

## *Practicing Righteousness*

Matthew 6:1

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Let's turn in God's word this morning as we continue in the Sermon on the Mount as we look at Matthew 6. This morning, you might note that we only have one verse which we are looking at. That is, it's only one verse that I am reading as we begin to look at this whole section. But I will be expounding on what Jesus introduces here as we look in the broader context in chapter 6.

As one writer asked the question, "What are the marks? What are the marks of a heart that has been drastically changed by the grace of God? If we trust in Christ, what should Christian hearts be like? It is not simply a matter of morally virtuous behavior. It is quite possible," he writes, "to do all sorts of morally virtuous things when our hearts are filled with fear, with pride, and a desire for power." It is completely possible for us to do all sorts of morally virtuous things, yet our hearts be filled with fear and with pride and a desire for power.

This is not a new idea. This is an idea which Jesus understood as He taught His disciples. And so, as I read this passage to you this morning, I want you to be reminded that Jesus is speaking to a group of people that have already committed themselves to following Jesus in discipleship. It isn't to say it is not applicable at all to those who do not believe. It's just that one must understand that what precedes this is they've already decided that they are going to follow Jesus.

You may be sitting here this morning and you are not a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, I want you to hear this very clearly and run from anyone who tells you otherwise. You can never come to Jesus through your behavior. Our behavior does nothing to impress a holy God. All of which Jesus is speaking here is talking about how, then, are we to live the Christian life? How are we to practice righteous actions in a way that is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ? So, if you do not know Jesus, you do not get to know Him by your righteous deeds. And let me tell you, thanks be to God. You do not need to get your life in order to come to Jesus. You do not need to stop all the bad stuff you're thinking about so that you can come to Jesus. You need to bring all of it to Him. All of it. And He in His mercy and His grace will receive you.

Now, please note, you cannot come to Jesus and expect that He will not change you. He will and does change us. But it is as a result of His grace and not the other way around. Thanks be to God.

But Christian, I want to say to you as I say to myself, we cannot simply ride the Christian life off the residue of previous spiritual highs. We cannot simply rest on what we think we know. God actually calls us to action. But please note, it is always an action which is empowered by the Holy Spirit in our hearts and motivations first, then works outward. But the outward and the inward are meant to be together.

So, let's look at God's word this morning about what it means to practice righteousness. What does a heart changed by grace look like? He says, Matthew 6:1,

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Now, our heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus who taught us how to live. Lord, we cannot live this life on our own strength. We can try, but it does not give us what we truly desire, what it means to be truly human which is to be in communion with a holy and living God enjoying your grace and mercy, and to enjoy life and you forever as you intended. We need you to enable us to do that. So, Lord, what does it look like for us to walk with you, to practice what you call us to practice? Lord, make us aware by your Holy Spirit the places where we seek to practice outwardly righteous things for the praise

of others. Help us by the word of your power to unearth motivations which are not of you but are born of pride. Help us, Lord, to unmask that pride and bring it to you and ask that you would work in us a heart that is deeply devoted in worship to you. And help us to walk with you seeking your love, your grace, and your mercy as the satisfaction. In fact, may your love, may your grace and mercy be our home that enables us to celebrate because you are our Father. And you love us completely. Help us to do this, O Lord. Help us to not rest on anything by Jesus alone. Now, help us by your Spirit. And help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we look at this passage this morning, you're going to note that we have a passage which I've read which is only one verse. Yes, I intend to cover the other verses because they are meant to be carried in a block. And I want to make sure we get to all of it. And so, I'll be reading bits and portions of the entire context. But as we understand this together, what Jesus wants to unearth even by this opening verse is He wants us to understand that practicing righteousness has everything to do with our motivation. Secondly, understanding what that motivation sees as its focus. What's the goal of why we practice these things?

Then He gives us three examples, these three practices of giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. Why would He pick these three? He picks these three because all three were a part of the key structure of what it meant for the Jew to follow God. But I want you to understand that that which Jesus critiques, we must understand that there was a lot of variety among Jews and their practice of these three things. Not all sought to do these things for the praise of others. But some did. As well as those who were coming from their Gentile or their gnostic or their pagan background, they, too, sought to do certain kinds of religious activities so that they could manipulate their gods, their idols, to do what they wanted them to do.

So, Jesus is going to the core of what does it look like with a heart that is changed to practice these things? And there, I believe, we will find our home, our home in the Lord. So, let's look together at motivation, focus, and practices.

