

Matthew 6 • Practicing Our Righteousness

Introduction

In Matthew chapter 5, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ teaches what it means to truly fulfill God's law, that it's not just making sure God's regulations are kept but that the heart and mind must submit as well. We might never actually commit the physical act of murder, for instance, but our heart and thoughts are so set against someone that for all intents and purposes we want them as dead as if we had actually killed them. We might never actually commit the physical act of adultery but we have thought and dreamed and fantasized it so much that for all intents and purposes it has produced the same results inside us as though we had. Christ teaches that God's true followers fulfill His law not just physically but from the mind and heart, which results in changing their behavior and actions so that they obtain what God's law intended – a holy (separated unto **Him**) and righteous (doing things **His** way) relationship.

Now in chapter 6, Jesus takes this thought deeper still from the issues of behavior attached to fulfilling/obeying God's Word to bringing into submission the behaviors most associated by non-Christians as witness of Christ in us: "...practicing your righteousness..." (v.6:1)

⁴⁸Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

[Read 5:48]

Q: This is the key thought that transitions between Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 that we are to bring our heart and mind into complete submission to God, and His teaching in Matthew 6 that we are to submit our Christian walk as well. Isn't it impossible to be "perfect", much less as perfect as God? What does this mean?

A: Another way of interpreting this word "perfect" is "complete". In the context of Christ's teaching in chapter 5, He provides a series of "you have heard it said" questions illustrating external obedience to the Law, followed up with "but I tell you" explanations of the *spirit* of the Law and how it is supposed to be followed from the heart. Our heavenly Father is "perfect" – or "complete" – in that His heart and mind are in accord (and therefore all His actions) with His Word. **WE** are to be complete, obeying from within, adhering to His Word from our heart and mind and soul as well as externally, not just on the surface.

¹"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

[Read 6:1]

Q: What does it mean "practicing your righteousness"?

A: This is our Christian walk, the things that we do in the course of our daily life which indicates to those around us that our life is dedicated to something greater than our self, specifically to Christ and His kingdom.

Q: Should we NEVER allow our righteousness to be seen by others?

A: No, the point here is the attitude from which we start: Are we intent on glorifying God or bringing glory to our self?

Q: What might "before men to be noticed by them" indicate?

A: Often times we have a choice as to when and where and how our actions are going to take place. Under such conditions, we are not to take the attitude "we'll show them how it's done" and choose the public venue over the private.

Point: Part of the true description of God's love acting through us is described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 as, "...love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own..."

²So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

⁵“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

⁷And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

⁹“Pray, then, in this way:

‘Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also
have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

[For Yours is the kingdom and the
power and the glory forever.

Amen.]’

[Read 6:2-4]

Q: How is the “wrong” behavior contrasted with the “right”?

A: The wrong behavior is illustrated by those who give to the poor in very loud, public events with the goal of being honored by people versus those that do it quietly with the goal of giving honor to God.

Q: BOTH are obeying the law to feed the poor. But what is the term used here to describe the one with the wrong motive and why?

A: Hypocrite. It’s the person who does things in the name of the church or God or Christ but in reality is doing it only for their self.

Q: How could this possibly make a difference? Isn’t the important thing that poor people’s needs are being addressed? Don’t the ends justify the means?

A: Put yourself in the shoes of the person in need; which is more likely to lead them to God: A giver who demands respect and honor for what he’s doing for you, or one whose attitude and actions reflect God’s love personally?

[Read 6:5-6]

Q: BOTH are praying to the same God, right? What difference is there?

A: As in the example of caring for the poor, it’s a matter of motive: Is this for self or God?

Q: Whereas the example of caring for the poor covers our external behavior and actions, what is being addressed here?

A: Our internal behavior and actions. Giving almost always involves some level of contact with other people, but prayer does not. It’s an extension of Christ’s teaching in chapter 5 that one’s heart and thoughts must be brought into submission to God in order to actually fulfill God’s Word that we might become perfect – or complete.

[Read 6:7-13]

Q: What is the significance of Jesus’ use of “hypocrites” in the above example and “Gentiles” in this instance? What is He comparing?

A: “Hypocrites” are those who claim to know God or Christ, yet do not believe from the heart. “Gentiles” are unbelievers who know God exists but try every way but the right way to reach God properly. In both cases, the results are the same – no rewards. Both ways are equally futile.

