

“The way you do the things you do”
Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount
Matt. 6:1-18
July 19, 2009

When you pass by a person on the street with their hand out, what do you do? Some of us always give a little, sometimes more, some of us never give anything. But do you ever ask yourself, *why* you do what you do? If you’re one of the givers, maybe you give out of pity for the person, a sincere desire to help. Sometimes guilt is the motivator, or maybe gratitude – “There but for the grace of God go I.” Or maybe it just makes you feel good to help somebody else. If you’re one of the non-givers, maybe it’s because you think they’re just going to buy drugs or alcohol with it and you don’t want to support that habit. You don’t want to be an enabler. What about when you give money to the church? Do you give out of a sense of obligation? A sense of self-satisfaction for obeying God’s commands? A desire to support the work of God in the world? What’s your motivation when you give?

It’s actually quite a penetrating question to ask about any area of life: *Why do I do the things I do?* Today I want to think about why you do the *religious* things you do. That’s what Jesus is talking about as we come to the 6th chapter of the gospel of Matthew, the middle chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. So far Jesus has described the character of those who live in the Kingdom of God – the Beatitudes; the influence they are to have in the world – salt and light; and what true “righteousness” is, as it relates to their moral conduct, how they understand and keep the Law.

Now Jesus begins to talk about their religious conduct: how they relate to God. And He begins by issuing a caution. It is the overall theme for what He says in the next 17 verses: Matt. 6:1. “The way you do the things you do is important,” Jesus says. “Don’t do your religious stuff in order to get applause from people, to be noticed by people, to be admired by people.” Jesus uses the same word in all three sections of this passage to describe those who do this: He calls them *hypocrites*. Well, that’s what *we* would call them, isn’t it? In fact, some people avoid churches – “organized religion” as they call it – because it’s full of *hypocrites*. Now, Jesus does not say, “Forget the religious practices the Pharisees have taught you because I’m showing you a new way.” That is *not* what Jesus says. He doesn’t say, “Don’t do good deeds. Don’t practice spiritual disciplines.” What He says is, “Watch your motivation. Know *why* you do the things you do. Is it to be noticed by people? To get applause from others? To be seen as ‘religious?’ Because if it is, you may impress people, but God won’t be impressed.”

And Jesus goes on to give three illustrations of this general principle referring to three well-known religious practices of first-century Judaism: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. We’ve heard the first two sections, here’s the last one: Matt. 6:16-18. Once again, as we’ve seen so often in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking about the heart. Not *what* you do, but *why* you do it. Not whether or not you give, pray, and fast. He assumes you will. But what’s in your heart when you give, pray, fast.

He criticizes the ‘hypocrites’: those who made a great show of giving large amounts to the poor so as to be seen as generous; those who prayed and fasted in such a way as to be recognized as

pious and holy. In Jesus' day, that word 'hypocrite' in the Greek referred to a stage actor. Somebody who was playing a role. Somebody who was pretending, a fake. What Jesus is really saying here is that the only motive we should have in our giving is to please God. Not to garner attention from people. Not to relieve guilt. Not to feel good about ourselves. To please God. No other motive than pleasing God. I should give because God tells me to give and because I know that generous giving pleases Him. Giving should be such a natural part of my life that I do it without even noticing that I'm doing it.

"It's the same with prayer," Jesus says. Now we're not going to spend any time today on the model prayer Jesus gives His followers, what we have come to call 'The Lord's Prayer.' Here is what Jesus says about the right motivation for prayer: "Prayer is communing with God. It is not informing God about what you need; He knows. It is not advising God about what you want; He knows." Real prayer is having an audience with the living God. You and God, one on One, up close and personal.

One writer has said this about prayer: "we should never utter one syllable of prayer, either in public or in private, until we are definitely conscious that we have come into the presence of God and are actually praying to Him."

I wonder how often we fail at this. How often we approach God like some kind of cosmic vending machine. We put in our prayer requests and out pops what we asked for. We hope! How often we approach time spent in prayer as more of a duty than a privilege. How often we pray just because we said we would, but not because we actually desire to encounter God, expecting to experience the very presence of God Himself. I'll say it again: Real prayer is having an audience with the living God. You and God, one on One, up close and personal.

"So, when you pray," Jesus says, "just be real with God. Don't be a fake, a hypocrite. Just be real. You don't need a lot of words. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Well, if that's true, then why pray? you may ask. Here's why. Oswald Chambers describes prayer this way, I love this: "I tell Him what He knows in order that I may get to know it as He does." Isn't that great? "I tell Him what He knows in order that I may get to know it as He does." You see, *this* is the true purpose of prayer: not self-congratulation or the applause of other people or even to get stuff from God. To know God and to know your life the way God knows it. To see the world and your life the way God sees them.

Now, Jesus is not saying that we should never pray together publicly as we do in worship or prayer groups, or that we should never pray aloud. He is not talking about *what* we do, but *why* we do it. The way we do the religious things we do. The attitude behind the action. Do we give and pray always watching to see who's watching and listening? Do we give hoping to get recognized? Do we pray secretly hoping to be admired for our beautiful language or the ease of our expression? If we do, Jesus says, we *will* get recognized and admired by people. But we'll get no reward from God.

