

Audience of One

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[0 : 0 0] Sermon on the Mount recap of where we have come.

We began the series on the Sermon on the Mount by a description of the blessed and happy life of being in the Kingdom of God and being in right relationship with God.

And Jesus paints for us a picture of the life that we are to expect as disciples of Jesus Christ. And He tells us that as we follow Him, as we imitate Him, as we learn from Him and obey Him, we have to expect hardship.

But also, we will definitely impact the world around us as we live our life in Jesus' culture. And so, we look in verse 17 that Jesus made it clear to us that He did not come to abolish but to fulfil the righteous requirements of the law and to establish a greater righteousness to which He calls His disciples to practice and preach.

This Kingdom righteousness goes beyond just an external observance of God's law but also judges the intents and thoughts and motivation of one's heart.

[1 : 4 6] And then, in the past two sermons, we have looked at how when Jesus gives us six examples of this greater righteousness in the Kingdom.

And we have looked, firstly, in our relationships with one another, we have looked at how anger is the root of murder. And then we have looked at the sin of lust leading to adultery.

Look at how unrightful divorce is also adultery in the eyes of God and how oaths open up to the bearing of false witness.

And then, last week's sermon, or two weeks ago, no, sorry, last week's sermon, we looked at how we are to repay wrongdoings and also how we are to love our enemies and not just our neighbours. All this that we have looked at has been in regards to our relationship with one another and how we should love our neighbour as ourselves. And today, we are entering into Matthew 6 where we are going to observe that Jesus not only demands this greater righteousness in our relationships with one another, but also in our relationship towards God.

[3 : 1 0] And today, we are looking at three specific examples that Jesus gives us in the area of giving, in the area of prayer and fasting. And these are considered acts of piety or acts of devotion to God.

And it also includes the following passage about how we relate to money, but we are not going to look at that this week. And part of the passage that we look at this week also covers the Lord's Prayer.

But we will not examine that closely, but next week, the pastor will bring us through that part of the sermon. And so, as we see these areas, we see that it relates to our worship and how we should love God with all our hearts, with all our minds, with all our soul, and with all our strength.

And so, even as we have seen, we are entering into Matthew 6, and in verse 1, it introduces to us the principle that should govern our motivations behind our acts of righteousness.

And verse 1, it starts with this. It starts with, Be careful. Be careful. Take heed. Beware. It is a reminder and a warning.

[4 : 2 3] But that word, be careful, also means to pay close attention to, to cling to, or to be committed to these things. And what is it that Jesus asks us to be careful?

He says, 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.

Well, as we read this, maybe some of you are thinking, well, doesn't that kind of contradict what we studied a few weeks ago from Matthew 5, where we read that Jesus told us, Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Well, the outward act may appear the same, but the inner motivation is very much different. In Matthew 5, the good works directs attention and glory unto God.

But as we will see in our example, in Matthew 6, the primary focus and the primary focus of the good works that we do is to direct attention to ourselves and with the intention of being gazed upon and admired by men.

[5 : 44] And so you see that there are definitely two totally different things. And we will examine three examples that Jesus gives us. Again, in the area of almsgiving or giving to the needy, in the area of prayer and in the area of fasting.

These are the three pillars of Jewish piety. And as we look at the three examples that Jesus gives, in each of them, Jesus exposes the practices of false piety that was practiced among the hypocrites.

And he uses them as an example of what a disciple of Jesus should not do. Well, you may think when we hear the word hypocrite, the first thing that comes to our mind is a Pharisee with a long beard and wearing long robes.

But for the hearers of Jesus, in the time of Jesus, when they hear the word hypocrite, it means something else. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word which describes an actor in a theatre.

And this actor wears different masks to play different roles. And he puts on a character and he pretends to be something that he is not.

[6 : 57] And so, as they hear the word hypocrite, it was not necessarily targeting specifically the Pharisees or the teachers of the law. But Jesus was condemning everyone who paraded their acts of righteousness before men as though putting on a show to gain applause, approval, and the praise of men.

And so, in verse 2, Jesus tells us, 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 others.

Well, this word to announce with trumpets most likely is to be taken figuratively just like how we would use the expression to blow your trumpet or to toot your own horn.

And what Jesus is saying is do not parade your piety or do not show off your giving because giving in such a manner is not motivated by the need of the person you are giving to.

