

Who is Your Righteousness For?

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Date: 24 October 2021

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[0 : 00] So the reading this morning is from Matthew chapter 6, verse 1 to 18.

That's on page 970 in the church Bibles. That's Matthew chapter 6, verse 1 to 18. Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others.

Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.

[1 : 15] Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

[2 : 23] When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Jackie, for reading.

And if you could keep your Bibles open on page 970, that would be a great help as we look at God's word together. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet with some points on there, if you'd find that helpful to see where we're going as we look at this.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Gracious God, as we come to your word, we pray that you will open our ears to hear wisdom.

[3 : 36] You'll open our eyes to see the Lord Jesus. You'll open our minds to know truth. And that you would open our hearts to the living hope that you give us.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it's not been a good month if you drive on the M25. That's the motorway ring road around London.

And we've all been seeing on the news that people have been gluing themselves to the road. They were from Insulate Britain. And they were running these sit-down protests to stop the traffic and raise awareness of the need to insulate.

But then Liam Norton, who is the head of Insulate Britain, stormed off Good Morning Britain and said that he hasn't actually insulated his own home.

And in fact, he admitted that he doesn't actually care about insulation. It was a big story because it was a story about hypocrisy. It was hypocrisy that got Matt Hancock finished as the health secretary in the COVID crisis.

[4 : 44] He'd managed to survive a number of apparent mistakes. He survived lots of criticism. He even survived, he even would have survived, having an affair in today's morality, in the moral maze. What finished him off was that he told us to stay two meters from one another and he'd, in order to have an affair, broken his own rule.

There was no way back for him from that. Infidelity was not a fatal issue in today's politics. Hypocrisy was. And then all around us, that's what people think of the church.

Would you like to come to church? No, people say. Church is full of hypocrites. Where has that perception come from?

Partly, I guess, the church. We need to hold our hands up. If you're someone who's been hurt in the past or burnt in your life by Christians who you realize were kind of hiding sin away in their lives and preaching one thing, if you like, but not living it out themselves, making you feel judged and condemned, and then realizing that they weren't all that they claimed to be, then I'm sorry.

[6 : 04] I'm sorry that that's been your experience, if it has. At the same time, I suppose, if we're being honest, it's easy to be a hypocrite about hypocrisy.

Who of us could say we've never been guilty of that, of acting in a way that might have made us look better than we really are because other people were watching? That's the idea of hypocrisy. It's the language of the theater, originally, of putting on a mask, giving a pretense that you're something that you're not. A few years ago, we had an older Christian minister come and preach here as a one-off, Peter Adam, and he said, Church, it's full of hypocrites.

That's exactly right. You're so welcome. You'll fit right in. But what does Jesus say about hypocrisy? Well, we're in this section of Matthew's Gospel, known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus has gathered his followers to him, and he's teaching them about how to live when we become members of his kingdom. You become a member of his kingdom just by turning to him, putting your trust in him.

[7 : 08] And now he tells us how he wants us to live. In chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, he talked about the kind of people that we will become if we listen to him. He talked about us being merciful and meek.

Good for you if you mourn your sin. Good for you if you're hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Then he talked about the impact that his people will have on the world, that we would be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, deliciously distinctive, drawing the world to Jesus because we live differently for Jesus.

Even while others insult us and persecute us, people are drawn in by a transformed life lived for Jesus. Then we heard about the Christian's relationship with God's law, the Old Testament.

As Jesus said six times, you've heard that it was said, and then he gave an interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures. And then he said, but I tell you this, and he deepens our grasp of what he calls his people to.

That culminated in verse 48, where we ended things last week. He said, be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect. And now Jesus turns to our religious living, our religious life, our righteous life.

[8 : 32] So this morning we've got two points. And the first is this, when you do good things, do them for your father's reward. So in verse one, Jesus warns us of a trap.

If you just have a look at how he starts, he says, be careful. Be careful because it's so easy to get this wrong and to drift over time into getting this wrong. Be careful.

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your father in heaven.

That's the principle for our time together this morning. Very simple. And he gives us three illustrations of the principle. He talks about giving. He talks about prayer.

He talks about fasting. They seem to cover three dimensions of our day-to-day lives if we're wanting to follow Jesus. There's our relationship with others, reflected in our giving of money.

[9 : 32] Our relationship with God, reflected in our prayer lives. And our relationship with ourselves, our self-discipline, with fasting. And in all three of these areas, Jesus isn't just commanding right behavior.

He assumes behavior. He assumes his followers are practicing these religious works. He calls them in verse 1, your righteousness.

Practice your righteousness. And he assumes that. But he says, be careful. Be careful that you can be doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Is your right behavior motivated by the glory of God?

