

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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DO NOT DO YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE MEN

Matthew 6:1-8

We will study today the question of the practice of piety for the Christian and we will be looking at the beginning of chapter 6 of the gospel of Matthew. We will consider Matthew 6:1-8 and 16-18. We are going to leave out vv. 9-15, a section on what is called the Lord's Prayer, which we will study on a separate occasion. So Matthew 6 begins like this.

Matthew 6:1. "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.

2 "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.

3 "But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 "that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

5 " 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.

6 "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.

7 "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Matthew 6:16. " 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.

17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

18 "so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

The call to be different

In the Christian life, it is not enough just to do the right thing. The Christian must do what is right in the right way and with the right motive. And the subject of this passage is precisely about the motivation of a true disciple. What motivates him? How does his motivation differ from that of a non-Christian? It must be very different because Christians have different standards, standards that are

based on the Word of God. If your life is not much different from the life of a non-Christian, there is something fundamentally wrong with your Christianity.

Jesus expects us to be different. Just look at v. 8 again. This verse gives us an important clue to understand the whole of Matthew 6.

*Matthew 6:8. "Therefore **do not be like them**; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.*

Notice the first few words, *Do not be like them*. Jesus calls his disciples to be different. God's people are to be holy people, people who are set apart from the world to belong to God. We are not to conform to the people who are in the world. This was already clear in the OT. Listen to this passage in Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:3. 'You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. 4 'You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the Lord your God.

'You are not to do what people in Egypt or in Canaan do. You are not to follow the world and their statutes. You are to follow Me and obey My commandments.' Do you see how Jesus is saying exactly the same thing? When Jesus says to His disciples, 'Do not be like them,' it is like God saying through Moses, 'You shall not do as they do in Egypt and in Canaan.'

Do not do that

The Christian's call to be different is a recurrent theme of our passage. Jesus expressed it by using the words 'do not.' We already saw an example of this in v. 8, 'Do not be like them.' But this 'do not' is also repeated in many other places.

Verse 1: '**Do not** do your charitable deeds before men.'

Verse 2: '**Do not** sound a trumpet before you.'

Verse 3: '**Do not** let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.'

Verse 5: '**Do not** be like the hypocrites.'

Verse 7: '**Do not** use vain repetitions.'

Verse 16: '**Do not** put on a gloomy face.'

Verse 18: '**Do not** appear to men to be fasting.'

This is not to say that Jesus' teaching is all-negative. What Jesus is doing is to draw a contrast between the wrong way and the right way. After saying 'Do not,' He goes on immediately to say what we ought to do. Saying 'Do not' is like putting a black cloth to give a contrast to the white that is in front. More specifically, the contrast has to do with the motive, the motive by which a Christian does things. Some people practice their piety in order to be seen by men. They desire to be applauded by men. Others practice their piety quietly in the secret place of God. They want to have a 'secret' relationship with God. So the contrast is between those who want to show off and those who are concerned for a deep spiritual life. This is what is meant by 'secret.'

In the secret place of God

The word 'secret' is an important word in our passage. It appears 6 times: in v. 4 (2x), in v. 6 (2x) and in v. 18 (2x). Jesus invites us to go into the secret place of God. This place is secret because it is out of view from all. It is a quiet place in the heart of the disciple where he draws near to God and God draws near to him. Just read those words in Psalm 32. 'Lord, you are my hiding place. You are

my secret place, the place where I can find rest.’ Do you feel at home with God? Is He the one you go to when you are sad or when you are joyful? Listen to this beautiful testimony concerning the safety that a person can find in God.

Psalm 91:1. He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

2 I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

Those are wonderful verses. God is our secret place, the place that we would retire to, the place that we delight to stay in.

Having explained the joy of abiding in God’s secret place and the Christian’s call to be different, we want to see how this difference is shown in practical ways. The Lord Jesus speaks about three specific religious practices: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. For each practice, He tells us that there is a wrong motive for doing it and there is a right one.

The practice of piety: the wrong way and the right way

First, the matter of giving. What is the wrong way? It is when you give and ‘you sound a trumpet before you.’ This is of course picture language. It doesn’t mean that people actually pulled out their trumpets and started to blow. Jesus uses this picture to tell us that there are people who give for recognition and prestige. They do it in order to gain some publicity because they want the praise of men. And Jesus condemns such an attitude.

What is the right way? ‘When you give,’ Jesus says, ‘don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.’ This, again, is picture language. That is not to say that we are not even to be self-conscious about our giving. We have to understand this statement as a picture of secrecy. Jesus is saying, ‘When you give, keep it quiet. Don’t let others know what you are giving. Flee recognition if possible.’ Practically speaking, it is not always possible to give alms in complete secrecy. But that is not Jesus’ point. He is talking about the motive of the human heart and He says that it is wrong to give in order to be noticed by men.

Secondly, prayer. What is the wrong motive for prayer? It is praying to be seen by men. Prayer can be either private or public. If a person prays mostly in public and neglects his personal devotions, this says something about his motive for praying. He prays in order to give others the impression that he has a close walk with God. He prays because he wants recognition and praise for his piety.

What is the right motive for prayer? It is praying with the earnest desire to be heard by God. The Christian is not interested in show but in substance. And so, when it comes to private prayer, he goes into his room and shuts the door. He shuts it against interruption. He shuts it against distraction. But especially, he shuts it against human spectators.

And thirdly, fasting. What is the wrong motive for fasting? It is when you fast to gain religious recognition and a sense of God’s approval. You fast to display yourself. You change your appearance in order to attract attention and look super-spiritual.

