

“Masquerade”– Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bibles and meet me in Matthew 6 (page 811 in the pew Bible). Last week we dedicated most of our time to corporate prayer in light of the connection between what we had been studying and the shocking recent events that transpired in a church in South Carolina. The previous two sermons were exploring what Jesus taught concerning loving and praying for our enemies. Then, just days after a race-motivated shooting that killed several Christians in a church, we witnessed the families of those victims, in the most difficult of circumstances, doing the very thing that we ourselves have been called to do.

So it didn't seem right for us to just breeze through to the next passage. Instead, we lingered. We lingered and we prayed. We prayed for our enemies. We prayed for the families of the victims. We prayed for God's help and healing. If you were here last week, you know it was a pretty unique service in that the majority of the time was dedicated to corporate prayer, applying what we had been studying in the previous weeks. Of course, that wasn't my original plan. I had scripted for us to be in Matthew 6 last week. Instead, we will be there today.

Now this is a new section of the Sermon on the Mount, so we should take a moment to understand how it fits into the whole. He is still talking about righteousness, or “right living.” But He's doing so in a different way. In the previous verses He had been contrasting His teaching with the teaching of many religious leaders who, while launching from the Old Testaments Scriptures, greatly misunderstood what they were communicating. So Jesus clarifies thing through those “Six Antitheses” that we have studied.

In chapter 6, He pivots a bit. He's still talking about righteousness, but He's zeroing in on how the righteousness of His Kingdom plays out in three areas of our everyday life. Borrowing the labels of Michael Wilkins, we see in the first 18 verses, Jesus is dealing with our “*public* religious life.” The rest of the chapter concerns our “*personal* interior life.” And then the first dozen verses of chapter 7 describe our “*interpersonal* relational life.”ⁱ

Matthew 6:1-18	-----	“ <i>Public</i> Religious Life”
Matthew 6:19-34	-----	“ <i>Personal</i> Interior Life”
Matthew 7:1-12	-----	“ <i>Interpersonal</i> Relational Life”

Today and next time we are going to deal with that first category, our public religious life. The key to unlocking those 18 verses is found in verse 1. This introductory verse is the thesis statement. Let's look at it...

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1)ⁱⁱ

That's a pretty loaded statement. Jesus is reminding us of our tendency to want to appear more put together than we are. We all have a tendency to play to the crowd and to do things, even “religious things,” to gain

the approval of the people watching. That temptation is so strong that we forget the point of the actions themselves.

If we are doing some act of piety, it should be for the Lord. But often it's done in a way that looks like it's for the Lord, but is really to impress others who we think would admire our acts of piety. The net result is that the acts are only superficially linked to God. That fools people. God, however, sees right through it. And, in no uncertain terms, Jesus says such activity will not receive any reward from God the Father, even if it received the accolades of our religious peers.

So fundamentally what this is about is hypocrisy. It's about us putting on a show of piety that is no real piety. It's more about showmanship and the longing for human applause than it is about service to God. It's self-promotion. But, ironically, it seeks to gain human approval by *pretending* to pursue the approval of God. That's what makes it hypocritical. It shows one thing on the surface that has little or nothing to do with what's going on beneath the surface. It's hypocrisy.

Jesus has a lot to say about hypocrisy, particularly of this religious variety. The term "hypocrite" was originally the term used for Greek actors who performed on stage and rotated through various masks in order to play different roles. They were pretending to be someone they were not. It's a fitting term for religious actors as well. They wear a mask, pretending to be a certain way, when in fact they are concealing their true selves. They come across as pious, but that's just an act, a mask. The mask conceals their corrupt selves. The mask conceals their true motives. They honor the Lord with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him (cf. Matthew 15:7-9; Isaiah 29:13). That's what hypocrisy is. But, notice, the hypocrite may indeed do many of the right things, but he or she does them for the wrong reasons. It's not practicing real righteousness; it's practicing pseudo-righteousness done for the thrill of a standing ovation from the audience.

All of us, when confronted with the hypocrisy of someone else, recoil in disgust. We despise hypocrisy. The world despises hypocrisy. In fact, that's one of the reasons often cited for why many people have no interest in the church—"the church is just full of hypocrites."ⁱⁱⁱ To which we could reply, "yup, and I think there is room for one more, I'll save you a seat." James Kennedy used to joke, "If you ever find a perfect church, don't join it. You'll ruin it."^{iv} But you see the point, don't you? Yes, this place is full of hypocritical sinners. Every church is. "In fact," as R. C. Sproul points out, the church "is the only organization that I know of that requires an acknowledgment of sin to belong."^v Not even prisons require that! The world shouldn't be surprised to find sin in the church. That should only be a surprise if we claimed that we didn't sin. We make no such claim. Indeed, that's why we boast in the cross. We are great sinners. But Jesus is an even greater Savior!

