

"Worship in Your Closet"

Matthew 6:1-18

February 27, 2005 by C.W. Powell

[Pastor Powell preached this sermon without the following notes, which he had inadvertently left at home. The audio sermon will differ in some respects from the notes below.]

I have read Matthew 6:1-18, but my text is the portion 6:1-6

- “1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:
- 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.
- 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. 6 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.”
(Mt 6:1-6 AV)

All true religion is private. If you are of the seed of Abraham, then you are so in your heart, for Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith that works by love. This passage speaks of the two most important works of religion, good deeds done to men and prayers to God, which encompass both tables of the law. Because the God is invisible, a most holy and pure Spirit, our true acts of devotion and love for Him and men, must be done to be seen of Him, that is, in secret.

Because of this, men cannot be compelled to worship. Force may and must be used to keep order in a society, but the devotion of the heart cannot be forced. Men may be forced to bow the knee to an idol, but that will not make them believe in the idol. Even in they voluntarily bow to the idol in order to gain some sort of advantage in the world--and there are many advantages to bowing to idols—this does not mean that they truly worship the idol to which they bow.

We normally and naturally in our sins, turn the injunction of Christ backwards. Instead of seeking the approval of God in the secret place and leaving it to Him to reward us, we do things to be seen of men, hoping for their approval, and somehow thinking that the approval of men will translate into approval of God. It is as if Jesus said, “Be sure that men see the good things that you do so that they will honor you with wealth, titles, honors, and preferment. God will see this and adopt you as His children.”

Let us do two things today.

1. Let us look at the words of Christ in verses 1-6 and understand their meaning.
2. Finally, let us make application.

I. The words of Christ.

A. There are two divisions

1. First division: vs. 1-4. Alms. The law commands that we love our neighbor, and the Jew was right in understanding this to be not just a feeling of good will, but the actual doing of kind deeds, relieving suffering and showing mercy.

a.

If the heart is foul, the deed is corrupt. They did not understand the nature of God, who looks at the heart, not the deed only.

- b. When we say that God looks on the heart, we do not mean that He looks at the intention. This is something else. A deed is not sanctified because you intended good when you did it. The Pharisees had good intentions. They were not hypocrites because they did good things with bad intentions, but they did good things with the purpose of being seen of men.

- c. They forgot, when they did alms, and when they prayed, the fundamental principle of the Jewish faith: that God is invisible and has no image.

- d. When we say that God is invisible, we are saying that He cannot be sensed with our five senses. You cannot see, hear, taste, touch, or smell Him. This is to say that He is transcendent.

- e. The meaning of what you do for the Lord cannot be discerned by the senses of men. Only God can reveal the spiritual nature of your deeds. This is beyond the reach of your power.

2. Second division: vs. 5,6. Prayers.

- a. The chief exercise of the First Commandment, to love God, is prayer. The catechism says that it is the chief part of thankfulness but if the heart is foul, the prayers are corrupt. "The prayer of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord," Solomon told us. The heart is not sanctified by prayer; the prayer is sanctified by the holy heart.

- b. Once again, it is not the intention, but the true devotion to God that is at issue here. Prayers are not sanctified by good intentions. It is not enough to mean well, and meaning well does not mean that the heart is good. A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things; the evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil things.

- B. When Jesus says "enter into your closet" or "let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing" He is saying the same thing. Do it in secret—not to be seen of men, but before God.. Not absolutely in secret, for God sees all things, but with an understanding that what you do is not to display anything before men, but to be seen of your Father in heaven. We know that Christ is speaking of the same thing because He closes both sections with the words: "thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly."

