



Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 17: No Time for Show-Time Religion

Matthew 6:1-2, 5, 16

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As we get into chapter 6, the second chapter in the Sermon on the Mount, we will begin to see a shift in Jesus' emphasis as He is teaching His disciples. What we have seen in the Sermon on the Mount is that real transformation is characteristic of the lives of Christ's disciples. Now certainly, we do not completely fulfill the standard of the Sermon on the Mount at all times. But if we are true believers, something of the character of the Kingdom, the beatitudes will be genuinely present in our lives – spiritual poverty, mourning over sin, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking. We will practice righteousness as Christ is formed in us. Anger, lustful desires, deceitful speech, the desire for retaliation will progressively diminish in our lives and will be replaced by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Our lives will take on righteous character. And that is what leads to the words of Christ this morning.

Christ wants to protect the proper motive for true righteousness. Why do we live lives of righteousness before the gracious, saving, and ever-holy God? Jesus is going to give to us a warning today regarding spiritual hypocrisy. Listen again to the words of 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.” (Matthew 6:1, ESV) Jesus begins here with a general principle and then moves to specific actions. So that is what we are going to do. We are going to look today at the principle and the illustrations Jesus uses to demonstrate it and then starting next week, we will look at the proper ways of giving, of prayer, and of fasting. First, let me say this:

1) Righteousness is an essential characteristic of the children of God. Before we break this text down and examine it, I do want to eliminate any confusion about what Jesus is saying here. Some people look at Jesus' words here and think that they contradict His earlier words in Matthew 5:16. There we read: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16,

ESV) Here in chapter 6 He says do not practice your righteousness before other people and back in 5 He says that we should let our light shine before others and do good works before them – what gives?

Well listen, righteousness is an essential characteristic of the children of God. John tells us that in 1 John 2:29 -- (1 John 2:29, ESV) Psalm 106:3 says: (Psalm 106:3, ESV) Open righteousness, acts of righteousness are to be characteristic of our lives as the children of God. But, here's the thing, the whole idea of righteous living is that we live to draw attention to the God who has saved us through Christ His Son and Who empowers us and sustains us and strengthens us and provides for us and Who gives us hope now and in the life to come. We live righteously to draw attention to the power of Holy Spirit to make our dead hearts live, the power of the gospel to save and transform us, the power of the blood of Christ to cleanse us and make us new. It is for the glory of God and the Lord Jesus Christ that we are to live, not for our own. We are to live righteously and do good works, do acts of righteousness – for the praise of God and not be seen and applauded by men. That is the very heart of what Jesus is speaking to today.

2) Jesus condemns show-time religion. (v. 1a, 2, 5, 16) He says: Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them... this is serious stuff which is why Jesus uses the word "Beware". Be continually on guard is the idea. Beware, because there are serious consequences to living for the approval of men and for your own glory and not for the approval and glory of God. You see, the issue here is the motive of your heart. When you do good things—"acts of righteousness"—make sure that you're doing it for the glory of God from a heart of thanks for His grace and not just to put on a show for the people around you. In fact, we get our word "theatre" from the Greek word used here for "seen" (theaomai). To practice a form of righteousness just to be seen by men, then is just like a play. It is show-time religion; it's not real life, it is acting. It is just a performance designed to get a certain response. It is theatrical righteousness performed to impress people rather than please and honor God, and to magnify the actors instead of the Lord. In our day, just like in Jesus' day, there are people who do good religious things, not because they are devoted to God, but because they are interested in looking good in front of their fellow human beings.

Jesus is saying that this is the very essence of hypocrisy. Now often, we think of hypocrisy as saying one thing and doing another and that is true. But spiritual hypocrisy is using religious acts, righteous acts, as a way to gain glory for yourself and steal glory from God. The way that Jesus uses the word hypocrite in verses 1-16 which we read this morning, means to do spiritual

things, to use spiritual things – in this text giving, praying, and fasting – as a means to gain glory and recognition and honor for yourself. In fact, in keeping with the whole show-time religion theme this word hypocrite which comes from the Greek word – hupokrites—someone who was an actor or a stage player in the Greek dramas and plays. Now listen, we need to make sure we understand this, a hypocrite is not a humble Christian who walks with Christ, battles with sin, sometimes falls, repents and asks God for forgiveness, receives it, and gets up, and keeps running the race, pursuing Christ and following hard after him. A hypocrite is someone who does that is good and right, not out of a love for God and for people, but to promote himself or herself.

