

## ***Piety without Hypocrisy***

Our second Scripture reading is Matthew 6:1-8, a passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The righteousness which Jesus requires of his followers exceeds that of the religious leaders, with their strict legalism (5:20). By God's grace we receive through faith in Christ a standing of perfect righteousness. And Jesus requires inner purity as well as behavioral conformity (5:3ff; 21ff), and calls us to a life of self-denial and even love for our enemies (5:43-48), which only he can enable, which he does through the Holy Spirit at work in us.

The same word used for this surpassing righteousness Jesus demands in 5:20 is the same word used in our text in 6:1. Here in this context Jesus refers to acts of righteousness and gives as examples three spiritual disciplines that were expressions of true piety among the Jews—giving, prayer and fasting. Piety (“pious” is often a pejorative term in our culture for those who parade their piety) is devoutness inspired by inward godliness and righteousness.

As we grow in grace for a life of surpassing righteousness and as we practice these spiritual disciplines of true piety, we face another danger, which Jesus warns us about in the verses of our text. It's possible that as we exercise spiritual disciplines we could be drawn by the Enemy into doing good things for the wrong reasons. In our text in his sermon, Jesus warns us about the danger of hypocrisy and describes for us true piety without hypocrisy.

### **Matthew 6:1-8:**

**6** *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

**5** *“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

**7** *“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Preparing this sermon today has been an experience of deep soul-searching, which has called into question my motives, even for preparing this very sermon. The word has been penetrating my thoughts and my heart with its surgical inspection of the integrity of my life and ministry (Heb. 4:12f). Do my actions match my words? Am I in secret the kind of person I project myself to be when I am before others, particularly those who know I'm a pastor? Am I in my giving, praying, and other spiritual disciplines seeking to focus on and please God or am I playing to the crowd, seeking to impress them and gain their approval? Jesus tells us in our text that our motives make all the difference and are a key component in this “surpassing righteousness” (5:20) which he expects of us. Am I genuine or am I a hypocrite?

A hypocrite is defined as “one who affects virtues or qualities he does not have” (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). As Christians, we can expect the secular world to label us as

hypocrites based upon whether or not we live up to their expectations, which are sometimes impossible standards. A hypocrite is not one who fails to achieve perfection, since no one can expect to reach absolute sinless perfection in this life. We are to seek perfection in terms of spiritual growth toward the high mark of Christ-likeness, but we will never reach that goal fully until we see Jesus face to face. A Christian is not a hypocrite, being morally imperfect and humbly acknowledging that fact. A hypocrite is one who refuses to admit to sinful failure and weakness and seeks to give an outward display of piety that beclouds a private life of immorality or lack of ethical integrity.

There are religious and also secular hypocrites. Those of us who are professing Christians and who hopefully are seeking to be more Christ-like are aware of our spiritual and sometimes moral sins and shortcomings. We should grieve over our sins and our failure to better represent Christ to a lost world. But secular hypocrites love to point out our sins and shortcomings as evidence, to their way of thinking, that we are hypocrites. Yet they are belying their own hypocrisy, which is their attempt to convince us that if they were ever to become a Christian they *just know* that they would never be a hypocrite, that is, less than absolutely sinlessly perfect.

During my seminary days, one of my favorite professors, Wayne Ward, shared a story with our New Testament Theology class that illustrates this misperception of the secular world of hypocrisy. Professor Ward's church where he was a faithful member was Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. On a particular Saturday this church conducted a door-to-door survey to discover the church affiliation of people who lived in the vicinity of the church building. The purpose was to reach out to those without a regular church home. Crescent Hill members were dispatched in teams of two to canvass the neighborhood. One of the volunteers was a faithful member who was mentally handicapped, but was always willing to serve the church any way he could. Another adult was teamed up with this person, whom I will call Billy, to make sure Billy asked the proper questions and could answer the replies of those surveyed.

