

Before An Audience

Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18

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Well, good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is great to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're here, that you would join us this morning, and we are in the of a sermon series looking at the Sermon on the Mount. And so, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew, chapter 6. So, the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And we are beginning a new section of the sermon this morning that begins in chapter 6, verse 1. So, we've been in this series since January, and we are now just into the second chapter of this series. So, you know, there's a lot to work through. And this morning, before we jump into this new section that Jesus is introducing us to, I thought it would be helpful to remind us where we've been.

So, we've heard about the Beatitudes, right? That's how the Sermon on the Mount begins, where Jesus tells us who those people are that are blessed in his kingdom, right? Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the peacemakers. And then, after the Beatitudes, Jesus declared that he didn't come to put aside the law to lay it aside, but he actually came to fulfill it. And then, after telling us that he came to fulfill the law, he gave us these six antithesis statements, these antitheses that describe what the deeper understanding of the law is, right? These are the statements where he said, "you have heard it said, but I say to you." And in doing this, Jesus was helping us to understand the deeper meaning behind the law. Things like adultery isn't simply an act done physically, but it's an act done in our minds and in our hearts. Or that anger runs far deeper than merely words. Or that our enemies are to be the objects not of our hate, but of our love.

These are the things that Jesus has been teaching us in this sermon. And this morning, as I've already mentioned, he's beginning a new section in chapter 6, verse 1. And in this new section, he's returning to the theme of righteousness. Now, I've said, I think, every week in this series, and I know Tobias did last week, that the Sermon on the Mount is about the kingdom of God. And it's about what it means to be participants in this kingdom of God. What does it mean to be God's people in this world? And what that means is to live righteous lives. Jesus actually said this in chapter 5. He said that our righteousness is supposed to exceed the scribes and the Pharisees. And now he's returning to that theme of righteousness this morning. And he's going to focus on three practices of the faith: giving of alms, giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. And these disciplines, these practices of the faith, they would have been what Jesus' hearers would have practiced themselves as a way of reflecting their righteousness. It was a way of demonstrating how pious they are, how faithful they were. Jesus' words here this morning are helping us to see what righteousness really looks like.

Now, as we look at these three practices of the faith, we're going to break it up into two sermons. So this morning, we're going to look at the first and the third. We're going to look at giving, and we're going to look at fasting, and then next week we'll look at prayer. So with that in mind, let's go ahead and read Matthew 6, beginning in verse 1. Jesus says,

"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. 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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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 Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that as we come to your Word that you would lead us, that you would guide us, that you would teach us from your Word, that you would help us to see what it means to live as righteous people, to live as people of your kingdom. And so we ask, Father, for your help, for we need it. Be with the one who preaches and all those who listen, that what is said and done here now would give you glory. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, on February 9, 2009, our experience with social media dramatically changed. And that's because on February 9, 2009, Facebook introduced the Like button. You all know what the Like button is, right? There's that little button that you can click, and a blue thumb pops up, right? It's a way for us to very quickly, very easily say that we like, we appreciate, we affirm what we have just seen, what we have read. It's also an easy way to just say we saw it and move on, right? If we're honest. But prior to 2009, if you liked a picture, if you appreciated a post, you actually had to make a comment, or you had to repost it. There was no such thing as a “Like” button. But then in 2009, they introduced it, and this actually had a great effect. It had an effect on those who read posts, right? We could just click Like and move on to the next one, but it also had an effect on those people who make the post.

You see, in 2011, Time magazine published an article called *Bird Brained*, where they were talking about social media. And the author says this, “real-time reactions is what makes social media awesome. The instant feedback, replies or retweets, the Twitter equivalent of applause, it's intoxicating. It's like a pleasure center reward for a lab rat pulling a lever.” Now, I don't know if I love being compared to a lab rat personally, but the author of the article is making a really interesting point here. And he actually goes on and does some self-reflecting about what this is doing to us. And he says, you can see how this would appeal to an exhibitionist, self-destructive impulse. And he's right. That impulse for exhibitionism, that impulse to try to seek out acclaim, that impulse towards this behavior, that's not just in other people, that's in us. That's in me. Because we all can become exhibitionists, right?

I mean, think about our behavior on social media. We post something, a picture maybe of a vacation, a quote from a book, a video reel that we really like, and we don't just post it and move on. What do we do? We check back again and again and again to see, are there any comments? Are there any likes? Are there any loves? And as we look, we don't just want to see if there's one or two, but we want to see how many there are. And we wonder why there's none. And why isn't anyone reposting? Why didn't anyone like it? Now, maybe we don't like hearing that about ourselves, but that's what we do, isn't it? We're not really concerned about what was posted or what was said as much as we're concerned with how people respond. Will

they think that I'm funny or pretty or intelligent or in the know or provocative? And the reality is, is you don't have to be on social media to experience this. Because oftentimes in our lives and in our lives before others, we are living in a performative way. I mean, think about how quickly and easily we can turn a conversation to our recent achievements, or how we can name drop, or how we can talk about our spouse or our friend or our child in a way that highlights not them, but highlights us. I mean, it's easy to do this, isn't it? To live and to speak and act in such a way that highlights how great, how smart, how put together, how pious we are to live for the likes of others.