This kind of hypocrisy is inwardly concerned with what others think of them. Do they think I am spiritual? Wise? Smart? Mature? Faithful? Generous? Well-versed in Scripture? Righteous? Holy? Leadership material? The hypocrite does something that is seemingly religious, seemingly spiritual, seemingly righteous, seemingly sacrificial, and inwardly just longing for someone to notice what they are doing or have done and to be impressed and praise them. Hypocrisy can be found in everything from great showy displays of spiritual virtue designed to be noticed, to the professions of humility and self-deprecating comments, making fun of yourself so that others will think you to be humble and spiritual.

Look at the way that Jesus illustrates spiritual hypocrisy, show-time religion. He takes three very common components of the Jewish religion and of the Pharisees in particular and uses them as an illustration – giving, praying, and fasting. ““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.” (Matthew 6:2, ESV)

The picture that the Lord is conjuring up in the Jewish mind is of the pompous Pharisee on his way down to the temple or the synagogue to put money in the special box for the poor, or to give a gift to the poor. As he walks down there's a whole parade, and in front of him there are trumpeters blowing a fanfare as they walk, and it's quickly attracting a crowd. People hear the noise and they all run out to see what's going on and the Pharisee is praised as a holy man for giving to the poor.

We are not really sure if people in Jesus' day actually blew trumpets to announce their gifts or if Jesus is simply using a metaphor here to colorfully describe the people who made sure that

everyone knew they were giving to the needy. In our day it would be the same as having a press conference or an announcement in church, or giving money to have a building or an award named after you, or casually mentioning how you had to help so-and-so out again, but you were glad to do it. Basically, Jesus saying, “When you give, don’t make a big deal out of it.” Don’t attract attention to it. Don’t advertise how much you’re giving. Don’t show off your generosity craving to be noticed for it. Don’t play the hypocrite. Give for the glory of God out of thankfulness to God with no desire to receive recognition from anyone. The hypocrite wants people to see how generous they are. They want people to be impressed with their spirituality or their devotion to God or their kind heart. But Jesus warns us not to follow their example because God does not recognize that kind of generosity and will not reward it. Then He uses prayer as an illustration. He says:

““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.” (Matthew 6:5, ESV) The Jews stopped to pray three times every day, and if you were able, you were to go to the temple during that time. If not, you were to go to a synagogue or, in some manner, mark the hour in a particular way. The issue is not praying in front of other people, the issue is praying to impress those who hear you and to draw attention to yourself. It is being showy in prayer. Jesus is talking about praying to impress your hearers because of the length or the theological breadth of the your prayers – demonstrating your grasp of all of the finer points of theology. Polished, flowery, theatrical prayer, neatly sprinkled with biblical references and quotes from theologians carefully crafted meant to grip the heartstrings of the hearer and to demonstrate the obvious spirituality of the prayer. Using the praying voice – that unnatural voice that you never use in any other context that always seems on the edge of tears. Don’t get me wrong – there is nothing wrong with using Scripture when you pray, or praying with emotion – the problem is doing it to get attention and directing others to you rather than toward God. But here’s the thing, it is not only praying to sound impressive, it’s failing to pray in front of others because you fear that you won’t. Prayer is not about how you sound. It is not a tool to impress others nor is it something to be avoided because you fear that you won’t. Prayer is communion of the child of God with His Father in heaven. Then he turns to the practice of fasting.

““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.” (Matthew 6:16, ESV) Fasting is not the issue here. It is fasting for the sake of personal recognition as one who is especially dedicated and consecrated to God. The language here

suggests doing something to accentuate their look of hunger and physical trial – maybe not bathing or messing up their hair. In our day it would be one upping one another on fasting and letting everyone know it. “I’m fasting from TV.” “I’m fasting from TV and movies.” “I’m fasting from TV, movies, and music...” Or “I’m fasting from food” “I’m fasting from food and juice.” “I’m fasting from food, juice and milk...”so on and so on. Fasting and announcing to everyone that you are or fasting and writing a book or blogging about your personal fast and how you spiritually grew exponentially through it, even as your waist, your outer man, was vanishing away.