But hypocrisy is a sticky wicket. It's easy to despise in others,^{vi} but much harder to see how we are complicit in it. In fact, usually the hypocrisy we spot in others is the variety that marks our lives more than we realize. That's what is so terrifying about hypocrisy. Sure there are those who know they are hypocrites and know they are intentionally lying to world. But many of the hypocrites that Jesus addresses had no idea that they were guilty of hypocrisy. They stumbled into hypocrisy accidentally. That should be a warning to us.

No one sets out to be a hypocrite. It usually starts with a genuine desire to do the right thing. Then we realize how others don't do the right thing and could possibly benefit by knowing how we do the right thing. Maybe they could join us. Maybe our example would be instructive. So we let them in a little bit and we experience a measure of praise and gratitude from them. We like it. We crave more of it. We like being noticed. Our motives start to mix and pretty soon we are no longer doing the right thing for the right reason. Somewhere along the way, the goal of pleasing men supplants the goal of pleasing God. Self-deception blinds us to our own faults. But it was all an accident. We didn't detect it. It was a slippery slope,

but the decline was slow. Then one day, if we're fortunate, we hear the teaching of Jesus and we realize we are "accidental Pharisees."^{vii} Oops. It's painful. But it's grace that can lead to either repentance or doubling down in our hypocrisy. That's a choice we have today as well.

Jesus gives us three examples of how this sort of thing plays out in our religious lives. He uses three common practices from Judaism to illustrate his point—almsgiving (i.e., giving to the needy), prayer, and fasting. Each section has the same format.^{viii} That format has been represented in various ways. Here's my attempt:

	Giving	Praying	Fasting
<i>Good Deed Hijacked by Publicity</i>	6:2a	6:5a	6:16a
<i>Earthly Reward</i>	6:2b	6:5b	6:16b
<i>Good Deed Redeemed by Obscurity</i>	6:3-4a	6:6a	6:17-18a
<i>Heavenly Reward</i>	6:4b	6:6b	6:18b

By "publicity," I mean that "notice me" motive that seeks the applause of others. By "obscurity," I am referring to those steps taken to minimize, or all together erase, the attention we receive for a particular action. So then let's take a look at what Jesus says concerning each of these acts individually. Then we will draw out some of the implications by looking at these three illustrations together.

First up, look at what Jesus says about giving, starting in verse 2...

Giving Hijacked by Publicity

"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:2-4)

Jesus is referring to the common practice in Judaism sometimes called to as "almsgiving," which simply refers to voluntarily contributing resources for the aid of the poor and needy. That God cares for the poor is very obvious in the Bible. The Old Testament Law reflected this same care, as seen in the laws of gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10), the Sabbath rules on harvesting (Exodus 23:11), and the Sabbatical years where debts were canceled (Exodus 15). The fact that the Israelites failed to be generous toward the needy was one of the major evidences that the prophets would cite as they warned of God's coming judgment (e.g., Isaiah 3:14-15; Amos 8:4-6).^{ix} Psalm 41:1 says, "*Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him.*" According to Proverbs 19:17, "*Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.*"

So clearly, it's not the practice of giving that Jesus is taking issue with, nor even the situation of being noticed. His issue is with *trying* to be noticed. It's the sounding of trumpets that precedes the giving so that we can be "praised by others."

Now, the trumpet reference is debated. Some say that it's an allusion to how trumpets were blown whenever a large sum of money was given, but there really isn't any historical evidence of this practice that I have seen. People were, however, recognized publically for their large donations. That could be what Jesus is referring to. Others have argued that Jesus is thinking of a trumpet-like receptacle built into a chest in which you would deposit your money. The money would clang against the metal as it funneled in the box and this could be drawn out in not so subtle ways. That will preach, but, again, the evidence doesn't

convince me that Jesus is using that sort of wordplay here. There are some other explanations that have been suggested, but more than likely Jesus is probably just employing a trumpet metaphor “for drawing attention to one’s pious act of giving.”^x “Sound the trumpets” just means “to advertise” or call attention to one’s charity.^{xi}

You don’t have to blow a literal trumpet to toot your won horn, do you? Of course not! You just throw out discretion and make sure everyone can notice what you’re doing, even though you do it in a way that fakes subtlety. When that happens, we reveal that we our giving is not really about pleasing God or meeting needs, but about acquiring a reputation for generosity. We care more about being considered generous, than about being generous.

Such is the state of the world. Another pastor asked rather cynically, “I wonder what would happen to our great national charities if there were no celebrity benefits or published subscriber list or bronze plaques or rooms to be named for major donors or pictures to be taken with crippled children?” We know the answer. And if we ask the same question of the church, we get the same result.^{xii}

But be very careful here, because, again, this sort of sin is hard to detect in your own life. Hypocrisy is often a blind spot, particularly when it has to do with socially accepted practices like giving. It’s hard to see in your life because even if the person you are helping sees the sin in your heart, they are not likely to complain because they are receiving some benefit. In their silence, they are reinforcing your self-delusion.^{xiii} They praise you for the deed and that just makes it harder to see the hypocrisy of it all. We may have a hypocrisy problem. Again, it’s easier to see in others than it is to see in the mirror.