Neither is it motivated by a love for God, but it is concerned with earning a reputation of generosity and piety before men. And we see that it's very easy to turn our giving into a hypocritical practice.

[8 : 19] The Pharisees, in Matthew chapter 15, Jesus says that the Pharisees declared their gifts to their parents as a charity unto God. And Jesus condemns that because He says that they are breaking God's command to honour your father and your mother for the sake of your traditions.

And so we see that we should not put on false pretense in our giving. but what should we do? Verse 3, it says, But when you give to the needy, do not let your hand, 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. Well, this expression again, what does it mean that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing?

Well, it is actually not really possible unless you sever the connection between your left brain and your right brain in a process called a lobotomy. But Jesus is using figurative language here.

Just like how earlier Jesus talked about if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. Or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Jesus was saying, give in such secrecy that God is the only audience.

[9 : 43] that if it's possible that you don't even know what you're giving. But it doesn't mean, Jesus doesn't mean that we don't keep track of what we give.

And Jesus doesn't mean that we don't give an accountability or report about our giving. Secrecy itself is not the goal. And it does not command us to God.

But giving in secret helps us to avoid the temptation for others to praise the giver rather than giving glory to God. And so how does this play out in our practical everyday life?

Well, it doesn't mean that as the offering bag passes you in church, you take out your wallet, close your eyes, put your hand in and pick up whatever note and put it in the bag.

So that you yourself don't know what you're giving. and maybe secretly in your heart, you're hoping to get that one ringgit in the middle of all your hundred ringgit notes in the wallet.

[10 : 48] It also means that sometimes as the offering bag is passed around, we do not give out of coercion or compulsion that maybe we did not intend to give but because our friend is sitting beside us or because we see someone else giving, we put our hands in our pocket and we pretend to put it into the offering bag but there's nothing that we are giving.

Such behavior is motivated by a fear of man and that too is hypocrisy. As a church and we want to encourage people to give, we don't practice announcing or publishing people's names because what we are encouraging people is to give into hypocrisy.

So how are we to give? We should be purposeful. Think not just about how much you are to give but how you are to give.

How can I become less and He become greater? How can I draw less attention to myself and what would result in greater glory and thanksgiving to God?

Well, one of the things to consider definitely is to give anonymously whenever possible. Well, that might mean a bit more work for us.

[12 : 14] Maybe it means actually going to a bank and banking in cash into someone's account or to put it in an envelope and slip it secretly or to ask someone to give on your behalf as to preserve your anonymity.

Why do we do that? Well, because when you give in secret, there is no chance of the person receiving coming to thank you or repay you.

And because that is, Jesus teaches us that your reward comes from God. And more importantly, when you can imagine with me as someone who prays unto God and who brings their need to God and suddenly you receive an anonymous gift.

How your heart feels with joy and thanksgiving and awe to God. It can only be you, God. It's you who have heard and answered the prayers that I bring to you in secret.

And so the glory goes to God. But that's not always the case. Sometimes our giving is a platform. It gives us a platform or an opportunity to share the gospel or to share the love of Christ with someone.

[13 : 38] And in that situation, then we should not give in anonymity because sometimes giving in anonymity also results in praise and thanksgiving going to a false God.

And so these are just some practical things to help you think. Again, the principle, the question to ask ourselves is how can I become less and how can he become greater?

The second area that Jesus talks to us about is in the area of prayer. And Jesus tells us in verse 5, Jesus is not condemning or forbidding public prayer.

In fact, public prayer was a very common practice at the time. At set times of a day, pious Jews would stop whatever they are doing and they would pray.

Some would do this discreetly when the time of prayer comes, they would go back into their houses and they would pray. But others would do it pretentiously.

[14 : 55] Maybe right where they are, right in the street, they would just drop whatever they are doing and cry out to God in a loud voice and pray. There are two dangers that are associated with public prayer.

The first is the danger to be seen. That we are concerned with the impression that we give to others.

We are concerned with our reputation as a devout, righteous, and pious person. And the second danger, maybe we are not given to that, but the second danger also is in the temptation of being heard by men, where we use eloquent words or right cliches.

We change our tone and our manner in a way that shows fervency in prayer. When you pray, what, or rather, who is on your mind?

