

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (27-8-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Matthew 6 v 1-6, 16-18
Additional Reading Luke 18:9-14

Introduction

So far, the Sermon on the Mount has dealt with the character of the Christian man, and then a description of his character. He is much more essentially righteous than the Pharisees. He has an entirely different kind of righteousness, concerned with the heart, and not with the outside. He is not limited by self-interest.

Now we come to three ways in which we worship God in our lives. Jesus moves from ethical righteousness to religious righteousness i.e. brings in relationship with God. All is done in the presence of God. Again Jesus emphasises that this is radically different from the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1). Three kinds of righteousness: giving to the needy, which involves concern for others and serving neighbours; life of prayer – seeking God’s face; fasting – one of the ways to deny and control self. Thus we have a duty to our neighbour, to God, and to self.

These three acts of righteousness were prominent in the Jewish religion, and the Lord assumes these will be features of the lives of his disciples. He emphasises that, although these things are good and right, it is the motive in the heart that is the important thing. All to be done as in the sight of God, done unto him. If you are hoping to make impression on others to boost standing and enhance others’ opinion – you are wasting time. Once again, state of hearts and relationship with God is at the root of his teaching.

One problem is that we must not do these acts of righteousness to be seen by men. And yet in the last chapter we read **Let your light shine before men that they might see your good works and praise your Father in heaven** (Mathew 5:16). Not really a contradiction. The clue is that Jesus is speaking about different sins. “Let your light so shine...” is the answer to human cowardice. The principle of not practicing righteousness before men is to correct human vanity. “Show when tempted to hide; hide when tempted to show.” Careful balance needed. In either case, our concern should be God’s glory.

Matthew 6 is a humbling and uncomfortable chapter. It probes and examines us. It is painful to the Big “I”, the self. Once again it shows us our need of Christ. It holds a mirror up to our lives. It does not let us escape. We need to know ourselves, and that can be a painful experience.

Three forms of righteousness

Giving to others, praying to God, disciplining self. The Lord is concerned with the motive behind all of these.

Firstly, giving to others. **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 men. I tell you the truth; 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** (Matthew 6:2-4). We are not to take this too literally. If we are responsible givers, we should keep books and accounts, so that we know to whom we have given, and how much. This way we can check our giving is balanced and planned. However, we are not to gloat, preen ourselves, but act responsibly. Once the gift is given, forget it. Do not keep congratulating yourself.

Three ways to give – (1) to get praise from men (the Pharisees had insatiable appetite for approval and congratulations of others). (2) Or do it quietly but all the time thinking how wonderful we are – especially because we don't show off about it. (3) Or seeking God's approval alone. The Lord says only the third way is worthy of his followers. The only thing that matters is God's approval and God's will. Pleasing him, and lifting up his name should be our concern.

The second form of righteousness is praying. **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 men. 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** (Matthew 6:5-6). The Pharisees were hungry for men's praise as outstandingly pious and God-fearing men. They wanted a good reputation. Not concerned with real prayer but with what men thought of them. Behind the piety was pride. The service of God was degraded to service of self. Prayer was a form of exhibitionism. Here is the essence of sin – self-worship.

How sin can intrude in our lives in the very presence of God, when we are at prayer. We persuade ourselves we are worshipping God but really we are worshipping ourselves. Worship of God, but all the time thinking how wonderful we are and how wonderful we must be in eyes of others. True in private worship and in public worship. How many good things – going to church prayer meetings, leading pulpit prayers, and preaching of the Word – can be perverted as means of serving self and enhancing standing in the eyes of those near us and listening. Our hearts can be full of things other than **reverence and awe** (Hebrews 12:28). There was once a man who prayed at a prayer meeting, and after he sat down, someone said: "That was the finest prayer ever offered to a Boston audience".

Side-glances at spectators destroy prayer. But awareness of the presence of God enriches prayer. Prayer is concerned with God, talking to him, who he is, and our needs. Not wondering if someone approved of this phrase, or hoping this shows how well I know my Bible, or that people should think better of me. Strangely enough, concern with what others think can stifle prayer and cause people to be silent. "I cannot pray like so and so", "I may let myself down", "They will laugh if I say this".

I recall a woman in my first church, who said she would never pray again in the prayer meeting because she could not pray like certain others, whose Brethren background caused their prayers to flow with scripture. But her ungrammatical

Geordie speech was just as precious to God as the most Scripture-laced prayer – if it was from the heart. This is what God is looking for, and it does not matter what the rest of the prayer meeting think.

