

“Do Not Practice Your Righteousness Before Men, but before God”
(Matthew 6:1)

Introduction: Jesus has been showing us in the Sermon on the Mount how we are to live to glorify God and to prepare ourselves for heaven. These are, after all, the two main reasons why the Lord leaves us here on the earth after He saves us. These are the reasons why He does not take most of His people immediately to heaven. He wants us to do His works, so that He might receive glory. He wants us to do His works, so that others might come to know who He is, and that He might gather His sheep out of the world. When others see us doing the things that God wants us to do, it becomes a powerful testimony to the reality of God and the truth of Christianity. It makes them pay more attention to the words that we say, when our lives in some way measure up to what the Lord calls us to be in His Gospel. It is also the most convincing evidence to the enemy of our souls that he has lost one of his captives. It is a sign of his eventual defeat. But our Lord also wants us to do good works, so that we will be prepared to enter into His heaven. He wants to make us more holy here, so that we will be more ready for the world of holiness there. Oh yes, the Lord does take some to heaven immediately--such as the thief on the cross or those who are redeemed on their death-beds--, and when He does the process for them is really quite short. But with most of His saints, it is longer. The Lord refines them on earth, as He makes them more fit for heaven. Now if we understand that this is what the Lord is doing in our lives, it can help us. It can help us make better sense out of this life, realizing that the Lord does not intend for us to live here forever, but there, in heaven. It can also help us keep our priorities in order. It can help us keep our focus away from gaining earthly possessions, to gain those spiritual ones which are much more important. It's not how much money or other possessions I gain in this world that really matters. What matters is how much I gain spiritually. What matters is how much I will prosper in the world to come. This is why it is so important for us to listen to what Jesus says here.

And so I would like to pause for a moment and take a brief look backward from this perspective to see what Jesus has already said about how we may accomplish these two goals. First, He showed us that when we do our good works, we must do them in such a way that God gets the glory and not us. He said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and *glorify your Father who is in heaven*” (5:16). Jesus is going to tell us a little bit more about this aspect of the Christian life this morning. Secondly, He told us that if the things we do are really to glorify God, they must be done according to His commandments (vv. 17-20). Jesus told us that we must not murder (v. 21), we must not commit adultery (v. 27), we must not make false vows (v. 33), we must not take justice into our own hands (v. 38), and we must not take vengeance upon our enemies (vv. 39-42). I don't know if you noticed this, but the Lord usually gives us His commandments in a negative form. He seems to say, “You shall not,” more times than He says, “You shall.” Eight of the Ten Commandments are put in a negative way. The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves, and He knows that this is what we need. But there are two positive commands as well. He says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8), and “Honor your father and your mother” (v. 12). Jesus tells us in His Sermon that we are to love our neighbors, including our enemies, as ourselves (vv. 43-

48). But the point again is that our works must be done according to the commandments, if they are to glorify Him, and if they are to help us prepare for heaven. Thirdly, He showed us that if we are to truly glorify God, our works must go deeper than simply what the commandments say. We may *do* the right things, but if our thoughts or intentions are wrong, they are not acceptable to God. We must not forget that God looks at our hearts, as well as our actions. He knows what is going on inside of us, as well as what is going on outside of us. He tells us that we must not only not take away someone's life unjustly, we must also not hate them or speak evil of them (vv. 21-26). We must not only not commit acts of immorality with anyone, but we must also not think any impure thoughts about them in our minds (vv. 27-32).

Now how can everything that Jesus said be summarized up to this point? He says, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). The goal Jesus is pointing us to is perfection. We must not look at each other to see whether or not we are what the Lord would have us to be. What if you do measure slightly higher than another person who is also imperfect? The standard is perfection, not imperfection. The standard is Christ, not mere man. You must look to Him, and measure your life by His life. Yes, as we seek to attain Christ's image, we will fail. Sometimes we will fail miserably. Until we reach heaven, we will not reach perfection. But, if you are Christ's, then by His grace, you will make progress, you will grow. And when you do, this will be an immeasurable source of comfort and encouragement to your soul. But brethren, I want you to see that this is what we are to be doing, this is what we are to be striving for. If you understand this, then you will see the beauty of what Jesus is telling you in this Sermon. Well, so much for our brief review. Let us move on now to what Jesus tells us in 6:1.

This morning, Jesus again focuses on the way we should do what we do. He already told us in 5:16 that the light of our good works was to shine in such a way that our Father may be glorified. But yet there were those then, and there are those today, who seek to glorify themselves by their works, rather than God. But Jesus tells us this morning that

When we do our good works, we are not to seek the glory of men, but the glory of God.

I. What I want you to see this morning is the general rule Jesus gives us. He says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

- A. As we've seen, there's no question that Jesus wants us to practice righteousness.
 - 1. He has already told us that those who are righteous are the blessed ones.
 - a. He said blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn for their sins, blessed are the gentle, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, and blessed are the peacemakers (5:3-9).
 - b. He even said that if our lives have been so transformed by His grace that these beatitudes describe us, and if the world sees us and hates us because of this, then we are blessed again. "Blessed are those who have been persecuted *for the sake of righteousness*" (v. 10).
 - 2. But we mustn't forget what else Jesus said about the practice of righteousness.