Are you busy finding the expression to please those that may be watching or listening in? That you are not really concentrating your attention on God to whom your prayers are addressed?

[16 : 10] It happens even to the best of us. Our hearts deceive us and our minds wander. The temptation is so great because it is unseen.

And Jesus knows this. And so he teaches us a better way of praying that will overcome such evil. In verse 6 he says to us, but when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who is unseen.

In private prayer, no one sees but God. There is no one to impress but God. He is the only audience.

There is no need for formality or pretense or putting up your God. It is a place of honest, genuine conversation with God.

And that is the very heart of prayer. Another example that Jesus gives us in verse 7 and 8, it says, When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

[17 : 26] Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. Is Jesus forbidding long-winded repetitive prayer using flowery words?

Is he saying that you better keep it short and simple and to the point or risk your prayers being rejected? That's not really what Jesus is talking about.

The word babbling used here comes from the Greek word batologio. It means to repeat the same things over and over and over to use many idle words, vain repetitions, empty phrases.

You see, in those times, many of the pagans repeat the name of their gods or repeat a same word or a nonsense syllable without thinking. This practice is known by many names, meditation, chanting, incantation.

and so Jesus is saying, do not do that. Do not pray mindlessly in that way. And how do we know this?

[18 : 37] Because the context is there. If you look at what Jesus is saying, do not keep on babbling like pagans. This is in contrast with the previous examples where Jesus says, do not be like the hypocrites.

But in this case, Jesus is saying, do not be like the pagans or the Gentiles. And in the time of Jesus, the hearers automatically, their minds automatically turn to the practices of the Romans and the Greeks.

They will be very familiar with these people around them, whose worship of different gods, their deities, depended on correct practices of prayer, ritual, and sacrifice.

And the Romans have this principle, do ut des, which means, I give that you might give. They will bring a gift or a sacrifice, or make a vow to their gods, in exchange for the god answering their prayer.

And so Jesus is saying, it is not the length of your prayer, it is not the language you use, it is not the frequency you come to god, but it is the motivation and the thinking behind your coming to god.

[20 : 03] Don't pray mindless prayers that have no heart, that are just mechanical repetitions, as though some magic formula that will command you to god, and ensure that your prayers are accepted and answered.

don't repeat prayers as though, you know, and this, in our day, it not just happens among unbelievers, but these practices are even in churches that call themselves churches of god, and so we have to be careful about these things.

How then should we pray? There are two points that we should take away from what Jesus is telling us. The first is, be careful about hypocrisy.

Pray to please God and not man. Do I pray more frequently or fervently when I'm alone or when I'm in public?

Do I love to be alone with God in the secret place of prayer? Is my public praying an overflow of my private prayer life? do I follow through when I say to someone, I will pray for you?

[21 : 24] Or am I more concerned with just saying the right things to please the person listening? How easily our private prayer life becomes a mere duty, a going through the motions, rather than true piety and devotion to God?

How often have I mindlessly given thanks for a meal without truly feeling any gratitude or affection in my heart for the one to whom I am praying?

This too is hypocrisy. Don't pray as though no one is listening. God is listening. prayer that pleases God stems from a right relationship with God.

Jesus said, do not come to God as the unbelievers. Where you come to God repeating prayer after prayer, incantation after incantation, bringing all kinds of gifts and offerings and piercing yourself, mutilating yourself in hopes that you will gain God's attention.

Or many people will religiously obey law after law, teaching after teaching, hoping that their devotion, that their charity, that their good deeds would be enough to merit favor with God and he in turn would grant their request.

[23 : 02] Even Christians, sometimes we think that we ought to pray like the persistent widow in Luke chapter 18, coming before an unrighteous judge, that if we persevere long enough in our prayer and petition, God will be moved to act on our behalf.

Do you know to whom you are coming? He is nothing like the dead idols and the false gods of this world. And our God is nothing like the unjust judge in Luke chapter 18.

you are coming before God your father. Don't worry about how many words or how few words you use or if you know the right words to say.

It is not how earnest you are or how fervent you are that commands you to God or inclines his ears towards your prayer. Jesus said your father knows what you need before you ask him.

He withholds no good thing from those who trust in him and works all things for good to those who love him. In view of such a God, come child, pray.