Hypocrisy is an especially dangerous and deceptive thing. Let me show you why. First, hypocrisy, being a sin of the heart, can easily go undetected. Hypocrisy was rampant in the spiritual leadership of Israel, amongst the Pharisees and the scribes, who were considered to be the protectors of the Jewish religion and the reliable teachers and interpreters of the Word of God. Their hypocrisy would have gone unchallenged and unnoticed and the Pharisees would have been remembered as some of the most righteous Jews ever in the history of the nation if Jesus had not exposed them by the Word of God. But that is just what Jesus did and the Pharisees despised Him for it.

Second, hypocrisy pursues the right things. Giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting all legitimate and right expressions of true saving faith. Jesus does not criticize giving and praying and fasting. Likewise, worship attendance, singing, Scripture reading, teaching, tithing – all of those things are legitimate expressions of true faith in Christ. This issue is not the action. The issue is the motive behind it.

Third, spiritual hypocrisy, like Jesus describes it here, receives the praise of men. From the human perspective, the spiritual hypocrite is a wonderful human being. . Hypocrites look wonderful on the outside and all the while they are filled with selfish ambition, self-exaltation, pride and self-congratulation. Jesus said as much about the Pharisees: (Matthew 23:27–28, ESV) Hypocrisy leads to the self-glorification that our fallen human nature, our old man, our sinful flesh desires.

Do you see, beloved? It is in our acts of righteousness that it is easiest to develop a false spirituality. As Christians we’re very aware of the dangers of worldliness. It doesn’t take long to

begin to see a drift into obvious worldliness in a fellow church member who stops coming to church or pursues an unbeliever or openly questions what the Bible teaches. But hypocrisy is like radon. It kills you slowly and silently. The danger of religious hypocrisy is that you can carry on doing all the same things you did when you really loved God even as your heart begins to turn far from him to be replaced with vanity and pride and self-righteousness. We must be on guard against hypocrisy in our own lives because...

3) What is at stake is the reward of heaven. (1b, 2b, 5b, 16b) Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." The word Jesus uses here is a business term. It means to be paid in full and issue a receipt. Those who give to impress other people get what they want—in fact, they get precisely what they want and no more. If the reason you give is to get human recognition, then that's all you get: human recognition. Their account is closed. Do you see? It is not that spiritual hypocrisy receives no reward, but instead cuts off the very reward and blessing of the God whom the hypocrite claims to serve. It is the height of silliness and stupidity. If you are living for the praise of men you will get it, but that is all that you will get, the only reward you will receive.

When Jesus says "then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" we are meant to understand first that in the case of the false professor who never has truly known Christ as Savior and God as Father, spiritual hypocrisy, spiritual playacting and pretending to be righteous will result in the loss of eternal reward. For the scribes and the Pharisees and countless other religious professors throughout history and in our own day who have never truly experienced the reality of a broken and contrite heart before God, a realization and mourning over their sins against God and a desperate longing for the salvation that can only be found in Christ, trusting only in Him and in His saving death upon the cross as their substitute – for those people, their self-deception will lead to eternal loss and judgment and destruction. Jesus warns of the end awaiting the self-deceived and hypocritical pretenders -- (Matthew 7:21–23, ESV)

In the case of the true Christian who really does know God as Father but has been seduced by the desire to live for the praise of men and not God, there will be the sickening sound of those works done in the name of Christ but for the praise of men burning up on the Day of Judgment and not meeting with the approval of God. Paul writes (1 Corinthians 3:10–15, ESV). Is it possible to build upon the foundation laid by the gospel with worthless acts motivated by a desire for the approval of man? Clearly there is. How horrible to come to the end of one's life and to discover that what was done in the name of Christ was done in vain, was worthless and will receive no reward because it was done with the desire to bring glory to one's self and not to God. Though there will not be a loss of salvation – though he himself will be saved, but only

as through fire – but there will be the revolting, repulsive and sickening realization of rewards forfeited and a life wasted and worthless for the Kingdom of God. With this in mind,

4) How do we kill show-time religion?