One who responded to Billy's knock on the door proved to be a cynic of all things Christian and anything that had to do with church. When Billy discovered this man had no church affiliation, he cheerily offered, "Why don't you come to visit us at Crescent Hill Baptist Church?" "No thank you," the man curtly replied. "There are too many hypocrites down there." Without hesitation Billy offered, "Come on anyway; there's always room for one more!"

At one point and to one degree or other, we are all hypocrites. And we can be grateful that Jesus forgives us and that gives us grace to cure us of our hypocrisy and enable us to have true piety without hypocrisy. Jesus gives examples, which were important Jewish practices of piety, to show how acts of righteousness can become corrupted by wrong motives and be turned sour into hypocrisy.

Almsgiving was an important practice and is taught in the Old Testament (e.g. Proverbs 19:17, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done." and Psalm 41:1 "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble." In the New Testament, caring for needy fellow believers is particularly enjoined (e.g. Galatians 6:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:11).

Certainly the character of godliness we have seen described in the Sermon on the Mount is one that includes Christ-like compassion for others and a godly generosity toward those in need. The New Testament assumes that followers of Jesus, who know his grace, will be gracious, generous and sacrificial toward others (2 Cor. 8:9). James even posits that if we fail to care for a brother or sister in need we are displaying a defective, even false faith (2:14-17). When we give to those in

need and also for the cause of the spread of the good news of Jesus, we are acting like God, who gave his only Son that we might have eternal life (John 3:16).

Giving of our financial resources is an opportunity for us to practice a spiritual discipline that is essential for our spiritual growth. For this reason, Jesus says more about giving than about heaven and hell. He knows that materialism can be a spiritual barrier to a life of following him, just as it was for the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16ff). All areas of our spiritual growth will be hindered unless and until we experience the grace of giving.

Jesus addresses also the exercise of praying (V. 5), which also was and is an important spiritual discipline, not only for the Jews of Jesus' day but for his followers today. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has already exhorted us to love and pray for our enemies, something only he can enable us to do (5:44). In what we call the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to whom we pray, for what we should pray, and for what purpose we should pray. Prayer is essentially our communication with God through the gift of our personal relationship with God. Prayer is as essential in our spiritual life as breathing is in our physical life. Without a life of prayer we cannot have any spiritual vitality in life or joy in our relationship with Christ. Jesus teaches us to pray in faith (Matt. 21:22) and to pray with persistence (Lk. 18:1).

Jesus gives us these examples of spiritual discipline and practice of genuine piety. But we can certainly add other disciplines, such as corporate worship and ministry, Jesus warns us against the abuse and corruption of these cases by wrong motives.

The corruption of true piety begins with our seeking to impress others. Jesus has called us to be his light in the world, saying, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). God intends for our piety to be seen, but also requires that our motives are right. Jesus condemns the motive of doing acts of righteousness *in order to be seen* (1, 5) and to be honored by others (2). We are to be seen doing good works but we are not to do good works in order to be seen. If Satan can't entice us to do the wrong things he will seek to get us to do the right things for the wrong reasons. And our old, sinful nature also will cooperate with this proclivity toward corrupt motives.

Our English word "hypocrite" is taken from the Greek theater and the word for actor, "hypokrites" (*Webster's*). Jesus is warning against the corrupting desire to practice our acts of righteousness before the world as our stage for a performance. Again, in the Greek, the verb in the first verse "to be seen" is "theathenai," from which we get our word "theater." How easily and subtly can we allow good deeds of true piety and devotion to God to become corrupted by a sinful desire to feed our pride with the approval and admiration of others, before whom we can give a good performance.

This is true in the case of our giving. Jesus uses the example of the blowing of trumpets in the synagogue and public places, perhaps referring to special feast and fast days. Obviously, the giving of offerings by the wealthy could be done with real flare (Luke 21:1ff). Maybe today we don't have trumpets blowing but the temptation remains for us to "toot our own horn" in order to gain recognition and appreciation for our giving.