[24 : 29] Your father is listening. And the third example that Jesus gives us is in the area of fasting. In the Old Testament, fasting was a sign of repentance where we confess and mourn our sin and humble ourselves before the Lord.

In fasting, the people would abstain from food and they would humble themselves by praying, by mourning and by wearing sackcloth. But during Jesus' time, fasting was not just a sign of repentance but a sign of general piety, of devotion unto God.

It was common, the Pharisees fasted twice a week and it's common that they fast on Monday and Thursday. And so much so that we see in Luke 18, the Pharisee praying before God, he says, God, I thank you that I am not like other people.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Fasting became a means of confirming their self-righteousness. And so Jesus tells us in verse 16, when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting.

Do you know it takes a lot of effort to put on a show? I mean, imagine you have to stand in front of a mirror, you have to make sure that your face has that unwashed look, and then you sprinkle a bit of ash on your head, and the most difficult part is to put on a perpetual gloomy and sad countenance.

[26 : 19] Your muscles are so pain. It takes so much, and how do you know you are doing it right? Well, as you walk down the street, instead of your usual greeting that you will hear and say, good morning Rabbi, instead when people walk past you and say, what?

It's Thursday already. It's so obvious on your face and your countenance on how you look that you are fasting. What was once a sign of humiliation became a sign of self-righteous self-display.

And instead of humbling ourselves before the Lord, we parade and promote ourselves before men. And Jesus condemns such hypocrisy.

Verse 17 and 18, Jesus says, 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.

What Jesus is saying is, appear as usual, groom yourself to appear joyful and content, so as not to attract attention to your fasting.

[27 : 33] Humble yourselves before God. Give no foothold for self-deceit or vain glory. Such is fasting that pleases God. And so in these three examples, we see a common theme that Jesus is telling us.

if our acts of righteousness are not done in secret before the Lord, then secretly they are done to please men.

Why do we deceive ourselves? Why are our hearts so inclined towards hypocrisy? because it is easier to appear righteous before man who sees only the outward appearance than to live righteously before God who sees everything, even the secret intents of our heart.

There is no hiding from Him. And so we would rather spend our time, our energy perfecting our mass of external piety and self-righteousness, hoping that our performance will earn us an encore from our audience.

But our motives give us away, for they show where our devotion truly lies and to whom our hearts belong.

[29 : 02] Whose applause are you living for? Whose praise are you seeking? The audience that you live for reveals who your master is.

For the hypocrite who lives to gain the praise and admiration and approval of man, the idol on the altar is not as you would expect.

The idol on the altar is not man but self. This is the reason why men build towers to reach to the heavens or conquer empires that span the entire breadth of the known world.

It is why men and women devote entire lives to writing books, to mastering an instrument, to perfecting their craft or to train in order that they may run down a length of track in the shortest time as possible.

people. The motivation behind our devotion is the desire for glory and self-glory. This is why we practice our righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

[30 : 20] And you may be saying, well, I don't care about what others think and if someone praises me, I always deflect the praise back to God. be careful, the scene is very subtle.

You may not do it in front of men, but do you perform your charity or your devotion because it makes you feel good about yourself? Because it satisfies your conscience and confirms what you think about yourself, that deep down inside, I am truly a good person.

Performing for an audience apart from God, even if it's just ourselves, is still hypocrisy. Beware! Hypocrisy begins at home. Unknowingly, we cultivate our appetites for the opinions and praises of men. The audience of an entire world resides right in our pockets, ready to watch every act we put up on the stage of our everyday lives.

And so we rehearse our lines, we don our best costumes, and we put our best sides forward. We sing, we dance, we share our poetry, and we share our pottery.

[31 : 46] Our thoughts, our victories, our food is laid out is laid out for all to see. We even get the whole family involved, all for a like, a share, a follow.

And when we get a heart, a smiley, or a good job, it makes our day, it makes all of it worthwhile. is it any wonder then that we do not know what to do with ourselves when the only audience watching is one who is unseen?

Charles Persians said this, How careful ought we to be, to walk humbly before the Lord?

The moment we glorify ourselves, since there is only room for one glory in the universe, we set ourselves up as rivals to the Most High.

Jesus said, No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

[33 : 04] You cannot serve both God and self. The master that we serve is the one from whom we will receive our reward.

is the pleasure of your heavenly father too poor a reward for you? Are the accolades of men sweeter than the joy of your master?

