

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

Two Kinds of Righteousness (4): The Practice of Piety

Matthew 5.20, 5.48-6.18

3.13.22

^{5.20} "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

² "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³ "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

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.

⁶ "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

⁷ "And 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. ⁸ "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

⁹ "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ 'Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen .'

¹⁴ "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

¹⁶ "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

We've been looking at *The Sermon on the Mount* Jesus Christ's most famous sermon. At this point, Jesus is interpreting God's commands. He's NOT teaching as usual teachers from His day as advocates of ONE PARTICULAR school of thought ...He's not saying, "I represent the progressive or the conservative and traditional party on this issue..."

Instead, He's saying, "As the Law Giver, I'm giving you the right understanding of each command and its implications...though you've all ingeniously muted My law...I've come to fill the law with

meaning, to put the heart back in it, to show you that the law depicts the good life – a wholeness that’s full, free, and beautiful.

Today, Jesus comes to the seventh and final example of two kinds of righteousness – artificial, man-made, synthetic-righteousness (the best human beings can do) and, in contrast, a whole-person, integrated goodness that only God can plant and cultivate in us.

This seventh illustration relates to what we, might call “virtue signaling” – The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as *“An attempt to show other people that one is a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media.”*

Jesus raises an enormous issue: human beings often do the right things for the wrong reasons.

How do we become, “perfect” (last verse of CH 6) i.e. how do we *integrate* our actions and motives – to do the right things for the right reasons? It’s NOT as easy as we might think...IN FACT, it’s actually impossible without a powerful influence that comes NOT only from outside of ourselves and our own willpower – but from outside this world altogether.

So let’s look at : 1) Motives Matter

2) Identity Inspires

3) Practicing Piety

Recently, the British comedian, Ricky Gervais, was asked why he went so hard on the celebrities at the *Golden Globes Awards* (that he hosted FIVE times) and he told the interviewer :*“People are just sick of celebrities’ virtue signaling and telling them what to do. It’s so funny over the last few years...I’ve seen the change, where ordinary people are getting sick of multi-millionaires telling them to recycle when everyone knew they were flying around in private jets and limos.”*

He’s raising the same issue that Jesus is raising, one wants to look virtuous (in the eyes of others) more than one wants to actually BE virtuous.

In six illustrations Jesus ...expanding the Law from merely external prohibitions and applies them to our hearts and intentions. And THEN in today’s section, Jesus moves from HOW human beings ingeniously (or so we THINK) we “ingeniously” limit or shrink or narrow-down God’s prohibitions and make them more “doable” but in doing so, we’re actually trying to tame God and keep Him out of our business. “I’ve never actually killed anyone or slept with another man’s wife... So, no one can accuse me of being a murderer or an adulterer. I’m a truly righteous man!”

And now, Jesus continues to illustrate these two types of righteousness but POSITIVELY. He’s saying that just as the heart, the intentions, the purposes ONLY God can see, just as the motives matter in why and how you avoid WRONG...motives matter to God in the way you do right.

In Hebrew literature/rhetoric, when lists are used, it's often the last point on the list that carries the greatest weight. If this IS the seventh illustration (seven's a big number in the Bible! Proverbs 6.16: There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him...) then Jesus is saying, "The heart attitude in doing GOOD *is even more important than it is in avoiding evil.*"

And THIS climactic example is in three parts: the three orientations we take in the practice of spirituality or spiritual disciplines or religious piety are OUTWARD (what we do toward others – acts of kindness or charity) UPWARD (how we relate to Him who is above – prayer) and INWARD (how we keep ourselves in line – fasting, self-discipline, self-control).

Whether you're a Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim or Jew or a Christian... or, if you see yourself (as many do) as "spiritual but not religious"... you face outward (in relating to others) and upward (in relating to God or the gods) and inward (in relating to yourself).

The case could even be made – if you think of a person's god as being whatever is the highest value in that person's life – even secular or atheistic people face these three directions and attempt to do good... OR ...at least to LOOK GOOD... in the eyes of others.

And just as the first six illustrations came in a formula ("You have heard...but I say to you...murder, adultery, divorce, vows, revenge, enemies) here the three directional practices (out, up, inward) are introduced by a formula: when you give, pray, fast.

Then there's the standard spiritual, religious or secular way of doing these things: whether it's in the religious community ("in the synagogue") or whether in the everyday workplace ("and in the streets...") we all find creative, shrewd, clever, slippery, slimy ways of turning these practices into ways of getting the immediate approval/applause/acceptance we need.

Then there's Jesus Christ's alternative righteousness that we can't work up: don't let the right hand know what the left hand is doing i.e. TOP-SECRET righteousness (repeated 3x).

There's hyperbole here – I'm not sure that people actually blew a trumpet when they gave but we've all "trumpeted" our achievements and our sacrifices: when I empty the dishwasher or fold the laundry, I find the most imaginative ways of letting people know about it... and they always applaud me and they never know that I get off on it and get a rush of dopamine and a sense that I am really a very special person – no one ever knows! (Shhhhh-h-h-h-h!)

When I'm on a diet...exercising self-control, working out, getting up early, working late – I find ways to squeeze it into my conversations – I can humble-brag with the best of them! And people always walk away thinking, "That T.J., he sure is a good guy – hard-working, diligent, strong and just a general, all-round good person!"

Is there NOT a wholesome, sense of success and accomplishment? Are we really THAT dark? Well, the psychology of virtue-signaling is complex. God Himself pronounced His works of creation... and some times... I have to remind myself: "I am not God."

