ said, if that's your motive, ***“...ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.”*** I believe the sense of this is that if the primary motive behind your religious activities is to be seen of men, you've no warrant to consider yourself a citizen of this kingdom at this time.

So, let's read on where in vs. 2, He definitely addresses those works which are directed outward toward our fellow man by speaking specifically about the giving of alms, saying:

“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.”

Now, alms refers to charitable giving ó primarily for the poor or needy. The case is often made that giving of alms refers to any compassionate acts of charity, including giving in support of a true gospel ministry. The sense of the Greek word carries the connotation of giving to the needy in an act of compassion or act of mercy. So, to the extent that we support a true Gospel ministry designed for the spiritually needy, certainly that case can be made. Our natural conscience tells us that we should give to those less fortunate. Not only that, the giving of alms was prescribed under the Old Covenant (the law of Moses) and the general principle is set forth in scripture as a by-product of God’s grace ó the principle that we should all give to the needy to address their needs, both physically and spiritually. As Proverbs 3:27 instructs, ***“Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it.”*** So it is presupposed here in the context that all who profess faith in Christ will give. Christ takes it for granted that these disciples and others who were listening to Him were in the habit of charitable giving. That’s not the issue. No, we should all give. The issue is the heart of the matter. Why do we give? Or, why do we extend any act of mercy or compassion to our fellow man? What is our motive?

Now from what I can tell, these hypocrites didn’t literally sound a trumpet before they prayed, but rather Christ is illustrating that the desire to be recognized and receive the glory of men by these was such that they may as well have had a trumpet sounded to announce their benevolence to insure it would be noticed by others. Now if you know human nature, you know that recognition is a powerful motivator. Any of you who have been involved in fund raising know that the appeal almost always involves the publication of those who contribute to the cause. If you give a token amount, your name will be listed, perhaps in a section labeled “Patron” or simply “Donor.” But if you give more, you might be listed as a “silver level” contributor. Give even more and your name might show up as a “gold” or “platinum” or “diamond” level contributor. And it works! Men and women act to receive the reward of recognition among their peers. But to the extent we give for that reason, then that is the reward ó no more and no less.

And so it is with our religious acts of charity. When Christ said, ***“Verily I say unto you, “They have their reward,”*** He is indicating that is it ó their reward is to

receive the praise and honor of men. But He is saying that it is not all the reward they will get.

Now verse 3:

“But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: ⁴That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.”

Now some think that the words spoken here in vs. 3 are simply a repetition of the thought conveyed in verse 2. That is, don't give charitably in order to be seen or gain the applause of your fellow man. But I think vs. 3 carries it even deeper. He's saying don't let your own left hand (ōthyō left hand) know what your own right hand (ōthyō right hand) is doing so that your giving will be in secret. Here he is commanding us not to get any self satisfaction in the performance of good works toward our fellow man. Now we're really getting to the heart of the matter. This exposes how our very best motives for obedience are tainted by who and what we are ó sinners. So as you examine this, if you take comfort and assurance from reflecting upon something that you did, then you better take heed for that kind of thinking may border on actually finding merit in that which you've done. And if you can find merit before a Holy God based upon anything produced by, in or through you ó then you've yet to see either (1) the perfection that a holy God requires or (2) the reality of your own sinfulness (and most likely both of these things).

As self-centered creatures, we're always attuned and inclined to act in ways that make us feel good about ourselves. The bookstores and libraries are full of writings on the value of possessing a high self esteem. And when you do something good, it makes you feel good about yourself. And listen ó you might even feel better about yourself and your sacrifice if you have done it secretly. We actually may even be more prideful if (or when) we perform a good deed that no one knows about. Well, I'm not looking to beat us all up this morning but we need to continually recognize our sinful human nature for what it is. You see, in light of the purity and perfection that characterizes the righteousness of God's kingdom, the one we need, it is helpful for us to get to the heart of the matter and see how anything that is produced by us has absolutely no meritorious value before God because it falls so short, tainted by our remaining sin nature.