Here’s another question to consider. Do you spend more time criticizing (perhaps legitimately) the way government institutions and programs seek to help the poor than you do considering God’s call on your life to help the needy around you and actually taking steps to that end? If so, then you have the same problem that Jesus is addressing here. It’s a hypocrisy problem. Welcome to the club.

Now look how he applies the principle in verse 1 to the subject of prayer. Let’s pick things up in verse 5...

Prayer Hijacked by Publicity

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

After this He takes a tangent regarding how to pray, which we will come back to next time when we share the Lord’s Supper together. The point of these verses though is the same as the words on giving. We ought not to pray to be “seen by others.”^{xiv} That shouldn’t be our motive. If that becomes our motive, then we turn prayer into a performance and we start speaking to the wrong audience. We take an act of genuine piety and pervert it into an act of hypocrisy. We may do it discreetly so no one notices or in a pretentious display that no one can miss, but we’ve all seen it and we’ve all done it.^{xv} D. A. Carson asks a pointed question, “Could it be that the prime reason we do not see more prayers answered is because we are less concerned with bringing our requests to God than with showing off before men?”^{xvi} Our prayer lives are not immune to hypocrisy and when that sin rears its ugly head our prayer lives may in fact cease to be prayer lives.

Now listen to what Jesus says about fasting. It begins in verse 16...

Fasting Hijacked by Publicity

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:16-18)

Fasting is one of those practices that most Christians know very little about and have even less experience with. Simply put, “fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.”^{xvii} It is not, as is popularly thought, a means to manipulate God into giving us what we want. Nor is it a biblical approach to healthy dieting. It is, as is popularly overlooked, also a response to tragedy, or sacred moments, or God’s anticipated judgment.^{xviii} It was an expression of mourning or repentance. In our day, for example, some might fast in response to the recent shooting in South Carolina or a difficult medical report.

Ultimately, however, the point of fasting is to draw closer to God.^{xix} John Piper writes, “God wills to know the actual, lived-out reality of our preference for him over all things. And he wills that we have the testimony of our own authenticity through acts of actual preference of God over his gifts.” Fasting reminds us how much we depend on God’s gifts. It reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”, not by food (Matthew 4:4; cf. Colossians 1:17).

Fasting can also bring to the surface the things that we prefer more than God. Piper continues, “Fasting reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us, or television, or computers, or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.”^{xx} Similarly, Richard Foster wrote in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.”^{xxi} I wish we had more time to discuss this, but we can only at the expense of the main point of this text so I have to move on for the sake of time.^{xxii}

Jesus, here, doesn’t criticize fasting per se, but fasting to be “seen by others.” They were “playing to the gallery.”^{xxiii} They are taking a sacred moment and transforming it into a “theatrical performance” to make much of themselves.^{xxiv} It’s the same issue as before with the same consequence. If the point of fasting, in part, is to remind us that God is the most important aspect of our lives, then, as Grant Osborne puts it, “to turn it into an attention-getting device and to prefer human admiration over the worship of God is blasphemous.”^{xxv}

So we have seen the problem in all of the texts—we have this tendency to practice our righteousness before other people to gain their approval. That prostitutes the righteous deeds themselves. And Jesus warns that acts with this attention-seeking motive will have no reward from God. But He has also given us examples of how we can go a different route—the way that actually is rewarded by our Father in heaven. So with the rest of our time, I want us to consider a few principles from Jesus’ teaching that will help us go this better way. For what it’s worth, these principles are applicable to all spiritual disciplines, not just the three that are mentioned here. Jesus chose these three specifically because they were considered the “pillars of Judaism.”^{xxvi} But the principles are applicable anytime you’re “practicing your righteousness” (Matthew 6:1), so really in any spiritual discipline of act of obedience.

So here are a few things that Jesus would have us keep in mind. First...

DOING THE RIGHT THING CAN BE THE WRONG THING

When it comes to spiritual disciplines and acts of piety, we don’t just do them because of some religious tradition. We don’t avoid them even though there are risks of legalism. No, we do these practices because

they are good and right. We do them because the Bible encourages them. Furthermore, in this very passage, Jesus assumes that His followers are practicing these things. He doesn't say "if" you give, or "if" you pray, or "if" you fast. He says "when." He assumes that His followers will do all of these things.

