

Righteous Christian Living

Life Changing Question

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Well, most of you are probably aware that there's a Presidential debate this evening. Thinking about that reminded me of a verse in Psalm 119 that we read a few weeks ago and it's kind of fitting for what we're doing here this evening. In Psalm 119:23 it says, "Even though princes sit and talk against me, Your servant meditates on Your statutes." Not that anybody's speaking against any of us here today in what's happening later this evening on a national stage but just the recognition that world leaders can do what world leaders do and they can do whatever they want but we kind of stand apart from that and come to God's word to meditate on it and we find our food and we find the world for which we live expressed in the word of God rather than in the passing things of men whose breath is in their nostrils, and so it's another delight to come together on a Tuesday evening and turn to God's word and find in it the bread of life that we cherish so much.

Last week, we began a series titled "The Question that Will Change Your Life," and we asked the question: how can I be righteous here? And it's a question that is designed to help Christians orient their life toward the right priorities and the right responses to life situations with an orientation toward biblical righteousness. Now we were clear and we were careful to emphasize the fact that we are considering the doctrine of sanctification here, not justification. We're talking to Christians about how we grow in grace now that God has put his Spirit within us. We are not talking about how we can accumulate merit in order that we might be saved, we're talking about how we live now that we have been already saved and the purpose of Scripture that it points us to is that we are to increasingly reflect the character of the Christ who saved us. Ephesians 2:10 says that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." This very life, these very circumstances that God has given to you are designed so that you would express his righteousness as you respond to life, and as you make your plans, and as you live life, and as you eat and drink and whatever you do, and when you face death, all of these things are an opportunity for us to manifest what it looks like to be righteous in those circumstances. Good works, good character, righteous living flows from the prior gracious work of Christ within us and that's the emphasis that we are trying to bring out here today. Now I'll get into this more a little bit later but for some people this idea of righteousness is equated with how busy they are in church activities and what they are doing and the programs that they're involved in and those kinds of things. Those things might have their place in certain circumstances but they are not a substitute for the biblical righteousness that we are going

to be talking about here this evening. It is easy to make your spiritual activity a substitute for the heart reality of genuine sanctification and I am concerned always to keep that difference and distinction in the minds of those who hear.

Now last week we left a very important question unanswered. It's contrary to the way that I normally do things but I did not make any effort to define the term last week. What is this righteousness of which we speak? What does righteousness look like? Exactly what it is that you pursue in the Christian life? Well, let me just give you a general answer to that thought, a general nontechnical definition of righteousness for our purposes here this evening, and then we'll kind of illustrate what it looks like as we turn to specific Scriptures. What does this righteousness look like? What is this righteousness of which we speak? We could call it a holy God-fearing life. You live life as though you genuinely believe Scripture, you genuinely believe in Christ and you have a holy sanctified reverence for him that affects the way that you think, the affections of your soul, the priorities that you give your life to and what it is that you seek out of life. You know, sometimes people just, I think it's a prevalent failure, people just don't ask the fundamental questions in life and we are trying to stimulate that in your own thinking today. You know, as we go through life, what kind of life are we trying to live? What is it that we are trying to with this 70 year window of time that God has given to us? It's not simply about pursuing what we like and what we enjoy, it's not simply about work and marriage and family even, what kind of person are you being as you pursue those things in life? What kind of Christian are you going to be? That's what we want to answer and you need that framework in your mind in order to give yourself to the right priorities. If you think that sanctification and Christian life is all about just keeping busy with different stuff, then you're going to live one particular way. If you understand that the biblical emphasis of righteousness is on heart matters, then you're going to live a different way and pursue a different trajectory of life and so there is this God-fearing dimension to righteousness that we want to bring out here this evening and we'll get more practical over the next couple of weeks as we continue on in this series.

Tonight I just want to consider two overarching themes. I don't know how long this will go but I just want to bring out that righteous Christian living has two centered focuses to it. One is that it is a heart-centered righteousness that relates to the inner man, and secondly there is a Christ-centered dimension to this righteousness. There is an inner emphasis to the biblical righteousness that we will see, and this inner focus leads us to a consideration of Christ, not simply activity but the person of Christ. And I ask you, my friends, how could it be any other way than a focus on Christ? If Christ loved us before the foundation of the world, gave himself for us at the cross, saved us in time during our life and is the ultimate eternal focus of our glorification as we gather around the throne and praise him and say, "Worthy is the Lamb," with saints throughout all of the ages, I ask you how could it be anything other than, how could righteousness be anything other than somehow a preoccupation with the Lord Jesus Christ? And it's funny how easy it is to lose sight of that and to focus on activity and to lose sight of the person in whose name we're supposedly doing it all in the first place. And so that's what we want to focus on here this evening. It may be a little briefer than normal but let's look at our first point here tonight.