First, motivation. When Jesus says, here in verse 1, He begins with a warning which is important. What is He warning us about? He's warning us at that at the very nature of what we are is our motivation, what one might call our self. He's warning us about our ego. He's warning us about that which is in us that desires to receive a reward. Please understand, however, that the text doesn't have something to say that wanting a reward is a bad thing. He's saying, what is the reward you're seeking? Because deeply imbedded even going all the way back to the garden, God looked at Adam and Eve and said, do this and live or do this and die. So, there is a sense in which the problem is not reward; the problem is, what reward are you seeking?

And when the word "reward" is used throughout this passage, it doesn't mean in the sense that we receive a reward from God like a statue, or as C. S. Lewis talked about as a silver cup or a hand clap. It's more in the sense of vindication that you will show by the way in which you live your life the one in whom you find refuge, the one who vindicates you. In other words, your motivations point to the source for while you're obeying to begin with. So, He's warning us to be careful about the way we go about practicing our faith. And when Jesus warns us, pay attention, right?

And He rightly says that other people who are looking or who we might think are looking, that they themselves aren't the problem. It's that their presence and our desire to please them becomes a matter of temptation. He says, "For then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." He is saying, if you want to receive a reward from people around you, go right ahead. Then that's what you will receive. But that's a very different thing than receiving vindication, than receiving my grace and love. For whom are we performing?

But the first question is, why are we doing it? This issue of motivation. What's important is that some commentators and writers have tried to find this sense that Jesus is trying to show something about

inward versus outward or outward versus inward. But actually, what Jesus is getting at in this entire passage is that both hold together, that the outward is to be tied to the inward and the other way around.

And so, He begins by saying to them in verse 2, "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may be praised by others." Now, that doesn't sound terribly funny to us, but He was actually using a form of humor. He was using a rather ostentatious action to bring out the ridiculousness of it. And He's telling us something about what He just said, which is that there is a motivation which seeks the praise of others or there is a motivation to please the Lord.

The question before us is our motivation will demonstrate where we think the source of godliness actually is. And in some sense, we have a question. Our motivation will show where that source of godliness is. So, if I'm looking to seek your praise, then I think the source of godliness is me because I want you to praise me. If, however, I believe (rightly, as the scriptures would teach) that the source of godliness is never us but always Him, that it is His godliness that flows through us, then He's the source of godliness and He's the one to whom all praise is to be rendered because He's the source. He's the power. He's simply reworking my will, my motivations, my desires.

This interconnectedness between an inward drive and outward action is the sign of maturity. So, Jesus wants His disciples to grow in their maturity because they were familiar with giving to the poor. They were familiar with prayer. And they were familiar with fasting. But now, what He's doing is He's drawing a contrast. Now, you've seen these things practiced in essence. But I'm saying to you that maturity, the mark of maturity, begins not with the outward action but with your inward motivation.

And there are obstacles, are there not, to our growth in maturity? One mark that we sometimes think is the mark of maturity is an intellectual capacity. Well, I know the right things to do, so I'm going to do them. So, that's the sign of maturity. No, that's not the case because we know that, in fact, embarrassingly so to my shame and to our shame, if we understood the degree to which the Pharisees and the religious leaders of this time were devoted to prayer, it would shame us when compared to our relative lack of praying. So, they were praying. But the issue is it's not just about knowing what to do or knowing how to do it or when to do it. It's not just knowing how to memorize scripture and how much scripture you have memorized, even though those things are right and good. But that in and of itself can be an obstacle to maturity because we stop short.

The second obstacle to maturity is a lack of discernment. Here, Jesus, as we're going to see in just a moment with regard with one of the practices, is trying to help them to see that neither the pagans get it right nor do the Jewish leaders get it right. You must exercise discernment. And it takes discernment, a wisdom to understand, a self-reflection to understand what is my true motivation for why I'm doing what I'm doing? Am I seeking to please others myself, or am I seeking to honor and please God? This requires self-reflection. And oftentimes, it's very easy to walk through life because we're busy, we're distracted, and we do not act out of discernment. Jesus is saying, beware of what's going on in your heart.

But not just Jesus. Paul would also echo this in the letter to the Corinthians. In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul says the following.