Or is it for your own glory? Is it out of love for God to please Him? Or is it out of love for ourselves to see other people impressed by us?

So let's take the first example. It's give without trumpets. If you have a look with me at verse 2. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by God.

[10:40] Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. So there's the man or woman doing the right thing, doing the right thing, and a trumpet.

The trumpet is a noticeable instrument. This is my daughter Hannah's trumpet. She wanted that to be known. And she was playing the trumpet one day outside and some builders fixing a roof quite far away stopped to applaud.

You can't play the trumpet quietly. Our neighbors have discovered that. It's saying, look at me.

People are going to look, aren't they? Jesus says, look at those generous givers over there.

And they're using trumpets to announce it. He could be describing something real, that they use trumpets to summon the poor to give to them. It could be that it's just a caricature.

[11:56] It's just a picture of the way that we want to ostentatiously give. Jesus says, look at those people getting a photo of themselves at the charity dinner for Instagram and their virtue signaling.

Look at them in the papers handing over that huge check. Look at them getting a brick with their name on in the new hospital ward. And Jesus says, if you give like that, there's a reward.

That's one thing to take away this week from the teaching here is that if you give, either way, there's a reward, isn't there? Whatever you do it for, there is a reward. Jesus wants us to know there is a better reward you can get with your giving.

The first kind of reward is other people know about your giving. They see your name and they might think of you very highly. They might be really impressed by your generosity.

you might become popular. But Jesus says, verse 2, that if that's what you do it for, that's your reward in full.

[13:08] God doesn't reward the person who gives with trumpets because they're not doing it for him. They're doing it for themselves. And then he gives the alternative in verse 3.

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

There's even a way that you can give and hide it from other people, but where we still don't do it for God and his pleasure, we do it for our own self-congratulation. We look back on it and we reflect on what we've given again and again.

And it makes us feel justified. Maybe it helps us look at other people and think, I bet they don't give what I give.

So Jesus says, just give generously and then move on. See that picture? You're typing in a bank transfer with your right hand and your left hand's going, what are you doing over there?

[14:15] And your right hand's saying, just don't worry about it. Don't even think about it. In other words, don't dwell on your giving for your own self-esteem to glow with pride.

Just give generously and move on. Why? For when we don't keep a record, someone else does. Our Heavenly Father sees what we're doing.

It goes in his book when we give for him. And he's rooting for you as one of his children. He's looking to reward you. Seek the pleasure of your good Heavenly Father.

We were away last week. First time in an airport for a very long time. You have to get all your hand luggage out into trays, don't you? And it goes into the x-ray machine.

And as it goes through the machine, the monitor shows the security person what's going on on the inside. I had a job working in security once.

[15:15] at Buckingham Palace in the summer opening. One of the guys in security with me, one day he climbed into the machine and went through it.

He took a little metal dish with him to preserve his dignity. Jesus wants us this morning to put our good works through the x-ray machine.

to ask, when I do that, what's going on on the inside there? What's going on in my heart? Some tasks like giving, you can often help guard yourself by keeping it a secret as Jesus suggests.

But there are other tasks that you can't keep a secret, are there? Aren't there? Coming to church physically is a massive encouragement to other people. I think of a friend who said of a guy in his church, he's got the spiritual gift of turning up.

It's a great gift to other people. We know that he'll be there and that encourages people. But you can't, you can't do that in secret, can you? You can't be on a welcome team and it be a secret.

[16:28] The question to ask though is, who am I doing this for? Is it to impress other people or is it to please my Father in heaven? Let's go on to the next example.

We've heard about giving without trumpets. Next it's pray without an audience. Have a look with me at verse 5. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen.

Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Jesus is not ruling out public prayer. The Bible talks about the need for public prayer.

Jesus is about to teach us a corporate prayer. 1 Timothy 2 talks about how when we gather we're to pray and for people to lead us in prayer and petition. He's just saying, verse 1, be careful.

[17:37] It's not wrong for people to find out you're giving or to hear you praying. It's just, it exposes you to this danger of enjoying other people's reaction as your reward.

Setting out to do it again for that reaction again. And missing out on this greater reward that Jesus says he would love us to experience in the future.

So the danger with public prayer is we start wondering too much what other people think of us because we prayed. And a good test for ourselves is how do you pray when you're on your own? When the door's shut and no one is listening? When it's just you on your knees before your Father in Heaven? How do you pray? And if you are someone who prays out loud in public at the prayer meeting or in your growth group or in roots, is your praying with other people just a natural overflowing of the prayer you do on your own at home?

If it is, good for you. Well and good. And if not, it's worth asking ourselves, have I fallen into a habit of praying horizontally?

[18:53] For other people to hear rather than praying vertically for God to hear me. And one way to help guard yourself I think when you're praying in public with other people against this danger is just to pray really simple prayers.