What is righteous Christian living? It is a heart-centered righteousness and Jesus emphasized the desire for righteousness in the opening sermon of Matthew, of the Gospel of Matthew found in chapter 5 and I invite you to turn there with me. This series, in some ways, builds on the prior teaching that we've done when we went verse by verse through the Sermon on the Mount, but in Matthew 5:3, we see a description of the true citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Let me remind you of a feature of the text that I brought out when we went through this some years ago. In verse 10 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That theme of the kingdom of heaven joins all of the intervening verses into a single dominant theme. This is a description of what the life of the true citizen of the kingdom looks like. This is the inner life that is produced when a man is born again. This is what the Spirit of God generates in the heart and all of this is pertaining to those who belong to the kingdom of heaven and to them alone. If we remember Galatians 5 and the fruit of the Spirit, you see the similar emphasis on heart, the heart dimension of the fruit of the Spirit. It's not busy activity and wordy wordy prayers, it's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, inner attitudes of the heart, an internal dimension to righteousness that the Spirit of God produces. Now what you find in these Beatitudes is a reflection saying similar things in different ways that are being expressed by our Lord Jesus during the course of his earthly life.

Now let's look at verses 3 through 6 with those general thoughts in mind. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That word "Blessed" has the idea that he is describing someone who is the privileged recipient of divine favor. This is someone upon whom the hand of God rests and produces blessing in their lives. They are receiving grace from God and this is what's manifested in their lives. It's more than, this idea of divine favor, it's more than simply a disposition of happiness as some people sometimes describe it, he's talking about the person that God has blessed and this is what he is speaking about as he emphasizes these heart attitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." All that I want you to see, we've expounded these things in days gone by, all I want you to see is that when Jesus is talking about the objects of divine favor, you can recognize it by what is produced in their heart by the work of the Spirit within them. They are poor in spirit. These are things that are not at all what the world would expect or even want. The one upon whom God has worked and instilled new life in has a spirit of humility about him, recognizing that he is not righteous in himself. He mourns over his sin. He grieves over the reality of his rebellion against God and the fact that he has not the personal righteousness that God requires in himself. There's this gentleness or this meekness, this quiet ability to live with strength, then in verse 6, this unquenchable desire for righteousness to be manifested, inside life and outside in the external way that we live.

My only point for this evening here, beloved, is this, is that when you look at the fruit of the Spirit, when you look at these opening verses of the Beatitudes, it is talking about

matters of the heart, matters of the inner man, your dispositions, your desires, your impulses, your affections, in the words of Jonathan Edwards. All of these things are matters that are oriented in the heart and what Jesus goes on as Jesus proceeds to teach in the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of chapter 5, 6 and 7, he presupposes everything about these inner attitudes that are being described when it starts. The Beatitudes are the foundation that everything else in the Sermon on the Mount is built upon, but they are heart matters; it's who you are really on the inside, not a matter preeminently, first of all, of your behavior, and this is consistent with what the Old Testament conditioned the Jews to believe and to expect. In 1 Samuel 16:7 it says that "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." And in Proverbs 4:23 it says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life." Watch your heart. The Lord looks at the heart. And then you start with that Old Testament premise and then you go into the New Testament and you see it exploding in a multifaceted display of fireworks of exactly what that means and what it is that that looks like.

