

The Threat of Hypocrisy to True Righteousness

Matthew 6:1 begins a new section in the Sermon on the Mount explaining how our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees' (5:20). It is summarized by a general statement "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them."

Unfortunately, there is something in us that wants to take Christ's demands for greater holiness, and prostitute them into opportunities for greater hypocrisy. Because of this tendency, Jesus focuses on three basic acts of piety; almsgiving (6:2-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). These become representative of all other forms of piety. All three examples follow a similar pattern (see below) and reach the same conclusion.

Matthew 6:2-4

2 "So when you give to the poor,

do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men.

Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

3 "But when you give to the poor,

do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 so that your giving will be in secret;

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

Matthew 6:5-6

5 "When you pray,

you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners

so that they may be seen by men.

Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

6 "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret,

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

7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Matthew 6:16-18

16 "Whenever you fast,

do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance

so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.

Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18

so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret;

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

In Ephesians 4:22–24 Paul tells us of our need to take certain characteristics off and put others on. Behind this lies the fact that there are always sinful attitudes and actions we need to abandon, and positive traits of righteousness that we need to replace them with.

In a similar way in Matthew 6 Jesus tells us ten times not to do certain things but to do others instead. Although the words “take off” and “put on” are not used, the idea is the same as in Paul’s writings.

Most of us are not as blatantly hypocritical as those in Jesus’ illustrations but the desire to be noticed by others is still there. “We may genuinely want to glorify God in all that we do. But deep down we also want to look good in the process. We crave recognition and the approval of others. But when we secretly seek to be admired by others, we are, in principle, no different than the hypocrites Jesus described. We are promoting our own religious reputation.” (Jerry Bridges)

In essence Jesus is telling us to take off pride and self-promotion and put on the desire to please God and promote His glory. This is not a call to hide our Christian character for in Matthew 5 Jesus said “Let your light shine before men in such a way *that they may see your good works*, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” However, we are not to display Christian behavior for our own glory either; “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18).

6: 1-4 – Giving to the Poor

The Bible always taught the importance of giving to people in need (Deut. 15:11; Ps. 41:1; Pr. 19:17). But much of our giving is less concerned with meeting people's needs and pleasing God than with earning the reputation of generosity and piety.

"When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you." The trumpets spoken of are probably metaphorical, though if literal, they could be the trumpets that announced the public fast. During public fasting, prayers were made in the streets and almsgiving was thought to assure the prayer's effectiveness. At such times, the opportunity to appear pious before men was great, and one could easily imagine someone giving alms at a time when hundreds were gathered to see it. But whether this is what Jesus was referring to or not, His point is that only a hypocrite draws attention to his giving.

Jesus' answer to avoid such hypocrisy is to give in secret. In fact, He gave a metaphor that shows just how secret our giving should be – we are to give to the extent that our left hand doesn't know what our right hand is doing. Such privacy insures that our giving is not for the purpose of receiving praise from others.

According to verse four, God will repay such giving, but it should be remembered that secret giving is not in order to receive heavenly reward, rather, giving in secret results in heavenly reward.

6:5-6 – Prayer

Jesus was not opposed to almsgiving, neither was He opposed to public prayer. Prayer had a prominent place in Jewish life. All devout Jews prayed three times a day, like Daniel. Public Prayer was often offered in synagogue worship and on the streets. But during public prayer there is the danger of hypocrisy - praying to be heard by men rather than by God.

In verses 5 and 7 Jesus gives two characteristics of hypocritical prayer.

The first characteristic of hypocritical prayer is the desire to seek public opportunity to be heard (v.5). The second characteristic is prayer that is filled with meaningless repetition (v. 7). The word translated as “meaningless repetition” is of unknown etymology but it was used of stammerers who repeat their words, of babbling or chattering, or of empty repetition. It was also use of a feeble poet who made long hymns full of repetitions.

The pagans thought that by endless repetitions and many words they would inform their gods of their needs and weary them into granting their requests (Dods, 118-119). The worshippers of Baal on Mount Carmel (1Ki 8:26) and of Diana in the amphitheater at Ephesus who yelled for two hours (Ac 19:34) are examples. (RWP)

There are both Christians and Jews alike who think that the longer they pray the greater the chance that God will hear or the more spiritual they will sound (Ecc.5:2; Mk. 12:40). Although long prayers may be hypocritical, a short prayer can be just as meaningless. Though we may pray, "Thank you for this food" we might not truly be thankful. Such a prayer never reaches the ears of God.

It's frightening to contemplate how much of our prayer is just the mindless babbling of words, a repetition of things we feel ought to be said rather than speaking to God from our heart.

Jesus says, “Do not be like them.” We are not to act like them because we do not think like them for our God is nothing like their gods. We are to be sincere instead of hypocritical, thoughtful instead of mechanical.

Are our prayers hypocritical?

1. Do I pray more frequently and with more fervor when alone with God or in public?
2. Do I love the secret place of prayer?
3. Is my public praying simply an overflow of my private praying?

Could it be that the prime reason we don't see more prayers answered is because we are less concerned with bringing our requests to God than with showing off before men?

According to verse 6, one way to avoid hypocritical prayer is to pray in secret. We are to shut the door against the disturbances and distractions but also to shut out the prying eyes of men.

Jesus' teaching on prayer is directed toward the hypocrite and shouldn't be taken absolutely. He wasn't forbidding all public prayer, long prayers, or prayers that repeated themselves. Jesus often prayed for long periods of time (Lk. 6:12). He also repeated Himself in prayer (Matt.26:38, 39, 42, 44) [e.g. He prayed three times in Gethsemane "saying the same words again" (Mt 26:44).] and He taught His disciples to repeat themselves (Lk .18:1-8). But Jesus never prayed meaninglessly (He never gave thanks when He wasn't thankful) and He prayed far more in private than He did in public (Lk 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:41 ff). The difference is much speaking in prayer and much praying (Broadus, 131).

The reward of the hypocrite is the praise of men. And that is all that they receive. There certainly isn't any reward or answer from God.

6:16-18 - Fasting

Jesus assumes that His disciples will fast (He says "*Whenever* you fast" not "if you were to ever fast") but He is more concerned with the motive behind fasting than the actual practice itself.

Fasting in the OT had many purposes (see additional notes on fasting). People fasted when mourning over death, sin or calamity (Ju.20:24-26; I Sam 7:6). They also fasted to turn aside approaching calamity or when they were burdened with great cares (Jer. 36:4-8; II Chron. 20:1-4; Joel 1:13-20; Jonah 3:4-9). The overall purpose was to express submission to God and to renounce self (Ps. 35:13).

In time, this deeper meaning of fasting was lost, and the practice was thought to be a way to gain personal advantage (Isa. 58:3-7; Jer. 14:1-12; Zech. 7:5,6). For the Pharisees it became law and was practiced twice a week (Lk.18:12). Some people would go about with solemn faces, unkept and unwashed. Some sprinkled ashes on their heads as a sign of deep contrition or didn't use oil on their heads to signify deep distress (II Sam. 14:2). Their goal was to draw the attention of men, not God. Jesus condemns such hypocrisy. Instead those who fast should do so in secret, and are to wash and anoint their heads with oil as was the common practice of the day. These are the ones who receive reward from the Father.