It can be really encouraging to hear somebody pray in a rich way, a spiritually rich way. Someone who knows their Bible well and leads in prayer. I find that really heartwarming.

It can be just as heartwarming to hear someone just pray a really simple prayer. You know, when it comes to praying for the quiz night on Friday, just, you know, we pray that, I pray that my friends would come and they would see a bit more of Jesus.

Amen. Just simple prayers when we're with other people. Might guard ourselves against the danger of showy prayer. That's our second example, praying without an audience.

Or maybe I should have said praying with an audience of one, praying with the right audience. The third example is fasting. Fast without the drama.

[20:02] So have a look with me at verse 16. He says, When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show they are fasting.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. Fasting is about going without food for spiritual reasons. And the reasons tend to be all about having a hunger for God.

We go hungry physically. You might miss a meal or you don't eat for a day. And you do that so that your physical hunger kind of matches the hunger you feel for God in the moment.

Or it matches the hunger you'd like to feel for God. It's a discipline to help nurture that hunger in your life. So under that, we might fast because you're seeking God's guidance.

You've got a big decision coming up. You're not sure what to do. And hopefully, hopefully we would pray about that. You might fast about that as a way of giving the time when you would have been eating to pray instead.

[21:09] And when you feel hungry to think, you know what, I really am hungry for is for God to guide me in this decision. Or you might fast because you feel convicted of an area of your life where you're not living like Jesus would live and you wish that you were more like Him.

And so fasting is a way of expressing that kind of mourning over our sin, over the way that we're living and expressing to God in prayer that though we feel physically hungry, our deepest hunger is to be more like Jesus.

Jesus assumes here that His followers will fast. But again, what He's concerned with here is not that we fast, it's that there is this trap that we might do it to impress other people.

So, you know how that might work. There's tray bake being offered round and, sorry, is that, are you offering me that? You know what, that is my favorite tray bake.

It's just, I can't do that today. Yeah, sorry, on a fast today. Sorry, you're off to play spike ball in the park, frisbee in the park. Sorry, I would probably feel a bit faint yet because, yeah, I've been fasting for a couple of days now.

[22 : 26] Instead, Jesus says, just be normal when you're fasting. Verse 17, when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face. That's not saying, He's not saying do that if you wouldn't normally do that.

He's saying do what you would normally do so that it's just not drawn attention to. The point here is, help guard your own heart against doing good things for other people's eyes instead of for God's eyes.

Help guard that by doing them without anyone knowing. And then the same result each time. So there it is again, verse 18, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

You can't help but notice in Matthew 6 that Jesus seems to be less embarrassed to motivate us through the promise of reward from God than we sometimes are.

I think sometimes we feel uneasy about that as though we think an act is only really a good act if it was not done for any personal reward. As if that were possible even.

[23 : 35] I'm not sure it is possible. But the New Testament talks about reward unashamedly. Very clearly, you can't get to heaven as a reward. None of us can earn our way into the kingdom of heaven.

We could only ever receive that as a free gift and it's offered as a free gift to all of us through Jesus our King and His work at the cross. At the same time, Jesus says there'll be varying rewards for Christians depending on how we've lived for Christ.

His parable of the talents in Luke 19 has the same principle. But the reward is a fitting one. So it's not like, you know, somebody marrying someone because they're rich.

You know, there would be that kind of, well that's not fitting. It's not appropriate that the reward for a marriage would be money. It's a fitting reward. And we don't get many details of what that would look like.

And I don't know about this but I just wonder whether, could it be that as we devote more of our lives to pleasing our Heavenly Father, the more that we're yearning for being with Him forever, yearning for His appearing.

[24 : 47] And the more special it will be when we're before Him and He says, well done. Everyone in Heaven will be full of joy.

It's not that anybody will be in Heaven saying, oh if only I'd done a bit more then I'd be a bit happier here. Everyone will be full of joy. But I just wonder, could it be that our capacity for joy is grown, multiplied by the ways that we live for God now and it makes us yearn more for being with Him forever.

We yearn for that day when we'll be with our Heavenly Father personally and He will say, well done that you gave in this way. And you might say, are you sure that was me?

I don't have any recollection of doing that. And He'll say, yeah, and you didn't dwell on it but I did and it's written here in my book. Well done. However God will work it out, Jesus says, there is this reward and it's worth waiting for.

It's far more valuable than impressing other people in this life to please our Father. So that's our first point. When you do good things, do them for your Father's reward.

[26 : 03] Put your life through the x-ray machine. But there is help on offer as we feel challenged by that because Jesus then gives us the tools for a prayer life that can reshape our lives, reshape them away from needing other people's praise towards seeking to please God.