So what we need to understand, beloved, is this, is that if the Lord has saved you, as I know that he has so many of you, for you to understand that your heart is the realm in which sanctification starts. It starts with who you are inside and Jesus expresses this in a negative way when he rebuked the Pharisees back in Matthew 23. Let me encourage you to turn there for a moment. Matthew 23:27 and 28. You know, this is all very encouraging, in one sense, it's edifying see what Scripture says about this, but it's also pretty searching to realize the emphasis that God puts on these things for his people. In Matthew 23:27 Jesus said this, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." You look like someone special and holy in your robes and tassels and with your dignified outward appearances, he says to them, but God sees through that mask, he sees through the costume to what you are really like inside. And just like a tomb might look spectacular on the outside, if you've gone to the tombs and burial places of great men, you know how magnificent those structures can look, whether you're visiting president's graves or things of that matter, many times they are impressive on the outside but if you were to open the grave, you know that it would just be an unpleasant spectacle of corruption, bodily physical corruption that you're looking upon that is completely contradictory to the external ornament that adorns the outside of the grave. That's the picture that Jesus is producing here when he says you look good on the outside but it means nothing because on the inside you are full of sin and corruption. So he admonishes them in verse 28, "you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." You look impressive and men praise you for your holy demeanor but the truth of the matter is you are hypocrites, you are sinful and there is nothing pleasing to God about who you really are inside.

Now that's sobering. That's sobering. It tells us, first of all, doesn't it that what men think about us is of utterly secondary consequence. It does no good to put on appearances before man if your actual life is full of corruption, of hypocrisy and a double life and deception to those who are closest to you. The fact that you might be prominent in the community or prominent in the church means nothing. It's irrelevant. It is actually a

source of judgment and condemnation upon you if it's not an expression of what you are really like inside and it's probably good for each one of us to take that to heart and examine ourselves in light of it. Outward righteousness apart from an inner reality is hypocrisy that God judges. He does not reward it.

So we take just a moment to pause and have a little bit of quiet to give you a moment to reflect on what the reality of this means in your own life. Is there a hidden course of life that you carry on like the hypocritical Pharisees that are manifesting the reality of robbery, self-indulgence, corruption and a love for sin even if you've hidden it pretty well so far? Well, this is a warning to you, God is not mocked Scripture says. God is not mocked. What a man sows, this he will also reap. So we take these things seriously. It's part of holy godly fear, living a God-fearing life is to recognize the reality of these things. So we understand based on this heart-centered righteousness that Scripture presents to us that we are to pursue righteous affections in our heart, be a confessor of sin not a practitioner of sin, and to repent and to live a life of repentance instead of creating this zone of hypocrisy and this zone of hiding yourself from the reality of who you really are.

The word of God applied by the Spirit of God is essential to this process of becoming a man of heart-centered righteousness, a woman of heart-centered righteousness. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Transformed by the renewing of your mind and an emphasis on that inner man. And so what we are to seek, what is to be our pursuit preeminently, first of all, is a heart-centered righteousness and listen carefully with what I'm about to say. The question that we are asking is not at all how can I behave righteously here, we're asking a prior more fundamental question. Not how can I behave righteously here, but how can I be righteous here. Who are you, which is not a question designed for you to tell me your name. The question is who are you really in the privacy of your own heart, in the privacy of your own home. Who are you, because behavior is not enough, the accolades of men mean nothing in this examination of life which comes to us through the word of God, it is a matter that begins in your heart, beloved, and sooner or later, sooner or later the things that are in your heart will come out of your life. It would be good for us to focus on that for a moment.

Mark 7, if you will. Mark 7 in verses 20 through 23. Mark 7:20 through 23. We see the positive aspect of this in the Beatitudes, we see the negative side of it in other places in Scripture. What I want you to see is that in both ways, the positive and the negative, there is this focus on the heart. So in Mark 7:20, Jesus was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness." That's a pretty comprehensive list, isn't it? And what do you find in that list? You find some manner of external behavior with the fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, but Jesus doesn't leave it there. You could avoid the outward act of those sins and still be manifesting the wretchedness of an unclean heart with your greed, with your wickedness, with your lies, with your hiding of self, with your sensuality, envy, slander, pride,

foolishness. These things are all matters of the inner heart and when the time comes, soon enough in a few months when we get to this long-promised series on the 10 Commandments, we'll find that the tenth commandment is a prohibition against coveting, regulating, God regulating the motions of a man's inner heart, not simply outer behavior, the 10 Commandments themselves address this matter of heart righteousness and forbid the kind of things that we are talking about here. This is not a minor matter of which we're speaking when we speak of a heart-centered righteousness. This is central to the law of God. This is central to the 10 Commandments, God's enduring moral law which is an expression of his own righteousness.

