

## **Series Sermon on the Mount**

### **Scripture Matthew 6:1-18**

When Jesus began His public ministry, one of His first statements was “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near (or “at hand”)” (*Matthew 4:17*). During the months of His itinerant ministry throughout Galilee and later Judea He “preached the good news of the kingdom of God” (*Luke 4:43*). Along with His preaching, He demonstrated the powers of the kingdom through His miracles of healing and casting out demons (*Matthew 4:23-24*).

The apostles had observed and listened to all these activities before they were called to be Jesus’ special companions, but until the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, they had a very inadequate understanding of how things worked inside God’s kingdom. The teachings of Jesus made it obvious that life under the rule and authority of God was much different than they had previously imagined.

Jesus, on this occasion on the mountainside, never actually explained to His listeners how they could become kingdom people, but as He continued His teaching, it became more and more obvious that a radical change in their understanding was necessary before they could become members of the kingdom.

Most Jews assumed that righteousness had to be earned by keeping the law. This was the thinking of the religious leaders. They put a lot of personal effort into their religious activities in order to gain favor with God. They wanted their “merits” to outweigh the adverse effects of sin. If the apostles and others were to have a righteousness which would surpass that of the Jewish religious leaders, they would have to cast aside their prior assumptions about works-related-righteousness.

Jesus continued to shape the thinking of His listeners in Matthew chapter 6. In our reading for today Jesus provided more examples contrasting the ways of Jewish religious behavior and kingdom ways.

### **Read Matthew 6:1-18**

Chapter 6 begins with the statement, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.” That theme is then illustrated with three examples of religious behavior and the motives which are behind the behaviors. In verses 2 through 4, the example is charitable giving; in verses 5 through 15, praying; and in verses 16 through 18, fasting. Note that Jesus uses the recurring phrase “do not be like the hypocrites” (*v2, 5, 10*) to introduce each new example in His teaching.

There is a pattern in the way each example is presented. Jesus first describes the hypocrite’s way of being religious, and then He contrasts the kingdom way. The religious leaders were inclined to do their giving, praying, and fasting so as to draw attention to themselves. They wanted to be noticed by people — to appear better or more important than others; to be praised by people. This attention was more important to them than approval by God. In contrast, the kingdom way emphasizes privacy and secrecy and intimacy with God, and the only reward which kingdom people should want is the blessing of their heavenly Father.

The word “reward” appears seven times in the passage (*in verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, and 18*). Notice that two kinds of “rewards” are mentioned. For the religious leaders there would be no higher reward than the approval of men. On the other hand, those who practiced piety in secret with proper motives would have the approval of God and they would receive an eternal reward from the Father. (*See 6:4, 6, and 18.*)

Now let’s look more specifically at the three examples. Jesus said that the proper way to do acts of charity, and the way to avoid hypocrisy, is to do it with such secrecy that others will not know about it. Indeed, in giving, the kingdom person may be so generous that he/she may not be able to account exactly what has been provided to others. Kingdom people must be so devoted to God that the amount is not a consideration.

Handling charitable contributions is not always easy for us. I have noticed that at the end of each year, organizations make urgent appeals so that we will send in our donations before December 31 in order to qualify for the income tax deduction. We can be thankful that the federal government allows a deduction for our charitable gifts, but our giving should be prompted by our appreciation for what God has done and out of compassion for the needs of others, not just because it will provide a tax-break benefit to us.

Kingdom people are not to brag about their charity. We are not to be self-conscious about our giving, for when we begin to think about what we are doing for God with our resources, then our giving will quickly become a matter of pride and self-righteousness. Our acts of mercy can easily turn into acts of vanity, so that our primary motive is no longer the benefit to the person receiving the gift but our own egos. The giving of kingdom people should be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation. Our motive in giving our charitable gifts must not be the praise of men, but rather the approval of God.

Jesus said that the Father will be aware of what we do, and will recognize if our attitude and motive and method is genuinely sincere. If the Father is pleased, we are promised an appropriate reward. What is the reward which the heavenly Father gives? As we have stated previously, the “reward” is our sense of the inner “righteousness” granted to us by God. It will be experienced in our spiritual growth in this life — in our heightened awareness of God’s closeness and peace as well as our confidence and hope and security in Him.

Now let’s think about prayer. The pious Jew prayed at set times during the day. There were morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. There were also prayers to accompany the daily sacrifices at the temple, which were offered two times each day. Prayers could be spoken discreetly or, as Jesus explained concerning the religious leaders, be spoken with pretentious display. There’s a parable in Luke 18 which shows the contrast of the two styles. Let me read this parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

After telling this parable, Jesus explained the main point: “I tell you that this man (the tax collector) went home justified before God, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (*Luke 18:9-14*)

The method advocated by Jesus was prayer in an “inner” room. The reference to the “inner” room was undoubtedly a metaphor for privacy since most Jewish homes did not have separate rooms. The typical Jewish home had no area to which a person could retreat in order to be alone. The “inner room” reference speaks of intimacy where the focus is exclusively on communion between the individual and God.