What follows that assumption, however, are descriptions of people doing what *appears* to be the right things but in a way that is hypocritical. When that occurs, the act is no longer right. It may appear to be noble, but God knows better even if everyone else does not. Thus, we can't judge a person's holiness simply by the way they look and what they do. We can look the part and possess none of Christ's righteousness. That's a sad reality that Jesus is going to say in even scarier terms in Matthew 7...but we will get to that on another day.

If this is true—that the right thing done in the wrong way becomes the wrong thing—then we have to keep in mind some of the other lessons Jesus is teaching in this text. Like this one...

WE MUST DO THE RIGHT THING FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

One of the most helpful questions we can ask when it comes to these spiritual acts is "who am I doing this for? Whose glory am I seeking?" If we are seeking God's glory, then we will keep Him as our audience and we will live for His notice alone. If we are seeking our own glory, then our audience will not be God. Instead, our audience will be the world. Do we live for the pleasure of a human or heavenly audience?^{xxvii} Whose approval are we seeking? If we can answer that, we will find our audience. Who you find sitting in the theater determines the value of the act (or lack thereof). And the audience determines and issues your reward.

The same acts will have two totally different orientations. We can pray or fast or give with a God-orientation. Or we can do the same things with a worldly orientation. They can look exactly the same on the surface, but the motives determine the actual substance of the act. This leads to another lesson...

WE MUST DO THE RIGHT THING WITH THE RIGHT MOTIVES

In some ways, this passage of Scripture is forcing our behaviors "through the sieve of motivation."^{xxviii} Do you give to the poor or in the church to honor God and help others *or* to be seen as honoring God and helping others? Is it better for you to pray *or* must you be known as someone who prays? Do you pray more fervently and frequently when you are alone *or* when someone else is present? Do you fast out of devotion to God *or* to be seen as devoted to God? These are motive questions. These are the questions that God would have us ask, even if may not always like the answers that we find.

With every spiritual act that we perform, we are seeking something. And in every act, in Jesus' equation, we find something, some reward. The motive and the audience determine the nature of that reward. If we are doing it for the praise of other people, then, ironically, Jesus says we will have that reward. People will praise us. If that's what you're after, you can find that. But Jesus' point is that this is all you will find. He says, "you will have no reward from your Father in heaven," if we are doing these things for the world's approval and applause. You'll have whatever the reward the world will give you, but it will be at the expense of His reward.^{xxix} You'll have something temporal, instead of eternal.

But the irony of it all is that, as depressing as it sounds, the people being described are actually getting what they wanted. The problem is, what they wanted wasn't good, or at least not the ultimate good.^{xxx} Alfred Plummer put it like this:

“They received their pay then and there, and they received it in full...God owes them nothing. They were not giving but *buying*. They wanted the praise of men, they paid for it, and they have got it. The transaction is ended and they can claim nothing more.”^{xxxix}

You have to see the gravity of what He is saying. This means that it is entirely possible for a person to come to church every week, be involved in all the programs, be set up as an example for all Christians, write the best books, preach the best sermons, give the most to the poor, handle and care for lepers and AIDS victims across the world, pray for their enemies, live a life that ostensibly, on the surface, looks as Christ-like as we can imagine this side of heaven and yet have *ZERO* reward in heaven. Zilch. Nada. Why? Because it’s possible to do all of those things for the recognition of men and not as unto the Lord. Therefore, Jesus is warning that all of the reward you receive could be the accolades that people gave you in this life and you could enter the next with nothing to show for it. We are being warned—“obedience in the public arena does not guarantee a reward from God, because motive is more important than simple activity.”^{xxxix}

Every truly righteous act is an attempt to glorify God. That’s the motivation.^{xxxix} Even when we’re motivated by doing good for others, that’s not a solitary motivation. That too should be for the glory of God. Like a child, we are seeking the approval of our heavenly Father and since we already have that because of the work of Christ then our acts of righteousness are acts of worship and gratitude. They are responses to God’s grace offered up for the glory of God.^{xxxix} That’s what drives our actions. Ultimately, when we do these things for the wrong audience and with the wrong motives, we are really just engaging in a form of idolatry masquerading as piety.^{xxxix} It’s just self-worship or approval worship. Therefore, we should do these things for the right audience (God), with the right motives (the glory of God and good of others), and...

WE MUST DO THE RIGHT THING IN THE RIGHT WAY

This point is like the previous two. Really they are all the same essential point, just coming at the matter from different angles. What I want you to notice now is that Jesus instructs us to practice our righteousness in the most obscure way possible. As Calvin famously said, “The theater of God is in the hidden corners.”^{xxxix}

So here is a convicting question, can you think of any significant act of charity or generosity or piety or devotion that absolutely no one else knows about, beside God Himself? If you can, you’ll be tempted to tell everyone that you thought of one and tell them all about it! But that kind of misses the point, doesn’t it? As someone else has said, “If our ‘acts of righteousness’ are not primarily done secretly before him, then secretly they may be done to please men.”^{xxxix}

The instruction that Jesus gives in these verses forces us to grapple with the question—Is God enough? Is it enough for us to be noticed by God alone? If so, then applying Jesus’ words will come more naturally. If not, then get ready for an inner battle.