So as we see this matter of heart-centered righteousness put before us, there is a sense in which, if I feel the atmosphere of the room rightly as I read faces and body languages right now, there is a sense of we're treading holy ground here. This is sobering to realize these things and to realize how much the Bible puts men under a spiritual x-ray machine and examines through and through what it finds. So behavior is not enough, this is a matter that begins in your heart and we, as it were, we feel the reality of an omniscient God in this moment in particular, not that it's any different than any other moment but we're more conscious now as we consider these things is that the holy God of the universe, the Creator and Redeemer of his people is a God of omniscience who knows our thoughts, who knows our mind, who knows what's on our tongue before it comes out of our mouth. So we take this seriously and we take this earnestly. We realize that Scripture is not playing games with us, it's addressing who we really are and what we find as we're still in Mark 7, I believe, is that the words that you speak, the outbursts of anger that you might be guilty of, the flirting that you do with people who are not your spouse, for example, all of these things are expressing what is in your heart. I remember a pastor many years ago saying this and it always stuck with me in this connection, you know, is that when somebody has an outburst of anger or profanity comes out of their mouth unexpectedly with seemingly little provocation, his comment was, "Your heart is showing." These things don't come out of nowhere. These things were in your heart all along and now simply found expression in a moment of time. So when those things happen to us and when we find those things, it's very sobering, humbling, and a time for some serious confession before the Lord.

Now that's a heart-centered righteousness. Secondly, and I'll talk more about this next week, we could say that this is also a Christ-centered righteousness. A Christ-centered righteousness and here, beloved, I want you to track with where we're going and what we're doing here. When we talk about this righteousness, this is not designed to simply make you profoundly introspective and simply examining every corner of your sin-defective heart. It's not designed solely for that. There's an element of it there but this righteousness of which we are speaking becomes something that develops an outward focus, it looks up and beyond to Christ and is a focus on him and a love and a desire for Christ himself.

Let's preface this by turning to Philippians 3. Philippians 3, another passage that we hope to get to in the near future, but in Philippians 3, Paul is talking about his own sanctification and in verse 12 he says, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already

become perfect," you have to love the humility of the greatest Christian who ever lived saying, "I haven't become perfect," but he says, "but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." You see the Christ-centered emphasis of it. "The focus of my life now," he says, "what I am running toward, what my finish line is, what I'm straining toward is to lay hold of Christ just like Christ laid hold of me." And he says in verse 13, "I haven't arrived yet. I don't regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but I'll tell you one thing I do: I forget what lies behind and I reach forward to what lies ahead, I strain, I stretch toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." He says, "I want to know Christ." Look at verse 10, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." He says, "There is this Christ-centered focus in my life since I have been redeemed and Christ is the sum of my heart pursuit. It is the sum of what I desire. He is my love. He is my desire. He is what I am after. It's Christ and Christ alone."

So this is a Christ-centered righteousness. It's very important for you to understand these things and to hold these things in balance. Yes, it's a heart-centered righteousness of which we speak and, yes, we all fall quite far short of that standard that God would have for us, but that's not the only dimension of it. If you only are thinking about it in those terms, you're missing the greater point because the Christian life, Christian sanctification is a pursuit of Christ himself, the person who saved us. Not simply behavior, you can go through all kinds of behavior and have none of your eyes, your two eyes on Christ. You can be so busy that you actually forget who your Savior and Lord is. You know what that's like, don't you? You come to the end of a day and say, "What have I been doing? I haven't thought once of Christ today, what's the matter with me?" Well, the Christ-centered righteousness brings us back the fact that again and again we come back to this person who is the object of our love, our gratitude, and our deepest affections and desires.

So that's the spirit with which we are approaching these things here in what we're about to say to develop the thought a little further. A Christ-centered righteousness. In Matthew 22:36 and 37, you don't need to turn there, a lawyer asked Jesus and said, "'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" Three terms all expressing the totality of the inner man, that your inner man is to love the Lord your God this way. And so we see immediately that this focus on the inner man contradicts the sense that we're simply trying to produce people who are outwardly moral in their behavior and, you know, this idea that a Christian is a good citizen, and a Christian is, you know, a good neighbor. You know, those things are a consequence of something prior and you can't skip the prior and have the reality. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind." That's the command. That's the greatest command is this focus on your attitude toward God. That's where righteousness starts.

