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Matthew 6:1 - 6:4 Introduction



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this lesson on Matthew 6:1-4, Steve Gregg discusses the true meaning of righteousness and the importance of giving, praying, and fasting. He highlights the danger of seeking rewards for religious acts in the ways that the carnal flesh appreciates, rather than seeking a reward from God alone. Instead, he urges listeners to focus on the condition of their heart rather than the recognition of others, and to avoid the two mistakes of hypocrisy and vain repetition in their prayer life. Overall, the lesson emphasizes the importance of genuine faith and obedience to God rather than outward religious acts for the sake of appearance.

Transcript

Let us continue in our study of the book of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount that is found there. It is found in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7, and today we turn to the opening verses of chapter 6, and we get into the second chapter of the sermon. This section that comes before us at this point is one self-contained section in the first 18 verses.

There Jesus is teaching a point and using three illustrations. Now, at the end of chapter 5, we saw that Jesus was trying to make a certain point, and he gave six illustrations. His point had to do with what was the righteousness of the law that God requires.

He said, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will no way enter the kingdom of heaven, and then he gave six examples of how the scribes and the Pharisees had taught and had interpreted the law, and then he gave his own clarifications and illumination on it, showing that there was a deeper aspect of righteousness according to the law, which was widely neglected in the teaching of the Pharisees and of the Jews in general, and so he gave a deeper understanding of what it means to be righteous. The religious Jews of the time largely saw righteousness as a matter of outward conformity to the rules and regulations given by Moses, whereas God, through Jesus, was now saying the real issues that God always had concern about were issues of heart, the issue of love for your neighbor as yourself, seen in the fact that you show justice and mercy and faithfulness. This is what real

righteousness is.

If you're going to use the law as a basis for righteousness, then you'll need to understand it in these terms, in terms of heart righteousness, and when Jesus said your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, he meant it must exceed their righteousness in terms of sincerity and depth, because theirs was only skin deep, and the righteousness that God desires is of the heart, and Jesus had given, at the end of chapter 5, six illustrations of how this is so. Now he turns a corner, and we're no longer looking at the issue of righteousness in the same sense as before. When we say righteousness, we're talking about how to be right in the sight of God, how to do what's right in the sight of God, but now he talks about what we could call piety or religiosity, or maybe even spirituality, because he gives examples that come from the giving of alms to the poor, which is, of course, an expression, ideally, an expression of generosity.

This is a spiritual trait, and then he talks about prayer, and he talks about fasting. These are religious activities. Giving, really, giving and praying and fasting all belong to part of the religious conduct of the Jews.

Now you might say, well, what's the difference between righteous and religious? Well, righteousness, basically, is doing what is morally good and right and pleasing to God, and that is what was being discussed at the end of chapter 5. Religious has to do with fulfilling certain spiritual obligations. You see, any man's conduct, whether he's a believer or not, can be judged on the basis of whether he's acting righteously or not, whether he's doing something that is right or wrong. But when it comes down to pleasing God as one of his own people and having a spiritual walk with God, then you've got to get into things like prayer and fasting, which have nothing to do, really, with doing what's right and what's wrong.

It has to do with special activities related to worship, special activities related to piety or religiosity. Now, just as the Pharisees in Jesus' day had interpreted righteousness shallowly and had not seen that God was looking on the heart, so also they interpreted religion in the same shallow manner. The scribes and the Pharisees did, in fact, give alms to the poor.

Alms being a word that means charitable gifts. They did give gifts to the poor. They did pray.

They did fast. These are religious activities that they were required to do, and they did. But once again, what they were doing was only skin deep.

They were more externalistic in their focus, and they were mainly concerned about whether they were doing outwardly the thing that their religion required them to do than they were interested in whether they were doing it in a manner that really pleased God. Now, you see, what Jesus is doing all the way through this sermon is teaching us what

God really cares about and what really pleases Him, and consistently, He's making it very clear, what God cares about is the heart. Now, here, Jesus makes a summary statement of the whole section.

In Matthew 6.1, He says, Now, what He's saying is, if you do your religious act, in this case, He gives the example of a charitable deed. Later, He'll speak similarly about prayer and fasting. But if you do your religious act in front of men, in order to be seen by men, He says, Now, what that obviously means is that your father is not impressed.

If you are not seeking simply to please God, but you're seeking to impress people with your religiosity, God will not be impressed, and He will not see you as in line for any kind of reward in heaven. Now, one reason that people practice religion, any religion, is they seek a reward in heaven. Now, I realize that many Christians say, well, I follow Jesus without any concern about reward.

I just want to follow Jesus because He's worthy, because He is the Lord, and because it'd be robbing God not to follow Him. I'll just forget about rewards. I just want to do what's right inside of God and be a follower of Christ.

Well, that's a very high-sounding thing to say, and it may be, in fact, genuinely true. I believe there are people who love God so much that they would serve God even if there was no heaven to go to or any hell to avoid, because they just love God. He's an attractive, lovable God, if you get to know Him.