When it comes to our giving, Jesus says, “*do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*” (Matthew 6:3). He clarifies His point in the next verse, “*so that your giving may be in secret.*” It’s an interesting way to make this point. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “keep your giving a secret from even yourself!” This obviously hyperbole, but it is effective at communicating His point. Not only do we not parade our giving before other people’s eye, we ought to not even make a big deal of it to ourselves.

Concerning how we pray, Jesus says, “*when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret*” (6:6). The point, again, is the privacy of the act. It’s a lot easier to focus your heart on God when you have intentionally carved out a place and time to meet with Him when no one else

is around. It doesn't mean you need a literal room. Most of His audience probably didn't have a private room. He means you seek out privacy. Some do this at a certain place or at a secluded time. Others find privacy through journaling their prayers. The point is not so much the specifics as the audience and motive. You're not doing it for people's attention. You are doing it to be in the presence of God alone. Jesus Himself modeled this on many occasions.

Concerning fasting, he makes the same basic point—“*when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret*” (6:17-18). Don't be like the hypocrites. Don't make yourself disheveled and walk around whining about how difficult fasting by lunchtime. Don't carry yourself in such a way that makes people ask, “Hey man, why are you so hungry today?” “Well, I wasn't going to say anything...but I'm fasting.” Don't do that. Comb your hair. Clean your face. Keep your mouth shut. Be discreet. God knows. Let that be enough.

Ultimately, it's not the privacy itself that makes the act righteous. The privacy just helps us keep our motives in check. Likewise, it's not the lack of privacy that destroys the act in God's eyes. There are times in Scripture where corporate giving, praying, and fasting is encouraged and modeled. So doing these in public is not always bad. There are times when we may try to do the right things privately and someone still notices. That doesn't remove the heavenly reward. There are even times when doing the right thing requires a measure of visibility, like standing for the truth in some venue or standing up for some innocent victim or inviting a widow to join your family for holiday dinner.

The point I am making is that we can at times be noticed by others and still be doing things for the audience of God and for His glory alone. That's the kind of situation Jesus Himself described in the previous chapter when He said, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (5:16). John Stott once said, “It is our human cowardice which made him say ‘Let your light shine before men,’ and our human vanity which made him tell us to beware of practicing our piety before men.”^{xxxviii}

Of course, that raises for us a new problem—how do I know if a particular action is more in line with Matthew 5 or Matthew 6? Should we be showing or hiding? That's not always an easy question. You have to ask the same motive questions we have addressed. Why am I doing this? Who am I doing this for? Can I do this in secret? Am I willing to? Am I trying to glorify God or self? Etc. It's a challenge.

The best piece of advice I have ever heard on this comes from A. B. Bruce, who over a century ago offered a helpful formula: “show when tempted to *hide*, hide when tempted to *show*.”^{xxxix} There may be some exceptions, but I have a lot of trouble imagining them in my own life. Generally speaking, that advice helps me to sort things out. But in either case, the aim is the glory of God.

THE GOSPEL AND OUR MASQUERADE

Having said all of that, let me mention this. There is hardly a thing that is more convicting for us than a discussion on our motives. We all struggle with mixed motives and ulterior motives. This realization exposes how crooked and sinful our hearts can be. There was a famous nineteenth century Russian author who wrote, “I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I know what the heart of a good man is like, and it's terrible.”^{xl} Maybe that's how you feel right now. Or maybe you resonate with the assessment of Blaise Pascal, “man is great insofar as he is wretched.”^{xli} Maybe you are looking at your heart now and seeing a lot of evidence for Pascal's statement.

Listen, I don't want this sermon to be yet another reason for you to fake it more. No, I want it to be yet another reason for you to understand your need for God's grace and to seek and find it in Jesus Christ.

Then and only then will you be able to take off the mask and even leave it off. I want you to remember what we have seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount that, yes, the standard of righteousness in God's Kingdom is high and, yes, you fall short of it but the righteousness that Jesus describes is a divine gift.^{xliii} It's something that God gives to us through faith in Christ. And it's something that God works in us by His Spirit.

Remember the Beatitudes again. Those are the norms of God's people. They start with a recognition of our poverty of spirit. That's what Pascal was touching on. We are wretched. We fall short. We need mercy. We mourn our sinfulness. And we hunger and thirst for righteousness and are told that we shall be filled with it. We don't fill ourselves with it. God fills us with it.

