

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18 - BEFORE THE AUDIENCE OF ONE

Chapter 6

1 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.

Authentic spirituality consists of both our lifestyles of love and our acts of devotion.

- Jesus has just spoken of how his disciples are to love (5:21-48). Now he speaks of how his disciples are to practise their acts of devotion. By acts of devotion – here referred to as “acts of righteousness” (v1) – I mean giving (v2-4), prayer (v5-15) and fasting (v16-18).
- It's interesting that the righteousness that Jesus calls us to has both components: 1) how we live in the world, especially how we relate to people (5:20-48); and 2) how we give ourselves to spiritual practices such as giving, prayer and fasting (6:1-18). We need both. There are some Christian groups that tend to elevate one above the other. For example, some churches place far greater emphasis on Christians getting involved in church activities and ministries, and practising spiritual disciplines. But they place little emphasis on how we are to live out our faith in everyday life. Some churches do the opposite. The emphasis is on our living out our faith out there, but little emphasis is given to things like getting involved in ministries to the poor, or to having regular devotions. We clearly need both kinds of righteousness.

Your Father in heaven will see what is done in secret and reward you.

- Notice the following four parallel verses in the coming section (v1-18):
“... you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (v1). “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (v4).
“... pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what

is done in secret, will reward you” (v6). “ ... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (v18). From these verses we learn four things about God:

- 1) *God is our Father*. Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He is not teaching the universal fatherhood of God, but rather God’s fatherhood toward the disciples of Jesus. Elsewhere in the New Testament this makes sense in two ways. First, because God himself gives us new birth, and through new birth we become his children (see John 1:12), it makes sense to call him “Father”. Second, the apostle Paul spoke of salvation as God adopting us as his children (see Galatians 4:4-7). What a privilege that through our faith in Jesus Christ, we can call God our Father!
- 2) *God is “in heaven” and “unseen”*. What does it mean that God is in heaven? The Greek literally says that God is “in the heavens”. This needs to be understood through a Jewish lens. In the mind of the Jewish person, the heavens referred to three possible things: the air immediately around one’s body, the sky above, and the “third heaven” (where Paul believed he was once “caught up to”, in a vision – see 2 Corinthians 12:2). In this context it means the first. Jesus was teaching that God does not observe your life from a distant third heaven, or even from high up in the sky. He is right here, right now, in the very spiritual atmosphere that surrounds your body. God watches close up. Although it is true that he is transcendent in glory, he is also immanent and highly involved in our lives.
- 3) *God sees what is done in secret*. This refers to the fact that God looks not just at our external actions, but to the secret motivations in our heart – which no one but he can access. God is not just interested in us doing the right things. He is also interested in us doing the right things for the right reasons. He has x-ray vision into our interior realm of motivation. Mother Teresa picked up on this point when she said to her organization of nuns: “It is not big actions that change the world. It is small actions done with big love that have the power to change the world.”
- 4) *God is ready to reward us*. When we, as God’s children, do the right things for the right reasons, God rewards us. All of God’s children are equally adopted, equally loved, and equally accepted because of our common faith in Jesus. But not all of his children are equally pleasing, and therefore equally rewarded by the Father. Over and above the gift of salvation, God wants to reward us for our faithfulness to him. If we are not faithful to him, we forfeit reward. But if we are faithful in both what we do, and the attitude with which we do it, we are promised that he will reward us. How does he reward us? The reward comes partially in this life, and fully in the next. In this life, the reward is simply sensing God’s pleasure toward you, and discerning him whispering, “Well done!” It may be that he increases our joy, or that he entrusts to us more spiritual authority. All of us are motivated by the thought of someone appreciating our efforts. If we seek this appreciation in people primarily, we won’t look for it in God, and we won’t find it in God. Instead we are not to pursue praise from each other but rather to seek “to obtain the praise that comes from the only God” (John 5:44).

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 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.

Give to the needy, but do so before the audience of One.

