

Acts of Righteousness

Matthew 6:1-18

Jesus gave the moral basis for life in His kingdom: God's people are transformed from within, and their godly values are expressed in a holy life that fulfills not just the letter of the Law, but its *spirit and intent*. In Matthew 6-7 Jesus described the lifestyle of those who live in His kingdom. We've spent quite a bit of the last two weeks looking at the lifestyle Jesus wants believers to adopt. All of his lessons have been about how to live as a child of God, a child of the Kingdom. In Matthew Chapter 6 Jesus teaches about almsgiving, prayer and fasting, all important aspects of living a life pleasing to the Lord. These three practices also comprised the three cardinal components of Jewish worship known as Acts of Righteousness.¹ We won't be going verse by verse, but rather example by example, looking at how Jesus contrasts *perceived* piety in public worship versus *true* piety in private worship.

Each illustration of the hypocrite Jesus gives is exemplified by what the people of his day *believed* was true worship. The only example the common people had was the example set by the Pharisees. Each of the examples we will look at today are examples of Pharisaic Righteousness – acts meant to exhibit piety and generosity. Sadly these acts – good in their true intention, had been distorted to become public spectacles to bring admiration and respect to the worshipper, not glory to God.

The Pharisees prided themselves on proving their righteousness by their Acts of Righteousness which can be seen by others – this is *visible piety*. Whether or not those acts were purely show, which by example of Jesus' anger and frustration with them seems to allude, or if they were backed up by truly heartfelt worship is hard to know. Surely some of the Pharisees were truly devoted to God and worshipped in sincerity, but again the only way they knew was to model themselves after their predecessors and teachers.

Jesus came to teach an honest, sincere personal way to worship which was truly holy and not at all self-righteous. In verses 1-18 Jesus attacks the ostentatious, although accepted, model of worship and reveals the hypocrisy of the action. He begins with a stern warning in verse 1 against visible piety. "*Be careful," Jesus says, "not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 6:1).

Visible Piety vs. Unseen Piety

Visible piety earns the reward of a good reputation of righteousness among *men*. Unseen piety earns a reward from *God*.

¹ NAC

“Who do you say I am?”
Session 5 Lesson Notes

	Characteristics of visible piety	Characteristics of unseen piety
Almsgiving:	Ostentatious show of generosity	Responsible and discreet giving in secret
Prayer:	Grand, verbose, sermonizing monologues directed at an audience	Private prayer with simplicity, directness, and sincerity in conversation with God.
Fasting:	Somber show of suffering in fasting	Fasting done in private unknown to on lookers
Reward:	Reputation among men for piety	Reward from God for humble piety

It's a very natural thing to want to be appreciated as men and women of God, and to be looked up to with respect. It's healthy to want to be a leader. But there are many religious games that people of every age play, which draw them away from the reality of the kingdom and instead glorify the person performing the act.

In Jesus' day, one game was to have a trumpeter announce when someone was going to give alms (charity) to the poor. Almsgiving was a key component in Jewish society where there was no public welfare. The poor and destitute relied on charity to survive. Generosity associated with almsgiving was considered a highly prized virtue. The poor would come—and so would a host of admiring observers. Everyone would watch as the giver earned a reputation for **piety and generosity**. The focus of the giver became building a *reputation* for compassionately helping the poor. The reputation was more important to the giver than an honest motivation to serve God by sharing the blessings richly provided to the giver by God. But Jesus' point in verses 3-4 is clear: his followers must not make a spectacle of their piety or display their generosity publicly. Ostentatious display on the part of the almsgiver reveals a heart more concerned with human approval than obedience and obligation to God disallowing any spiritual benefit for the almsgiver.

Jesus was not denying the necessity of keeping track of finances or being responsible in the stewardship of the blessings provided by God. His words are an illustration of *privately* and *discreetly* giving in charity to the less fortunate. Charity ought to be motivated from a heart desiring to please and obey God, not seeking praise from others.