So, no works of righteousness that we might produce are acceptable acts of obedience before God except they be made acceptable, based solely upon that perfect righteousness wrought out by our Substitute ó except we be one with Him, **“...accepted in the Beloved”** as the scripture puts it.

Now I think it is important that we understand when Christ says **“...that thine alms may be in secret...”** that in the context the emphasis here is on the heart of the matter ó penetrating to the motive. This is important so that we don't misconstrue what is being taught. He isn't legally forbidding any giving that may be recognized by men. Some might be tempted to use such an interpretation to justify hoarding what they have under the guise that, “Since others might know about it, I just won't give.” I think you can see that would be an abuse of this passage. Again, the beginning phrase, **“When thou doest thine alms...”** shows that it is taken for granted that the charitable, compassionate giving is being done. To misapply this would be akin to someone deciding to forsake the worship services under the pretense that they wanted to be sure someone didn't misconstrue their faithful attendance as a legal act to which they assign some merit. I think we can all see that such reasoning would amount to nothing more than a convenient twisting of the scriptures to fit our natural, sinful preferences. No, Christ is telling us to take heed and examine our motives.

You notice that He says that **“...thy Father which seeth in secret...”** ó who knows all things, including our motives ó that He **“...shall reward thee openly.”** I'm reminded of what our Lord told Samuel as recorded in I Samuel 16 when He said, **“the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”** We can fool one another, but there is a judgment to face and we can't hide from God. He knows our thoughts and our motives even better than we know our own. The Lord looks on the heart.

I believe that this open reward mentioned here in vs. 3 refers to the judgment when all things will be brought to account before angels and men ó when God and His Gospel shall be vindicated as every knee bows and every tongue confesses that He is indeed Lord. Then all shall know that His way of salvation, conditioned on Christ alone, was the truth and that all found in Him, who have been brought to trust in Christ alone so as to find all of their merit before God to be based upon righteousness imputed, then their heavenly citizenship and the inheritance awaiting them, all the blessings that accompany that citizenship, shall openly be made known.

III. Prayer:

Now, beginning in vs. 5, we'll look at the issue of prayer, keeping in mind also the sense in which praying is typical of religious activities that are directed God-ward. Christ continues saying,

“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.”

Notice again that He says, “...*They have their reward,*” implying that it is the praise and esteem of their fellow man and nothing more “*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.*”

So again, Christ is going to the heart of the matter as to the motive for prayer as and later, in verse 9, to the manner of prayer. We know from the whole of scripture that we are to pray publicly as that He isn't forbidding public prayer. But in our meditation and prayer that is directed God-ward, here too we see that remaining sin defiles even our best efforts.

Though public prayer in our worship services is important, it is difficult to remember that even when we pray in public, we're praying toward God and not the audience. But aren't you, like me, tempted or inclined to pray, at least somewhat mindful of how others might be evaluating something of our knowledge or viewing us as more or less "spiritual" based upon the things we pray? We can't get away from our sin. But thank God our prayers too are accepted because (if and only if) we are "accepted in the beloved." I'm thankful for Romans 8:26 where we're told that God the Holy Spirit helps us as we struggle with how we ought to pray by interceding on our behalf, knowing our hearts.

Now when He says here in vs. 6, “...*enter into thy closet...*” it clearly refers to a private place in contrast to those who pray in public in order to “...be seen of men.” Think of the evil of this as praying to God, in order that we may be seen of men! We need to remember what prayer is about. I plan to address in a separate message the manner of prayer set forth in verses 7-15, (the passage that includes what much of religion calls the Lord's prayer); but, when we get there, you'll see

that prayer is to be an expression of our need and dependency on God. And as such, it is totally inconsistent with such evil thoughts of pride that would have us use prayer to parade our own piety, to seek to attract the attention of others, or to gain a reputation of great spirituality. I cannot help but think of those who make a public display of bowing their heads to "say a prayer" in a restaurant before eating their meals. I am ashamed to say that years ago I too would occasionally do that and when I did, I was proud of my willingness to take that stand, to make a statement that I was a man of prayer as part of my witness. Think of that as a witness to what? I will tell you what. It was a witness of my own self-righteousness. It was to be seen of men. It was driven by my interest in how others viewed me. That activity is not letting your light shine before men that would glorify God but rather it is vain glory designed to bring attention and glory to the sinner, not the Savior.