Thirdly there is fasting. **When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that it will not be obvious to men 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** (Matthew 6:16-18). Fasting is a subject which catches us out. Many evangelicals live as though these verses were torn out of their Bibles. We give and pray, but we do not fast. It does not do to say this is Old Testament practice or Roman Catholic practice associated with superstitious view of the Mass, for Jesus fasted. He spoke about fasting here, on the assumption that followers would fast. The early church fasted. People we admire – protestant reformers and preachers like Wesley and Whitfield – they fasted. Interestingly, there has been renewed interest recently in fasting to seek God for revival.

Fasting is about abstaining from food wholly or partially for spiritual purposes. To humble ourselves, express our penitence and seeking God for special blessing. It is a help to discipline and self-control. Helps to concentrate the whole being on God.

Jesus says, when you fast, be natural, do not advertise self or seek reputation. You can bluff fellow men, who can be taken in by a performance. We can even deceive ourselves. But God is not mocked. He looks on the heart. We can put on nice little show for others and self, but God is not taken in. We only lose our integrity. God is concerned with the heart. Forget self. Be concerned with God and pleasing him. This is all that matters.

Answer to temptation associated with these three forms of righteousness

Key to situation is to bring God right into the centre of our heart, lives and activities. We are always in his sight. He sees every action and knows every thought. He knows the motives behind our actions which men see, and knows whether we are concerned to please him or impress our fellow men. We so often forget his presence, hence our mistakes.

We are so different from our Saviour. **The one who sent me is with me. I always do what pleases him** (John 8:29). He never thought of himself, or thrust himself forward. He did not seek his own honour, but the honour of the one who sent him. We ought to be so conscious of God that we cease to be concerned and conscious of self. If God is in the right place in our lives, we should have no time for self and worrying what others think. Our priorities would be radically different. C.f. Paul's confession of God **whose I am and whom I serve** (Acts 27:23). Pleasing him was all that mattered. If we get that right, then there will be no difficulty with other things. Know how to give and pray and fast. Be right with God – then leave the rest to him.

And reward of that man is safe and certain and assured. The Father who sees in secret will reward us. He is not a snooping celestial policeman. He is loving Father who wants to bless us. People are worried about rewards from God. They do not contradict salvation by grace. Rewards of grace – though we are still unprofitable servants, who

only do what we ought to do (Luke 17:7-10). The rewards he gives are spiritual, and only appeal to the spiritually minded. Inner satisfaction as we please him. Obeying Christ, however costly, gives inner pleasure and delight.

The famous preacher, Dr Dale, recalled a Birmingham street lady who came up to him and said “God bless you, Dr Dale” She did not give her name. Just thanked him, blessed him, and passed on. Dale, till then, was very depressed. Then the “mist broke and sunlight came. I breathed free air of the Mountains of God”. When God lifts his countenance on us, he gives us peace, refreshes our soul, satisfies our hunger, and quenches our thirst.

Another reward is that he gives us more work to do c.f. parable of the talents. Our final and greatest reward is a vision of God. This is no reward for the worldly man, who regards it as a terror and not a joy. The prospect of death for the believer means entry into God’s nearer presence without fear and with radiant joy. Seeing God – this is his final reward. Eternity with God, joy complete. **Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame** (Hebrews 12:2).

So we receive this call from our Lord to forget self. Give self to God. Make him supreme in life. Begin each day with him. Wake up in his presence. Throughout the day, remember that all we do, think, or say is under his eye. That will end our self-absorption, self-adulation, pretence and sham in individual life and church life.

Conclusion

This is indeed an uncomfortable chapter to read. It probes and disturbs. Knowing oneself is most painful piece of knowledge. Brought face to face with ourselves. Yet knowing this shows us our need to fly to Christ, and seek to be filled with the Spirit who alone can burn out the vestiges of self and all that mars our Christian life and living.

If this disclosure does not persuade us of sinfulness and helplessness and need of God’s saving grace, need for forgiveness and new birth – then nothing will. Even if born again with new life, we still need this teaching. Constantly called on to choose. Civil war between old nature dominated by self and new nature whose centre and source is Christ. Daily and hourly we have to choose who will rule and be enthroned in the life. Either please self or please God. Only one place for self - on the cross. **Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passion and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit** (Galatians 5:24-25).