

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL VISIBILITY"

(Matthew 6:1-18)

2.7.21

INTRODUCTION

One of the blessings (among so many) of pastoring this church with the circumstances in which I live is that every week, I get to drive back out here. And one of my favorite things is to watch the process of crops being planted, and then beginning to grow, and then maturing before harvest. I think my favorite time is summertime, coming down from Hwy 212, taking Hwy 15 to Winthrop and then turning west on Hwy 19 before the final six miles into Redwood. It is amazing to me to just look out on mile after mile of crops as far as the eye can see.

Now I've never met or even seen the farmers whose work has produced those amazing crops. But it will never be necessary for me to meet them so they can brag to me about their skills or their equipment or how many long, tough hours they work or anything like that. All those things are evident in watching their crops grow. The fruit, you see, reflects the one who did the work.

Today we are going to take that same idea and apply it to how Christ wants His followers to reflect Him, in three particular areas of worship: in our offerings, in our prayers, and in our times of fasting. We'll be looking at the first eighteen verses of Matthew 6. But first, let's prepare our hearts with **a moment of prayer**.

TEXT AND ANALYSIS

Jesus starts with His main point: *"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" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:1.*

So far in this Sermon, Jesus has talked about the character traits of the Kingdom of heaven, the purpose of those character traits, and what those character traits look like in different interactions with the world. Now, just as kind of an aside, one of the things I'm intentionally trying to do when talking about Christ's teaching ministry is to use OT references to underscore the points He is making. The reason is simple: Our OT is the only Scriptures the people of Jesus' time had. And the fact of the matter is, Jesus is really not teaching anything new so much as He is broadening the understanding of what God's laws ultimately mean, and how they should be obeyed. So He is, in His authority as the Son of God and as the author of the Book - *"You have heard it said . . . but I say to you"* - taking God's law to its spiritually logical conclusion, that, if an outward act is wrong - murder, adultery, etc. - how can the inner thoughts that result in those actions not be just as equally wrong. He doesn't redefine sin; He expands its reach, turning sin from only "what was I doing?" to include "what was I thinking?" Jesus is striving to make the point that limiting sin to our actions is only telling half the story. The other part, the priority in Christ's mind, is getting His audience to understand what a life lived pleasing to God really looks like - a living, breathing reflection of His priorities. As a result, we want to be clean before our Lord down to the finest detail. He wants us to keep digging deeper into our souls, being unwilling to rest until we are completely clean, clean in His sight, versus just looking good in our own sight. This makes God's word through Moses, that God - *"keep[s] His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments" - Moses, Deuteronomy 7:9b* - understood to a far deeper,

more all-inclusive level, that loving God and keeping His commandments is all about "*[loving] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul [as well as] with all your strength*" - Moses, Deuteronomy 6:5.

So, as we move into this next section, Jesus is going to change the interaction a bit - going from interacting with the world around us as citizens of the Kingdom to interacting with God Himself as citizens of the Kingdom.

And this first verse serves as a very appropriate introduction to this section of His Sermon. Jesus is going to put the spotlight on three areas of practicing one's devotion to God - the giving of tithes and offerings, the giving of prayers, and the giving of ourselves to the practice of fasting. And that's an appropriate way to say it, because the behaviors of the Jewish religious leadership suggested that their worship was all about the spotlight - having it pointed squarely on them so that the whole world could see their piety and holiness.

So, Jesus begins this section by issuing a warning: ***Be careful.*** In the Greek, Jesus is literally telling His followers to "hold this in your mind," a shout-out to pay attention because this is really important. If we found this in an owner's manual, it would be in all-caps and boldfaced. So, what's so important? What is it we need to be pay such careful attention to? It's this: showing off your righteousness before others as if your righteousness is all about you - your desires, your doings, your efforts. Our righteousness, if properly viewed, is a praise and celebration not of us, but of God in us. Our growing into the image of His Son, and the behaviors that result, is only the result of the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit continuing to mold us and make us. And ultimately, the purpose of the holiness happening in us is simply a means of reflecting the holiness of the Son and witnessing to His presence in our lives.

This was an issue because of what the people in Christ's time saw everyday - their religious leaders pointing to themselves as the ultimate models of holiness and purity, but not for God's praise but for their own, seeking to receive the praises of those around them for living such wonderful, God-fearing, reverent lives. But Jesus counters those expectations: If the reward you're looking for in life is based on the approval or the applause of men, then that's the reward you're gonna get, but that's also the only reward you're gonna get; don't expect something more from God. God is not going to let you have it both ways: rewards on earth and rewards in heaven. You choose which one is the most important; you choose which one matters.

But Jesus is also wanting His followers to understand that we have no reason to carry out these means of worshiping and relating to God as public displays. We can do them in secret, in privacy, because this is uniquely between us and God. The world isn't invited. This is about a private relationship, not public relations. And we can be assured that God sees, God always sees, these means of worship, these outcomes of our personal relationship with Him. As the psalmist wrote: *[W]ould not God have discovered it, since He knows the secrets of the heart? - Psalm 44:21.* And God is the only audience that matters - and that's the "radical visibility" that Christ is presenting.