It was interesting for me to learn that the same word for "closet" used here is translated later on in the book of Matthew as "secret chambers." I read where some believe that for those Jews who were contemporaries of Christ, who heard his Sermon on the Mount, that one place in particular would likely have come to their minds when Christ referred to "thy closet" or secret chamber. And that would be the innermost section of the temple where God dwelt in the holy of holies. It was a "closet," a secret chamber from which the people were barred. Only the high priest could enter as the representative of the nation to meet God and he must carry sacrificial blood with him.

And the one piece of furniture there was the Ark of the Covenant upon which sat the mercy-seat. Here one man spoke to God and God to Him. And now, as we read in Hebrews 10:19: ***"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; ²¹And having an high priest over the house of God; ²²Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water"***. What a privilege is afforded us by virtue of our mercy seat, (the satisfaction made by Christ in appeasement to God's wrath for the sins He bore) that we might commune directly with a holy God based solely upon the very blood and righteousness by which grace reigns in His kingdom! So, go boldly into this closet, based solely on that which provides you access and fellowship with God the father as the blood of Jesus, which is just another way of

saying based upon that righteousness which was established and finished by His death ó His blood.

Now if we approach God in that ðclosetö ó that is, not to be seen of others, but also based solely upon the very ground of reconciliation (His blood and righteousness), the mercy seat which covered the broken law, whereby I can commune with Him in prayer, on the one and only basis upon which I can rightly call upon Him as my Father ó then I can know that I shall be among those who are rewarded openly.

IV. Fasting

As I said, today weð skip over verses 7 ó 15 as I plan to deal separately with the manner of prayer in a separate message. So skip with me now down to verse 16 where weð consider the issue of fasting, keeping in mind also the sense in which fasting is typical of religious activities that are directed inward or those things that might fall into the category of religious acts of self denial or self sacrifice in devotion to God. So, in vs. 16 Christ continues saying,

“Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.ö

Now fasting consists of the practice (apparently very common in their day) of occasionally abstaining from food, or drink, or other pleasures to subject the needs and desires of the body to the burden of the heart and to a prayerful spirit. While it appears that there was no command to fast under the Old Covenant, here again the context suggests that Christ assumes his listeners will fast as was customary in their day. And certainly here He did nothing to discourage the practice of fasting, but rather again, he goes to the ðwhyö ó the motive. We know that the Pharisees required fasting at least once per week which is why the Pharisee in the parable of Luke 18 boasted of fasting twice per week ó going beyond what was customary.

Now in vs. 17 we read:

“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; ¹⁸That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

Here we see that Christ goes beyond telling them to simply refrain from the self-serving efforts of trying to appear as if they were fasting, but He says to actually take proactive measures so that others will not recognize that you're performing this religious activity. So, how does this apply to us today? Well I believe it has to do with not wearing our religion on our sleeves so to speak so as to bring the attention upon ourselves under the pretense that we are performing an act of self-denial or sacrifice motivated by our devotion toward God.

There is no direct command given in the Word of God requiring anyone to fast or teaching us that we should fast. So we have to conclude that the specific act of fasting is to be left to each believer to decide whether he or she will fast, when, and for how long. The only thing our Lord requires of those that do fast, (and we might well substitute for fasting the performance of any act of self denial in devotion to God) is that it be done in secret; ***A...do not appear unto men to fast.*** That is the only rule or guideline pertaining to fasting that I am aware of in the scriptures. There was nothing wrong with the practice of fasting, but when sinners believe that this in some way commends them unto God, or when they even think that this or any other religious practice proves they are saved, or when they take pleasure in allowing others to judge them saved based on such acts, then it becomes a dead work, fruit unto death. And as before that esteem, whether self-esteem or that esteem by which others hold us that is their reward. And again, that is their only reward. Always keep in mind what Christ said as recorded in Luke 16:15, where He said, ***"... Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."***