And I believe that it's a wonderful thing to be so motivated to please God that you wouldn't care at all if there were any rewards to be had afterwards. However, that's not the way most of us think, even if we do love God. And it's not the way that even God encourages us to think.

God never encourages us to think not in terms of reward. He encourages us to think in terms of reward. But He wants us to seek the rewards that really show the right priorities.

The Pharisees were seeking a reward for their religiosity, but the reward they were seeking was they wanted people to be impressed. And indeed, people were impressed with them, and so Jesus said they have their reward. They were seeking a reward which they managed to get, which was to have people impressed with them.

But Jesus said, if that's the reward you want, then that's the only reward you're going to get. You'll have no reward from your Father in heaven. And so Jesus is teaching His disciples that when they do their religious things, they should do so not with the mind of impressing the religious community or finding status among your religious peers, but you should do it entirely with a mind of whether God is concerned about it or not.

It is not wrong to be interested in the reward. It might seem selfish, but God always

appeals to this, we could call, selfishness in us, when He always warns us that if we do certain things wrong, there'll be certain punishments. And if we do certain things right, there'll be certain rewards.

Why would God appeal to this motive in us if it was a wrong motive to even have? It says in Hebrews chapter 11, and in verse 6, But without faith it's impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Now notice, the writer of Hebrews says that people will not even come to God unless they have a prior belief that God exists, of course, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him. He's the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Now, to say He rewards those who seek Him doesn't mean that He rewards them in ways that the carnal flesh would appreciate. After all, what reward is being sought by the person who's diligently seeking God? Well, God Himself is the reward. To seek after God is to try to apprehend God Himself.

And if God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, then He is the reward that they obtain. But it is still a reward, and it is a motivating reward. It gives incentive to diligently seek God and to put all other pursuits aside.

In fact, it speaks of Moses in the same chapter, in Hebrews chapter 11, that he left Egypt when he was the king's daughter. But it says in verse 25, he chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, for he looked to the reward. Now, isn't that interesting? Moses gave up the treasures of Egypt in order to suffer with the people of God because he was looking to the reward.

Now, obviously, the reward he was looking for was not position and power and status and fame and wealth in Egypt. He had that already. He gave that up in order to seek a reward that mattered more.

Throughout Scripture, we are encouraged to seek the rewards that last forever. Jesus said in John chapter 6, Do not seek or labor for that bread which perishes, but labor for that bread that endures to eternal life. There are eternal rewards for those who will diligently seek God, and Christ and the New Testament in general encourages us to seek those rewards.

Unfortunately, religious people often settle for much less. Many times, people who are religious, the only reward they really care about is that other religious people respect them and think that they are at least as religious or maybe even more religious than the average. And these strokes, this appreciation that they seek from men, is in some senses satisfying.

It's rewarding. If people think you're a good person, if people look up to you, that's rewarding, is it not? But it's not a reward worth getting at the expense of an eternal reward, namely, of having God say, Well done, good and faithful servant. Now, what Jesus is going to teach us in these passages is that you cannot have both.

Or let's just say you can't seek both. If you are seeking the reward of human approval and human accolades, then you cannot have the reward that comes from God alone. If you seek the reward that comes from God alone, you may, at times, have people respect you and think well of you, too.

But you can't have that be your motivation. The Apostle Paul said it this way in Galatians chapter 1 and verse 10. He said, But if I were yet seeking to please men, I could not be the servant of Christ.

You can't serve God when you're trying to please men. You have to have one motive that dominates everything you do, and that is the motive to please God. And that is what Jesus is saying.

Now, God is more pleased with a heart that is devoted to him and loves him than he is with a person who does a great number of religious acts. And so Jesus was telling his disciples here, when they do their religious acts, make sure that they are trying only to please God. Now, he goes a little into what we call hyperbole here a little bit.

Hyperbole is a slight exaggeration to emphasize a point. And Jesus does this in order to make it very clear and to make it very emphatic that God is looking at the heart. Let me read the passage for you.

I'm going to read all 18 verses because they really make up a self-contained unit here. This is Matthew 6, verses 1 through 18. Jesus said, Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them.

Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will himself reward you openly. And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father, who is in the secret place, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly. But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they

think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them, for your Father knows the things that you have need of before you ask Him.

In this manner, therefore, pray, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear to men to be fasting.

Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to be fasting to men, but to your Father, who is in the secret place. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly.

Now, this is the section. This is Matthew 6, verses 1 through 18. And one thing you may have noticed is that there are three passages that follow an identical paradigm, or an identical framework.

He starts out by saying, when you, then he names a certain activity. In verse 2, it's when you do a charitable deed. In verse 5, it's when you pray.

And in verse 16, it's when you fast. Okay, so you've got doing charitable deeds, praying, and fasting, all treated as separate categories. Now, in each case, he says, when you do this activity, he says, do not do what the hypocrites do.

