

## Watch Your Motives When You Pray and Fast

Matthew 6:5-18

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*5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when 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 "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this:*

*" Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*

*14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

*16 "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. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 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 (Matt 6:5-18).*

Matthew 6 introduces a powerful word to us. The Greeks loved theatre, and they thought very highly of those who could play a part on a stage, drawing the audience emotionally into the illusion that the story presented was real. That is what good actors do; they can pretend that they are someone who they are not. The Greek word for this is hupokrites from which we get the very loaded term hypocrite. And that is the word that Matthew introduces to us in chapter 6.

Have you ever been called a hypocrite? It is loaded charge. It means that one pretends to have virtues, morals, or religious beliefs that he or she does not actually have. It means that you say one thing but do another. It means that you are not real.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites...and when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites" (Matt 6:5,16). Jesus is

down on people whose religious practices are fake, phony, all-show, or pretend. Once again we see that Jesus identifies for us that true religion is real!

## **Exposing Superficial Religion**

Jesus' target in the Sermon on the Mount is to expose superficial religion for what it is – a phony system of spirituality meant to make self-worship seem like God-worship. He aims to show us what real righteousness is, and in order for that to be clear he must expose hypocritical actions.

The first exposure came in chapter 5 with 6 shocking statements regarding really constituted breaking the Law. Jesus wanted us to see that the roots of superficial religion are planted in the soil of self-deception (“I don’t have a problem”) and self-justification (“Well at least I’ve never committed adultery”). Over the last three weeks we’ve heard about lust, anger, divorce, oaths, getting even, turning the other cheek. You could think of the first exposure as dealing with the “what” problem with superficial religion.

Chapter 6 introduces a different angle – the “how?” problem of superficial religion. From 6:1-6:16 we see that Jesus turns his focus from what are real sins to what constitutes real religious duties. In other words, Jesus wants us to see that superficial religion involves doing the right things with the wrong motives. This kind of fake righteousness can be more dangerous than outright sin because the person doing the “righteous” deed feels spiritual when in fact he or she is merely serving the sinister and treasonous desire for self-glorification.<sup>1</sup> And that is why the word hypocrite is such a powerful word; it captures the disgusting practice of making the worship of yourself look like you are worshipping God. It is disgusting to God and disgusting to others. No one likes a hypocrite. No one except the devil.

The principle for this section is found in 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.” Let me state it very clearly and simply: **motives matter to God.** Real religion involves righteousness from the heart and religious actions done with the right motivations.

Jesus shows us the importance of motivations through three examples: giving (6:2-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). Our task this morning is to look at the last two – prayer and fasting.

## **Warnings about Prayer and Fasting**

There are three warnings here that I want you to see. Let me give them to you and then unpack each of them:

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Bruner, The Christbook – Matthew 1-12, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 282.

- 1. Prayer is a platform for intimacy with God not the exaltation of self**
- 2. Prayer is a statement of simple dependency not the means of divine manipulation**
- 3. Fasting is about creating an appetite for God not for fulfilling a hunger for applause**

Each of these expresses the fact that motives really matter to God. They warn us that it is possible to turn actions designed to worship God into the worship of self.

### **Prayer is a platform for intimacy with God not the exaltation of self**

In 6:5 Jesus identifies the potential sham of public prayer. He is not condemning all public prayer; rather he is saying that the motivation behind the prayer is critical for it to be genuine, acceptable, and rewarded by God. The religious leaders loved to pray in environments where people would perceive them as being spiritual. Therefore, they loved to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners.

You might wonder about praying on street corners. Some suggest that Jesus is talking about the fact that committed, religious Jews prayed at set times during the day, and that they timed their day to be at public areas during the hours of prayer so that their prayers would have greater exposure. In other words they had an audience problem. For them, prayer was not about the audience of God, it was about the audience of people. But the real problem is even deeper than that – prayer is supposed to be about intimacy with God but it became about the exaltation of self. Sick!

That is why Jesus says (v 6) – “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” There are two important words here: secret and Father. Jesus tells us that the essence of prayer is private communion with God. In other words, the focus of prayer should be on the audience of One – God. But Jesus also introduces the word “Father” here, a term loaded with love and affection. To speak to God as father means a level of intimacy, the kind of praying that Jesus did because he knew the Father.