So let me just flesh this out with three sub points here in the time we have remaining here and these things are not at all comprehensive, they're just kind of suggestive for ways for you to cultivate your thought going forward. First of all, and we'll do this by way of contrasts and the first aspect of this Christ-centered righteousness is humility instead of

pride. Humility instead of pride. God's law teaches you, as we've seen, that you fall short of his glory and what that produces in the heart of a true disciple is this attitude of humility, not a brash boastfulness about our spiritual attainments, far to the contrary. Matthew 5:3 again, look at it there with me. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Now this mourning of which he speaks is not simply the mourning of standing beside the grave of a loved one because a lot of people stand beside the graves of their loved ones in a state of mourning that receive no comfort, and so it's not just a general mourning that is common to all of humanity. This is a particular kind of mourning of which Jesus speaks, a mourning over our lack of righteousness as is shown in verse 6, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. You hunger and thirst for something that you don't have. You are thirsty for something that you lack and the mourning and the poverty in spirit is over our lack of righteousness.

So what does that mean in this Christ-centered righteousness, this inner righteousness of which we speak? There is this recognition and free unqualified confession that you make about yourself. You recognize that you are a sinner with no merit of your own before God, and as a result of that you mourn over your sin. You are grateful for Christ that he saved you but you look and you recognize this poverty, this spiritual poverty that is the mark of your existence and you mourn over it. You mourn over the remaining corruption that is in your heart. When you sin, you repent and you seek forgiveness from Christ rather than continuing to pursue it. When you sin, you don't run from accountability for that, you don't run from those who would rebuke you for it. You humbly submit to it. You receive the rebuke in humility rather than resenting it and rejecting it in a prideful reaction that is designed only to protect your own reputation.

In the words of 1 John 1, let's turn there for a moment, this self-confession of humility that a true believer makes. 1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins," and this has the idea of an ongoing confession, not simply of individual sins but of our nature, "I confess that I'm a sinner, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." But, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." Do you realize that it is impossible to be a true Christian and to proclaim your own righteousness? The one excludes the other. To be a Christian is to genuinely, truly, rightly say, "I am a Christian," in biblical terms is to say that, "I am a man, I am a woman and I have no righteousness of my own," because Christ came to call sinners, not righteous people to repentance. So there is this confession in humility that recognizes our own sin and simultaneously confesses the great righteousness of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist illustrated that attitude in John 1, the Gospel, chapter 1, verse 27. He said, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." And in John 3:30 he said, "He must increase but I must decrease." This focus on Christ lifting men higher and to a greater focus on Christ while simultaneously growing in our confession of our own poverty of spirit and our unworthiness of the one who loved us and gave himself up for us. So our recognition of Christ produces in us a twin response: we recognize his superlative righteousness and we confess the ways in which we ourselves fall short. This Christ-centered righteousness produces humility rather than pride in our hearts.

Now secondly, it does something else for us, it gives us a focus on God's glory rather than on our own desires. God's glory rather than our own desires. This heart righteousness flips the purpose for which you live. You know, whereas before just speaking from, you know, from personal experience and personal testimony, before I was a Christian my desire was for prominence, for recognition and all of the riches that would flow from that. Well, you know, those things aren't important to me anymore. Those things don't matter like they did in my unsaved state and this is the way it is for every true Christian, sooner or later we grow into our understanding of these things, that whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God. "You've been bought with a price," Paul says in Corinthians, "therefore glorify God in your body." And as we look, I believe we're still in Matthew 5 here, you can flip over to Matthew 6, in light of those general principles this expresses itself even in the priorities with which we pray, the glory of God being the priority of our heart so that Jesus teaches us that the preeminent priority in prayer in this model of prayer that we follow, not simply quote verbatim but we see the themes and the sequence and we follow them and we aim our prayer life after them, Jesus says, "Pray like this, Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. God, as I come to You in prayer, the first thing that I want to express is a recognition of Your great glory and I honor You for it. I can wait, Lord, to talk about the needs of the day. I can wait for intercession for my friends. I can wait on those things because there's a greater higher priority that I want to pray about to You right now and that is, Father, I recognize and ascribe glory to Your name. I adore You. I worship You, I praise You for the magnificence of Your Triune essence. I praise You for Your power, for Your grace, for Your goodness, for Your kindness, for the self-manifestation that You made of Yourself in the Lord Jesus Christ." All of these things expressing honor to God and giving priority to him over our own desires.