In each case, he gives an example of what the hypocrites did. When they gave charitable deeds, they'd sound a trumpet before them to make sure that everyone was looking when they threw their money into the cup of the beggar, or whatever, or into the temple's treasury. They wanted to make sure everyone saw.

They wanted to make sure everyone's attention was upon them. And therefore, they were hoping to have the approval of men, or the reputation of being generous men. In the case of praying, Jesus said they loved to stand in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets so that they may be seen by men when they prayed.

And when it comes to fasting, he says in verse 16, these people, these hypocrites, put on a sad countenance, and they disfigure their faces so they may appear to men to be fasting. Now, in all these cases, what he's pointing out is what the Pharisees were doing. The Pharisees were the ones that he later identified as the hypocrites here referred to.

And he says that they are ostentatious in their religious activities, because they have to be. What they're seeking is man's approval. What they want is for as many people as possible to look upon them as godly and righteous men, and religious men.

And so they do all they could to broadcast to the public and get as many observers as possible when they would pray or give gifts so that they would have basically what they wanted, their reward. And that was human admiration. Jesus said they have their reward.

Now, he says that in each case. But in each case he also says, but when you do these things, charitable deeds, prayer, fasting, he says when you do it, do it this way. Now, in the cases where he tells the disciples how to do it, there's fair reason to believe that he resorts to a tad bit of hyperbole.

For example, he says when you give charitable deeds, don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. He's not speaking literally, of course, since your hands don't know anything at all. He is basically saying, do it in such a non-ostentatious way as to guarantee that your own heart is not trying to get attention.

Do it as secretively as necessary in order to make sure that you're not doing it to be seen by men. Likewise, he says when you pray, go into your closet and shut the door behind you so people don't see you. Now, once again, he's overstating it because there were times when Jesus and the apostles did pray in front of others, and that's not wrong.

He is simply saying, to avoid the error of the Pharisees who try to get as much attention as they can, you seek to avoid getting that attention so that you'll know that your heart is doing it to be heard of God and not to be seen by men. And when it comes to fasting, he says make sure you anoint your head and comb your hair and wear your normal cheerful countenance rather than disfiguring your face and wearing your hair messed up so that people say, man, what's wrong with you? And say, oh, I'm fasting, like the Pharisees did, so they could get the admiration. So Jesus says, in all these cases, don't do it like the hypocrites.

He gives an example of what the hypocrites do. He says, but when you do it, do it this way. And he gives, in many cases, sometimes a slightly exaggerated picture, but the idea is that you do it privately.

You do it without show, without showiness, without any ostentatiousness. And at the end he says, and your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you openly. So there's really kind of two stanzas to each of these paradigms here.

You've got, don't do it like the Pharisees, for they do this and they have their reward. But you do it this way and you will have a reward later. Your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Now there's one interruption in this basic pattern. And that is, once he has said these

things about prayer, rather than going immediately off and talking about fasting and closing the loop, he, at least Matthew here, and Jesus may have on this occasion or on some other occasion taught these other things about prayer. We have, of course, the model prayer, sometimes called the Lord's Prayer, given here in chapter 6, and some teaching surrounding it.

Because really the paradigm that fits the passage about prayer really ends at verse 6, where he says, your father who sees in secret will reward you openly. But instead of going on to the next point, he discusses prayer further. And he says, but when you pray, don't use vain repetitions as the heathen do.

Now here he says, when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, meaning the Jewish Pharisees. But he says also when you pray, don't be like the heathen either. There are two mistakes, at least, that people make about prayer.

One is characteristic of the Pharisees, don't do that. And the other is characteristic of the heathen, don't do that either. And then he gives this model prayer and so forth, and then he gets back to talking about fasting.

Now in the following sessions, we're going to look more closely at each of these paragraphs, and we will give them as much time as I feel should be given to them in a radio format like this. But the point here is, of course, of the whole passage, that religion is no good at all if it is not done unto the Lord. And what I mean by that is, if there's no sincerity in it, if you're a hypocrite, and by the way, the word hypocrite in the Greek means a play actor.

If you're like an actor in a play, you're just playing a role. You're not really a worshiper of God, you're just acting like one, just like a person who would play a priest or something in a movie, and the actor is himself not even a Catholic, or whatever. You have people who play roles, even religious roles, in plays.

And that is the term that Jesus used of what the Pharisees were. He said, they're actors in a play. When they act religiously, they are not really being themselves, they're playing a role.

Don't be like that. God wants you to be genuine. God wants you to worship Him sincerely, and not to be an actor, because the actors, they get their paycheck, but they already have it.

You'll get your paycheck, as it were, your reward later in heaven. Your Father in heaven will reward you openly later on. So, in our next few sessions together, we will be looking at this passage more in depth.

We'll look at each separate issue, and try to ascertain not only what Jesus' message is on it here, but what His general teaching was on each of these subjects throughout His

ministry. And I hope you'll be able to join us tomorrow and in the coming days, as we seek to explore this more deeply.