

**“Kingdom Motivation”**  
**Matthew 6:1-6,16-18**  
**January 20, 2002**  
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MT 6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

MT 6:2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup> But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

MT 6:5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

MT 6:16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

I begin this sermon with a rather embarrassing illustration drawn from my own life.

But it happened long enough ago as to suggest that I **have** no more recent illustration from my own experience and thus also suggest that I have become much more righteous since then.

If that were my motivation, that very motivation would be an example of the hypocrisy Jesus warns us of in this passage. But that gets ahead of ourselves.

When Billy Graham last held an evangelistic crusade here in Denver, I was the chairman of the Pastors' Committee, with 900 churches supporting the crusade.

We worked for months before the crusade and when it finally occurred, I was invited to sit on the platform at MileHigh Stadium with Graham and to speak and pray before the assembled thousands.

I was so ashamed of my motives and thoughts for desiring that opportunity that I turned it down.

I suspected I couldn't stand before that crowd by Billy Graham's side and not just glory in the honor.

But a strange thing occurred.

After I turned it down, I found myself glorying in my humility and thinking that surely God, and anyone else I could tell, would be pleased with my self-denial.

My act of righteousness, that is my self-denial, became the very trap I fell into.

I stepped **out** of the **gross** hypocrisy of wanting to be known for my efforts for God **into** the more **subtle** hypocrisy of wanting God and others to think more highly of me for my humility.

The subject of this text is not about giving, praying or fasting.

In verses 7-15, which are in the midst of this text, Jesus does make an excursus into the subject of prayer, which we will look at next week.

But the verses we read are not about giving, praying and fasting.

They are about what Jesus says they are about in verse 1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Early in chapter 5 (in the Beatitudes) we learned how God's grace is what brings us into his kingdom.

Later in chapter 5 (in the six illustrations) Jesus showed us some of the great possibilities of Kingdom living – a “kingdom” lifestyle.

Now early in chapter 6, Jesus will show us how to live that lifestyle in the right way – with God not others as our audience.

He begins with a warning: “Be careful.” In other words, look out, beware, or be on guard.

In chapter 5, verse 20, we were told that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law we certainly will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

By this, Jesus was not calling us to more or greater acts of goodness than the Pharisees, but to a wholly different kind of goodness.

A Christ-follower does not just adhere to the strict **letter** of the law, but through a change of heart desires and acts in the **spirit** of the lawgiver – God.

And the latter part of chapter 5 dealt with what Jesus meant by that.

For example, Jesus was not calling us merely to refrain from murdering those who offend us, BUT as his followers, we are to love, pray for and do good to those who harm us.

Now in verse 1 of chapter 6, we find that if we do that, if our righteousness exceeds the Pharisees, we encounter a danger – the danger of hypocrisy.

When Jesus speaks of “acts of righteousness” in that opening verse, he is speaking of the good things we do for others – any act of mercy or generosity that we might do for someone.

But what is important to note is that it is the very “act of righteousness” that can be the problem.

Jesus warns us that we aren’t done growing as Christians when we finally get to the place where we actually cheerfully give, or faithfully pray or do any number of other good things.

In fact the very **doing** of those good things becomes a potential land mine for us.

These verses do not contain a command for Christians to give, pray and fast.

Jesus assumes that Kingdom citizens will do “acts of righteousness” – he’s already spoken of that.

These are people who have experienced God’s mercy and want that mercy to flow through them to others.

But, says Jesus, don’t stumble over your good deeds and “break your spiritual neck” (Thielicke 81)

In verse 1 Jesus tells us what he teaching but then he gives us three illustrations, let’s look more carefully at those illustrations.

And the first thing I noticed was how nearly exactly parallel the illustrations are.

The first begins in verse 2 and is about **Giving.**

He calls some hypocrites – those who announce their giving

They announce it in the synagogues and on the street corners

They announce it to be honored by men

But Jesus says, I tell you the truth, they have received their reward

But when you give

Do it in secret (not letting the left hand know what the right hand...)

So that your giving may be in secret.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The second illustration in verses 5-6 is about **Praying.**

Hypocrites pray conspicuously standing

street corners and synagogues

To be seen by men

I tell you the truth, they have received their reward

When you pray

Do it in secret (close the door)

To your Father who is unseen

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The third illustration in verses 16-18 is about **Fasting.**

Hypocrites look like they are fasting

To show men they are fasting

I tell you the truth, they have received their reward.

When you fast

Do it in secret (wash to be inconspicuous)

To your Father, who is unseen)  
 And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

So what do the illustrations illustrate?

They illustrate a contrast. The contrast in:

Who: Hypocrites vs. to “You” kingdom citizens

A contrast in What: Conspicuous vs. inconspicuous goodness

A contrast in Why: To be known by others vs. known by God

A contrast in the Result: Reward now vs. God’s reward later

In all three illustrations Jesus refers to **hypocrites**.

Originally the word was used of actors with no particularly negative connotation.

It was one who pretended or acted like someone he/she was not.

But the word began to take on moral connotations.

1. We might think of the person who intentionally deceives others – a fraud, a hypocrite.
2. Or we might more likely think of the person who is so self-righteous that he or she is blind to his own faults even while criticizing others.

It is the churchman who publicly castigates adulterers but privately relishes pornography.

It is the woman who condemns immorality in her neighbor but delights in reading it in novels.

But I think Jesus has something else in mind here – something much subtler.

And that is why he warns us.

The hypocrites Jesus has in mind are doing the right things; they aren’t pretending good and doing bad.

Nobody is getting cheated and the recipients of their generosity or service are pleased.

In fact the hypocrite may really believe that his primary motive is the good of the other person, or obedience to God in praying or fasting.

But in all three illustrations what does Jesus say is really going on?

