

Abiding Fruit

John 15:16



Vol. 1 No. 4

October 15, 2006

Practicing Righteousness Matthew 6:1

Jesus utters a ruthless condemnation to us if we practice our righteousness in order to be seen by others in the sixth chapter of Matthew. We are alerted to this fact by his introductory word, "Beware". This is an imperative verb – a command to take heed, to be aware of danger, and since Jesus speaks like this to us, we must "be aware" that he is expecting a response. Matthew 6 continues the line of thinking that Jesus began in chapter 5. Jesus is speaking about the righteousness of the kingdom (5:6, 10, 20 & 6:1), and he is contrasting the righteousness of God's kingdom with that of the Pharisees, the scribes and the hypocrites (5:20; 6:2, 5, 16) This contrast is delivered in scathing rebuke form similar to John the Baptist when he called them all a "brood of vipers."

Matthew 5 contrasts rabbinical expectations and standards with Jesus standard of true religion. He expresses this contrast by speaking about what they were teaching and what they were practicing. The ultimate standard of the righteous life as found in the kingdom of God is stated by the Lord Jesus Christ as being found in spontaneous obedience to the summation of the Law: love God above everything else and love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 6 deals with the first part of this summary statement and Matthew 7:1 – 12 deals with the second section.

In Matthew 6, Jesus demands a sincere devotion of the heart to the Lord (6:1 – 18), and an unwavering, undivided trust in God the Father in the midst of all the varying circumstances of life (6:19 – 34). Loving God with all our hearts means that we will surrender everything to Him, and we will expect everything from Him. That's the great thing about submission to God. As we yield to Him more and more, He provides more and more for us in ways that we never expect.

There is a distinct shift away from the scribes and Pharisees in these verses and the focus leans towards God as "your Heavenly Father", "our Father", "your Father" (also *your* plural.) Matthew 6 speaks of God in this way at least a dozen times. So what is true religion or righteousness and how is it practiced? If this is the standard that Jesus calls for then how does he express it? Jesus uses a variety of religious exercises through which we express or practice true righteousness. These are our giving (6:2 – 4), our praying (6:5 – 14), and our fasting (6:16 - 18).

These 3 areas constitute the definitive expression of practicing righteousness according to Jesus. The devotion of the Christian heart is expressed in these 3 ways. Each of them has a dangerous negative side to them in that we can do them to be seen by others. Jesus says this lies so close to the surface in every human heart, because we are tainted and defiled by our sin, and we love the praise of men more than the praise that comes from God (John 12:43). In other words, we want our praise and reward now, and the only place that comes from is others. Drawing attention to what you do as part of your duty to Christ does not earn a reward from God, but rather a rebuke and a loss of reward in the future. If we want our reward now, it can be easily obtained.

Jesus tells us that when we give (6:2 - 4), it is to be done in such a way that not even our hands know what has transpired between them. What this means is this. Alms giving in those days was often done from hand to hand, as the Pharisees passed the poor they would touch hands (using left and right

hands of course) with the poor. They were not to make a show of knowing what each hand was doing. The emphasis for us is that we should forget as soon as possible what our hands have done in the act of giving. Even more damnable was that they announced when they were doing it with loud trumpets going before them, thus drawing the attention of others. Now someone may never see what you place in the offering plate week by week, but you might be guilty of telling someone all the things you have done and are doing – things that are good and right. Jesus condemns outright this show of vanity and self ostentation. Beware, Jesus says, of trying to impress others by showing or telling them all the wonderful things you have done. True offering is done in secret where no-one knows the results (or the heart) except God alone (6:4).

We pass to the second area that Jesus deals with, which is our prayer life. There is probably no other area that confronts the Christian in terms of discipline (confronting sin aside) than in this area of prayer. The hypocrites love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They love to be seen by both righteous and unrighteous alike that they are spiritual people. (6:5). They want to be seen by others and that is their reward. To obtain glory from men by praying in public is according to Calvin, a profanation of the name of God. Hypocrisy is always ambitious, so the injunction is for us to examine our hearts.

Among the Jews, prayer could be offered at set times. There was prayer in the morning, afternoon and the evening (Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1). The ancient historian Josephus even tells us that there were sacrifices (including prayers) made in the Temple “twice a day, in the early morning and at the ninth hour” (*Antiquities XIV. 65*). Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the publican who went to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:9 – 14), and how they offered to very different prayers, the Pharisees being rejected and the publican’s been accepted. One was self-righteous, self-comparing, who loved the praise of men, the other casting himself upon the sheer mercy of God. True prayer is done in secret – the hard work of prayer is done in the closet alone with god, with no eye to see. Jesus also gives to his disciples the model prayer (the Lord’s Prayer) and some application regarding forgiving others in 6:9 -15. Prayer is not to be vain repetitions, empty babblings or phrases (as pagans did), as if God needs to hear the same thing without forethought or consideration from our part. No, all prayer is hard (heart) work - do it in secret and your reward will come from God. It is always easier to let others know about our spiritual endeavors so that our egos are boosted. If that’s what we do – we have our reward.

Finally, Jesus comes to the issue of fasting (6:16 – 18). Hypocrites must always play a part – put on a mask or face. Jesus says, don’t be gloomy faced because you are engaging in the very difficult discipline of fasting. We are no more spiritual than someone else by putting on a face. People may praise you as being a very spiritual person – you have your reward. We rather are to wash our faces and anoint our heads – doing very natural and normal things that give no indication of the spiritual exercise being undergone. Fasting in the Scriptures (1 Sam. 7:5; Ezra 8:21 – 23; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2, 3) is often associated with prayer (in fact, prayer probably sustains us through our fasting), with lamentation and humiliation. In these verses, Jesus neither promotes nor forbids fasting, but simply acknowledges the practice, which he also engaged in himself (Matt. 4:2). The focus is also on true fasting with respect to humiliation for sins. This can be done in a pious way (looking gloomy) or from a broken heart that God sees in secret (6:18).

It is imperative that we practice our righteousness before God, looking to Him to give us his reward in due time. Do it before others and you will be rewarded now! That doesn’t compare to “well done, good and faithful servant.

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