"So then no more boasting about men. All things are yours whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or of life or death or the present or the future, all are yours. You are of Christ, and Christ is of God. So then men ought to regard us as servants of Christ as those who are entrusted with the great secret things of God, now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear. But that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

What Paul is saying there is he's getting at an application forum of what Jesus is teaching here. Paul understood what a temptation it was to live out your life to please others but also to please yourself. And so, he says, I care very little about what other people think of me. In fact, I care very little about what I think of myself. But then he goes one step further. Even if I were to venture an examination of what I think of myself, even if I find myself to be pure in seeking to walk in righteousness, even depending on God's grace, even that I cannot depend on. I must only give myself over to the righteous judge who is the Lord.

Do you see the motivation? He wants us to walk in obedience. But he's saying it's ultimately the Lord. That is the mark of maturity is when we are free in our motivations to say it doesn't matter what others think. It doesn't matter what I think of myself. I am free to practice these things because my focus is the Lord.

Jesus says here in verse 6:1 and then He unpacks in the different forms of practices, he says here, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." It's said negatively there. But positively stated, what Jesus is saying is your focus to worship the Lord in the actions which you take in your walking in obedience with me.

And that reward is a recognition not of God giving us a silver cup, but of the Lord saying, when you give to those in need, you're seeing that they are in need and your giving to them is an act of love. When you pray to me as I am teaching you how to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," your will, not my will, is an action in prayer of saying, Lord, I love you. I love your will more than mine. And in the act of fasting, I'm saying that I love you more than the gifts of food and water that you give to me. I am going to discipline my body to be more dependent on you so that I don't just because dependent on the gifts you give. All of these in some form of fashion are an act of love.

John Stott in his commentary on this passage brought this out wonderfully. And I believe it is very true. That these practices are really about love at their very base. And so, when we seek to act them out with the Lord as our focus saying, I love you because you have first loved me, that my reward is a recognition that I am loved. I'm at peace, and I give myself to these things. I give myself to all forms of obedience and of righteousness because I am wholly and deeply loved. I am loved because I get to do them. And I get to do them because I am loved. Yes, I recognize that that's circular reasoning. But that's still reasoning. And that's the kind of loop I want to be in. I want to love because I've been loved. And if I'm loved, do you know how motivating that is?

I was at the end of my rope. I had only been in seminary just a few weeks. Yes, I had been away from college and away from my family. I had been living in Chicago and going to Wheaton College a long way from home. But I never felt more alone than my first semester in seminary. I didn't have roommates. I was living in a room over the garage of a family that had given generously to the seminary and allowed for seminaries to come and live cheaply. And so, I got to live in this apartment over the garage and I got a great job at the number one restaurant in the city. I was like, man, I'm rocking and rolling. And by the end of that week, I was desperately lonely. I had fallen into habits of sin even that week because I finally found myself thinking, I've gotten everything I've ever wanted. I'm away from home. I've got a killer job. It's the great restaurant. Everything is happening. I mean, it was like celebrities and rich people. And I'm serving food and partying afterward until middle of the morning. And you get up and you do it all over again, making money hand over fist. Man, it was great.

But I got to the end of that week, and I was like, whoa. My hair wreaked of smoke. I'd been drinking too much. I had one more shift that I needed to be able to make to become a full server. And that Saturday morning, I woke up, and as clear as day, I had a choice to make. And I did not want to make the one that led to righteousness. And I felt utterly alone. And I prayed, Lord, I need you. I am desperate for you. And my friend, who I had known for just about four years at that point, called me that morning. And I said, John, this is what's happening. What do I do? And he says, you've got to get out of there today.

I said, yeah, but I won't have a job. He said, Randy, you've got to get out of there today. And he prayed with me over that phone that morning.

Knowing that I was loved, knowing that the Father heard my prayer asking, Lord, help me. I stand here today as a graduate of seminary only because of that moment. That in a moment of desperate need, a moment trying to decide am I going to go this way or that way, that that morning I needed to know that I was loved because only then could I begin to direct by the Holy Spirit, Lord, I need to walk and follow you. Once we know that we are loved, then our actions and practices become an act of love.

Now, life was not easy after that. There was no hand clap. But I'm here to say that there were days that I didn't know where my next paycheck was going to come from or whether I would be able to pay my bills. But thanks be to God, He provided. He is good and He loves us. And He desires that our walk of obedience is motivated by love because it is His love and we seek to love Him. And He is good all the time. Are you with me?