1. Look at the first illustration in 6:2-4 – financial charity:

What we are **doing** is good.

We make our contributions, good contributions, contributions that really help people, contributions that further the kingdom.

But Jesus looks at our hearts, he knows our motives.

We like the appreciation and respect others give us, **or more subtly, we like the feeling we feel, we like the self-congratulations we admit**, we even like the thought that God will certainly be more pleased with us.

We don't blow trumpets today but we do put donors on the "President's Counsel" or publish their names at the "Gold" level.

Some Christian organizations treat donors the way airlines treat frequent business travelers – red carpet treatment, special privileges, honor and status.

I was in a church that in years past had published the contributions of its attendees.

It was originally intended as a means of accountability but probably became a source of pride or false embarrassment.

When we were asking people to make commitments to the building fund we were encouraged by stewardship organizations to invite leaders of the church to publicly indicate the exact amount of their intended contribution so as to encourage others to give.

We didn't do it, because knowing what another gives tempts both the giver and the recipient to hypocrisy – the donor to giving more generously than he otherwise would and the recipient to treating the donor differently than he otherwise would.

But Jesus' warning is even to us who know we shouldn't seek public approval. He warns even of self-approval.

Someone may give a great deal of money anonymously and then think smugly to him or herself how benevolent they are.

Someone may give very little but it represents a great sacrifice for them and then they proudly think of themselves as more spiritual than the one who can give much without it hurting at all.

2. Look at the second illustration about praying in verses 5-6.  
Who would fault us for praying?  
Praying is what Jesus asked us to do.

But the right thing can be done in the wrong way.

In the illustration, they prayed to be noticed by others.

They felt good about being competent in public prayer – they were eloquent or at least able.

They sought opportunity to demonstrate their piety.

What was supposed to be a conversation with God had become a statement to others.

Praying at meals in restaurants can be more to make a statement about our piety than to truly thank God for his provision.

A newspaper account noted that the opening prayer in the legislature was the finest prayer ever offered to the legislators. Telling!

Or maybe our hypocrisy is not so obvious.

You see, we just take secret delight in being known as a man or woman of prayer.

Or we fear what others will think of our spirituality if we don't pray adequately.

3. Look at the third illustration? 6:16-18 Fasting.

The hypocrites made themselves unrecognizable in order to be recognized – literally “they disfigure their faces so that they may figure to people”

Fasting was not unique in that day but these people wanted everyone to know they were doing the religious act of fasting.

They were pretty obvious in their desire to be noticed.

We might cover our hypocrisy better.

But we hope someone will ask why we aren't eating, so after momentarily demurring we can tell them we are fasting.

And when someone does ask we have a sense of satisfaction.

We might think, I hope people notice that I am still driving the same old car, live in the same house, and apparently haven't wasted my money (God's money) on frivolous toys.

Or even if no one notices, and even if we don't want anyone else to notice, we can still feel smugly superior to others because of our great discipline.

We secretly take pride in our self-denial.

And we take comfort in knowing that at least God will notice.

Because God and I know that I'm a cut above the average.

In all three illustrations we either revel in the approval of others or are privately pleased with ourselves even when others don't notice.

The hypocrisy is in the contrast between the selfless, pious, appearance of our actions and the real motive, which is fundamentally self-centered.

Helmut Thielicke tells of a nurse he had known for many years who was outstanding in her competence and attitude toward her patients.

Thielicke asked her the source of her selflessness in service.

With a radiant smile she told him that every night she was setting another jewel in her heavenly crown and she already had 7,175.

She was building up IOUs in heaven that she expected to cash in someday.

**She was not giving, she was buying!**

Thielicke says that when he heard that, he as a patient felt as if she was no longer the caring servant he had thought her to be but she was only using him to get something else.

The sick people she cared for were only means to reach her desired objective.

That is hypocrisy.

It looked like selfless care but it was actually selfish greed.

What does Jesus call us to instead of such hypocrisy?

In verses 3,6,18 he tells us to do our acts of righteousness “in secret”

6:3 “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret.

6:6 “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray... in secret

6:18 “Fast (in a way) that will not be obvious to men”

The point **cannot** be that we should always **hide** our good deeds, after all Jesus had just said, 5:16 “let your light shine before men, **that they may see** your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

The point **is** that we are not to do our good deeds **in order to** be seen by others or even ourselves **and lauded or self-congratulated** for our spirituality, our goodness and thus rewarded.

**Jesus wants us to be unselfconscious about our obedience to him and our service to others.**

**This “secrecy” Jesus calls us to is mostly secrecy from ourselves.**

We can look at the six illustrations Jesus gave us in chapter 5 about forgiveness instead of anger, loving instead of lusting, faithfulness instead of divorce, honesty instead of deceit, and doing good to one’s enemies instead of retaliation, **and by his grace begin to live that way as kingdom citizens.**

**But we can at the same time begin to take pride in our achievements.**

When that happens we have taken our eyes off the relationship we have with Jesus and have begun to focus on the kingdom lifestyle.

We begin to think of our kingdom lifestyle as extraordinary.

But such a lifestyle is not extraordinary, it is simply the ordinary lifestyle of Jesus now being lived out through us, his followers.

We are simply following Jesus and spontaneously and without premeditation doing what he does.

Jesus wants us to have an unselfconscious relationship of obedience to Him.

This is an issue of faith – because the question is, “Do I trust God to respond to my faithfulness in the best and sufficient ways or do I **need** the response of others **and myself** to make up what God can’t or won’t give me?”

The need to impress, to be noticed, is built in.

The issue is who are we trying to impress, who are we trying to please?

Ourselves, others or mostly to God?

Please Jesus rid me of all those subtle hypocrisies.

Let me follow you, love like you, live like you and do it not to curry your favor or anyone else’s but just because I belong to you.