So, then Christ moves on into the details that explain His opening statement: ***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 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" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:2-4.

The Pharisees were notorious for making sure that their tithes and offerings were given in the most public ways possible - like winning some prize at the county fair. But we're not talking about some kind of casual look, like we'd momentarily give to somebody while continuing to walk on, but rather an intense view, as one would see in a captivated audience. The giving of offerings to the poor was seen as a way to show everybody how compassionate they were toward the most unfortunate, so why not make a lot of noise to make sure nobody missed their generosity and kindness. They, quite literally, were "blowing their own horns," an idiom that refers to the medieval practice of using trumpets to herald the arrival of royalty or some other important person. In this case, the Pharisees themselves were the important ones. And, if I'm so important and kind and generous, why shouldn't I be recognized? Why shouldn't people be made aware of what I'm doing? I wish there were more people like me in the world.

Jesus suggests something better - giving to the needy like you're doing it for an audience of one - God - "radical visibility." Nobody else has to know what you're doing. And that one who needs to know and wants to know will know. And it's with Him that any reward will be assured; it won't be misplaced or forgotten.

And before we go any further, we need to look at one word that Jesus will use often in His teaching, as a means of illuminating the stark difference between the religion their leaders practiced and taught, and the personal relationship with God that Jesus Himself practiced and taught - and that word is hypocrite. It is one of the most frequent ways that Christ describes the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Its meaning actually comes from the theater and the world of "stage players," where somebody would wear a mask to portray a character that was not their true selves (which is why they call it "acting"). To be a hypocrite was literally to hide the person you really are by acting in a way that deceived your audience. Of course, that would be the ultimate futility when dealing with a God who sees all and knows all. But the behaviors that Jesus will be highlighting are going to be behaviors that actually reveal a hypocrisy that, though the people couldn't see it, Christ could.

He continues: "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 Christ, Matthew 6:5-6.

Prayer is, at its most basic, talking to God. It is not about talking to anybody else. So, to do so as a means of personal enhancement and publicity is the ultimate contempt and lack of understanding as to what prayer is truly meant to be. Prayer, particularly when done in individual circumstances, should be done in a private setting to underscore the direct, "one-on-one" communication between the individual and God - "radical visibility." Again, the praying that Christ was condemning was the praying being done by the leadership as a public display of righteousness. Prayers done in this manner will not only be unanswered, but they won't even be listened to.

And then Christ continues on the subject of prayer: ***"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" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:7-8

Jesus first points His audience to the practice of some of the false religions around them by using the colorful term "babbling." Just like in English, the Greek word is an onomatopoeia, which is a word that attempts to imitate the sound that word is describing; examples would be "splash" or "barn" or, like here, "babbling" - all of which essentially means to be speaking tediously, using "vain repetitions." Various pagan believers were known to use long lists of the names of all the gods of their faith in their prayers, the idea being that by constantly repeating their names, they would eventually get the attention of one of their gods who would come and help them. But Christ doesn't want His followers to ever think that God will be impressed with prayers that are either wordy or repetitive or use fancy phrases.

But then Jesus gives one of the most comforting acknowledgements of God's sovereignty in all of Scripture: ***"[Y]our Father knows what you need before you ask Him" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:8b.*** Two wonderful highlights:

- 1) First, relationship. We are not blindly praying to a god of religion, but to a "Father" of relationship. This underscores how different the life can be for Christ's followers - far more than knowing about God, we can know God from within a personal relationship. The pagan faiths of that time (as well as false religions today) never declare a god who would reach out to mankind for relationship. In fact, those faiths would deny even the possibility of a personal relationship. Not so the one true God:
 - a) As Isaiah acknowledged: ***[Y]ou, Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer - Isaiah 63:16b.***
 - b) And as God promised through Jeremiah, because He is our father: ***"[Y]ou will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you" - God speaking, Jeremiah 29:12-14a.***
- 2) Second, knowledge of our needs. God not only completely knows us, but He just as completely knows what we need. He knows what is best for us - every "where," "when" and "how much." Their Scriptures would have already told Christ's audience that in abundance:
 - a) ***The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing - David, Psalm 23:1.***
 - b) ***[T]hose who seek the Lord lack no good thing - David, Psalm 34:10b.***

Then Jesus gives us what has come to be known as the "Lord's Prayer." As perfect as this prayer is, the idea behind it is not to mindlessly repeat it. The idea of the prayer is, as it says in the Greek, to pray "in this manner." In other words, Jesus is not saying, "Pray this," but rather "Pray like this."

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" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:7-15.

The Lord's Prayer has two basic components: first, focusing on God and, second, focusing on

people.