How foolishly we trade the blessedness of our eternal inheritance for a morsel of praise from the mouth of perishing men.

if we perform our acts of righteousness in front of others to be seen by them, to be honoured by them. Jesus says three times, truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Jesus is saying that's all you're going to get. Your dues, your wages, the payment for your lip service, that is all that you deserve.

[34 : 11] The idol of self is a hard taskmaster. It will pay you pittance in return for all your effort and performance.

Self-glory is a vain and fleeting glory, and a life that is lived for its sake is one that is empty, meaningless, and a chasing after the wind.

we see that in the example later in Matthew, a young man came to Jesus. He had riches, he had position, he had good reputation before man, and he was righteous in his own eyes.

And he asked Jesus, what must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven? And after Jesus telling, and after Jesus told him all the things, he said, all this I have done since I was young, what else do I lack?

In the end, he went away sad, because the emptiness of pursuing your own righteousness, the stakes are higher than you realize.

[35 : 32] Jesus said that if you do this, you will have your reward in full from man, but you will have no reward from your father in heaven.

We see that in verse 1. And earlier in Matthew 5 verse 20, Jesus says, for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

the stakes are high. And for those of us who live before the audience of one, we can be sure that our heavenly father sees what is done in secret and will reward us.

He rewards us not as a master who gives to his servant what he earns, but as a father who gives abundantly to a son who loves him and serves him.

Our greatest reward from God is this, that we will see God, that we will be called children of God, that we will know for sure that the kingdom of heaven is ours.

[36 : 54] Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled, for they will be satisfied. And so as I end, I want to talk to two groups of people.

You may have come here today not knowing who Jesus is, but as you listen in, your hearts burn within you as the scriptures were opened to you.

No one ever spoke like this man. The words that I read and explained to you are not the words of man, but the words of God. And the one who spoke them, Jesus, he is not just a wise man, or a good teacher, a prophet, but he is the son of God.

He said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. Consider his claims.

If he is not God, you have nothing to lose. But if he is who he says he is, then he is the one audience before which you must live your life.

[38 : 14] Only his opinion matters. Follow him. If you are that person, we would love to speak more with you, reach out to us and connect with us.

And for many of you, you may consider yourself a Christian, a follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ. And before today, you talk to yourself, hey, I'm doing okay.

I attend church, I go for prayer meetings and Bible study, I do my devotions faithfully, I try my best to keep all the commandments, to be a good person.

I mean, nobody's perfect, right? But as you sat through the Sermon on the Mount, you felt as though a sword pierced right through your soul and laid bare everything inside of you for everyone to see.

And when you heard Jesus saying, be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect, it felt as though you had the wind knocked right out of you.

[39 : 23] I mean, it's impossible. How can anyone live up to all of this? Can anyone ever be pleasing to God? Well, the one who spoke those words, the preacher on the mount, he did.

Of him the voice from heaven said, living Jesus culture, keeping the sermon on the mount does not begin with us, but with God.

Kingdom righteousness does not come from us trying to keep the law, but by coming to and trusting in him who fulfilled the law and the prophets.

If you go home from here thinking, I'll try to do better, to be more like Jesus, then you miss the point. The burden is beyond you.

And if you realise the impossibility of it and your insufficiency to bear it, then you are in a good place.

[40 : 42] Because Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for us is the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus says to you, come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Let us come to the Lord in prayer. help us, Lord, to examine our hearts, and if our hearts condemn us, then let us not run and hide from you behind the leaves of our own righteousness, which cannot cover our nakedness and our shame.

help us to recognize our insufficiency and in poverty of spirit, may we come to you, our Father, knowing that you have made a way for us to come.

Clothed in the righteousness of your Son, Jesus Christ, give us a hunger and a thirst for true righteousness, one that cannot be satisfied by keeping the law, but only by trusting and partaking in the perfect righteousness of your Son, Jesus Christ.

[42 : 25] Help us to live in light of the day, where we must each stand before you, the righteous judge of all the earth, the one audience to whom we must each give account.

Only your opinion matters. May we hear those words, well done, good and faithful servant, as we take our first steps into glory.

In Jesus' name, we ask and pray. Amen. Amen.