

Matthew 6:1-18 The Message of the King: “How to Practice Righteousness” March 1, 2015
Genesis 50
Psalm 51

You’ve heard me say many times that “I’m sorry” is not repentance.

“I’m sorry” simply means that I have sorrow that this situation is happening.

An apology is a “defense” – an “excuse”:

“I’m sorry, I’m having a bad day.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

“I’m sorry your face got in the way of my hand...”

“If you hadn’t provoked me, I wouldn’t have done that...”

Far better to say, “What I did was wrong. Please forgive me.”

But even “please forgive me” can be misused!

In Genesis 50, Joseph’s brothers send a message to Joseph, telling him that their father, Jacob, had said, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers, and their sin, because they did evil to you.” (v17)

Joseph had already forgiven his brothers.

But they are afraid that Joseph was just waiting for his father to die, and then he could get his revenge.

There are several places in scripture where “please forgive me” is misused:

In Exodus 10:17 – Pharaoh asks Moses to forgive his sin and plead with God for him:

“I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you.

Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once,

and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me.”

In 1 Samuel 15:25 – Saul asks Samuel to pardon his sin and return with him

so that he won’t lose face before the elders.

Later, in 1 Samuel 24 and 26, Saul will ask David’s pardon –

only to resume his quest to destroy David.

I’ve seen people talk openly about their repentance – how they have asked for forgiveness – but the *other person* would not forgive!

Ah! the deceitfulness of the human heart!

We see the failings of others – but we are blind to our own!

This is at the heart of what Jesus means by the *hypocrite* –

the one who criticizes others, but does not apply the same standard to himself!

Look at Jesus!

As Jesus describes the character and qualities of the disciple in the Sermon on the Mount, who is he describing?

The Sermon on the Mount shows us Jesus!

The Sermon on the Mount describes the life of the disciple
because it first and foremost describes the life of the one who *showed us*
how to live like this!

And, if you want to know how to ask for forgiveness,
Psalm 51 shows us the way.

Sing Psalm 51
Read Matthew 5:43-6:18

Introduction: How to Be Perfect (Whose Eyes Matter?) (v1)

“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.”

Last time we looked at Jesus call to us:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (5:48)

Often, we hear this and we want to say, “well, no one is perfectly righteous in this life,
so we need to rely on the perfect righteousness of Christ.”

And it’s true – no one is perfectly righteous in this life,
and so we need to rely on the perfect righteousness of Christ.

But that’s not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is not talking about how to be justified before God.

Jesus is talking about how to live as his disciple.

A disciple is a learner – one who has put him or herself under the authority of a master.

The disciple is an apprentice.

A disciple is a learner who *does* what he or she is taught.

Jesus will say at the end of Matthew’s gospel:

“Make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them *to observe* all that I have commanded you.” (28:20)

A disciple who merely *hears* but does not *do* is not a disciple.

A disciple is one who *observes* – who *practices* – all that Jesus has commanded.

So what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Jesus says it means to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As we’ve seen in chapter 5, it starts with Jesus himself.

The Sermon on the Mount describes Jesus.

He *is* the one who perfectly exemplifies the whole sermon.

And therefore, those who follow Jesus will look like this too.

Here in the first half of chapter 6, Jesus provides a warning – a caution – to us
about *how* to practice your righteousness.

First, what does it mean to “do righteousness”?

There are three things that Jesus highlights here:

giving to the needy,

prayer,

and fasting.

The second half of chapter 6 will go on to talk about the rest of life,

but Jesus starts with our religious practice.

How do you give to the needy?

How do you pray?

How do you fast?

This is “practicing righteousness”!

And particularly, Jesus emphasizes the importance of *motive* in doing righteousness.

Jesus has already said, “let your light shine before others,

so that they may see your good works

and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (5:16)

Now Jesus says, “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.”

There is no real difficulty in reconciling these two statements.

Certainly your righteousness should be open and obvious to everyone.

But you are not doing this *in order* to obtain their praise.

It’s the same point that we saw in how Jesus applies the Law to the heart.

If you do good things in order to obtain the praise of men,

then you already have your reward.

Whose eyes matter to you?

When you are a child, your parents are everything.

What they think of you is your whole world!

When your father praises you, your heart sings!

And there’s a reason for that!

God is teaching us about himself.

He is our heavenly Father.

And he wants us to look to him for our praise and reward.

When your heavenly Father praises you, your heart should sing!

Our problem is that we do not learn our lesson properly.

As we grow up, we do not transfer our desire for praise to God –

but to others.

And so we look for the applause of men.