Therefore, real religion is understanding that to pray in such a way that you are focused on exalting yourself rather than pursuing intimacy with God is just wrong. Motives matter. Prayer is supposed to be about intimacy with God not about you exalting yourself.

### **Prayer is a statement of simple dependency not the means of divine manipulation**

In verse 7 Jesus address the folly of thinking that God is going to do what you want because of how long you pray. This is what the pagan Gentiles did, and it is just as self-centered but in a different way. Apparently the Gentiles thought that God was moved to answer or that he was

impressed by the use of many words. Thus they used long, repeated incantations to try and get their god's attention thinking that "they would be heard for their many words."

When I read that statement I couldn't help but think of my trip to India last year. Next to the seminary was a pretty famous Buddhist monastery, and throughout the day you could hear the incantation of prayers. There were dedicated rooms where monks burned incense and canted all day long. There was a room to the side of the temple with what looked like a giant top inside and someone would walk around it, spinning the giant top, reciting prayers. Every completed lap was marked by a bell that rang. And strung between the trees were brightly colored pieces of fabric which were prayers that the monks hung out in the wind. The whole environment felt so oppressive, and I just got this sense that these people approach God with such bondage.

Jesus' instruction is very clear: don't be like them. And then he gives the answer: your Father knows what you need before you ask him. In other words, prayer is not about manipulating God into action or about informing him about what we need. So what is prayer about then? It is about a humble statement of your need for his help. Prayer is supposed to be about dependency.

Motives matter. Jesus makes us look at our motives and ask ourselves "why am I praying about this?" Is prayer an expression of my heart whereby God is glorified through my statement of dependency upon him? Or is prayer really an expression of my desire to glorify myself by asking God to give me what I want?

Then Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as an example, but I want to look at that at the end.

### **Fasting is about creating an appetite for God not for fulfilling a hunger for applause**

The last religious duty that Jesus talks about is fasting. Fasting was a normal part of the Jewish faith, so there is an assumption about fasting here. Jesus says, "...when you fast..." (v 16). The problem, however, was not fasting; it was how they looked when fasting. He indicates that when the religious crowd fasted everyone knew it, and that was by design – "they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others" (v 16). So the religious crowd accentuated the real hunger that their fast created because they were starving for the approval of people. And this missed the point (and perverted the point) of fasting.

Fasting is designed to remind you that more than anything you need God. The hunger created by the absence of food is meant to create joy in your heart that God is more satisfying than a juicy steak, a brownie with ice cream, or a piece of blueberry pie. Fasting is supposed to lead you toward a greater appetite for God. Motives matter. And when it comes to fasting, Jesus wants us to see that the applause of others is garbage compared to the banquet of God's approval.

Prayer and fasting are commendable spiritual activities, but we need to be warned about the real possibility, the subtle slide of self-glorification that can creep into even the best spiritual disciplines. The secret of religion is religion in secret. Motives matter.

### **When you pray...**

Jesus didn't just focus on the negative. He gave us an example of how we ought to pray in the Lord's Prayer. Now there is a lot that could be said on the Lord's Prayer; we could do an entire series on it. For our purposes today, I simply want to show you how the Lord's Prayer supports the things that we've already talked about.

There are two things that I want you to see:

#### **1. Notice the balance between a vertical and horizontal focus**

The Lord's Prayer includes three petitions that relate to the Father's glory and three that relate to the needs of the disciples. Let me list them:

- **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name** – a statement of unique intimacy with the Father which Jesus shared with his disciples coupled with a desire for God's name to be glorified.
- **Your kingdom come** – a yearning for the values of heaven to be expressed on earth.
- **Your will be done** – a passion to see the reign of God extended on the earth.

Really these three petitions are "one expression of burning desire to see the Father honored on earth as he is already honored in heaven."<sup>2</sup>

- **Give us this day our daily bread** - a simple request for the daily sustenance that is needed to survive.
- **Forgive us our debts** – a humble acknowledgement of the need for personal forgiveness.
- **Let us not into temptation** – a honest recognition of one's weakness and the need to ask God's help to avoid situations that would continue the devastating effects of sin.