And now we find ourselves knee-deep in the beauty of the Gospel, so let's venture even deeper. One of the best books I have read recently is called *Hidden in the Gospel* by William Farley.^{xliii} It's a book that teaches you one way to preach the Gospel to yourself. It's very good. He describes the Gospel in eight steps—election, incarnation, active obedience, cross, resurrection, ascension, second coming, and new creation. Then he shows how each of those steps can be an entry point for preaching the Gospel to yourself.

When I think of our text today, I think of the active obedience of Christ. The standard of obedience we are called to is perfection. "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). We missed the mark, of course. *But Jesus did not*. He was perfect. He kept everyone of God's Laws. He never once sinned. That is absolutely essential for our salvation. We would have no hope of being saved without the active obedience of Christ. Why? Because it solves our need for perfection.

Paul explains it like this—"*For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin [i.e., Jesus], so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:21). What is the righteousness of God? In a few words it's absolute moral perfection. It's the righteousness God requires from man, which none have ever produced except Jesus. So what we have earned for our lack of perfection is God's wrath. But what Christ has earned for His utter perfection is God's approval. And, according to Paul, that perfection and approval can be ours in Christ.

When we acknowledge and turn from our sins (repentance) and put our trust in Jesus alone to save us, then our sin is completely forgiven on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection and in its place we are credited with Christ's own righteousness. Are you catching this? Christ's perfect righteousness is given to us through faith. Grasp this, His perfect track record on prayer, credited to your account. His perfect obedience in giving, credited to your account. He textbook fasting practices, credited to your account. His perfectly pure and holy motives, credited to your account! That's what makes us right with God. That's how the standard of perfection is reached for us. And that is why Christ's active obedience is necessary for our salvation and good news for our lives now.

We don't have to wallow in our unrighteousness, we can boast in Christ's righteousness. We don't boast in our good deeds, we boast in Christ crucified because that's where our true righteousness was bought. When we realize this, that's where the daily change in our lives come from. Practicing our righteousness becomes worship. It's not a means to gain approval of God; it's a response to the grace of having it in Christ. Our lives are increasingly catching up to our identity of Christ. Day by day, we are being made more and more like Jesus. It's a lifelong journey. We will stumble many times along the way. But never forget that the journey is filled with good news.

So you see, as challenging and convicting as these verses can be for us, there really is good news in this text. It is good news to know that we are approved by God through faith in Jesus Christ. It's good news to know that we have every spiritual blessing in Christ. It's good news to know that God sees all our good deeds, even when no one else notices. It's good news to know that when everyone else misconstrues our

motives, God sees them clearly. It's good news to know that He rewards what is done in secret. And it's good news to know that we can be fully righteous in the sight of God today, if we would put our faith in the finished work of Christ. Amen! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Pray with me...

ⁱ I have adopted the wording of these divisions from Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 270.

ⁱⁱ The King James Version reads a little different (followed, of course, by the New King James Version), obscuring the role of the verse by combining it with the teaching on almsgiving prematurely. This is owing to the inferior manuscripts that the translators of the KJV had access to several hundred years ago. As D. A. Carson explains, "The King James Version begins chapter 6 with the words, 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them.' In other words, it introduces the question of alms in verse 1 instead of verse 2. But the oldest and best manuscripts preserve the reading of the New International Version", or the ESV for that matter. D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 60.

ⁱⁱⁱ A book that may interest you is *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told: A Sociologist Shatters Myths from the Secular and Christian Media*, by Bradley R. E. Wright. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

^{iv} Quoted in R. C. Sproul, *Matthew* (SAEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 131.

^v Ibid. “Nevertheless, the sin of hypocrisy does indeed exist in the church. Sometimes the blame for it lies with the preacher. Preachers constantly exhort and admonish people to grow their faith to a higher level of obedience. So much pressure is put on Christians to grow spiritually that sometimes they fear being rejected if others realize they are not quite as righteous as they ought to be. No two people in the Christian community started their Christian life at the same place, and no two people in the church are at exactly the same place in their spiritual pilgrimage and growth into conformity to the righteousness of Christ. That is why the Bible enjoins us to have a love that covers a multitude of sins. We are not to be spiritual policemen, judging everyone and looking down our noses at those in the congregation. ‘There but for the grace of God go I,’ says the old adage. Winston Churchill once play on that adage when he mentioned someone who manifested arrogance, saying, ‘There but for the grace of God goes God.’ May it be that no one can say that about us.” Ibid., 131-132.

^{vi} Scot McKnight, however, gives a helpful warning against trying to detect it in others—“Jesus is infallible and we are not. In fact, we are particularly fallible, and our judgment of when someone is hypocritical in their piety should be subjected to severe constraints. Not only that, but we need to work at seeing the good in the other instead of developing a cynical approach to the pious deeds of others. What may bother you, say someone’s dancing in the worship team that you find to be showy, may be a genuine expression of piety—not unlike David’s dancing in public before the Lord—and we may simply be off base in our judgment.” Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (SGBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 159.

