

Matthew 6:1-18
(Isaiah 1:11-20; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13)
“Whose Praise Do You Seek?”

Introduction

In order to understand these familiar verses, we must first deal with two obvious questions: *The first is this*: Doesn't Jesus here contradict what he said at the beginning of the sermon? How does one reconcile these two statements: On the one hand, Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven;” on the other hand, he says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them”? Do these two statements not contradict each other? The answer to this question is essential to our understanding of the Christian life. Far too many Christians confuse their celebration of the spiritual disciplines with what Jesus means by letting our light shine before others.

In chapter five, Jesus describes behavior that is not specifically religious but rather is relational: being trustworthy friends, faithful husbands and wives, promise-keepers, peacemakers, people who show mercy. But in chapter six, Jesus is dealing with specifically religious behavior, and illustrates this with three of the disciplines of the spiritual life: giving, praying and fasting. His point is that seeing us practice our piety will probably not draw people to the gospel. Simply hearing us pray or seeing us give or noting that we are observing a fast will not give people a reason to believe the gospel. At best such things will show that *we* believe the gospel, but will not demonstrate the gospel's power to transform human relationships. The disciplines are not aimed at other people, but are rather the means of maintaining our spiritual health.

Of course we pray for others and give in order to help others, but the power of our prayers and of our gifts is closely associated with their hiddenness, so that God alone will be glorified. Too often we make the mistake of thinking that if people know that we go to church or that we pray or that we give generously, we have somehow witnessed to them. Jesus refutes such thinking. People may think that you are a religious person, but they will not be inclined to believe the gospel unless they see your religious practices have a positive impact on the relational dimension of life that Jesus addresses in chapter five.

The second question flows logically from the first: Doesn't Jesus then at least imply that what is really important is not religion but relationships? Shouldn't we conclude that the disciplines of the spiritual life are beside the point? Note that Jesus does not say, “Beware of practicing your righteousness” or even “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people.” What he says is this: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people *in order to be seen by them*” (6:1).

Body

1. When we give (6:1-4):

*God expects us to give: he does not say "if you give" but "when you give."
God wants us to give like this ...
God wants us to give in secret
God sees in secret and will reward us.*

2. When we pray (6:5-6):

*God expects us to pray: he does not say "if you pray" but "when you pray."
God wants us to pray like this ...
God wants us to pray in secret.
God sees in secret and will reward us.*

3. When we fast (6:16-18):

*God expects us to fast: he does not say "if you fast" but "when you fast."
God wants us to fast like this ...
God wants us to fast in secret.
God sees in secret and will reward us.*

Conclusion

What we do when no one is looking is the true test of what we really believe and love. When we trust and love the Lord, we will seek him in the secret, unseen places of our lives. When we love others, we will seek the Lord's presence on their behalf and cry out to him to work in their lives for good. When we want to see the gospel change the lives of others through ministries of compassion or the extension of the gospel, we will give generously, but quietly.

And out of this kind of quiet, private celebration of discipline in the presence of God, we will grow strong in the Lord and become more like him. And we will discover – as will those closest to us – that our relationships are being transformed as well, as we move from self-centered, self-seeking lives to self-giving, self-forgetful lives that aim at serving others and glorifying God.

So whether you are giving or praying or fasting, don't do it in order to be seen by others, but do it in the quiet, hidden place where only God sees. And he has promised that he will pour out upon you his own blessing in good measure, pressed down and running over.