- 1) The prayer starts out focusing on God, underscoring to whom we are praying - ***Our Father in heaven*** - differentiating between our earthly fathers and our greatest father, but still within the wondrous context of relationship.
- 2) ***Hallowed be your name*** - means "to regard as holy." It also shows the balance that needs to be found between knowing God as our father yet also maintaining the reverence that He is rightfully due.
- 3) ***Your kingdom come*** - refers to God's kingdom continuing to show itself more and more completely; eventually at the end of time it will come fully into its perfect glory.
- 4) ***Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*** - refers to what His followers already know God wants them to do, known especially by means of the Scriptures. God's will is already perfectly and completely being done in heaven.
- 5) ***Give us today our daily bread*** - begins the prayer's focus on people with a phrase that is a way of saying all of life's necessities. Note that this refers to what we need, which is a faith statement that we leave our lives to God's judgment regarding what is a need for our life and then providing it. Just because we assume a need doesn't mean that God sees it that way.
- 6) ***Forgive us our debts*** - does not mean that each day's sins somehow lose us our salvation but rather that our fellowship with God is wounded when we fail to acknowledge and then repent of our sins.
- 7) ***As we also have forgiven our debtors*** - obviously not to the same extent as Christ but in the same manner as Christ has forgiven us. It is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that is explained (vv. 14-15) to make sure its meaning is understood. Christians of all people should always be ready to immediately extend forgiveness to others, as Christians should be the most personally aware of what forgiveness has meant for them.
- 8) ***And lead us not into temptation*** - not something that God even remotely does, but rather a plea that God would not allow us to fail in our times of temptation.
- 9) ***Deliver us from the evil one*** - our ultimate enemy, Satan. God is bigger than anything that Satan can throw at us.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others 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" - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:16-18.***

As with the other practices of devotion, somebody fasting - refraining from the time of meal preparation and eating - should not allow somebody to know what they are doing. Apparently at this time, you could tell a "faster" just by looking at him. He looked miserable, and hungry, and famished - and apparently wanted everybody around him to know how miserable and hungry and famished he was too, and why he looked that way. Christ went another direction: Groom yourself, look good. Your fasting only needs to look obvious to God - nobody else: "radical visibility."

APPLICATION

Christ is making a very fundamental statement about the makeup of the citizens of His

Kingdom, and it's this: Citizens of the Kingdom are made from the inside out - and it's all done for to accomplish one thing: That we would reflect God in the world; as Christ said previously: ***"[L]et your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:16***. So what's shining? Can't be us because the Bible says there is no good in us. It's the light of God shining through the dwelling of Jesus Himself in our lives. The "beatitude attitudes" that we've talking about are traits that have "sprouted" as a result of being planted with the "seed" of God's Son so we can be reflecting the Son to all the people around us. Jesus said as much: ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 8:12***. These are the character traits that best reflect the light of Christ's life to the world. Jesus is the light; He makes us shine. Inside out!

Christ then starts to dive into what "inside out" for the Kingdom really means. He starts with grievous sins: murder, adultery, retaliation, enemies - what we talked about last week. Those are outer fruits of the seeds of anger, lust, judgment, and revenge. For those outer acts to be changed, the inner basis for desiring those acts must be changed. And then He includes not only these obvious sins but then sins thought to be acts of faith and godly devotion - what we've talked about today. So, what is the basis of those actions? They are coming from mindsets grounded in pride, ego, and conceit. Again, an inner work must take place for those outer actions to be changed. We must go "inside out!"

It also reminds us that, as surely as God sees the hidden actions done in secret for only Him, He just as surely sees the wrong motivations that render the worship done from those hearts meaningless. The people had heard this before: ***"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is based on merely human rules they have been taught"*** - ***God speaking, Isaiah 29:13***. And the result of such misspoken worship? Exactly what we heard earlier this morning (from the ESV): ***"When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen"*** - ***God speaking, Isaiah 1:15 (ESV)***.

Now, all that being said, can we do these things publicly? Absolutely. We can certainly lead in and share our prayers with each other. It is certainly appropriate to be praying as a representative or on behalf of the church family. Many was the time in the OT where the kings of Israel or Judah prayed for the nation. Because they were operating from a heart pleasing to God, their prayers were appropriate. We can also share our testimonies regarding what God has done, or even about what God has allowed us the opportunity to do - which can sometimes mean disclosing about a tithe made, or about a fasting experience. If these are given for the encouragement of the body and the glorifying of God, then the publicizing of those things can absolutely be appropriate. But the most important question - always: Is this about God or me? "To God be the glory" is not just an expression, but a lifestyle and a statement from the heart that has been remade - from the inside out! Radical visibility!

CONCLUSION

From the inside out! More than anything else, what is that speaking to? Jesus Christ! And ultimately what's His message? "I see you, I love you, and I want you. I can fix your life; I can make all things new." Or as Jesus Himself said: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:28***. Let's pray!