

Review Matthew 5b.

Jesus tells his disciples that he is come to "fulfill" the law. That means that Jesus calls his disciples to a higher, more full righteousness than the law required. He gave six examples of this. Can you remember any?

Matthew 6 - Righteousness in our Religion

The Christian is called to practice "piety" or "spirituality" that is genuine, rather than hypocritical. In other words, this is righteousness in relation to "religious" acts, our relationship with God, and our heavenly focus.

6:1-18 Private Religion

6:1 Summary

The first verse sums up this section. God calls us to perform "rituals" of religion, like prayer, charity, fasting etc. But these have often been practiced hypocritically, robbing them of any value. To combat hypocrisy, and promote sincerity, we should ensure that we do these things in a private way that does not give us any glory with other people. If we make sure we are doing these things "secretly", without making a show of them, then we can demonstrate that they are a truly sincere act done for God's sake, and not our own. The Lord now gives us three examples of this.

6:2-4 Giving of Alms

This refers to collections or offerings made to the poor, especially among the faithful. This is emphatically commanded throughout the old and new testaments.

But it has often been reduced to a formality, a ceremony for public display that is designed to give glory to the giver rather than thinking much of the poor or of giving glory to God.

Jesus exhorts us to make it a private affair and even to think little about the act ourselves, lest we become proud.

6:5-15 Prayer

6:5-6

Unlike the "hypocrites", who make a show of their prayers, we ought to go into our room and shut the door.

6:7-15

At this point, the Lord wishes to extend the teaching on true prayer. He no longer speaks of the "hypocrites", but of the "gentiles". In other words, pagans who did not know the true God as he had revealed himself in the scriptures. They prayed to God in a formulaic and dead way. The prime example of this in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-40). Instead we should learn to speak to God as "father", that is in a personal capacity, with sincerity and formula.

"The Lord's prayer". This is no grand public prayer of worship or thanksgiving. Neither is it a heartbroken prayer of repentance. Instead, this is a foundational daily prayer that expresses our dependence on God. Any time we speak to God, we must put him first "May your name be kept holy, May your kingdom come, May your will be done...", but we must also be simple and constant in seeking God for the basic physical and spiritual requirements of our life, "bread", "forgiveness", and "deliverance".

God, as he listens to our prayers, knows the sincerity of them. How can we expect daily forgiveness, if we do not forgive others also?

6:16-17 Fasting

We have mentioned how the Lord himself fasted in preparation for his ministry, expressing his need for God. And last week, we briefly discussed how the Sabbath can be fulfilled in the life of a Christian. The exact form that fasting takes is a matter of judgement and wisdom, but the requirement for separation from the ordinary things of life to give God his due remains an essential component of spiritual righteousness. And this too must be a private matter, not done for the show of men.

6:18-34 Heavenly Focus

The Lord now digs deeper than the surface acts of religion. He asks us to consider what the purpose of our life is. What are we living for? What are our goals? What is our chief hope?

6:19-24 Earthly and Heavenly Treasure

This world will come to an end. Christians will either die, or be taken straight to heaven when the Lord returns. They cannot take the material things of this world with them. But there are also many immaterial things, such as fame and reputation that they cannot take with them. What they will take with them are the spiritual investments in our relationship with God and others.

So what are we spending our effort on now? Our love will be directed towards what we have laboured most for! The thing we set our eye on will affect our whole character! We cannot balance the two, one must come before the other!

6:25-34 Earthly and Heavenly Anxiety

What are the problems we are most concerned about? If we have faith in God, we should not need to fear earthly lack - what does this amount to in light of eternity? But we ought to be more concerned for personal and corporate righteousness. Is God pleased with my conduct? Is our church obeying the scriptures? These questions must take priority over What is going to happen to housing market? And Will the church have enough money for the Sunday school trip?

Finally, the Lord gives us a great relief in all this. "sufficient for the day is its own trouble". The Lord calls us to recognise our own creatureliness. The future is in his hands, but we are given to take responsibility for the choices we can make today.