



Sermon on the Mount: An Invitation to New Creation

Session 7 “Knowing God”

Have you ever done the right thing with the wrong spirit? When I worked in youth ministry, I led a group of students on a mission trip, where we were hosting a VBS for children in an impoverished village of Mexico. It was an especially hot day, I was tired and a bit disgruntled, and can remember thinking, “I can’t wait for this trip to be over!” As I looked into the eyes of the sweet children we were there to serve, I was rather convicted by the ugly thoughts that came out of my heart. I was there serving, doing my best to put on a happy face to be a good example to the students I was leading, but my heart was not in it. The joy that resonated from these kids, who had so little yet daily greeted me with smiles, hugs, and even small gifts, eventually won over my bad attitude, to where the Lord was able to transform my hard heart enough to experience true joy in our time together.

Jesus has a lot to say about our hearts in the Sermon on the Mount. What is going on inside of us seems to matter even more than what we actually do. Serving from a disgruntled spirit is not what pleases the Lord. When we do good things in order to please people—Jesus says we miss the point of the good deed. Especially when it comes to spiritual practices—prayer, giving and fasting—Jesus says that when we do these things from the wrong motives, we are hypocrites. Ouch.

Doing the right actions with the wrong motives or wrong spirit can be a struggle for many people. How do we live in such a way that our actions arise from pure motives? The good news is that God is in the business of transforming hearts, so it is less about us trying harder to muster up the right motives, and more about living in relationship with him, surrendering our wrong motives to him, and allowing him to change us from the inside out.

Matthew 6:1-18

1 “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.

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 honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

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 others. Truly I tell you, 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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

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Matthew 6:1-18 (continued)

9 “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us today our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

16 “When you fast, do not look somber 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.

On the other hand, if we live unto God alone, he responds to our expectations—which are of him alone. Os Guinness, the well-known Christian thinker and leader, has said of the Puritans in American history that they lived as if they stood before an audience of One. They carried on their lives as if the only one whose opinion mattered were God. Of course they understood that is what Jesus Christ taught them to do.

But the principle of the “audience of One” extends to all that we do, and not just to deeds of devotion or charity. The apostle Paul charges us to do all our work, whatever our situation “with enthusiasm, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that he whom is the one who rewards you and whom you serve.” Indeed, we are to do all that we do “on behalf of the Lord Jesus, in that way giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Col. 3: 17-24). Even more so for our “righteousness.”

Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 190.

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you, encouraged you or challenged you from this past Sunday’s sermon?
2. Why do you think Jesus encourages the people to engage in these practices “in secret” as opposed to the manner in which the “hypocrites” engaged them? Do you think this means we should not do “acts of righteousness” that other people can see? Why or why not?
3. People pleasing can show up in our spiritual practices as well as other areas of our lives. Where do you struggle with the need for approval?
4. When it comes to giving or serving can you think of an example where you have done it with the wrong motives? In what area of your life are you challenged by Paul’s words in Colossians 3:23?
5. Have you ever fasted? What was this experience like? What do you think the purpose of fasting is? What is something you’re not sure you could live without? Consider fasting from this sometime over the next week and report back to the group what this experience was like.
6. Read the Lord’s prayer together. What elements does Jesus include in his model for prayer? Which element would you like to incorporate into your own prayer life more often?
7. As you share prayer requests with one another, consider using the Lord’s Prayer and as a framework for your prayer time.