Seeking Man's Praise

And that's what Jesus is addressing with these verses. He's addressing what we're seeking with our lives. Are we seeking the praise of man, the likes, or are we seeking what pleases God? And he begins with the seeking of man's praise. He says in verse 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." Now listen, if you've been with us as we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, then maybe your antenna is going up a little bit. Because it sounds initially like Jesus is contradicting himself with what he said in chapter 5. Because in chapter 5, verse 16, he said, "let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works." So, chapter 5, he says, let people see your works, your acts of righteousness. Chapter 6, beware, be warned about doing your works and righteousness before others. So, which is it? I mean, clearly Jesus isn't contradicting himself, right? Or at least maybe not clearly, but we don't want to go there.

Because he actually isn't contradicting himself, right? We don't stop at beware of practicing your righteousness before others because he goes on and says, in order to be seen by them. You see, Jesus isn't prohibiting public displays of faith. He's calling us to consider the motivations for those displays. Why do we give? Why do we fast? Did you see in verses 2 and 16, he says, "when you give to the needy" and "when you fast." He didn't say "if", he said "when". So, Jesus is expecting us to behave in these ways. He's expecting these acts of piety and he's addressing the motivational orientation of our hearts. So, how were people demonstrating their piety? Look what accompanied giving and fasting from our passage.

In verse 2, what accompanied giving was the sounding of trumpets. And in verse 16, it was looking gloomy and disfiguring one's face. So, you see the images there going on, right? So, you can imagine this person of great means, this wealthy man or woman, they're walking down the street and before them is someone blowing a trumpet. And it's a way of signaling to everyone to come and to give them attention because this person of means, this person of great wealth, they are ready to shower their wealth upon the needy. So, everyone come and see how generous they are. The other image Jesus gives regarding fasting is someone who is unkempt, who's unclean, who is sad and burdened. And they're this way so that someone will come and go, "are you okay? Is there something wrong?" And they can respond, "no, no, no, I'm perfectly fine. I'm just fasting." It's a way of calling attention to the fast, to the gift. And in doing this, what are they wanting? They're wanting the praise of people. "Look how generous she is." "Look how spiritual he is."

Now, listen, y'all, we don't go around blowing trumpets, right? And we don't go not showering for days, though, you know, sometimes little boys do. Boys, listen to your mom, please shower, especially on Sundays. But anyway, but we don't do those sorts of things, right? No, we have much more subtle and culturally acceptable ways of pointing others to our

piety. Like when we fast, we walk around with ash on our forehead. Or we post things online about what we've given up. Or when we make a donation to a GoFundMe, a donation that maybe is warranted to a cause that is good, we fail to click on that box that makes our donation anonymous. So everyone can see, not only did we give, but how much we gave. And why do we do these things? I mean, let's be honest. Let's interrogate our heart for a moment. Why do we do these things? We do it so that people will think we're generous. We do it so that people will think we're spiritual, right? And Jesus says there's a reward for this. He said there's a reward. What is it? To practice our righteousness, to be seen and praised by others.

He says in verses 2 and 16, you will receive a reward. And what is that reward? It's the praise of man. And y'all, that reward feels good. It does feel good. I mean, I like it. Who doesn't like to be praised, right? We respond with some false humility. "Thank you. You know, Lord, be praised." You know, that kind of stuff. But we like it. And we want more of it. I do. You do. It feels good for a moment. But the truth is, is it's not sustainable. Right? That fades. It's not enough. And you know how I know this? Because we have to keep going back for more. We have to keep going back for more. We need another hit of that intoxication that comes with people seeing our piety and our righteousness. You see, when we live to be seen and to seek man's praise, we gain a reward. But Jesus tells us in verse 1, you may gain the reward of the praise of man, but you will have no reward from your Father who's in heaven.

Seeking What Pleases God

See, what he's telling us is that there's a better reward. He's warning us that there's a better way of life. And it's not seeking man's praise, but it's seeking what pleases God. And what pleases God? What Jesus tells us. Giving to the needy. Fasting. But doing it in secret. To be seen only by him. Look what he says in verses 3 and 4. "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 then in verses 17 through 18, he says, "but when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret."

Now, of course, verse 3, when he talks about your left hand not knowing what your right hand is doing, that of course is metaphorically speaking, right? Because it's impossible for our left hand not to know what our right hand is doing. It's all part of the same body. But what Jesus is getting at is that we would make such little fanfare about giving, that we ourselves would even forget about it. That we would forget about others. And so he says, anoint your head, wash your face, so that no one will see anything different. Now, let me just pause for a second and say a word about fasting, because I'm going to imagine that for many of us, this isn't a common practice in our spiritual disciplines. I think most of us, right, we read our Bibles, we pray, we come to worship, we do all sorts of other disciplines, but maybe fasting is one we don't do. And so let me just say a very brief word about what fasting is and what it isn't.