In verse 7 Jesus warned His followers against repetitious prayer. An example of such praying is in I Kings 18:26 when the priests of Baal prayed all day with increasing intensity and self flagellation in the hopes that their pagan god would listen and respond. Scripture indicates that God is always willing to listen, but that He cannot be manipulated through ritual prayers.

I have three additional comments. First, God already knows what we need, yet we are instructed to ask. The purpose of prayer is not to provide useful information to God that He may not know. Rather, prayer is the method by which believers acknowledge and demonstrate their dependency on God. Secondly, lengthy continuous prayer is OK as long as it is not of a repetitious nature. Jesus Himself prayed all night on occasion. Finally, it is important for us to keep in mind the purpose of prayer: Prayer is a discipline which changes the pray-er. Prayer brings the character, will, and values of the pray-er in line with God.

In verses 9-13 Jesus described a model prayer for the Apostles. Notice the introduction to the prayer: “This is how (not what) you should pray.” The prayer calls attention to the kinds of issues which should be on the minds of the pray-ers. Verses 9-13 are contrasted with the ostentatious and thoughtless prayers of verses 5-8.

I am not going to offer a detailed commentary on this model prayer in this message, but the following observations are important: First, the prayer is kingdom focused. It is, more than anything else, a request that the kingdom of God will become manifest on the earth. Secondly, the prayer is concerned about “today,” not some future time. “Your kingdom come — today;” “your will be done — today;” “give us today;” “forgive us today;” “deliver us from evil today.”

Also, notice that forgiveness is a very important point in the prayer. Not only does the prayer itself, in verse 12, emphasize forgiveness, but Jesus adds to the emphasis in verses 14 and 15. Individuals who have experienced the forgiveness and salvation of God are expected to graciously forgive those who sin against them. This emphasis on forgiveness highlights the “change” that takes place in the pray-er.

Beginning in verse 16, the subject is fasting. Jesus assumed His disciples would fast, just as He assumed they would give alms and pray. Jesus introduced the segments with the same kind of statement, “When you give, when you pray, when you fast,” (*verses 3, 5, and 16*). He did not use the word, “if.” Jesus did not treat giving, praying, and fasting as “optional” kinds of religious activities.

Frequent fasting was neither required or prohibited under the law. According to the Old Testament law, the only required fast for the Israelites was on the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Number 29:7*). That was the day in which the High Priest entered the inner room of the tabernacle / temple, the Holy of Holies, the room in which God was present, in order to sprinkle blood on the mercyseat.

Many years later, during the time of the Babylonian exile, regular fasts among the Jews were introduced to take the place of the annual festivals. In addition to these national fasts, both the Old and New Testaments describe personal and group fasts for a variety of purposes.

In Jesus’ time, the religious leaders bragged that they fasted two days each week (Mondays and Thursdays). They often left their hair ungroomed on those days and “disfigured” or blackened their faces with ashes to show to everyone what they were doing. The purpose of the disfigurement was, presumably, to make the person unrecognizable, but the truth was that these people did not want to be completely unrecognizable since they wanted everyone to know what they were doing!

Jesus emphasized that fasting was a heart issue between an individual and God. Fasting was a discipline undertaken by an individual for the purpose of focusing on God. Only the Father was to be aware of what the person was doing. Jesus did not want His followers to look like they were fasting. They were not to blacken their faces. Rather, they were to have clean faces and use oil on their heads. The use of oil was normally associated with celebration, not mourning. The point was that fasting, like giving and praying, was to be a private personal experience with God. It was not to be used as an opportunity for showing off.

I hope you recognize that these eighteen verses of chapter 6 described important aspects of the public practice of religious life that were expected of kingdom people. They were called “acts of righteousness,” (and I think Jesus used this phrase in a sarcastic way). From these 18 verses, we learn how important it is for believers to have pure motives in their religious activities.

There are several lessons we can learn from the passage. First, our religious activities must be pleasing to God. This is our highest and only priority. If pleasing God is not what we live for, then we will be inclined toward hypocrisy. One of the greatest temptations of people is to elicit the praise of others in order to build up self-esteem. This passage indicates that God knows our every motive and deed, and it is His approval alone that matters.

Second, Jesus' words in this passage do not mean that we must never engage in public acts of righteousness. Even when carried out in the knowledge that our actions will draw attention to ourselves, public displays of righteousness are not wrong so long as our motives are the glory of God rather than our own. Back in chapter 5, Jesus stated that kingdom people were not to hide their lamps under a bowl. Instead He taught, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (*Matthew 5:16*). There is no inconsistency in Jesus' teaching. The motive must always be the glory of God. We must do our good deeds in such a way that people praise the Father, not ourselves.

The Apostle Paul stated this principle this way: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (*Colossians 3:17*).

Third, there is nothing of eternal value in the popularity and fame which comes from people. There is a poem which has these lines, "The lives of great men all remind us that we can make our lives sublime, and in parting leave behind us footprints on the sands of time." We might be able to get our names into history books, but that is much different than getting our names into God's book of life. The benefits of approval of men ends with death. We must be concerned about what our deeds will gain us on the day of judgment. It is His reward that we must desire.