So that's our second point. When you pray, trust your Father's will and concern. He describes another kind of prayer to avoid in verse 7 and he calls it pagan prayer, praying like pagans, people who have an idea of God to pray to but it's a wrong idea.

And we hear that it's mindless prayer. If you have a look at verse 7, when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans.

So just saying one word on repeat or a set phrase on loop without really putting our mind into what we're saying. You get this practice in Eastern religions but it does sometimes creep into Christian spirituality and ironically you can use the Lord's Prayer like this.

You know, we become so familiar with it, we say it in church, we see it and maybe we pray it at home, that sometimes you can find yourself praying the words and not thinking about it. It's just become a babble.

[27 : 24] Well, let's avoid mindless prayer or vain repetition as it's sometimes called, mindless prayer. Jesus says avoid that. The second side of pagan prayer to avoid here is that it's mechanical.

So you see that in verse 7. You see that, he says, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. So they have this transactional view of prayer.

There's a distorted view of God and this idea of if I pray long enough or desperately enough or with a particular pattern that I've heard with particular phrases to declare, then God will hear me.

That's the kind of key to unlocking God's generosity door and getting from him what I need. And Jesus says that's a wrong view of God.

Don't pray like that. What's the answer? A clearer picture of what God is really like. Look at verse 8. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

[28 : 31] In other words, prayer is not a test for us to try and get the right answers to get something. Prayer is a gift. It's a gift of an experience of consciously being in the presence of our good Father.

We all have different views of the idea of a Father. Some of us will have positive views of that. Others might have very negative or painful views of the word Father.

But I think we all have in our heads an understanding of what the ideal Father would be like. And God is the ideal Father. He's good. He's pure. He's wise.

He's consistent. He's dependable. He's faithful. He's kind. He's gentle. He's always in control so he can keep his promises.

And his promises are for us. They're good. So knowing God as our Father revolutionizes prayer.

The safety to approach God in secure, loving relationship.

[29 : 34] Knowing he's delighted that we want to be with him. And that leads us into the model prayer. It just flows from that right view of God. There are three petitions at the beginning that are all about God and his glory.

We can start with him because we trust him. Three lines of adoration. Hallowed be your name. That we ask God to act in such a way around the world that his name would be known and revered for who he is as a holy God.

Your kingdom come. God's kingdom comes wherever his king is recognized and acknowledged. So praying your kingdom come is praying that people all around us would turn to see Jesus as their saving king.

And we're also praying when we pray your kingdom come that Jesus will come in glory and fully establish his kingdom forever. Your will be done.

Trusting in the goodness of God we're able to say to him not my will be done but your will be done. We know he knows what's best. So we pray for the Father's glory then we turn to his provision for us.

[30 : 45] We pray for our provision our daily bread then our pardon forgive us our debts. And then he adds something to that as we also are forgiven our debtors and he expands on it in verses 14 and 15.

I take it that Jesus is not saying there that by our forgiveness of others we would earn the right to be forgiven by God rather that when we come to Jesus and our debt is wiped clean and we come to grasp and understand how deep and great that debt was and that God has freely lifted it from us we must go out to others with a different view of their wrongdoing to us willing to forgive because we've been forgiven so much.

So these are our daily essential needs our provision daily bread our pardon and then our protection from the evil one. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.

Should we even have in mind especially that we need protection from the kind of temptation that Jesus has described for us today of being drawn away from seeking to live for God because we're seduced by the reward of living for other people and pleasing them.

So folks how would a prayer life based on the Lord's prayer reshape us in our hearts? How do we stop caring so much what other people think of us?

[32 : 30] Is it not through growing and being more concerned with the living God and what he thinks of us so that we see that his approval of me in Christ is enough and that liberates me from needing other people to be impressed?

And how do we let that verdict on our lives of approved and adopted by God be the motivation for our behavior? is it not through practicing a deeper conscious awareness that today every day we have a heavenly father and he always is watching us he's always with us every moment I was struck this week by what a difference it would make to my life if I was to wake up in the morning with the overriding conscious thought that I will spend today in the presence of God he sees me when I'm with others he sees me in secret he's watching you and me and we don't hear that and see him as like a big brother watching us looking to catch us out we hear that and see him as Jesus describes him as a good father who's looking to reward us and he longs for us to enjoy doing righteous acts not for others but for him and one day we'll stand before him and he will say thank you for your giving and your praying and your fasting and all the righteous things you did for me we didn't keep a record but he did and he'll say well done let's pray together just a moment of quiet to reflect on the challenge of God's word our father father we thank you that you are our father and we ask that you would make us more aware of your presence in our day to day lives so that our times of private prayer would be our most treasured moments and as we go about our lives your glory would be our chief concern for Jesus name's sake
Amen Amen