1. He is not talking about closets and hands. He is speaking of spiritual realities: The good deeds must be done in the eyes of the invisible God; and the prayers must be offered to the invisible God. The closet isn't a holy place. Don't go home and fix a private room with a cross and a picture of Christ with candles to make it a spiritual place.
2. This means that the secret of your heart is the true altar of worship where pleasing sacrifices are offered to God. Jesus is here calling us to acknowledge what is absolutely true; whatever we truly worship, we worship from our hearts—no matter what we do openly.
3. We also know that there is no good deed or prayer that we can do which will earn us anything with God. What we do, we do because of the thankfulness we have to God for our redemption. "Reward" here is used improperly, in a logical sense, not because we have earned it, but because it is a benefit that we receive. From whence do you expect your benefits or blessings? Jesus is not contradicting what is taught elsewhere in Scripture—He is re-directing their minds away from that which is seen, to that which is not seen. Do not expect your blessings to come from the men that you see, but from Him whom you cannot see.
4. This is the reason that the men of the world will never understand the life of faith. The brethren of Christ told him to go up to the feast and show himself openly. "How can you expect to make a name for yourself if you do not do some PR?" You need to package yourself a little better. Show your assets and hide your defects.

II. The application.

- A. Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life. Please note the following:
 1. Eph 3:16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;
 2. 1 Peter 3:4,5 "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." In other words, the true adornment of a woman—and anybody—is to be a good Christian, and that takes place in the "hidden man."
 3. Heb 4:12 "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." The proper operation of the Scripture is in the heart—in the thoughts and intents of the heart. Receive the Word there, or you will not receive it at all.
- B. The heart is the true altar of God, and it is there that true sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise are offered to God.
 1. All worship in the church must be designed to foster this spiritual worship.
 2. The more sensuous—adapted to the senses—that men make their worship, the more they depart from the true nature of God—His invisibility. Now that Christ has come, we reject all the trappings of the Mosaic worship, which pointed to Christ. Christ truly prays for us, so we need no incense. The Holy Spirit has

been given, so we need no lamps or candles except to keep from tripping over things in the dark. We don't need trumpets to call us to the feasts, for the Gospel has trumpeted the truth to the end of the world. We don't need comedians and apes and peacocks to attract men to worship, for those who come to the show will not hear the still small voice of God.

3. Men who are empty in their hearts will demand more and more ceremony and outward show. All the racket of the senses will detract from the worship of God in the heart, for the mind will be drawn to that which is seen and heard and felt and smelt.

Note: Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

The best thinking you will do will be when you are carefully reading the Scriptures, calling upon the Lord in the quietness of your heart, meditating on the things of God, and are alone in your hearts and minds with the Lord.

Public worship is for two things: as a public witness of the nature of the true God, and to teach the people of God how to worship aright—in the quietness of their hearts and minds. Col 3:15 “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.” There is a tract in the foyer on this subject.

You must take the time to keep you hearts. There are three things necessary if you are to grow in the Lord and fulfill the purpose for which you have been called. I will list them, starting with the least important, and moving to the greatest importance:

- a. You must get your finances in order so that you can do good deeds. This passage assumes that you are not living from hand to mouth, so that you can do good to others.
- b. You must get your time in order so that you can be productive and attend church and do other things in their proper time. Everything is beautiful in its time, but if your life is a tangle and mess because your mismanage your time, and you are constantly pushed here and there, your heart will constantly be in a turmoil. Before God created man, He made the sun, moon, and stars, so that man could live according to God's times and seasons.
- c. Most important: You must get your heart and religious affections in order, so you are not whipped to and fro and back and forth by this spirit and that spirit. You must arrange time to read your Bible with your family, to pray with your wife and children, to study the word of

God yourself, to gain wisdom and knowledge. Turn off the TV. Turn off the radio. Turn off the cd player. Quit being bombarded twenty four hours a day with a cacophony of sensual stimulation, and learn to know your own heart: I Kings 8:37 If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be; What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house:....

Pr 28:26 He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered.

Jas 1:26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion [is] vain.

4. Note the following verses:
 - a. Ps 4:4 Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.
 - b. Ps 46:10 Be still, and know that I [am] God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.
 - c. Ec 9:17 The words of wise [men are] heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.
 - d. Isa 30:15 For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not.
 - e. Isa 32:17 And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.
 - f. 2Ti 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.
 - g. 1Th 5:23 And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and [I pray God] your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God bless you.