This is how Jesus wants us to approach prayer and, by implication, all religious activities: with a vertical and horizontal focus.

#### **2. Notice the focus on attitude in approaching God**

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<sup>2</sup> David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 187.

There are two statements that capture the right attitude for approaching God. The first is "on earth as it is heaven." This statement captures the heart of the vertical focus by saying I want you to be honored in my world like you are in yours. It is a humble, God-centered perspective.

Verses 14-15 capture the second. The verses seem to connect the forgiveness of God to one's forgiveness of others. What Jesus is saying here is really important: those who've experienced God's forgiveness are going to forgive others. A lack of forgiveness is a sign that you haven't tasted the forgiveness of God. It is a humble, God-centered perspective.

Motives and attitudes matter. Pride and God-centeredness cannot co-exist. The approval of man and the approval of God are competing values. True religion springs from the right heart, with the right motives, worshipping the right object. And the person who tries to play games with religious actions as a means of self-worship is nothing more than a hypocrite. Jesus says, "Don't be like that!" Be real!

### **Please, No More Hypocrites!**

I think that we could all agree that it would be good thing to not have one more hypocrite. We don't need anyone else playing the game of spiritual commitment; we don't need any more people who use religion as a platform for self-worship.

So let me give you three applications or thoughts about this text that relate to more than just prayer and fasting.

#### **1. God's glory is the ultimate aim of everything, especially religious activity**

It is a simple but profound truth: God's glory is the ultimate aim of everything. Why were you created? Why are you alive? What is the purpose for your life? Why was the cross necessary? The glory of God.

What is the purpose behind Sunday worship? What is goal of giving, serving as a nursery worker, youth ministry leader, choir, or an elder? What is the goal of foreign missions, vision trips, and the Brookside Initiative? What is the goal of every song, every sermon, and every Sunday school lesson? The glory of God.

Therefore anything done, in the name of religion, for any reason other than the glory of God is sinful. It is treacherous act of covert self-worship.

#### **2. Pious people need to work hard not only on what they do but why they do it**

True religion is not just about what you do, it is about why you do what you do. Getting real means asking yourself two very important questions: 1) Am I really pursuing righteousness?

2) Am I pursuing it for the right reasons? Being in the building, finding your calling, serving sacrificially – these are all part of the equation. But we have to go deeper. We have to ask ourselves why we are doing this. We have to get to motives. Because motives matter.

So be careful about subtle advertisements about your spirituality that expose your real motives:

- In my devotions this morning at 4:30 AM, I was reading...
- During my 30 minute prayer time with my wife this morning...
- Isn't that verse found in 1 John 3?
- In my third discipleship meeting this week...

It is so subtle, so sneaky, so easy, and so sinful. And we must not be content with what we do for God, we have to examine why.

### **3. The heart is the target of the gospel and the essence of true religion**

Again Jesus comes back to the heart, and this is where getting real is both devastating and hopeful. How can it be both?

It is devastating to realize that real religion is not just a list of good things and bad things. Real righteousness is more than just doing the right thing. Desires of the heart, intentions, and motivations are all in play and that makes God's standard for righteousness doubly high. It is both an internal and external righteousness. It means that all the good things that you do are absolutely worthless and even offensive to God if they are not done for the glory of God.

It is hopeful because in the cross of Jesus, God made way for a person's heart to be changed. The target of the gospel and essence of true religion are the same – the heart. And God made it possible for the heart to be right with him through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

So this message should not leave you hopeless. It should help you see the beauty of what Jesus made possible. He made real religion possible.

Several years ago WalMart ran a series of ads featuring their commendable service projects in the community under the banner – "Good Works." And while it may have made for good marketing, it actually isn't true. Good doesn't work. Jesus works so that we can work what is good for the glory of God. Jesus worked so that I can work for the glory of God.

The world doesn't need any more hypocrites. Please, we've seen enough of that. Getting real means that we really understand that when it comes to real religion, motives matter.

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