



Matthew 6:1–4

“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 honoured 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.”

Reflection

In the first verse of our passage today, Jesus makes a general statement which he goes on to illustrate three times in the first half of Matthew 6. He illustrates it with examples from public religious life: giving, praying and fasting – three areas of public religious life that also overlap into a Christian’s private religious life. So Matthew 6:1 is very important to our understanding of this major section of the Sermon on the Mount, and equally, is an important prin-

ciple for the whole of Christian life. Verse one 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.

But just before we deal with this very important statement it's important to acknowledge that while Jesus' topic area may have changed his subtext remains the same. Jesus is still taking aim at the religious practices of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. The ones who would lead God's people, the ones who would teach them and offer them examples of ethical conduct by the way they live, have not only been teaching God's word false-

ly but they've also been living hypocritically, and setting very poor examples for God's people to follow. Jesus has come not just to reform the teaching of the religious establishment, but also the way they live out their teaching. He's come to reform not just their preaching; but their practice. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law have been 'showing off their righteousness' in front of people; which is no righteousness at all.

Now you'll remember that righteousness is a broad word in the New Testament meaning essentially 'being right before God' but also, and flowing out of that right relationship with God, it can also mean 'right living in our world.' In his gospel, Matthew mostly uses righteousness this second way, he usually means 'right living

in our world.' When he uses the term he most often means the outward and visible actions that flow out the hearts and minds of people who live in a right relationship with God.

And so Jesus is saying in the first verse that your actions betray the motives of your heart. So if you're showing off publicly about an area of your Christian faith, your motivation is not righteousness, it's pride in how well people will think of you because of your action. Your focus isn't on God, and living rightly in this world out of your love for him, it's on people, and looking good in their eyes. Jesus is saying, showing off your supposed righteousness in front of people, well that's no righteousness at all.

Next Jesus speaks of reward. The Greek word here literally means 'paid in full' like a stamp on an invoice you've just paid. There will be no reward for people who show off like this. Their public vanity will receive nothing other than worldly recognition. But what rewards does true righteousness bring? Is Jesus talking about rewards in heaven like he did in Matthew 5:12 or treasure in heaven as he will in Matthew 6:19? And if so what is all this? Well as we spoke about in Matthew 5:12 and will no doubt speak further on in Matthew 6:19 the bible is not specific as to what Jesus may mean. The bible has no problem in equating right living with rewards both in this life and the life to come. Just as sin has consequences in this life, and in the next, so does righteous living. To use Jesus' example in what follows, giving to the

needy in secret will be rewarded. Thinking this through, most immediately there is the intrinsic reward in doing a good deed like giving to the poor. There is great worth in it, in and of itself. Anyone who volunteers or gives their money to good causes will recognise immediately the intrinsic worth of their action which is in itself great reward. Also, a righteous lifestyle often, but certainly not always, leads to respect and appreciation from friends, family and the wider community. This may also be part of the reward. Finally, in terms of rewards in heaven this may be something tangible that awaits us when God finally calls us home or it may be simply, but no less wonderfully, the pleasure that our God takes in his children living as he has taught them, and bringing glory to him as members of his family.

Moving on, Jesus isn't one to keep his meaning veiled for long, is he? Imagine the shame on the faces of the Pharisees and teachers of the law and anyone else for that matter who'd been loudly clinking coins into temple collections and making great shows of giving to the poor in crowded marketplaces and right out front of the Synagogue on Saturday mornings. Jesus paints a picture of them showing up to a fanfare of trumpets. No, it's not Caesar arriving in all his glory after winning some foreign war, it's Rabbi 'more-holy-than-thought' condescending to share some of his largess with some poor soul who'll be in his debt forever. 'Do not announce it with trumpets' – you can see, can't you, why Jesus' words ended up getting him in so much trouble. But Jesus deliberately

chose to speak so directly and it's in part for this reason that we still hear his words so loudly today.

Again with beautiful, emotive words, the Word incarnate, the Word become flesh could not be more clear or direct when he says,

‘But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing’

This is how you give. Give in secret, and your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Think

It's quite a passage which means there is plenty to think about. It touches on our pride, on the deeper motivations of our heart, and on the rewards inherent in, and flowing out of, righteous living. How have you been struck by it? Perhaps you've taken a mental stocktake of your public persona and your public ministry at church. Why do you come across as you do? What motivations lie behind your right living in your family and friendship groups, in church and at work? Genuine righteousness, or is it some part display? Our hearts can be so deceitful and our pride so slippery. Perhaps think about this. More directly, are you giving money to the poor? Did you notice that giving to the needy is a basic assumption in the passage? Even the Pharisees and teachers of the law are doing that. Are you giving to the

poor, or to the work of the church in the area of ministry to those in need? You can give more than money. You can also give your time and your gifts – your time, talents and treasure. Or perhaps you'd like to meditate over the intrinsic rewards of righteous living, the satisfaction that doing good brings as well as the inherent good in the act itself. Four verses of Scripture and musings for days. So please take all the time you can right now to think deeply over Jesus' words.

Pray

And then pray. If there's something you need to confess, then confess it to the Lord. But also praise him. Isn't it wonderful that our Father sees everything, and is so completely just that every act, both good

and bad, is weighed? Only for us, those who've put their faith in Jesus, one side of the scales has been cut off, the other side slamming heavily to ground, filled with the blessings that are ours through his sacrifice on our behalf on the cross. And adopted into God's family by our brother's blood, we can now only multiply blessing with blessing by simply living as who we are, as the children of God.

A second illustration from our Lord tomorrow. Until then.