^{vii} A book that may be of interest is *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith*, by Larry Osborne (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

^{viii} Scot McKnight (152) depicts the format like this:

	<i>Almsgiving</i>	<i>Prayer</i>	<i>Fasting</i>
<i>The observance</i>	6:2a	6:5a	6:16a
<i>Prohibition</i>	6:2b	6:5b	6:16b
<i>Intent</i>	6:2c	6:5c	6:16c
<i>Amen...Reward</i>	6:2d	6:5d	6:16d
<i>Alternative observance</i>	6:3-4a	6:6a	6:17-18a
<i>Father’s reward</i>	6:4b	6:6b	6:18b

^{ix} Ibid., 154-155.

^x Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 219.

^{xi} Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ’s Message to the Modern Church* (NACSBT; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 174-175.

^{xii} R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 147.

^{xiii} Carson, 61.

^{xiv} For some examples of how seriously prayer was taken in the Judaism of the first-century, see Quarles, 178-181; Wilkins, 273. Scot McKnight also reminds us that “Synagogues were *the* place of prayer for Jews, and for that reason perhaps the most typical word in the Greek-speaking world used for the synagogues was *proseuchē*, or ‘house of prayer.’” McKnight, 165; cf. Josephus, *Life* 277-298.

^{xv} Wilkins, 273.

^{xvi} Carson, 63.

^{xvii} Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 48.

^{xviii} Scot McKnight does a great job at highlighting this aspect of fasting, though I believe he takes his argument too far when he suggests that there were never instances where fasting was meant to bring some spiritual benefit on the follower of God. See McKnight, 193ff. He writes, for example, “...the genius of the Bible is its focus on the whole-body *response* of a human being to grievous, severe conditions. Fasting means a human being refrains from food or water, or both, for a limited period of time *in response to some sacred, grievous moment*. Such sacred grievous moments include death, the threat of war, sin, our neediness, or our fear of God’s judgment. These kinds of events expose God as judge, God as the giver and taker of life, and God as the one before whom we live...the focus of the Bible on fasting is *not on what we get* from fasting or one motivating people to fast in order to acquire something, but instead lands squarely *on responding to sacred moments in life*.” (194). He then points to John Wesley, who said something similar—the “natural incentive for fasting...[is for those] who are under deep affliction, overwhelmed with sorrow for sin, and filled with a strong anxiety about the wrath of God” (Kinghorn, *Wesley on the Sermon*, 181). I think McKnight’s point is true enough—fasting was done in response to sacred moments—and he is right to point out that many modern explanations of fasting lack biblical support or balance, but nonetheless, I don’t think he has quite captured that balance either. For example, the fast of the Ninevites in Jonah, which the narrator seems to look on favorably and nothing in the Bible would suggest otherwise, was indeed in response to “some sacred, grievous moment,” but it was still done in the hopes that the “God may turn and relent from his fierce anger, so that we might not perish” (Jonah 3:9). You can argue that these were pagans and therefore don’t really represent a correct understanding of fasting, but that same mentality can probably be seen in other instances of fasting in the Old Testament, not least of which the corporate fasts connected with Israel’s

feasts (e.g., The Day of Atonement). Yes, those were sacred moments too, but they were sacred moments that the Israelites hoped would produce spiritual benefits (e.g., repentance, atonement preparation). Furthermore, there may also be as much discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments as there is continuity with regard to fasting. There may be a distinctly Christian way of fasting in the New Covenant that may add a dimension not seen as clearly in the Old Testament examples that can be cited. For this John Piper's book, mentioned below, is helpful.

On another note, Quarles writes, "One can readily see why the Jewish practice of fasting sometimes bred this hypocrisy. During times of crisis individuals began to fast as a first step toward seeking God's intervention. These individuals were probably highly regarded for their piety and for the effectiveness of their prayers. One rabbinic text describes the man called on to pray in time of drought as 'well-versed [in prayer]' whose children were hungry and whose cupboard was bare 'so that he might be whole-hearted in the prayer.' When one fasted and prayed and God intervened, he could attain immediate celebrity status. The Mishnah describes a man named Onias whose prayer during a national fast brought abundant rain. He was so respected that a rabbi who wished to pronounce a ban against him was forced to say: 'But what shall I do to thee?—though importunest God and he performeth thy will, like a son that importuneth his father and he performeth his will; and of thee Scripture saith, 'Let thy father and thy mother be glad, and let her that bare thee rejoice.'" Quarles, 230.

^{xix} For more on the Jewish practice of fasting common in Matthew's day and prior, along with how the prophets challenged the hypocritical practices of some Jewish fasting, see Quarles, 224ff; Wilkins, 280-282.