When Jesus says give to the needy in secret,

pray in secret,

fast in secret –
the point is not that no one knows what you are doing.

Jesus does not say, “Do not practice your righteousness before other people, period.”
He says beware of practicing your righteousness before other people
in order to be seen by them.”

You are to practice your righteousness before other people!
 (“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”)
But if you do this *in order to* win praise from men,
then when they praise you, you have your reward.

(But don’t expect God to be pleased with you!)

I should also comment on this refrain of “reward.”
In all three cases, there is this refrain –
Let your “giving be in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”
“Pray to your Father who is in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”
Let your fasting be seen “by your Father who is in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

What does Jesus mean by “reward”?
The ESV is not quite as helpful as it could be.
In English the word “reward” can either be a noun or a verb.
But Matthew uses two entirely different words here.
When Matthew uses the *noun* “reward”
(referring to receiving a reward from men) that is the word “misthos”
(which means payment or reward).
When Matthew uses the *verb* “reward”
(referring to how God will reward you) this is the word “apodidomi”
(which means “to pay” or “to reward”).

But in English, it *looks* the same.

I would prefer to say that the one who does this to be seen by others
has received “full payment.”
But the one who does this to be seen by your heavenly Father
will be “rewarded.”

Why do you do what is right and good?
If you do it to be seen by men,
then when men praise you, you have been fully paid.
But if you do it because you are a child of God and you desire his fatherly praise,
then your Father, who is in secret, will see in secret

and reward you.

Let me say this very simply:

God is pleased to reward that which is sincere.

As we saw last time, Jesus is talking to his disciples.

He is talking to those who are already justified.

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how to “win favor” with God.

Jesus is talking about how the Father relates to his children.

We keep seeing over and over that the Sermon on the Mount is *first and foremost* a description of who *Jesus* is.

Jesus certainly lived openly and did his righteous deeds before men!

But he also did his righteous deeds in secret.

It didn't matter whether everyone was watching – or no one was watching.

Jesus lived before his heavenly Father.

And his Father, who sees in secret, rewarded Jesus.

So, what does it mean that God rewards us?

Think of it this way:

your child does something good –
what do you do?

You smile!

You give them a hug!

You say, “Well done!”

Maybe you even give them a candy bar!

That's what God does when you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus!

He smiles.

He gives you a hug.

He says, Well done!

And maybe he gives you a candy bar!

When your heavenly Father sees you looking like Jesus –

he is pleased!

And he will reward you.

As soon as you start thinking,

“ooh! Reward? I hope it's a fancy new car!”

then you are not thinking straight!

One of the hardest things about my father's dementia

is that he's not really able to notice

when I do something that used to make him smile.

It has made me appreciate, all the more, the fact that my heavenly Father still smiles.

In fact, what reward could possibly matter more than the smile of your heavenly Father?

So the point is *not* that you need to be *secretive* when doing your righteous deeds.
Rather, the point is that you shouldn't care who *on earth* is watching.
What matters is that your heavenly Father is watching.

Do you act differently when you are alone and when you are in public?
Do you give to the needy in public – but are stingy when no one is watching?
Do you pray well in public, but ignore God in private?
Do you participate openly in corporate fasts, but never fast in secret?

1. Giving to the Needy *in Secret* (v2-4)

The Jews organized a fair amount of “poor relief” through the synagogue.
The Prophets had condemned Israel for their failure to provide for the poor.
So the Jews had decided that they would not fail in that way again.
Throughout the ancient world, the Jews were well known
for the way that they took care of their own.
Indeed, the word “righteousness” almost became synonymous with
“gives alms to the poor.”

Even in Jesus' day, “doing righteousness” could mean “giving to the needy.”

After all, “righteousness” has to do with how you order your world –
if you are a head of household – how do you order your household?
If you are a ruler, how do you order your community?
If you are a manager, how do you order your department?

And particularly, how do you treat the poor and needy in your world?

But Jesus has harsh words for the Jewish system:

² *“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.*

If you give to the poor in order to be praised by others,
then when you receive praise from men,
you have received your reward.

³ *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*
⁴ *so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Whose eyes matter to you?

Jesus is contrasting the fear of man with the fear of God.
If you are concerned with making other people happy,
then your reward will be their praise –
but that also means that when other people are *not* happy with you,

then your life will fall apart.

But when you care first and foremost what *God* thinks of you,
then your reward is *his* praise.

And God is *always* happy with his children.

Sure, sometimes he disciplines us – because we are forgetting him!

But our heavenly Father disciplines us *for our good* –

as Hebrews 12:6-7 puts it,

“the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure.

God is treating you as sons.”