What is the right motive for fasting? The believer abstains from food in order to concentrate upon God and seek His answer to a particular matter. Fasting is to be done without notice. Jesus says, *When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.* ‘Behave just as you do usually. Wash your face in a normal way. Shave or trim your beard as usual. Let it be nothing different about you externally to indicate that you are fasting.’

In secret or in public?

Almsgiving, prayer, fasting, three important practices of Christian piety, three practices to be done in secret and not for display. Now, I would like to read to you Matthew 5:16.

Mathew 5:16. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

How do we reconcile this verse with the repeated command, in chapter 6, not to practice our piety before men in order to be seen by them? There seems to be a contradiction. Are we supposed to show our good actions or not? This apparent contradiction can be explained in this way. First of all, these two passages refer to two different aspects of the Christian life: good works (Matthew 5) and piety (Matthew 6). Our piety, which is expressed in our giving, praying and fasting, can be and should be practiced secretly and without notice. But we cannot do the same thing with good works. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, clothing the naked, all these good works cannot be hidden from those who benefit from our kindness. We can give in secret, or pray, or fast. But we cannot do good works without showing our identity.

Secondly, the object of both passages is the same: they make reference to the glory of God. Why must we practice our piety in secret? In order that the glory may be given to God and not to men. Why does Jesus ask us to let our light shine in such a way that men can see our good works? In order that men, when they see us, may glorify our Father who is in heaven. In both cases, the ultimate end is the same, that God may be glorified.

Seeking rewards

There is another important word that we must look at in this passage, and it is the word 'reward.' It is used 7x, in vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18. Right away, you can see that there is a certain insistence on this topic here. In fact, the Lord Jesus says a great deal about reward in all His teaching, not only in this passage.

You know, some Protestants feel very uncomfortable to talk about reward. They tend to think that the spiritual Christian does not look for rewards. If he is interested in rewards, it simply shows that he is carnal. That is how they think. It is quite possible that this kind of belief has developed from the Reformation. In the desire to defend the grace of God, Protestants have sometimes been reluctant to teach that God can reward people for their actions. They don't like the idea of merits in rewards because it seems to contradict the concept of divine grace.

But when we look at Jesus' words here, we see a different teaching. In fact, our passage indicates clearly that there is nothing wrong to seek the reward that God gives. Just look at v. 4. Jesus says that if you do the right thing with the right motive, 'God will reward you.' We have to get rid of the idea that we should live the Christian life for its own sake, and not for the reward.

Let me tell you this. Nobody does anything for no reason. And to do something for no reward is to do something for no reason. The reward is the reason why you do it. If you say that you serve the Lord for no reward, I am going to be blunt with you, you are a hypocrite. When you do something, you expect a result, a reward. But there is a difference in the kind of reward that you expect. The spiritual Christian looks for spiritual reward. The carnal man looks for carnal reward. The heavenly man looks for heavenly reward. The earthly man looks for earthly reward.

Earthly rewards vs. heavenly rewards

What does the carnal man get? At first, it seems that he will get nothing. We read in Matthew 6:1b, *Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.* But that only means that he will have no reward from heaven. It doesn't say that he will have no reward at all. The reward that he wants, he will get. He will get the applause of man. But that is all that he will get. Nothing else. Once the applause has died down, Jesus says, 'There is no further reward to come.' That is the meaning of v. 2b, *Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.* Those solemn words are repeated two more times in v. 5 and in v. 16.

The spiritual man serves God because he loves God. But that doesn't mean that he is not interested in any reward. As he serves the Lord, his eyes are on the spiritual reward. You see, love always claims the object of its love. For example, when we say that a person loves the world, we mean that he loves the things that are in the world and he wants those things for himself. In that sense, love always claims what it wants. Now let's bring that at the spiritual level. If I say that I love Jesus, I imply that I want Jesus. Christ is the one that I want. Paul says, 'I lost everything so that I may win Christ' (Philippians 3:8). Jesus is what motivated Paul to suffer the loss of everything. It is in that sense that Jesus constitutes his reward.

So the spiritual man looks for the spiritual reward. And what is that spiritual reward? It is nothing less than God Himself. What is more precious than God in this world? Abraham looked for one reward: that God would be his reward. Listen to Genesis 15:1.

*Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, **your exceedingly great reward.**"*

God was Abraham's great reward. In other places, the Bible speaks of 'inheritance' and of 'portion.' The psalmist declares in Psalm 16:5, *The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup.* In other words, God is his reward.

Rewards: a present reality

We can also think of the reward in terms of the blessings that God gives in the here and now, and not some time in the future. For example, when we give secretly, we experience the joy of seeing somebody's need relieved. We understand why Jesus says, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' We get the reward of joy.

When we come to God in the secret place, we are refreshed with His presence. He renews our strength. He satisfies our hunger. He quenches our thirst. He is always ready to receive us. These are all rewards that we receive when we pray.

Or, when we fast quietly, we are rewarded by a gradual sense of self-control and discipline. And at the same time, we experience the blessing of our dependency upon God.

Summary

We saw in today's lesson three types of contrast concerning the practice of piety. There are opposite forms of piety: one is done for display and the other is done in secret. There are different motives for piety: one is done for self-glorification and the other one is done for the glory of God. And finally, there are different rewards: we get either the applause of men or the blessings of God. We know which ones should apply to the Christian. And throughout this whole passage, God calls us to be different from the world and not to conform to the people around us.