So when we ask the question how can I be righteous here, well, I don't know exactly how you would do this unless you record your own prayers which is something I wouldn't recommend necessarily, but in a manner of speaking I would encourage you to listen to the way that you pray. What do you pray about? Maybe I should ask a prior question, do you pray? That's kind of important. And when you pray, is there a place of some kind, even, in your prayers for giving praise and thanksgiving to Christ, praise and thanksgiving to God? This is an expression of a heart that is growing in righteousness, that is preoccupied with his glory and expressing that in the privacy of your own prayer closet or wherever you pray, somehow finding a place, "God, You are great, You are good, You are gracious and I honor You for it." It's God's glory and it's reflected in the way that we pray.

Now this Christ-centered righteousness not only reflects itself in prayer like that, but it also prefers God's glory over earthly things and in verse 24, Matthew 6:24, you see it expressed by our Lord himself in this manner. He says, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." "O Christ, I prefer You over all that this world has to offer. If I lose all of my earthly possessions and still have You, I will still be a man richly and greatly blessed." So this comes out in the way and what it is that you

pursue and what it is that you love. Now look, we all have to earn a living, we all have homes to care for in one manner or another, and families to feed, and children to raise, or parents to care for, all of these things, I get all of that, and when it comes simply to a preoccupation of time, these earthly things have a way of dominating what the focus of our time is but we're not talking about the focus of our time here because we're talking about matters of inner heart righteousness and what it is that we preeminently love and what it is that we are preeminently living for. That's what we're talking about and this Christ-centered righteousness, this God-fearing life has a centerpiece in its affections for the glory of God that is preferred over everything on earth. So this God-centered righteousness makes Christ the object of our devotion.

Now one more thing as we wrap things up here this evening. This is a very awkwardly worded point but I think it will communicate, is that this Christ-centered righteousness seeks spiritual quality rather than spiritual quantity. Quality over quantity and here's what I mean by that. It may be surprising for you, for many, to realize that what we've talked about... No, let me step back here and make an observation about my own sermon. That's kind of weird, isn't it, but I want to point something out to you. As we've been talking about righteous Christian living, I want you to notice something important. I have not said a word to you thus far about the nature of your morning devotions, I haven't said a word to you about when or how long you pray, I haven't said anything about those matters at all yet and that's by design because it is so common, it is so common for people to start there, to start with the mechanics of a devotional life and to lay out for you that you need to read your Bible this much, or you need to pray this much, or you need to pray at this time of day, you know, and inevitably it will tell you that Jesus woke her up early in the morning and that's what you need to do too, you know, and taking narrative passages and making them prescriptive for how we are to live, we haven't done any of that. That's by design because I believe that it is consistent with our Lord's own teaching in Matthew 6. I've said nothing to you about how long you need to pray and so there should be no feeling of guilt about that aspect of anything that's been said here. This righteousness of which we speak is not about X amount of time reading or praying, it's not about X amount of X on the clock about early morning devotions. That's not what I'm talking about here. Whatever place those things have, it is not the central focus of the righteousness that God requires from us, and what we find is that prayer – listen to me carefully – prayer in and of itself is certainly not a substitute for this righteousness. You just start praying trying to be righteous, you're probably wasting your time if you haven't dealt with these preliminary issues of which we speak, these foundational matters that we have emphasized here.

Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 6:5. He rebukes praying so much, certain kinds of praying. He says in verse 5, "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." He says they're praying but it's not righteous. Wow. Right there is a, it's one of those drop-dead moments of recognition that you say, "Okay, this is something different. The Bible's describing something different than what is common parlance in many Christian circles." Jesus says, "when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is

in secret," pray in a way no one can see it. That's what your Father's after. Then in verse 7 he goes further and says, "when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." So many messages I heard early in my Christian life laying guilt trip upon guilt trip because you're not praying enough, you're not praying long enough, you're not praying early enough. You've heard those messages, haven't you? You've heard preachers talk that way to you, designed to guilt you into the motivation to pray, like that works, like that produces long-term results. Sure. Jesus, here's what I want you to see here before I lose my train of thought, Jesus here rebukes and rejects long-winded praying in some circumstances. He says, "The Gentiles pray and pray and use all kinds of repetition and they think they'll be heard for their many words. I'm telling you," Jesus says, "do not be like them. Don't multiply words just for the sake of filling the clock and filling the air with the flapping of your tongue. Do not do that," he says. "You are wasting your time."

