

Sermon 22, A Secret Righteousness, Matthew 6:1

Bulletin verse: Gal 1:10

The theme of Matthew 6:1-18 is *pure religion*. How do you have pure religion? How do you practice piety in a way that honors God? Jesus tells us. You do everything good you do strictly in God's sight, to please Him (v. 1). Specifically, you

1. Give alms in God's sight, vv. 2-4
2. Pray in Secret, vv. 5-6
3. Pray for God's Glory, Kingdom, and will, and your own provision, forgiveness, and sanctification, vv. 7-13
4. Forgive those who sin against you, vv. 14-15
5. Fast in secret, vv. 16-18

- I. One Action: Doing Righteousnesses
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Proposition: Do your righteous deeds to gain the reward your Father generously grants to those who do righteous deeds for His sake.

Last week we finished the fifth chapter of Matthew. There, we saw Jesus describe the character and destiny of the Christian, and then the requirements of the moral law. Now, from describing strictly moral things, Jesus begins to describe religious things. Indeed, we will discover that chapter 6 deals with heart religion from verses 1-19, and then with the question of ordinary daily life from verses 19-34. In other words, Jesus is very practical here. He tells us what the law requires. Then He tells us what kind of religious activity pleases God. Then He tells us how to live our daily lives. And, moving forward, we will see in chapter 7 the role of discernment in the Christian life, and how we must be careful to discern the true prophet and the true way.

But when we come to this section on heart religion, Jesus first opens by stating the general principle. So, in a way that I haven't done since we were in the Beatitudes, I want to preach on a single verse, Matthew 6:1, looking at the general principle of true religion. That principle is this: motive is everything. Good deeds are mandatory. Of course. Religious worship is mandatory. Absolutely. But why you do those good deeds is really the bottom line. With God's

help, I will show you this morning that righteous deeds must be done for the Father's sake. Righteous deeds must be done for the Father's sake.

I. One Action: Doing Righteousnesses

What are the righteousnesses that Jesus talks about here? Not just charitable deeds, as in giving money to a church, a school, a charitable organization, or someone in need that your family knows. Those are deeds of righteousness, yes. But as the rest of the chapter makes clear in talking about alms, prayer, and fasting, the the righteous deeds Jesus is talking about here are primarily religious deeds and by extension all acts of obedience to God. Remember, *righteous* means "in accordance with right." Righteousnesses, or righteous deeds, would then ultimately be any time you do the right thing. Beware of doing the right thing!

Now, as we saw last week, Jesus isn't saying to do the wrong thing. He clearly said, in the previous verse, that we must be perfect. We must be doing righteous things all the time. In fact, we should always be righteous and always be doing the right thing, every minute and second of every day.

Yet, precisely when we are pursuing righteousness like that, something intrudes. A huge temptation will come your way the minute you start trying to be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.

II. Two Different Motives

A. To Be Seen by Men

What is that temptation? Well, it is just this: to do the right thing for the sake of being seen doing it by another person.

This is the love of worldly glory. This is the love of human adulation. And it is a subtle sin. It's subtle precisely because it can often motivate us to do the right thing! Jesus doesn't say, "Beware of doing wicked things in front of people." He doesn't have to! We know that it's a bad idea to sin in broad daylight. We know that we want to hide and do evil things all alone, in the dark, away from other people who might see us being bad. No, the problem He's warning against is not the problem of doing wicked things in public. What Jesus is warning about is something entirely different: the problem of doing good things in public!

If your boss comes by your office every few minutes, randomly, that can really motivate you to keep working. If your spouse is sitting in the same room with you, that can really have an influence on what you allow yourself to watch on the TV. If the pastor is around, that can make you want to bring up Bible topics and talk about theological subjects you otherwise wouldn't mention.

All of these are good things! There's nothing wrong with faithfulness at work or discretion in your TV viewing. But Jesus warns us to beware of doing the right thing just for the sake of the people watching.

This sin is so subtle I'm having trouble finding appropriate examples of it. Let's say you really want to impress that girl at work, or that you really like hearing your boss tell you that you

did a good job on project X. Is that a sin? Maybe. In fact, Jesus clearly labels doing good things — not bad things, good things — *for the sake of the people watching* as a sin.

You see, family of God, the whole point Jesus is making is this: *motive counts*.

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.²

The point is not what you're doing, but why. Why are you trying to do a good job on project X? Why are you trying to impress your coworker, your spouse, your pastor, yourself? What hollowness needs filling? What craving needs satisfaction? What ache needs soothing? Jesus says, categorically, across the board, that the craving for human approval, taken as an ultimate goal (an idol) is a sin.

To have human approval is not the sin. Oh no. It's wanting it more than you want anything else. It's looking to it for your ultimate satisfaction and meaning.

Perhaps the most obvious way to apply this is child-raising. I know you all, and I know that you desire, as Alexa and I desire, that your children will grow up and be Christians. In fact, I know that you want them to be better Christians than you are — not just now, when it would be nice to have them obedient and loving at home, but years down the road, when they have families of their own and may be living far away. Or as my grandfather once expressed it to me, when you have a son you don't want him to grow up to be a hippie or a druggie or some other kind of outrageous sinner. And so, you tend to apply pressure to your child to not be those things.