But Christian, let me say, we do not do these things because we are earning it. But that doesn't mean we don't do them. And sometimes I pray because I'm a pastor; I'm supposed to pray. I have to pray. And sometimes, my emotions are not there with me. Sometimes my heart of love isn't there. But thanks be to God, sometimes when our actions begin to walk His way, the Holy Spirit enables our wills to be changed, our emotions and desires to catch up. But they are not always together. Do you hear me? But sometimes we think because we prize in this culture that if I'm not motivated to do it, then doing it is not sincere. And that can be the case. But sometimes that is a tool of Satan to keep us from praying. If you don't feel like praying, then don't pray. And then we go weeks, months, even years without praying or reading the word or coming to worship.

If it is the Lord's love who brought us here and it is the Lord's love that empowers us here, it is the Lord's love that will carry us there. But our desire and our motivations oftentimes need that time by the word and by the Holy Spirit to catch up; and the Lord does it. And we're not doing it for the praise of others. We're doing it because we love Him.

But let's look at these practices. He gives us these three practices: giving, praying, and fasting. When He talks about the giving, He simply says to them, you've seen it done this way that as you're giving, you're announcing it with a trumpet. You're announcing it with an instrument. So, that's why you're giving. If you're giving because other people are going to be impressed by your gift and the reason for your giving it to the poor, good for you. Give away. But that's going to be your gift. That's your reward.

But He's calling us here to not let each hand know what the other is doing. He's simply saying when we give to those in need or give at all, it's better not to be even mindful of ourselves. Just give. And that oftentimes requires a lot of maturity. There's a lot of intermediate steps. But He's saying if you aren't impressed by your own giving, if you're just giving because I have first given to you, then that is enough. And he says, "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Remember what I quoted from Paul? Paul continues when he says in 1 Corinthians,

"Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time, each will receive his praise from God. Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit so that you may learn from us the meaning of saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another, for who makes you different from anyone else? What you

do, what do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

His whole point is everything you have, every gift, every talent, who cares who has more? Who cares who has less? It's all from God anyway. All of it. Every thread on our bodies, every penny in our bank accounts, everything we have that is us, that sustains us, is all from His hand. So, let's stop comparing and be grateful that we have anything. And let's give from that space. And the Lord, when it is His time, will bring what was done in secret into the light. And if we are giving because He first gave to us, then that will be delight enough.

Second, He talks about praying. And He gives us a form of prayer at the center of which I think it is right to say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Ultimately, He's saying in all of this, not my will but your will be done. Not the praise of others but your pleasure, Lord. Not my praying because I might impress others, but the fact that I am praying because I am in communion with you.

See, what was happening is the Jews who were practicing these things outwardly in the open were seeking to pray prayers that others would be impressed in. But on the pagan side of the equation, they were simply doing these incantations so that as they thought that doing these things, their idols would be benevolent to them. The Greek gods would be kind to them and gracious to them. So, both are a form of manipulation, using religious practices for manipulation. One is to manipulate the praise of others. The other is to manipulate God to do what we want Him to do. But ultimately, they find their center in self-centeredness. It's coming out of a place of ego. I want the praise of others because I need to be filled up because of the praise of others. I want to manipulate God because I think I know what I need most, and I need it filled.

Jesus simply directs them how to pray. And even at the end of it when He says, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," that very prayer is in teaching us to pray, He's praying for us. And in teaching us how to pray, He's teaching us how to pray to get out of this whole mindset of seeking the praise of others or trying to manipulate Him.

And then He tacks on this other point. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you." Here again, it's the motivation. How on the one hand can I pray for the Lord's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, and yet I refuse to forgive those who have a debt towards me and I refuse to forgive the debt, and yet I have been forgiven all these things? It makes us the worst kind of hypocrites. The refusal to forgive others is saying that we reserve the right to drink up God's mercy and grace to the full. But then we get to decide how we want to dole it out.

But I want to make something very clear. Forgiveness doesn't mean the same thing as reconciliation. We can forgive others which is an act that is out of the action of God's forgiveness of us through Jesus Christ. But reconciliation takes time, and so does forgiveness oftentimes. We've talked about this before. That when someone has sinned against us and we're reminded of it, instead of reminding them of it, we oftentimes need to say, Lord, help me to forgive and walk in that forgiveness which I have offered. But reconciliation is a process.

So, please, I'm not suggesting that we need to go and rush and be reconciled. That takes several steps. But the heart of forgiveness can be something we receive and can act on today because forgiveness is what opens the door to reconciliation. If we're unwilling to forgive, reconciliation will not happen.

But Jesus is telling us something about the nature of our prayer. If you are praying because you desire to please me, you will understand that you will forgive as you have been forgiven. Again, back to the motivation.