In the same way that our earthly fathers disciplined us,

so also our heavenly Father disciplines us – for our good –

as Hebrews puts it, “so that we may share his holiness”! (12:10)

In our society, we do much of our poor relief through taxes.

So one way to obey Jesus is by paying your taxes cheerfully!

We also care for those in need through the deacons.

(We’ll be taking up a diaconal offering later in the service!)

But as we heard last time,

Jesus says, “Give to the one who begs from you,

and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” (5:42)

If your default mode is *not* to give,

then you are not thinking about the needy in the way that Jesus commands.

When Jesus says, “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”

he simply means that you should not be calculating personal benefit in your charity.

So, for instance,

if you only give to 501c3 organizations and make sure that everything is tax deductible,

then your left hand knows *exactly* what your right hand is doing.

In the early chapters of the book of Acts,

the disciples took Jesus seriously:

they even sold property so that they could give to the needy among them.

The assets of this age are to be used in such a way as to provide for the furtherance

of the kingdom of God.

2. Praying in Secret (v5-15)

a. Pray to the One Who Sees (v5-6)

Jesus also talks about prayer in the same way:

⁵ “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.

When Jesus talks about prayer in the synagogue he is not talking about corporate prayer.
The synagogue was not a place for worship.
Worship happened at the temple.
The synagogue was a place for studying the scriptures
and coordinating the care of the needy.
It was more like a school or a community center.

But the scribes and Pharisees would do their “private devotions” publicly in the synagogue.
Again, the theme is that the “hypocrites” want to be seen by others.
For them, “people” are big – and God is small.

⁶ *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Again, Jesus’ point is not that you should never pray in public.
Rather, his point is that you should not care what others think!
You should pray the same way in public that you pray in private.
This is just who you are.

b. Pray Like This (v7-13)

⁷ *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.”* ⁸ *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Lengthy prayers – flowery prayers – detailed prayers –
all are about being heard by men.

If you are praying to the God who *knows what you need* before you ask,
then your prayers should be characterized by simplicity, directness, and honesty.

You are talking to your heavenly Father.
You are talking to almighty God.
You will not convince him to do what you want by getting more flowery!
If you add lots of extraneous details you will not impress the one who knows all things!

⁹ *Pray then like this:*
“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.”^[a]

The Lord’s Prayer starts by addressing God as “Our Father.”

This has been a stumbling block for some.
You may have had a bad experience with your father.
You may even hate your father!

But the reason why you hate your father
is because he failed to be what you *know* a father should be!
If you want to see what a true Father looks like,
look at how the Father loves the Son.

But also notice that we pray “*Our Father*.”
Jesus assumes that we will be praying with and for one another.
As Stanley Hauerwas puts it,
“Though we may pray in secret, we always pray with others.
We begin to learn to pray by praying to ‘our’ Father...
Through the Spirit our prayer is joined to Jesus’s prayer
so that when we pray we pray with the whole communion of saints
who surround the Father in heaven.” (p77)

And our prayer begins by asking that God’s name would be “hallowed” –
sanctified – consecrated.
Our prayer is not primarily for ourselves – but for the holy Name of God!

After all, if *his eyes* are the ones that matter,
then *his name* is the one that matters as well!

And so we pray:

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come,
your will be done,^[b]
on earth as it is in heaven.*

We pray that the kingdoms of this age would be cast down –
and the kingdom of Christ would be exalted.
After all, Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom –
that the Kingdom of God had begun in *him*.
And so we pray that God would do what he has promised in Jesus.

Notice that the Lord’s Prayer starts with a focus on the holiness of God
and the kingdom of God.
If you start with yourself and your own desires,
then you are putting yourself at the center of the universe.

And, to put it simply, you are *not* the center of the universe!
Jesus is!

Of course, *because* Jesus is the center of the universe,
and those who believe in Jesus have been united to him –
therefore, if you have believed in Jesus you are *united* to the center of the universe!

And so it’s good and proper to pray to your heavenly Father about your daily needs!

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread,*^[c]

Our prayers for ourselves should be humble.
Your goal is not to get rich.
Your goal is to have sufficient bread for today.
And again, notice the pronoun!
Not give me – but give us.

You are praying for yourself – and for all of God’s people.
Sometimes God gives you a surplus so that you can provide for the needs of others.
(That’s the point of giving to the needy in the previous paragraph!)
Sometimes the way that God gives you your daily bread
is through someone else giving you a handout!

The financial theme continues in verse 12:

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

Jesus teaches us to ask God for the same sort of forgiveness that we offer to others.
Debt certainly includes sin (sin is a sort of debt),
but Jesus is talking about a whole way of life.