^{xx} Phil Thengvall, "The Horrible Horizontalizing of Holy Things," a sermon preached on March 11, 2007, to First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, KS. He also quotes John Piper.

^{xxi} Foster, 55.

^{xxii} Foster continues, "More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes, 'I humbled my soul with fasting' (Ps. 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ." Foster, 55. Another book I have found very helpful is *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* by John Piper, which can be downloaded for free here: <http://www.desiringgod.org/books/a-hunger-for-god>.

^{xxiii} John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke* (trans. D. W. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:214. Similarly, Martin Luther commented, fasting became for them "a device for having people look at them, talk about them, admire them, and say in astonishment: 'Oh, what wonderful saints these people are! They do not live like the other, ordinary people. They go around in gray coats, with their heads hanging down and a sour, pale expression on their faces. If such people do not get to heaven, what will become of the rest of us?'" Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat* (Luther's Works; ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 155. Also quoted in McKnight, 197, 200.

^{xxiv} Ibid., 197.

^{xxv} Osborne, 238.

^{xxvi} See Quarles, 174; Daniel Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 107-108; Wilkins, 286. These remarks from Wilkins are also helpful: "One of the gravest dangers is to practice these disciplines in a rote way for the approval of the people around us or to satisfy the expectations of the church tradition of which we are a part. Another grave danger is to fall into the opposite trap, neglecting the practice of the disciplines because we are afraid of becoming legalistic. Perhaps the most important example is in Jesus' own life, who not only calls us to practice these disciplines but sets the example himself of how to practice them as a natural outgrowth of his inner godliness. Donald Whitney states, 'The Lord Jesus not only expects these Disciplines of us, He modeled them for us. He applied His heart to discipline. He disciplined Himself for the purpose of Godliness. If we are going to be Christlike, we must live as Christ lived.'" Ibid., 286; the quotation comes from Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 21.

^{xxvii} Quarles, 173.

^{xxviii} McKnight, 151.

^{xxix} C. S. Lewis wrote, "We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no natural connexion with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man a mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it... The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation." C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2.

^{xxx} McKnight, 165.

^{xxxi} Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 91. D. A. Carson put it like this, "They got what they were after; but that's all they get. The whole thing turns out to be a successful public relations stunt, and no more. There is no real 'act of righteousness,' no genuine piety—and no reward from God." Carson, 61.

^{xxxii} Wilkins, 271.

^{xxxiii} Motives are easy to get wrong, but sometimes harder to recognize. Using giving as an example, Scot McKnight offers this counsel: “What are some signs that we need to back off and go more private with our giving? The first sign of a person having a motivation problem is grumbling when his or her actions aren’t noticed or congratulated. The second sign is envy and jealousy when others gain credit and they don’t. A third sign is irritation or volatile emotions when one doesn’t get one’s wishes—on, say, the choice of a pastor—in spite of how much one has given to that church. And a fourth sign of mismanaged motivations is counting heads or numbers when one is asked to do a religious deed like teaching a Sunday School class.” McKnight, 161. He summarizes a proper motivation as “to engage with God for the good of others.” *Ibid.*, 200.

^{xxxiv} For more on our motivations, see Wilkins, 283-285. In that same resource, he later writes concerning giving: “Again, Jesus is addressing the *motive* of the person giving, not any particular format. We are not to give with mixed or ulterior motives of gaining public acclaim for our giving. But we are not to wait until our motives change by themselves. Dealing with our motives can be a paralyzing issue, because in the process of our growth in Christ we will continue to be influenced daily by the temptations of this world. God doesn’t require us to be perfect; he just tells us to pursue it—and that includes our motives. Years ago, before giving a prayer for the offering in the little church where I was pastor, I used to tell the people that if they were grudging that morning in their giving (2 Cor. 9:5), or if they were tempted to give to be noticed by the pastoral staff or the leadership, or even their own family, they should put their wallet or purse away. God doesn’t need their money given with bad motives. The elders of the church gasped almost visibly. But then I went on to say that even if they had mixed motives in giving, God could change their hearts in a beat. So if they were ready, we could pray and ask God to purify their motives. The elders were much happier! It is within our responsibility to check our motives, to ask the Spirit of God to purify our motives, and then to move on, knowing that he will continue to cause us to grow in this area, if we really desire it.” *Ibid.*, 288-289.

^{xxxv} Quarles, 183.

^{xxxvi} Calvin, 1:202.

^{xxxvii} Carson, 79.

^{xxxviii} John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 126-127.

^{xxxix} Alexander Balmain Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (1897; repr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 1:116.

^{xl} Written by Ivan Turgenev and quoted in Hughes, 145.

^{xli} *Ibid.*

^{xlii} For an excellent discussion on how righteousness is presented as a gift in the Sermon on the Mount, see Quarles, 172ff.

^{xliii} William Farley, *Hidden in the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014).