I gotta tell you, when I grasped that principle, it was immensely liberating. It actually made me want to pray more recognizing that length of time was not what Jesus was asking for, what he was calling us to. He says in contrast and then he goes in, in verse 9, and gives us that model prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer. "Don't pray that way, pray like this." And you see the simplicity and the variety of the request that he makes, and that he models for us to make, I should say. Scripture in other places warns against multiplying words in prayer and lays forth before us the emptiness of praying with a wrong heart. Your heart must be right before your prayers matter so that in Psalm 66:18, David said, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear me." James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives." Your heart is wrong and so your prayers are useless. And husbands both in the room and over the live stream, let me just remind you that Scripture speaks a special word to us about these things in 1 Peter 3:7 when it says, "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, and give her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered." Multiple places in Scripture, multiple, multiple places in Scripture, God expressing his rejection of prayers that are wrongly ordered from a disordered heart. And so the answer to this righteousness, the pursuit of this righteousness is not simply to simply start praying without examining your heart first. And wives, I would venture to say that that admonition is implied to go both directions because God has no partiality.

And so what we see, then, is that there is this place that is needed for the cultivation of a sincere, earnest simplicity of life in the spiritual realm that is far better than the complex systems that are sometimes laid upon us in the name of righteousness. Think about some of the great prayers in the Bible and just how brief and earnest and simple they are. Nearly half of the Psalms are under 12 verses long. I think the number is 73 that are 12 or less, and my numbers are probably off there, but you can do the counting, you can do the math on that and see that a preponderance of the Psalms are very brief, could be read in 60 seconds or less. That must mean something. Peter's great prayer when he was sinking into the water after a few steps of defying nature and he started to sink, "Lord, save me!" Simple. To the point. "This is what I need. God, help me now. Christ, help me now." And other things could be multiplied as well. Sure, sure, we would hope that over time that as

you develop this heart righteousness that there would be a growth in prayer that would manifest itself in a greater devotion of time to prayer, but that's, if I can show my city of railroads roots and the way that things used to be, that's the caboose on the train, it's not the engine that pulls it. The time comes as a matter, as a result of pursuing this righteousness, this heart righteousness first and that's what we mean by spiritual quality not spiritual quantity.

Let me just simplify life for you. If you're not serious about this heart righteousness, let me encourage you to abandon praying because you're wasting your time anyway. You can't possibly be enjoying it and you can't be accomplishing anything in it when you're regarding wickedness in your heart. Just stop. At least you would eliminate the hypocrisy. At least you would eliminate the hypocrisy of praying when you're not serious about what you're doing anyway. Of course, it would be far better for you to earnestly seek repentance and this poverty of spirit and this mourning over sin of which Jesus speaks and then pray from that earnest humble position of a man who loves righteousness more than he loves life itself.

So what can we say about these things? This is the life that God calls us to. This is the life that God blesses. These heart attitudes are an indication of the work of the Spirit of God within you. If you see these motions of your heart, this is the work of the Spirit within you. It is a mark of a true Christian and it is worth your time to pursue and develop and water and cultivate all of those desires because this is the life that God truly blesses, and as you orient your spiritual life toward this heart-centered, Christ-centered righteousness, you will be positioning yourself to walk in those coming good works which God has prepared beforehand for you that you should walk in them. May God help us all to do so.

Let's pray.

Father, we do honor Your name. We seek Your kingdom. We bow before Your will. We are dependent upon You for our daily bread and for the fruit of this spiritual life of which we have spoken here today. May Your Spirit produce it abundantly in the ears and in the hearts of every Christian that hears my voice. Father, for those that have been convicted and have seen that they are outside the reality of this true spiritual life, God, I pray, God, we ask again for them that You would have mercy upon them, that Your Spirit would take away their stony heart and give them a heart of flesh that they would repent, believe in Christ, and bring forth fruit in keeping with genuine repentance. Help us all to that noble end, our God, and we'll give You the praise and the glory which is our desire all along. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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