Q: There have been entire books and theses written on the Lord’s Prayer. What are the basic points that show whether or not we have the right attitude of the heart?

- Acknowledging God’s sovereignty and authority first and foremost over all things. (“...Hallowed be Your name...”)
- Seeking to build God’s kingdom here on earth, not our own. (“...Your kingdom come...”)
- Seeking God’s will, not our own. (“...Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”)
- Focusing material requests to just what we need, not want. (“...give us this day our daily bread...”)
- Forgiveness of our sins in direct proportion to our forgiveness of others’ sin. (“...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...”)
- Help us avoid all the situations in which sin will try to take hold of us. (“...and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil...”)

Application: Can you see how much “easier” it is to be perfect/complete in following all of God’s Word from our heart when our prayer life seeks God’s will and behavior rather than our own? Under such conditions, is our righteousness a “chore” with which we struggle or something that becomes a natural part of our everyday behavior?

¹⁴“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

[Read 6:14-15]

Q: Why does Jesus single out forgiveness from the list?

A: It’s the most important thing for us personally, that we are secure in the knowledge that our sin will not result in separation from God.

¹⁶“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

[Read 6:16-18]

Q: What is being highlighted concerning fasting that is very different from giving or praying?

A: Giving and praying are activities which, if done publicly, are recognized by everyone passing by as such. No one passing by would normally be able to detect fasting.

Point: Jesus is showing how to discern a hypocrite, because they so want the glory of men for their self that they’ll go to great lengths to make sure you notice every little thing they do in the name of God, church, etc.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

[Read 6:19-20]

Q: Up to this point, what has Jesus identified as the 3 main activities associated with “practicing your righteousness”?

A: Ministering to the poor, prayer, fasting. (Interesting this is also the focus of the Old Testament Law.)

Q: To what is He equating the end result of how we engage in these activities?

A: Whether we’re obtaining temporary, earthly treasure or eternal, heavenly treasure.

Q: How is this tied in with each of the above examples?

- Giving. “...and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (v.4)
- Prayer. “...and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (v.6)
- Fasting. “...and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (v.18)

Q: When are we guaranteed reward?

A: In eternity. But He will also act in kindness to us in this life based on what He sees in our private, devoted life.

Q: More importantly what does all of this state about our spiritual character in Christ? How does it fit with Jesus’ instruction to be as perfect/complete as the Father?

A: “...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (v.21) If our actions and decisions are made in the knowledge of the shadow of eternity, we will be obedient from the heart and therefore “complete”.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

[Read 6:22-23]

Q: How does this teaching fit within the context of what’s been taught and about to be taught?

A: Our “eye” – both physically and spiritually – is the device that focuses our attention. We can be focused on the wrong, earthly things – such as the praise of men for our actions – or focused on the right, heavenly things. One leads to obtaining temporary, earthly treasure and the other to eternal, heavenly treasure.

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

[Read 6:24-30]

Q: Why the lecture on material possessions?

A: Jesus has just made the distinction between a hypocrite and a true follower by what they value most. He is further elaborating for the sake of Believers that all of their material needs in this life will be taken care of by the Father and that the path to hypocrisy begins by focusing on the wrong things.

²⁵“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!

Q: What was the example from the Lord’s prayer in this regard?

A: “Give us this day our daily bread.” (v.11)

Q: What is the application for us personally in this passage?

A: [Many answers, but here’s just one.] The world we live in has focused it’s eye and heart on itself, on the concern for making this life better while ignoring the need to prepare for the next life. Most of the people we’re around are concerned with this life, yet we are to concentrate on the next.

³¹“Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ ³²For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

[Read 6:31-33]

Q: To whom are we compared when we become overly concerned about earthly needs at the expense of our spiritual walk?

A: “Gentiles”, or unbelievers. It’s equal to not having faith in God nor a relationship with Him.

Q: Verse 33 is one of the most famous and memorized by just about every Believer in the entire history of the Church. But what is it’s meaning in the context of Christ’s entire message to this point?

- Following God’s laws (chapter 5) externally without following them from the heart is the difference between someone focused on an earthly life versus heavenly.
- Public versus private display of Christian characteristics and activities is the difference between a hypocrite (earth-focused) and true Believer (heaven-focused).
- The difference between being perfect/complete as our Father is whether or not we first seek our kingdom and righteousness or **HIS**.
- Spiritual obedience results in **BOTH** earthly and heavenly security, and fulfills the whole of God’s Law.