

LESSON 7: PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS, PART 1 (MATTHEW 6:1-8)

Righteousness in the kingdom of God must not be superficial or ritualistic. We have seen this demonstrated through the contrasts Jesus has given in the previous section. Now, Jesus makes it clear that good works and religious devotion must not be for self-glorification. Instead, citizens of Jesus's kingdom must be committed to practicing their righteousness even when no one else is watching (Matthew 6:1-8)!

BE CAREFUL (MATTHEW 6:1)

Jesus begins this section with a warning that His followers must be careful regarding how they practice their righteousness (i.e. giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting). Particularly, Jesus says not to practice righteousness in front of others so that you will be seen by them. However, you must not see a contradiction in this command and Jesus's previous teaching about others seeing your good works (Matthew 5:14-16). In that passage, Jesus makes it clear that citizens of His kingdom will be known for their good works and lives committed to the cause of righteousness. This type of life will result in glory being given to God. In this passage, Jesus is focused on the motivation and reward of the person who is practicing righteousness. For example, the scribes and Pharisees would commonly make a public display of their professed "righteousness" so others would see the things they did and praise them for such (Matthew 23:1-7; Mark 12:38-40), even boasting about what they did (Luke 18:9-14). Then, in addition to their desire for praise by others, Jesus saw that the Pharisees and scribes were hypocrites in that they would look righteous on the outside but were spiritually dead on the inside (Matthew 23:25-28). However, those who practice their righteousness to be seen and praised by people have their reward here on this earth. Yet, these have no reward waiting for them

from God in Heaven! So, Jesus's admonition should cause each one to empty oneself of pride and do what is right without any thought, desire, or expectation for earthly praise. Rather, the motivation of the heart should only desire recognition that leads to God being glorified!

WHENEVER YOU GIVE (MATTHEW 6:2-4)

Jesus now gets specific with the instructions about how and how not to give to the poor. The poor have always been (and will always be) part of society (Matthew 26:11) and God has always wanted His people to be compassionate toward them (i.e. Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 19:9-10; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27). However, the way a person gives also matters to God! For example, Jesus forbids the sounding of a trumpet before you give that would attract attention (whether literally or figuratively to make sure other people are watching and take notice). Doing such is the way of the hypocrites (i.e. scribes and Pharisees). Thus, the noble deed of giving to the poor can be perverted and become displeasing to God when it is done for earthly recognition or credit. Such people would already receive their full reward through whatever recognition they receive from people. In contrast, Jesus demonstrates that the proper way to give requires you to give in secret. The point is not that someone can never know about your giving, but that you give without the desire or expectation for earthly praise or recognition. So, the contrast of sounding a trumpet versus not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing is presented. For, citizens of God's kingdom know that God sees what is done in secret and will reward those who do what is right (Proverbs 15:3; Hebrews 4:13; Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 25:31-46).

WHENEVER YOU PRAY (MATTHEW 6:5-8)

Similar to giving, God has always desired His people to pray to Him (Daniel 6:10; Luke 18:1; Romans 12:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). One who is praying, though, is not to be like the hypocrites (Matthew 15:7-9) who would stand in the synagogues and on

the street corners to be seen by others and given recognition for their appearance of righteous devotion to God. Once again, those who pray in this way will have already received their full reward through whatever earthly recognition they receive. People can do this today by speaking beautiful prayers that are for the purpose of gaining the attention of others. Rather than praying in this way, go into your private room (i.e. inner room, storeroom) and pray with God as your only audience. While Jesus is not forbidding public prayer (i.e. Acts 2:42; 4:23-31; 1 Corinthians 14:15), He is emphasizing that a person should be just as devoted to God in private prayer and to pray in every circumstance with the only motivation being an audience with the God who always hears the prayers of His people (Hebrews 4:14-16; James 5:16; 1 Peter 3:10-12)! Furthermore, Jesus also teaches His followers not to pray in the same way as the Gentiles, with empty babbling (vain or thoughtless repetitions, empty phrases). The emphasis with this may have been on some special combination of words or phrases as if speaking them had special power. Although repetition in prayer itself is not forbidden (Luke 18:1-8), relegating prayer to empty phrases and meaningless speech is! Since God knows what you need even before you ask Him, God's ability to answer His people is not dependent on special wording – as He even works when we don't know what we ought to pray for (Romans 8:26-27).

CONCLUSION

Citizens of Jesus's kingdom must practice their righteousness in ways that are superior to the scribes and Pharisees. Namely, the practice of righteousness is not for the purpose of human recognition and earthly reward, but for true devotion to God. Therefore, even when there is no one watching and nothing physical to gain from the practice of righteousness, the follower of Jesus Christ will practice his/her righteousness just the same!

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

How does Jesus warn people about practicing righteousness?

How do Matthew 5:14-16 and Matthew 6:1 harmonize?

How did the Pharisees and scribes often practice their righteousness?

How do hypocrites give to the poor?

How does Jesus want people to give to the poor?

What two problems did Jesus address concerning prayer?

How does Jesus want people to pray?

What do those who do their good works or pray to be recognized by others receive?