Public prayer also can become good "theater" for performance and recognition. Please note that Jesus is not precluding or even minimizing the important place of public prayer in the life of the church, which we see practiced throughout the Book of Acts (e.g. Acts 4:24; 12:5). Corporate prayer is an important element in the church's worship and ministry of intercession. What Jesus is condemning is the practice of turning prayer into a performance before others, seeking to

impress them of one's piety. Jesus referred to the hypocrites who arranged, at the times of prayer, to be in public places, in the synagogues and street corners.

When we have occasion to participate in public prayer, we should be praying out of the overflow of a rich personal prayer life. I recall hearing someone remark about the pastoral prayer after the worship service, saying, "He (the pastor) seemed to know who he was talking to." We can add to these cases of giving, prayer and fasting, other activities like corporate worship. We need to check our motives to examine whether we are seeking to glorify God with our music and preaching, or are we seeking to impress others.

Those of us who have weak egos need to be vigilant against the more subtle desire to impress self with our deeds of righteousness and piety. These words of Jesus have caused me to search my heart regarding my motives for all that I do in my spiritual disciplines and in my ministry. As Willard says, when the ego swells, the soul shrinks. What I need is the grace to recognize the sinfulness of this corrupted motive and the solution of self-forgetfulness and even death to the sinful, pride-driven self. I see that a lot of what I do needs to be under the searching eye of God, including my personal devotional life. My Bible reading, which is very much an inbuilt habit I formed in my youth, can become a matter of impressing myself.

All that we do is to be done to the Lord and for his glory and honor. But there is a crucial difference between acts of devotion done for God and those done to impress him. All of these three cases Jesus gives can be efforts to impress God. We think our giving to the needy and giving faithfully, generously, and perhaps occasionally sacrificially, will impress God and obligate him somehow to us. This includes what we give to the Lord and to his church.

When we come to God through his Son Jesus and confess and repent of our pride and hypocrisy, we have assurance of his forgiveness. But even then, we must come to him as did the tax collector in Jesus' parable, which he told to those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." Jesus contrasted the self-righteous Pharisee with the repentant tax collector. The Pharisee exemplified everything that Jesus speaks against in our text. He prayed with the motive of pride in his own righteousness, and in his prayer he commended himself for his semi-weekly fasting and his faithful tithing. He was clearly "tooting his own horn" and his prayer had no effect with God. But the despised and ostracized tax collector "stood at a distance," yet was close to the heart of God when he prayed in repentance for God to be merciful to him a sinner. Jesus noted that he was the one whom God heard and blessed (Lk. 18:9-14).

With God-given righteousness and a heart of humility before God we may now do acts of righteousness with focus. The only way our acts of righteousness can be free from the distraction and the corruption of hypocrisy is by keeping our focus on the Lord Jesus and to seek to do all we do with and for him and for the glory of the Father in heaven. Hypocrisy is impossible for those who are focusing on Jesus and whose prayers, giving, worship and living in the world is centered in a life of fellowship with Jesus and awareness of his presence. Bonhoeffer said that Jesus calls us to so focus on him that we hide our righteousness even from ourselves.

Jesus promises the rewards of the heavenly Father, which also are to be our motive for true righteousness and acts of piety and devotion. Giving enriches our lives with gratitude and allows us to participate in God's work of caring for others and extending his kingdom. Praying is the opportunity we have to seek the face of God and receive the immediate reward of his treasures. Thus, the reward Jesus promises is the cure for hypocrisy.

Jesus tells us to seek the Father in prayer in the secrecy of our room (6). "Tameion" refers to a storage closet where treasures might be kept (Tasker). The greatest treasure of prayer is not to coerce God into giving us our desired objectives, but rather to experience God himself and be transformed in his presence so that we submit to his will.

Piety without hypocrisy, pure and simple, is to think, act, live, give and love like Jesus. And to become like Jesus is our greatest reward.