So fasting in the Old Testament was required by the Old Testament law to occur one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. Okay? So all the people of God would fast for one day on the Day of Atonement. But we know that that wasn't sufficient for the Pharisees, so they fasted twice a week. I wonder why. I wonder if maybe Jesus is addressing some of them. But regardless, the reason that people were to fast was so that they would give up food to devote

themselves to the Lord. And that's what biblical fasting is. It's giving up something necessary or something good for the sake of focusing on God.

So what is it not? Fasting is not giving up sin. Okay? Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. Giving up sin is good. Okay? But we don't enter into a fast to say, you know what, this week I'm fasting from gossip. Like, you should fast from gossip, but when you fast, you return to the thing that you were fasting from, and we don't want to return to gossip. So fasting isn't giving up sin. That's just something we're supposed to do. Okay? So fasting is not giving up sin. Fasting is also not, biblical fasting, is not for the sake of losing weight or for health benefits, though those things could be good. Right? I know some of you, myself included, have done intermittent fasting, right? Trying to get kind of a little more fit, right? A little better looking, those sorts of things. Okay, you know, dieticians, doctors, they can talk about whether that's good or helpful or if it even works. I don't really know. But that's not biblical fasting. Okay? It's not for the sake of losing weight or for health benefits. No.

Biblical fasting is focusing, it's giving up of something to focus on our relationship with God, our devotion to Him, or when we are making a particular request. So maybe you're wrestling with something. You're trying to make a decision. Should I take that job or not? Should I move to that new city or not? Should I marry this person or not? Right? We have a major decision. And so maybe for a day, for a couple days, maybe for a period of time, we will give up food. And in those times when we would normally be eating, we would devote our time to prayer, to asking the Lord to show us what we are to do, how we are to live.

Now, look, in doing this, this isn't like magic, right? It's not manipulating God. It's not like, "well, I fasted, Lord, so you better tell me how I'm supposed to live. I fasted, so you better give me this request." That's not how it works. But what it is, is turning our hungers and our cravings towards the Lord and focusing on Him. That's what a biblical fast is. And it's not required by God's law, because Jesus has fulfilled the law, but it is something that is still good and that God's people, Jesus, expects for us to practice from time to time. So, when you fast, when you give, do these things not for the praise of others, but simply because it pleases the Lord. I'm sure most of us, if you've grown up in the church or been around the church for any length of time, you've heard that phrase, we live before an audience of one, or we act before an audience of one, right? I'm sure you've heard this.

And, you know, sometimes this can be used in a very cheesy, kind of hokey, Christian-y sort of a way, but it actually, at its core, is getting at something that we all should truly be seeking. At its core, this is actually a wonderful thing to think about, a phrase to be thinking about, because we are to live our lives primarily before the Lord. That when we fast and we give and we pursue holiness, we do that not for the acclaim of man, but because it pleases God. And isn't that what we want to do? I mean, when we think about all that God has done for us, don't we want to please Him? Right? That He gives us good things, like food and drink. He gives us friendship and marriage and family. He gives us children and grandchildren and grandparents and parents. He gives us jobs and abilities and gifts. He gives us good things. He has given even Himself. I mean, when we consider what Jesus has given, that He gave up His very life so that we would have life, so that we would be recipients of these good gifts. I mean, when we think of all that God has given, don't we want to please Him? I mean, of course we do.

As the praise of man is never enough, never sufficient, as it leaves us wanting more, God being pleased with us, that is what we need. That is what we long for. Right? I mean, think

about Eric Liddell. You all know his story, the main character in Chariots of Fire. Right? This Olympic athlete, this runner, an Olympic gold medalist. He ran before thousands. And this was before the Olympics were televised. It was the 1930s. It wasn't before hundreds of thousands, but his story was reprinted in newspapers and magazines and told on the news. And he ran in front of all these people, but why did he run? It wasn't so that they would praise him. It wasn't simply for a gold medal. It wasn't so that he would be lifted high by all those who would hear his story. What did he say? "I run and I feel God's pleasure." Now, that's beautiful. Not I run for the cheering of man, but I run. I live because it pleases God. His pleasure. That is our reward.

You see, giving and fasting to please the Lord, Jesus tells us that it comes with a reward. Sinclair Ferguson put it this way. He said, "the follower of Christ, the disciple of Christ's desire is to be thought well of by his father. When the disciple gives because he loves his father or fast because he longs to submit his whole being to his father's will, he has his reward. The pleasure of God." That's why we fast. That's why we give. Not so that we would be seen by man. Not so that we would be lifted up by one another, but so that we would please our heavenly Father. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you that we can live our lives before you and we can live in the freedom not of what man might say or do, but in the freedom of living in your pleasure. And so we pray that as we live, as we give, as we fast, that we would not seek to make much of ourselves, but instead we would just bask in your pleasure. That you look upon us and say, well done, good and faithful servants. That you call us your sons and daughters. That you call us people of your kingdom. Let us rest in that and find satisfaction in those words. And so, Father, we thank you for making us your people and let us be strengthened by your Spirit to live as those people. And we pray all this in Christ's name. And God's people said together, Amen.