How do you intend to teach your children to love Jesus? Well, the obvious ways, right? Bring them to church. Teach them to listen to the sermon and put money in the offering basket and learn the Sunday School answers. Read the Bible to them at home. Pray with them before bed. Ask them about the sermon at Sunday lunch.

But kids are savvy. If you do all those things just to impress them, they will know it. Those religious deeds have to be real! Your kids have to be able to see that you genuinely love Jesus, and that that's why you read the Bible to them, pray with them, tell them to listen to the sermon, and tell them that certain fun activities are not appropriate for Sunday. When they get older, that's why you tell them that many films and television shows and video games and kinds of music are ungodly, and that playing, watching, or listening to them is sinful. That's why you do not allow them to date non-believers, or have unsupervised romantic relationships. Why? If it's all about external religiosity, your child will almost certainly rebel against your standards. He might still rebel if you really do all these things because you love Jesus. Parenting has no guarantees. But again, I repeat that if you do all those righteous deeds because you want your child to be a certain way, and not because you love and enjoy Jesus Christ, then you will almost

² T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

certainly not get the child you want. Your rank hypocrisy will be only too obvious to your children.

The point here, again, is not that it's wrong to get human approval or even to try for it. If you're writing a paper or working on a project or growing a garden for your mom or doing anything, it's good to think about pleasing the people for whom you're doing the work. But that can't be your ultimate goal! That mustn't be your final thought. No.

B. To Be Seen by God

Rather, when you're doing the right thing, your bottom-line motive must be this: you want to please God. In fact, other parts of the Bible go so far as to say that whatever you're doing, it's not actually good (as in pleasing to God) unless you're doing it out of love for Him.

Let me put it in human terms. Let's say you have a girlfriend and the relationship is getting serious and you're ready to pop the question. You take her to a nice restaurant, and you're dressed up in a tux. You get down on one knee, pull out the ring, and ask the question. As soon as she says "Yes," you turn to the folks at the table behind you and say, "Did I look good doing that or what?"

What's your new fiancée going to think? What should she think? Should she be happy that you at least went to all the effort to put on a tux and practice your getting down on one knee? No! She has every right to say, "The fact that you weren't doing it for love of me spoils the whole thing."

Brothers and sisters, that's God's attitude toward your good works. It doesn't matter how good they are if they are not done to be seen by Him. If your primary motive is getting praised by your teachers, getting lauded by the crowds/your spouse/your boss/yourself, then Jesus says, "The Father isn't honored. The Father is aware that you are offering this good deed to the idol of human praise, not to Him. And He will treat you accordingly."

Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you see how the exact same action can proceed from all kinds of motives? Jesus isn't condemning the desire to please other people; rather, He's condemning the ultimacy of that desire. It must be a subsidiary desire. It must be subordinated to the desire to please your Father in heaven. God tells us that we can please Him by doing good work, by blessing our spouses with love, by doing the right thing in every situation. But He demands that we be doing it ultimately for Him.

You see, each motive brings about its own reward.

III. Two Different Rewards

A. To Be Rewarded by Men

The first kind of reward is the one you get from doing things to show off. It's the one you get when you get an "attaboy" from your boss, or your name in the paper, or even a university or an airport named after you. Sure, it feels good. But it doesn't last. And further, if this reward is the only reward you're seeking, then it's the only one you'll get.

B. To Be Rewarded by God

Jesus tells us that if you do your righteous deeds as in the Father's sight, then you will have His reward. He only states the negative, of course — but He implies the positive. Nothing good done for the Father's sake will go unrewarded. Not the least cup of cold water, or the smallest act of kindness, or the smallest donation when no one was looking, will be wasted. The Father will reward you.

What will that reward consist of? At a minimum, knowing Him better and being more like Him. Jesus told us in the previous chapter that we ought to be like our heavenly Father. Here the reward is that we will get to fulfill our purpose in being like Him. But further, the Father is unimaginably generous. You can't name or think of a single thing that He hasn't thought of first. And everything you have right now came from Him. He's already, unasked, given you life, health, air, light, freedom, arms and legs and sexual organs. He's likely given you new life, health, joy, peace, and love, not to mention His Holy Spirit. Do you imagine that His reward will be chintzy?

IV. One Presupposition: The Father's Reward Is the Best Reward

Indeed, Jesus instructs us that the Father's reward is the best reward. Do you believe that the Father's reward is better than the adulation of the crowd, or of that one person you really want to impress? Do you trust in your heart of hearts that you will not be put to shame by trusting in the Father's reward? Oh, you must! No one that has waited for Him has ever been put to shame. Everyone who deserved a reward from Him got it.

Brothers and sisters, I leave you with this: do righteous deeds. But don't do them for the sake of being noticed and lauded by other human beings. Do them because the Father loves obedient children, and rewards them in ways unimaginably good. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1Co 2:9 NKJ). Amen.