V. Conclusion

Now I believe that verses 19 to 24 pretty much summarize all of these preceding verses. Beginning in verse 19, this summary begins:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: ²¹For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. ²²The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. ²³But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! ²⁴No man can serve two masters: for either he will

hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

In verse 22, consider that the eye represents the understanding, how we view and judge things. If the eye, the understanding, is single (seeing and bowing to God=s testimony, God=s standard, God=s judgments, and God=s Gospel ó His way of salvation to the exclusion of any other) ó then the soul is full of light, of truth. This refers to the light of the Gospel of Christ wherein the glory of God is revealed (2 Cor. 4:6). If the eye, the understanding, be evil (clouded with self-righteousness, self-love, and religious pride) the soul is full of darkness. The evil here does not refer to immorality. But Christ is talking to religious men and women about the performance of religious activities. But until sinners see the truth of God as it is in Christ, the whole soul is full of darkness, no matter how much other truth they may have. The Jews he spoke to here had much more truth than the Gentiles, but they were still full of darkness. Why? ***õIf therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!***”

They rejected the light they had. This light refers to the truth, the Gospel which resided in the nation in the elements of the Law of Moses (all the types, pictures, and shadows) as well as in the testimony of the prophets. That light became darkness, not because the light in itself was insufficient, but because the Jews rejected it. So it is today when men have a distorted understanding of the scriptures and so presume that they have light.

But it=s not the light that glorifies God, exalts Christ, and removes all room of boasting in them as evidenced by their clinging to the false notion that their salvation (their acceptance before God) is conditioned in some way, to some degree on themselves. And here we see just how deceptive religion can be when we consider that to be in error on the õlightö (on the Gospel ó on how God saves sinners based solely on the Person and work of Christ ó His righteousness) is described by Christ to actually be in õgreatö darkness. ***“...how great is that darkness.”***

You see, in going to the heart of the matter, Christ exposes that you can=t have it both ways. ***“No man can serve two masters.”*** God=s Word isn=t here for us to pick and choose what fits our natural persuasions so that we might go merrily along, not confronted with our desperate need for God=s mercy so as to remain content in our imagination that we maintain some control over determining our

own eternal destinies as we insist on believing that salvation is conditioned (at least in part) on something we do ó our response, our act of faith, whatever. And **“...how great is that darkness!”** It’s so great, it takes a new life, spiritual life ó we must be born again ó before we’ll see any different. God must give us an understanding and I pray that He will do just that for anyone who hears this message if He hasn’t done so already.

When I consider verses 19 -21 in the context here, I see it as a reminder to continually take heed and inventory of why we do what we do ó to examine our own hearts. Where’s your treasure? What do you treasure? What is really most important to you? Where are our priorities? God knows for He knows our hearts. So it matters not if you and I are able to fool each other, because the judge of all, the one that ultimately will matter, He **“...seeth in secret.”** Christ declared that **“...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”** Philippians 3:20 says of those who have spiritual life that their òconversation,ö meaning their citizenship, is not of this world but rather is in heaven. They are made citizens of His kingdom and their reward is in heaven. Their reward is not found in this world. But do you and I go about our daily lives as citizens of His kingdom or do we live as if everything is wrapped up in this fleeting, decaying, temporary life on earth? How are we to lay up for ourselves incorruptible, eternal treasures in heaven? Well verse 33 of this chapter is helpful as Christ commands there, ò**But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.**” We’re talking about an inheritance that is incorruptible, eternal, and is no less magnificent than that which the Lord of glory Himself, the impeccable, spotless Lamb of God, could and did merit in His life and death. That’s got to be good!

In closing, consider God’s word to us as recorded Colossians 3:1 where it reads: ò***If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, (live like it) where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. ²Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. ³For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.***”

What motivates you? Where do you find your reward? Where’s your treasure? Well, that will tell you where your heart is. That’s the heart of the matter and as I hope you’ve seen ó that really does matter.

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein.

Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself - the Bible.

Randy Wages