- One of the things that really undermine our spiritual progress as disciples is that we do the right things for the wrong reasons. In this case Jesus tells us to give to the needy not to try to impress people, but to please our Father who watches us. He is the audience of One.
- We as disciples are to give to the needy. This speaks directly to the giving of things and money to the poor, but the broader principle is also time, treasure and talent that is invested in trying to relieve the suffering of the poor, and in trying to empower the poor in ways that increase their dignity rather than create a sense of dependency.
- Jesus called the Pharisees “hypocrites”. Hypocrite was the name of the mask-wearing actors who performed in Greek plays at the time. Jesus was likening the Pharisees to these actors. Apparently, the Pharisees gave to the needy (which was good) but did it for the wrong reasons (they wanted to be recognized by others as holy men of God; they were seeking to uphold a respectable reputation). Humorously Jesus spoke of them blowing their own trumpets (v2). They received “their reward in full”. Since all they were interested in was being affirmed and honoured by each other, and this is what they got, they were fully rewarded. In other words, although people honoured them, God did not. We are not to be like them (v3)! We need to give for the right reasons.
- When giving to the needy, what does it mean to “not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”? It means to give in a way that is not self-conscious, or self-advertising, or self-congratulatory. We give because we love God and we love people and not because we want to prove to ourselves or to others how amazing we are. We’re not fazed whether people know or don’t know about our giving. We don’t care too much about what people think of us, since we seek our joy not in people’s praise, but rather in the act of loving others (in Acts 20:35 Jesus taught that “it is more blessed to give than to receive”), and in God’s pleasure. Seeing people helped and sensing God’s pleasure are the only reasons we give.

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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6 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.

7 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.

Come to the Father in prayer – sincere, trusting, simple prayer.

- Jesus was a man of prayer. Matthew records that Jesus thanked God for food (14:19, 26:26), praised God for his grace (11:25-26), went to the mountainside to pray (14:23), spent a few days in sustained prayer (17:1), prayed blessing over children (19:13), exercised faith in prayer (21:21), sang to God (26:30), just before the cross felt the need for prayer, wanted others to pray with him, and urged the disciples to pray for themselves (26:36-46), and even prayed on the cross (27:46,50). He expected his disciple to pray too. This is seen in his words “when (not ‘if’) you pray” (6:5).
- Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasted the quality of life and the spirituality of his disciples to that of the Pharisees (v5) and the non-Jewish pagans (v7). Let us look at these two points.
- The prayer of the Pharisees was marked by the desire to appear spiritual and respectable before people (v5). In contrast, the disciples were to pray, not because of their hunger for human approval, but because of their hunger for God (v6). Jesus told us to “go into our rooms, close the door, and pray to our Father”. Here he is not condemning prayer meetings (after all, the book of Acts reveals that prayer meetings were a major part of the early church’s life), or even praying in front of people (he himself did this). He is instead urging us to prioritize getting alone with God in order to seek and listen to him – for his sake alone. All Christians must make solitude (getting alone with God from time to time) a non-negotiable aspect of their relationship with God. If we do this, we will find it to be greatly rewarding.
- The prayers of pagans were an attempt to manipulate “the gods”. They would use special incantations, or lots of repetition, in their attempt to get “the gods” to do what they wanted. We see examples of this in the book of Acts where Simon the Sorcerer seeks to get the formula for drawing the Spirit’s power (8:18-23), and where the seven sons of Sceva use the name of Jesus as a kind of magic power (19:13-16). Still today, many religions see prayer primarily as a way of getting from the ‘universe’ what they want. Instead of coming before the personal God, who knows and loves them, they attempt to manipulate the ‘universe’ or God or whatever deity they believe in to protect, or provide for, or guide them. But Jesus insists that our prayers be different! Instead we should pray simply, with simple faith in a Father who loves us and knows us. Prayer is not an attempt to manipulate God. Prayer rather is speaking to God about issues of common concern. Prayer is an act of reliance on “a Father who knows what we need before we ask him”. Prayer should be neither mindless nor mechanical, but rather it should be characterized by meaningful thought and heartfelt, trusting simplicity.
- This last point begs a question: If God already knows what we need before we ask him, why do we have to pray for it?
Let me suggest three reasons:

1) *We need to pray because our Father likes it when we pray.* In the same way an earthly father likes his child to ask (and thank!) him for things, so our heavenly Father enjoys the expression of our dependence on and gratitude to him.