The third religious practice Jesus talks about is fasting. Like giving to the poor and prayer, fasting was a standard practice of Judaism, as it is of most major world religions. However, most of us do not often fast for religious reasons. Maybe before certain blood work. Or as part of a

diet plan. But not as a religious exercise. But His point is the same: When you fast, your motivation should be to make more room for God in your life, to be more attentive to God's presence and what God wants to say to you. It's not about religion. It's about relationship with God.

See, we often do the right things, but for the wrong reasons, even religious things. And most times, I don't think we even recognize our own selfish motives. But God does. This is something God has really been working on in me: an honest awareness of my motivations. Over the last few years, I have become more and more aware of just how often pleasing people is more important to me than pleasing God.

So ask yourself: Do I do the things I do to please people or to please God? To please myself or to please God? To get recognition and praise for myself, to feel good about myself, or so that God gets praised? "Can we not do both?" you may ask. Yes. But the problem is we usually get them mixed up. So we very often tell ourselves we are doing something to please God when we are really doing it to please ourselves or get attention from others. I have been surprised as I have asked myself, "What is my motive in this?" Because very often, my motivation is praise and approval and acceptance from people, or even just to feel good about myself. If I am concerned as I preach about what you all think of my preaching, whether or not you'll like *it* and like *me* – if I preach to get your approval, your praise, to hear, "Great sermon, pastor!" – I may certainly get that, but that is all I will get and nothing from God. I may get your approval, your praise, but not God's. So I have to ask myself: Why am I really doing this? To please *you* or to please God? I'm pretty sure I should be motivated by a desire to please God first and foremost.

Jesus is teaching here that we are not to be controlled or driven by the opinions of others. We care so much more about what people think of us than we do of what God thinks. That is what Jesus is condemning here.

Now, it must be said that there is a certain tension in the life of following Jesus. You may recall that earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells His followers: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." You may ask: "How are we to let people see our good works and at the same time "not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing"?" It's a delicate balance sometimes, but it all goes back to the heart. Jesus is saying that mixed motives are wrong motives. The ultimate choice we have in all of life – not just our religious life – is between pleasing self and pleasing God. We have to make that choice all the time.

And let me say this: if your primary purpose in life is to please God, to please Him *only*, and to please Him *always* and in *everything*, you cannot go wrong. Our *only* motive must be to please God: to please Him *only*, to please Him *always*, and to please Him in *everything*. You know, I think that sometimes we forget God as we go about our daily lives. We forget that He is always with us, that we live always in the presence of God. That He sees us *always* and in *everything*, and not only our external actions, but most especially and terrifyingly, our internal motivations. The condition of our hearts. You know, you can come to church every time the doors are open, you can appear to your friends to be very 'religious,' it does not impress God. Not unless your

‘religion’ is motivated by a deep, personal, intimate relationship with Him, a desire to please Him and only Him. He knows what’s in your heart. He knows why you do the things you do. You can give lots of money to the poor, to the church, to charity. And you’ll get very nice acknowledgment letters from those organizations and a nice tax deduction from Uncle Sam. But you will not impress God. Unless your giving is motivated by your deep, personal relationship with God, by your desire to please God and nothing else.

Isaiah 29:13. You can pray beautiful prayers. You can lift your hands in praise to God. You can sing until you’re hoarse. But where is your heart? Is it hoping to be admired? Is it feeling pretty self-satisfied?

Listen: What you need is not more recognition from people. What you need is *not* to get more of your prayers answered the way you want them answered. What you need is more of God. A deeper, closer, more intimate relationship with Jesus. I know you *think* you need the stuff you are praying for. I know you *think* you will not survive it if your kids continue down the road they’re going. I know you *think* you will never be happy if you don’t get married, or if your spouse doesn’t change, or if you don’t find a new job. And I know it feels really good to have people compliment you and admire you and approve of you. We can get addicted to the approval of other people. It’s pretty heady stuff.

But what you *really* need is not any of that stuff. What you really need is a real, authentic, personal relationship with God. 24/7/365 to realize you live and move and have your being in the very presence and power of Almighty God. Look, here’s the bottom line of what Jesus is saying here: God doesn’t want your money or your religious devotion. God wants you. He wants your heart. He wants a heart-to-heart relationship with you. When you do your religious stuff motivated by this heart-to-heart relationship, Jesus says, God will reward you.

What is the “reward” Jesus speaks of here? It’s not just eternal life in heaven with God after you die. It *is* that, but it’s so much more than that. It’s living in the Kingdom of God *now*. The word in the Greek for ‘reward’ literally means, “Your Father will *pay you back*.” When we give Him our hearts, God rewards us, He pays us back. When we give *our* hearts, we get God’s heart. When we give *from* the heart, God gives to us from *His* heart. When we connect heart-to-heart with God in prayer, we get God Himself. Not just what we ask for. We get God. When we submit our appetites to God – whether it’s giving up food for a time, or TV or internet or whatever – we make a space for God to fill us with Himself. That is the reward Jesus is talking about here. God Himself: His life flowing in and through your life. His character reflected more and more in your character. His love filling more and more our hearts so that it overflows to others.

I’m not talking about religion – a relationship with God. Not the praise of other people, but the power and presence, peace and purpose of God Himself. The way you do the things you do matters. God sees everything. So play to an audience of One.