1. Learn to rightly discern your own heart. Because hypocrisy is an internal sin, easily disguised before others, we have to learn to rightly discern our own hearts and then to do it. Now listen, we need to understand something here. We cannot discern the heart of someone else. Yes, we can examine the fruit of someone's life and Jesus calls us to do that later in this Sermon, but these words today serve a different purpose. These words of Christ are meant for us – for you and I – individually. They are a warning and a call to self-examination, not the examination of someone else. Here are some discerning questions to ask yourself: Do I truly and consciously desire that God be glorified through my life, my thoughts, and my deeds? Do I really seek for His glory and do I truly desire for Him to receive glory through me? What brings greater satisfaction in some act of righteousness like prayer or giving or serving – the opportunity to express gratitude and obedience and love to the Christ who saved me or the accolade and approval of other people? Am I fine to do what I do simply for the joy of walking with Christ and because I love Him or do I want others to notice how faithful, how spiritual, how righteous I am? Do I find as much joy in private expressions of devotion as I do in public displays of devotion in Christ and do I do these things with only one audience – God – in mind? Am I preoccupied with how others will perceive me? Am I preoccupied with the way that my service will be perceived by others and with the potential praise and acceptance that I will receive from them? Am I content to be thought little of, or thought of not at all, as long as the Lord receives the honor and praise that is due Him? When all is said and done, why have we done what we have done in the name of Christ and for the sake of righteousness? When we give our offering or preach our sermons or offer our public and even private prayers or help the poor or discipline our bodies, what has been the motive behind it?

2. Remember the gospel. When discerning our hearts and sensing the fleshly desire in us for personal glory and self-exaltation rising in our souls, we must remember the reason for the gospel. The very heart of the gospel is the truth that by nature we are wretched, wicked, needy sinners, unworthy of any praise who desperately needed and still need a Savior to make us acceptable to God. We have been redeemed and rescued, given new life and the Spirit of God within us not to celebrate us and exalt ourselves but to bring glory and honor to Christ and point to the worth and wonder of our Savior – not ourselves. The goal of the gospel is salvation

for us, and glory for Christ. Remembering the gospel will stir up love for Christ in our souls that will want to make much of Him and serve Him with a gratitude and devotion that proclaims that He alone is worthy of glory. When we are secure in the love and acceptance of Christ, we will not need to seek security in the approval of man. Martin Luther, the old German reformer says of the need for the gospel to resist the temptation to hypocrisy in typical Martin Luther fashion: 'Most necessary is [the gospel] that we know it well, teach it to others, & beat it into their heads continually'.

3. Come to the Christ for forgiveness. The truth is that we are all guilty of this sin to one degree or another. The unsaved religious person lives in this sad charade, carefully crafting the way that other people perceive him or her, so to create the perception of being a Christian without the reality of it. Believers can commit it this sin on occasion or even frequently but the answer for both is confession and repentance of sin, turning faith to Christ and His saving, substitutionary death on the cross and being cleansed by the blood of Christ.

The unrepentant hypocrite won't care about true repentance as long as they can maintain their image and reputation in the eyes of others, but for the repentant, there is grace. For the one truly convicted of sin – the lost man or woman for the first time or the saved man or woman for the ten thousandth time – there is grace. That is why Christ became flesh, suffered, bled and died, bearing God's wrath and rose again from the dead – so that we in our sin, clothed by our filthy rags, could come to God in Christ and find forgiveness of our sins at the throne of grace.

4. Imitate Christ. His one goal in life was to please God – in all of His preaching, in all of His living, in all of His miraculous works. He lived entirely for God. The words He spoke were God's words. The works He did were the works the Father had given Him to do. His whole life was given to glorifying God. He lived entirely and always and only for the glory of God. His goal was not to please Himself. Nor did He desire the praise of men more than the praise of God. That is the life he calls His disciples to. (John 13:16–17, ESV)

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