2) *We need to pray because we need the personal contact with God.* Our unmet needs and desires surface a sense of dependence in us that drives us to God. If God were to just respond to our needs, and not to our prayers, we would bypass our need for actual relational contact with him. In this sense, God has not ordained prayer for his sake, but rather for our sake. Stott (pg 145) quotes Luther as saying, “By our praying we are instructing ourselves more than we are instructing God.”

3) *We need to pray because that is how God has ordained it, whether we understand it or not.* So we need to accept the mystery factor in it all. Eaton (pg 118) writes, “God has simply ordained that his blessings, which are already lined up for us, come piece at a time as we pray.” Instead of being paralyzed by the mystery of it, let us instead start to pray! If we fail to pray, we fail to enjoy all that God has for us. Dallas Willard (pg 268,269) writes, “I was raised with a (wrong) theology that presents God as having a great unblinking stare, who never in the smallest respect changes his mind about what he is going to do ... but our requests really do make a difference in what God is and is not going to do.”

Fasting

16 “When you fast, do not look sombre 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. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 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.

Fast when appropriate, but do so for the right reasons.

- Jesus expected that his disciples would fast from time to time. This is seen in his opening words, “When you fast”, not “If you fast”. But he wants fasting to be something done for the right reasons (i.e. the humble, prayerful pursuit of God and his will). He certainly doesn’t want us to fast for the wrong reasons, such as the attempt to show off to people how spiritual we are (v16). Unlike the Pharisees, who were known for boasting about their fasting (Luke 18:12), we should not try to draw attention to ourselves when fasting.
- Eaton (pg 134-140) looks at every reference to fasting in the Bible. Let me summarize his findings:
 - 1) Jesus does not make much of fasting. It was the later church that added into texts references to fasting that were not in the original (Mark 9:29 for example) and over-emphasized fasting.
 - 2) Fasting can be done for foolish reasons (see 1 Samuel 14:24-30 and Acts 23:12-22 for example). Fasting is worthless if other aspects of our lives are in defiance against God, and in lack of love toward others,

especially the poor (Isaiah 58).

3) It is appropriate to fast when we're in danger, in great distress or in deep repentance, and don't even feel like eating anyway (1 Samuel 7:6, Acts 9:9). On the other hand there are times, like celebration moments or when physical energy is greatly needed, that it is inappropriate to fast (1 Samuel 14:24-30, Matthew 9:14-15).

4) It is appropriate to fast when God's people are about to venture out into something new and are seeking God's guidance and help (Esther 4:15, Ezra 8:21-23, Acts 13:2-3, 14:23).

5) The majority of references to fasting in the Bible are to a one-day fast (Isaiah 58:5, 2 Samuel 1:12). But sometimes lengthier fasts, especially in times of distress, may be suitable. See Nehemiah 1:4 (3 days), 2 Samuel 12:16-23 (7 days), Daniel 10:2-3 (21 days). The 40-day fast is very rare and requires supernatural help (Jesus, Moses and Elijah alone fasted this long, and only once in their lives).

6) There is such a thing as a partial fast (Daniel 10:2-3).

7) Some people are called to fast more than others (Luke 2:37, 7:33).

8) The leaders of God's people can sometimes call a fast (Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:15,16).

9) Overall, fasting is to be done when appropriate, when the Spirit leads, and for the right reasons.

Sources used - Much reference will be made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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