- a. He said that unless our “righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees,” we “shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 20).
 - b. He said that our righteousness, our good works, must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. But these men were so meticulous, so exacting in the way they tried to serve God. How could we ever surpass their zeal for righteousness?
 - c. Well, if we see where it is that they fell short and seek to overcome that same weakness, then I believe that we can surpass them, by the grace of God.
- B. The question Jesus raises here is, For whose benefit do we practice righteousness? It is for our benefit or for God’s? Are we doing our works to be seen of men, or to be seen by God? Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness *before men to be noticed by them.*”
- 1. This is the area in which the scribes and Pharisees were falling short.
 - a. Their acts of piety, their good works, in sheer number, far outweighs our own. They devoted their whole lives to doing what the Law required. And even though they misunderstood many things, as Jesus has shown us, yet none of us here would accuse them of being lazy when it came to serving God.
 - b. But the one area in which they fell short was their motivation. Why did they do the things they did? Was it out of love for God, or love for themselves?
 - c. Jesus plainly tells us that it was out of love for themselves and not out of love for God. They did what they did *to be noticed by men.*
 - 2. This shows us that it is possible to do the right things, but for the wrong reasons.
 - a. We can do the things which God requires, but still do them in such a way that He will not accept them.
 - b. This is the reason why God does not accept the so-called good works of unbelievers. Consider the man who loves his wife and is faithful to her, who loves his children and provides for their needs, who is an honest worker, who never takes anything that doesn’t belong to him, who is a good neighbor to all who live around him, and who gives to those on a regular basis whom he considers less fortunate than himself. He is model husband, a model citizen, and a model of benevolence.
 - c. But is he pleasing to God? No. What does he lack? He lacks the right motivation. He doesn’t do any of these things for the right reasons. All he has is the shell of the duty, not the heart of it. The Lord tells us in His Word that, “God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). And when the Lord looks at the heart of an unbeliever, He doesn’t see *any love for Him*. He doesn’t see *any desire for His glory*, but only for his own. Does this mean that this man couldn’t be any more displeasing to God than he is. No. If he didn’t do the things God commanded, he would be *much more* displeasing to God. But no matter how much he may do of what God requires of him, he will never please God, because he does not love Him.
 - d. Now this should cause all of us to examine our own hearts this morning. What is our motivation in serving the Lord?

- (i) Do we keep God's commandments because we really love Him? Do we keep them because we know that this pleases Him? Do we serve and honor Him out of a real thankfulness and out of a real awareness of the debt that we owe to His mercies in Christ? Are we really seeking His glory in the things we do?
 - (ii) Or are we seeking our own glory? Do we do the things we do to be noticed by men? If so, the Lord tells us this morning, "Beware." Beware, for you will have no reward in heaven.
 - (iii) A day is coming in which all that we have done will be laid before Christ. He says that on that day He will put His fire to each man's work to test its character. Those things which were done out of a real love for Him and a real desire for His glory, will survive the fire and will be rewarded. But those things which were done purely for ourselves, will be all burned up.
 - (iv) Now its not that any of the works we do really deserve a reward. Even the best of them are still polluted with sin. And if the work we offer to the Lord is made of nothing but sin, it will be burned up in the fire. But when God sees a real sincerity in our hearts, when He sees that we keep His commandments out of a real love for Him, then He receives that work through Christ, for in Christ, all of its imperfection is removed. This means that the rewards we receive are rewards of grace. We must never think that our works earn anything in the sight of God. It is just that the Lord has been pleased to reward the works that we do for His glory.
 - (v) But there is another reason why we should beware. We should beware not only because we might lose our reward, but because if this is the pattern of our lives, if we constantly seek the applause of man, rather than God, then there is no grace in our hearts. Jesus says that if anyone abides in Him, that person will bring forth fruit, good fruit, fruit that will remain (John 15). It is impossible that a Christian could be fruitless, or have no better fruit than that of a non-Christian. If this is the case with you this morning, if this is the kind of fruit that you are bearing, then you need the grace of God. A change of heart is what you need. And the only one who can give you grace, the only One who can change your heart and put a true love for God in it, is Christ Himself. You must come to Christ. You must turn from your sins and embrace Him in faith. He is the only One who can help you. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). He is also the only One who can make you willing to come to Him. If the desire to believe in Him is not in your heart this morning, then ask Him to change your heart and to make you willing and able to receive Him. Jesus is your only hope.
3. But there is one last question I would address this morning, and it is this: Why does Jesus tell us here not to practice our righteousness before men, but yet He told us earlier that we should do our good works before men, so that they might see our works and glorify God? There are at least two possible answers.
- a. It may be that the Lord focuses more here *on the way* in which we should do

our good works. We must not do them to receive glory from man, but from God. This is also what He means in 5:16, when He says, “Let your light shine *before men* in such a way that they may *see your good works*, and *glorify your Father* who is in heaven.” Compare this with what Jesus says here, “Beware of practicing your righteousness *before men to be noticed by them*” (6:1). In both cases, the idea of not doing them for your glory, but for God’s, is emphasized.

- b. However, when we look at the three examples which Jesus gives us, it appears as though He is requiring absolute secrecy. It may be that Jesus wants *certain* of our good works not to be seen by anyone else but God.
 - (i) Usually when we do an act of kindness to another person, they can’t help but see us. In these cases, we should do our good works in a way that God gets the glory, and not us.
 - (ii) But there are certain things which we can do in secret, such as giving to the poor, lifting up prayer, and fasting. Since they can be kept secret, perhaps Jesus is saying that they should be. This way, those who receive the benefit can only thank God, since they don’t know that you are involved. Next week, we will begin to look at these secret works of righteousness.
- c. But for now let us pray and seek the Lord for His grace to do what it is that He has called us to do this morning.