We don’t like to be “indebted” to someone else –
we spend our lives “trying to avoid acknowledging
[that] we owe anyone anything.” (Hauerwas, 79)
Have you ever said, “He owes me”?
After what she did, “she owes me”?

Jesus says, “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
When someone “owes you” do you insist on repayment?
Forgiveness is more than just “forgiving sin.”
We are to have a disposition of forgiveness
that does not press *my claims* against others.

Notice that Jesus does not say,
“forgive us our debts as we forgive those who ask us to forgive their debts.”
Your debtor may not admit that he owes you!

Are you still willing to forgive him?

I should add that there are two parts to forgiveness.
There is the disposition (which Jesus talks about here),
and then there is the transaction –
when the person comes and *asks* for forgiveness.

Here in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus insists that the *disposition* must always be present.

You must always be eager, willing, and ready, to forgive.

The transaction may take longer.

If that person never asks, then the transaction may never happen.

But you must always be ready.

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

We ask that God would preserve us from trials and temptations.

Jesus himself will pray, "Let this cup pass from me."

He prayed "lead me not into temptation."

But sometimes it is God's will that we endure temptation and trial.

The Spirit of God led Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted.

Sometimes God *does* lead you into temptation!

But when he does, you can still pray, "deliver us from evil."

God promises that he will provide the way of escape –
that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10)

c. Prayer and Forgiveness (v14-15)

But then Jesus adds an extra note on Forgiveness.

¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Here Jesus switches over from "debts" to "trespasses."

But the basic idea is plainly the same.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to treat us the same way we have treated others.

Indeed, Jesus goes so far as to say that if you do not forgive others,
neither will God forgive you.

Remember again – Jesus is describing first *himself!*

Jesus will say on the cross,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus is the one who forgives others,

and so when the one who knew no sin *became sin* for us,

the Father heard his cry and raised him from the dead.

And so therefore, Jesus says that his community – those who are united to him –
will share in this disposition, in this attitude of forgiveness.

Since we have been forgiven much, we should love much.

If you do not forgive others, what you are saying is that you don't believe in Jesus.

A year ago we hosted a group of Rwandans who were preparing for the 20th anniversary

of the Rwandan genocide (April of 1994).

Many of those who had participated in the killings have repented and sought forgiveness.
How would you respond?

One of the speakers said it boldly and clearly:
you can either forgive – and go to heaven with the penitent killers;
or you refuse to forgive – and go to hell with the impenitent killers!

Such is Jesus' command to forgive.
If you will not forgive others – then God will not forgive you.

Now, a word to the wise:
if you are asking for forgiveness,
be careful not to push the other person to forgive you!
There is nothing more ugly than “If you don't forgive me, then God won't forgive you!”

What is the right language of repentance?
Israel says to Moses, “We have sinned,
for we have spoken against the LORD and against you.” (Num 21:7)
Achan said to Joshua, “Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel,
and this is what I did...” [and he gives the details] (Joshua 7:20)
The prodigal son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (Luke 15:21).

Genuine repentance *names* the sin –
demonstrates that you understand *how* you have wronged the other person –
and how you intend to make it right.

Jesus then returns in verses 16-18 to his discussion of practicing righteousness.

3. Fasting in Secret (v16-18)

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

We have forgotten how to fast.
“Fasting involves the discovery of what we serve.” (Hauerwas, 80)

How hard would it be for you to go a week without any electronic devices?
An electronic fast could be good for you!

“Nothing enslaves more than that which we think we cannot live without.” (Hauerwas, 80)
The discipline of fasting is given to us by God to remind us that
“man does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

The point of fasting is to remind yourself that you are a beggar.

You are poor.

You are helpless.

You are hungry.

When you go for a day – or a week – without food,
you begin see more clearly what really matters to you.

I realize that there are some people who have genuine medical reasons
why a total fast would be dangerous.

But even those people can engage in genuine fasting –
eating only the minimum that is required for their medical condition.

Jesus does not say, “if you fast.”

Jesus says, “when you fast” – just like he says, “when you pray,”
or “when you give to the needy.”

A Christian who never fasts is like a Christian who never prays –
or who never gives to the needy.

I should point out that Jesus uses both the plural and the singular.

In verse 16, he says “when you [plural] fast” –
suggesting that he is speaking of corporate fasts.

But in verse 17, he says “when you [singular] fast” –
pointing either to individual fasting,
or at least to how the individual participates in a corporate fast.

In your giving, in your praying, and in your fasting –
don't worry about what people think – don't look for their opinion –
but practice your righteousness in order to be seen by God.