Another common game was played with prayer. When a man wanted to pray, he would go to a busy street corner or a well-filled synagogue and stand to pray aloud. Often he would pray grand, prolonged and wordy prayers directed more to impressing the audience with his knowledge and understanding of God rather than praying to God. His sermonizing prayer would give evidence to all that he was pious and eloquent. How could God not

answer such compassionate well spoken prayers of such a pious man? The reward of this type of prayer was the *reputation* of piety.

In his contrast of the hypocrite and the earnest person at prayer, Jesus does not deny the necessity of corporate prayer; he stresses the importance of the private side of piety. Jesus contrasted this self-serving hypocrite with the earnest worshiper who sought time alone with God, pouring out his heart to an ever-listening God. Prayer in private, in secret away from the eyes of onlookers, allows us to become aware of God’s unseen presence. He is present to us; he is God *with* us in a wholly personal, individual way. The reward of such prayer and worship is a personal relationship with God, seeking to know and hear the voice of God in response to heartfelt prayer. Neither does Jesus deny repeated prayers. We are called to be persistent in our prayers, seeking the counsel of God, bring our needs and our gratitude to him.

The third and final pillar of the Acts of Righteousness was fasting. The Lord called Israel to fast only one day a year, the Day of Atonement. Pharisees would take on two additional days a week of fasting, turning it into a public spectacle of their version of piety. When men took a vow to go without food, they would be sure to look pained, and would rub dirt into their faces so all could see how much they were suffering for God, how obedient they were to God! These devoted men loved God so much they were willing to make such an unrequested sacrifice, even weekly! They modeled what many in Israel believed was a righteous lifestyle. This public self-denial earned these men their pious reputation. Jesus does not condemn fasting. Abstaining from food or other pleasure in order to spend more time in prayer is worthwhile and difficult. It requires self discipline and obedience. God will still call us to fast at specific times for specific reasons, but it is obedience to God’s call for fasting, not our unasked for offering that pleases God.

It is not the fasting that Jesus condemns, but seeking the public approval of men. Again Jesus’ words contrast the self-righteous hypocrite with the devout man of God who sought to obey God for the sake of obedience and devotion. Only the man himself and God knew he fasted. To all others his appearance was unaltered, but God knew his devotion and sacrifice stemming from a heart for God.

Jesus wanted people to learn spiritual disciplines for the right reasons – devotion, obedience, compassion, worship, humility, gratitude, to name just a few – not to earn the reputation of righteousness among men and a selfish need for praise and adulation. In these three examples Jesus introduced the idea of

1. Responsible and discreet giving of alms in secret
2. Pray with simplicity, directness, and sincerity in conversation with God.
3. Appear joyful and content in fasting, honoring God in private and unknown to observation

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God described David as a man after His (God's) own heart. David wrote in Psalm 51: *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it, you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart O God, you will not despise."* (Ps. 51:16-17) The public acts of a man do not necessarily reflect the heart of a man. God greatly condemns those who come to pay him lip service, going through the motions of piety for the sake of their own reputation. Isaiah 1:11-17 is God's stern rebuke of those who make every attempt to appear righteous but fail to put his commands to show love, mercy and compassion first.

These public games of apparent piety were not played to bring honor to God. They were played for other men, to be seen by them, and to win a reputation among men for piety. Tragically, many in Jesus' day thought that such people were truly pious. They felt that the way to find the kingdom was by imitating such public acts. Thus an earnest seeker could be drawn into a hypocritical, "play-acting" style of worship. One cannot be rewarded, as the Pharisees expected, by *both* man and God.

The hypocrites have perverted the acts of righteousness into acts of self-righteousness. In all three of these examples of acts of righteousness Jesus has contrasted the actions of the hypocrite against the pure motives of a man dedicated to serving God to teach true reverence, obedience, piety, compassion, and mercy. When these acts of righteousness do stem from a heart aligned with God, they truly become what they are called, *Acts of Righteousness*. When not done for the admiration of man, these acts of righteousness please God. After each of the three examples Jesus repeats the same phrase, emphasizing its importance: *"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"*. (Matt 6:4,6,18)