I know it IS possible to give and get compliments and a pat on the back in a healthy, wholesome way... but I've also seen that the lust for human approval and applause in my own life... is darker than I've imagined...and what I think of as my own cleverness is sometimes slippery...and oftentimes plain slimy!

Why do we long for approval from people? Why is it so hard to have that wholesome sense of accomplishment... but I just can't keep it to myself...? I have to slip it into the dialogue because I want people to approve of me, like me, be impressed by me, respect, thumbs up. And social media...social media...new level!

And the answer is – I'm insecure. Life is scary. I don't want to be a loser... I want my life to matter...I want to be significant, a somebody.

And it turns out that the impulse I'm describing was actually instilled in me...IN US...in every human being by God Himself. We were made for glory (read the Eighth Psalm)... and to some degree we can "rain that down" on others but ultimately it must come from God, the King of Glory (Psalm 24).

Ultimately, our work, our family, our looks, our success or even fame and all the accolades those things might occasion... they leave me dry and unsatisfied... I need a source of affirmation that's NOT dependent on what I do but on who I AM. I have to become a new person and I have to (I GET to!) LIVE out of that new identity!

The truth that God is a Father to His people is not unique to Jesus Christ. You'll find it (sparingly) in the Hebrew Bible and it was found in some of the writings at the time Jesus spoke ... but no one put the Fatherhood of God so very central as Jesus did.

References to God as "Father" or "Heavenly Father" are found throughout Matthew but this is the densest concentration – here in THIS section of the Sermon on the Mount. The point Jesus is making is to say, "If God is your Father, and YOU are His chosen child, His adopted and Beloved son or daughter – that identity inspires the new kind of righteousness. I will plant that in you and I will cultivate it for your whole life!"

Jesus is not coming simply to give us an example of righteousness that we have to follow – that wouldn't be good news at all. He's come to give us a new identity, a new status.

Because Christianity has left such a deep mark on the Western World, we just assume that God is everyone's Father... we're NOT shocked by the idea as they were when Jesus taught them but

the truth is...(and this is why we started our series in John CH 3): your mother gave life to your body but God Himself must give life to your spirit... Jesus came, God and Man in one Person, He came, the eternal Son to give His status to sinners who had been orphaned from God since our first parents first disobedience.

Jesus Christ always prayed, "Father..." or "Abba, Father" (like Papa) but the time came for Him to stand-in for me...He took the place of T.J. the sinner, the orphan...and when He hung, suspended between Heaven and Earth (Mediator) He prayed, not "Father" but "My God, My God."

At the end of this book, Matthew CH 27 (v. 47), the Unique and True Son is dying and He prays, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned Me?" The justice I deserved was coming down onto Him who had been perfectly united to the Father for all eternity – there is a horror that engulfs Him and He loses the face of the Father... FOR ME.

He is, as it were, giving to ME...and to all who believe in all ages... He is giving away His right to call God Father... He is losing His Sonship in order to give that identity to rebels and sinners.

And in that new identity, that I am a child of God and He is my Father...in that I find, BY FAITH, a level of affirmation, recognition, acceptance, honor and glory that no human being or group could ever give me.

There is an infinite, eternal, unchangeable Being whose Presence permeates the Universe (He is as present a billion light years away as He is here right now) and He calls me "My beloved son..."

I have a very important Father...and He is very fond of me! And when I'm believing that, I just lose my craving for the recognition and applause and validation of people. In fact the inspiration in this identity overshadows everything else.

Now what does this mean for the practice of piety? How will this enable a new and liberated way of outward, upward, inward living? How will I do spiritual practices differently?

Well, first, you can't see the new status ON ME ... (Can you?!) I mean, it's in secret. It's not visible or audible or tangible. And frankly, that's one reason we prefer the miniscule, paltry praise of people because at least we can hear it...and see it and get a dopamine bump from it.

The reward of My Father...is by faith. Faith deals with the unseen. I'm receiving what Jesus did for me...in LIVING by FAITH I am living out of the new identity that's reserved in Heaven for me... but I can't see it.

I don't find faith to be comforting... in fact, it's very uncomfortable because everything in me is crying out for something I can touch, see and control ... and faith is not that. It's resting and

receiving; it's trusting and waiting. AND YET, it does receive, the influence of God's Heart does press on my heart and little by little I am coming to look like our Father. He is making me complete as He is complete. It's True and Real... but it's by faith...in secret...out of my control.

Second, as a defensive person is always ready to give you a checklist of tasks he/she's completed as if to say, "See?! You said I'm lazy but I've done THIS and THAT and THE OTHER THING!" And there's no refuting that person.

But the child of God is able to boast NOT in his or her accomplishments or check-list but in the LORD! Let Him who boasts boast in the Lord!"

Here's St Paul to the Corinthians: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." (1.30-31; also Jer 9.23-24 et al)

So get used to doing that. We were built to boast... but not in ourselves. And if we're really boasting in Christ, we can receive wholesome compliments... in a whole-some way (we don't HAVE to have it... but we receive it as grace and yet another token of our Father's care.)

Last, be simultaneously skeptical of self (harder on yourself than on others) and celebrating of Christ. Faith is a gift so just tell the Lord that you need it... "Father, I'm volunteering but I wonder if I'm doing it for the wrong reasons... please help me trust that I (despite what I see in myself) really am a child of God." Your motives will never **make** me totally pure on this side... but there IS , in the life of repentance and faith a wholeness and integrity that's different from life outside of Christ.

If you're not sure that you're IN Christ and started this life of grace, come talk to me or someone up here after the service.

Next week we'll zoom in of the filet mignon of the Sermon on the Mount – prayer (a practice in which we ALL need help) I hope you'll be with us!