And then He comes to this last one of fasting. Now, fasting today is entered back into the mainstream. Now, I don't know how many of you practice fasting with regard to spiritual disciplines, but

some of you may be practicing intermittent fasting which is kind of the rage now for weight loss. And that's great. That's fine. But there is still the practice of the spiritual discipline of fasting.

Now, notice all of these practices, Jesus assumes that we're actually doing them. So, some commentators have said, well, we don't need to fast anymore because people take it the wrong way. That's not what Jesus is saying. He assumes that we practice these things. He assumes that we practice praying and assumes that we practice giving to the poor. But when we do them, what are we seeking to do? And in essence, they were practicing fasting in a way that had become a fad. They were just looking awful, forgotten the makeup and curler and everything else, then put on their best clothes. They looked like trash and they were fasting. They were not looking their best selves. But they saw that as an outward form of, look at my dedication. Look how much I'm disciplining myself.

Again, it is to seek the praise of others instead of acting out of faith which is the ground for why we practice fasting. For when we fast, at the times we would normally be eating, the church has regularly taught in practice that when we fast instead of eating, we take that time not to look horrible, not to go about with our heads held low, but to take that time and to pray when we normally would be eating. It is disciplining the body so that we do not become lazy. But it is also disciplining the body to be reminded that we do not depend on food and water alone but upon everything that precedes from His hand, that He is the source.

And so, in these different practices, Jesus is calling not for us to flee them but to see them in light of the proper motivation with the proper focus. And when we do, we begin to practice these things in a way where we find a home, not in the praise of others, not in a better sense of an ego. But we find a home in knowing that in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we have been loved eternally. And because of that, I am free to do all of these things because I can delight in my Father who has given them. Because each of them with a motivation properly established and now empowered by the Holy Spirit, I begin to see Him as not only the source but as the goal of all that I do.

This came home to me this week because there is a week of cycling which is really important to me. It's called the World Championships. The World Championships probably don't mean much to you. But in cycling, it always happens in one place around the world this week. And this year, they happened in Yorkshire, England.

And the field of women cyclists, and particularly American women cyclists, have gone off the charts and they have been winning left and right. But Friday was the women's elite road race. And it was not won by an American, but it was won by a Dutch woman who with a hundred kilometers to go to the finish, she broke away from the rest of the cyclists.

Now, in the cycling world, you don't do that in hopes to stay away because one person against a whole platoon of cyclists working to catch you makes it unlikely that you will finish by yourself. But she was so determined, so focused, that she not only broke away, but she stayed away. She stayed away and kept her head down until she crossed the finish line. She got across that finish line and she got off of her bike. Along the finishing of all major cycling events, there are these large barriers which, for me, they come up to about right here. And the same was the case for this Dutch cyclist.

And as a cyclist, you also have cleats on the bottom of your shoes which are made of carbon fiber. Shoes are very slick when they're made of carbon fiber on their soles. Then you put a cleat on them. It's not a fun thing to wear when you're not on a bike. So, she comes to rest against a barrier. She is surrounded by screaming fans cheering her name on. And she starts to weep. But you don't know why she's weeping other than she's bathing in the praise. But she gets off of her bike and she attempts to climb over the barrier. She does so successfully. And she waddles as she's trying to run. And she runs over. And right in the middle of a throng crowd is her mother, and her mother is saying, "You did it." As she gets to her mom, she embraces her mother and they weep, "I did it. You did it. You finished the race." It was as if nobody else was present. Nobody else, not her team flag, not her compatriots. It was her and her mother in that moment.

This is the focus for the Christian life. We have no other audience. We have no other source. We have no other goal than to see our heavenly Father and to be embraced by the love and grace of our heavenly Father in Jesus Christ, to be empowered to finish the race. But we run the race knowing that the source and the goal is God Himself. May the Lord by His Spirit transform our motivations so that when we give and when we pray and when we fast, we have an audience of one. And we have one Savior. He is our Lord. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would forgive us for the ways in which we practice our righteousness to receive the praise of others or to please our tribe. Lord, we ask that you would help us to be rescued from even pleasing ourselves, but to find that source of godliness which is you alone in Jesus Christ so that as we walk to you and walk with you, we do so because you have first loved us. And we do these things because we love you. Lord, these were never meant to be a means by which we earn salvation. But it becomes the way in which we express our love to you out of salvation. Help us to do this. Help us not to give up these practices of righteousness, but to find the proper place aided by your Spirit to be motivated to love you, to find our home in you, our embrace in you, our freedom in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.