

October 28th 2012: 'Sermon on Mount' #6 Matt 6:1-18
"Undercover Righteousness"

This morning I want you to imagine one of Jesus' disciples sitting there on the grassy slope as He talks about His coming Kingdom. He has already made the decision to follow Him and to be part of His rebellion against the current religious leaders in Israel. And he has already recognized that this will involve two major changes in his life.

First, he will be seen by the Pharisees, Scribes, and Chief Priests as the enemy. They already despise Jesus because of the things He does and also what He says very publicly about them, and he knows that they will be against him too simply because he is His disciple.

Second, as he has listened to Jesus preaching this sermon he has begun to understand that Jesus expects His followers to do religion, or acts of righteousness, in an entirely different way to what the religious leaders have practiced and taught for as long as he can remember.

Even as he sits there his mind goes back to a comment Jesus made earlier when He said, (and our Bibles record this in Matt 5:20):-

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now he realizes from what Jesus had then gone on to say that by righteousness He meant the religious acts His followers would do to please God, and he also knew that when it comes to doing religious things, the Pharisees are the professionals. They spent all their time doing religious stuff, very openly and very loudly. They even dressed in a way that set them apart from every other person and that declared emphatically that, 'I am a religious person and I fulfill my religious duties very well. Look at me and you will see that to be true.' Now imagine this disciple wondering, How on earth, could I ever better that level of righteousness?

As a Jew he would also know that other than keeping the law, the other acts of righteousness were summarized into three main areas being:- **Giving, Praying, and Fasting**. And the Pharisees worked really hard at doing these three religious duties in a way that was ten times better and more obvious than the normal Jew would do them.

They had made giving an exhibition of their generosity. Everyone knew that they tithed even the little herbs they grew in the garden. They were ostentatious about the money they put into the large offering pots that stood outside the Temple, and praised greatly the rich when they did the same. They publicized their giving to all as a sign of their goodness. Someone once said that **"Their gift was a speculation. They invested in charity and looked for a profit of praise."**

They also prayed in a very noticeable way on street corners and in the market places, with prayer shawls on their heads and arms in the air. With loud voices they would extol their own virtues, as the Pharisee did in the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and Tax collector praying in the Temple. Consequently their praying was often a multi-purpose thing. It served as a vehicle of praise and petition to God but also as a means of showing others how good they were at praying. At fulfilling this religious duty.

Even their times of fasting, which you would think would be a private affair, they used to extol the merits of their personal godliness. For fasting was a God ordained way of controlling some area of your normal life, such as your eating, in order to show God the depth of your concern over a certain matter on your heart. Your fasting enabled you to come to God in prayer about that matter with a greater inner fervency and focus.

Yet when certain Pharisees fasted, they would often use cosmetics to make their faces look pale and haggard. They would deliberately go to the places where most people would see them. They would keep every fast day and occasion so that men would be impressed, and indeed the majority were.

Yes—these Pharisees were excellent at doing righteousness. So what could Jesus mean by asking His followers to do such acts of righteousness as giving, praying, and fasting, better than the Pharisees did?

Well the answer to that our disciple would have found in what Jesus said next as recorded in Matt 6:1

"Be careful 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."

The followers of Jesus will surpass the Pharisees in their acts of righteousness when they do them unto God and not to men.

For instance, says Jesus, you will not give so that others notice your generosity and make a fuss about you, but you will give as a response to the love of God in your heart, and do so in secret. And even when others do see that you have given they will understand by your manner that you are not after their praise, but that you are just doing what a Christian should be doing if circumstances allow.

And your praying says Jesus. It won't be like the hypocrites who love the attention that public praying gives them. Not at all. Your praying will be a deep relationship of your heart with the heart of God. It will mainly be done in the secret place where you can hear back from God as well as speak to Him. And even when you pray with other believers it will not be a case of out-praying another, but of all coming to One Father and praying in a way that honours Him, seeks His will and His Kingdom, before asking for His provision for that day, protection from the evil one, and forgiveness for ourselves along with our prayers for the forgiveness of others.

Then regarding your fasting, says Jesus, and I expect my followers to fast when they feel led to do so, but it will be an offering of their will to God as they lay aside something for a time in order to focus on Him. It won't be a way of getting the attention of others because they will not reveal it to them. Only to God.

That's how you do your acts of righteousness unto God, says Jesus. Humbly and without public recognition. The hypocrites with all their noise and outward show have got it all wrong. They may indeed get a lot of praise from men and be seen as very religious, but that's the only reward they will ever get for all their efforts.

What I expect from you as my followers said Jesus, is Undercover Righteousness. It may not be that obvious to other people and you are not going to gain celebrity rating because of it, but God who knows the secret parts of your heart, will see it and He will reward you.

(Now just as an aside I found it interesting to note how many times the word reward is used by Jesus in these 18 verses. There is the reward that the Pharisees and others get for their outward, hypocritical and empty righteousness from men, and it's worth nothing. But then there is the reward

God the Father gives to those who work quietly for Him in these areas. To those who may never achieve great human recognition. And because it comes from God it is a reward that cannot be surpassed.

The other interesting thing I found is that the word reward here refers not just to a future reward but especially to a reward given straight away. That although we may not receive praise from man we do receive a blessing from God when we are faithful in our giving, our praying, and our fasting. And I sense that such a blessing is God making what we do effective for His Kingdom, even if we ourselves never see that.)

So returning once more to our disciple on the hillside we can imagine him now understanding that the righteousness Jesus wants from him is not a noisy, in your face type of religious display. It's not going out there to impress people by the way he gives, prays, or fasts. That Jesus wants him to do those things sincerely from the heart unto God, trusting God for their effectiveness.

And I sense that our disciple would have been relieved to hear that, but maybe he might also have wondered how such a low key approach could achieve anything great for God. And if He had wondered that I'm sure God would have assured him that it is God's way to take the small things we do and the prayers we pray and achieve immense and eternal things through them that others may never see and associate with us. But which will be to His eternal glory.

I am thankful this morning that I am part of a fellowship where believers truly seek to practice the type of righteousness that is unto God and not unto men, and I have benefitted from that. That the praying, giving, fasting here are not with great fanfare, but with trust in the power of God to do more through us than what we could ever ask or think. And God does. And I want to close this message by showing a short video that shows what can be achieved when even our words are used to help others.

