



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Do Right Religion

Matthew 6:1-18

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Why Do You Come to Church?

I once read of a man whose main reason for attending a church was to make good contacts for his business. Human nature being what it is, that story rings true.

Why do you come to church? Out of duty? It's what good people do? To be with friends with a common outlook, value system, political philosophy, etc.? To have a social group with little risk of moral compromise?

Do not misunderstand:

1. It is better to come to church than not; the good results of church-going will not come to those who never attend.¹
2. There is nothing wrong with benefitting from by-products of church attendance: fellowship with good people, moral encouragement, etc.
3. Doing one's duty is not a bad thing; it's what keeps us going on days we don't *feel* like doing what we know is right.²
4. All of us have times when our minds wander, our focus isn't the best, etc.

So, by all means, come to church. But know that Jesus calls disciples under heaven's reign to the highest standard in the practice of religion. Since his audience lived in Israel, he illustrated his point with the "acts of righteousness" (NIV, 1984)³ they considered important, but the principle applies to any religious acts.

¹ A friend started on the way to learning "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26) when a worker he met in a clothing store insisted that their first date would have to be where she went to church. After study with that church's preacher, baptism, and their wedding, they left to drive cross country to the preacher school he attended.

² As a colleague would tell junior high students we were teaching, sometimes you "fake it 'til you make it."

³ What brings out the sense "acts of righteousness" is the present infinitive ποιεῖν (*poiein*), to do or make.

Theme: God's Theater, Not Man's (6.1)

1. Righteousness (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosynēn*): this is a major theme in the Sermon; the point here is that our religious deeds are to be governed by the same high standard as every other part of life (5.6, 10, 20; 6.33).
2. Motive – each of Jesus' following examples will demonstrate the point in the middle part of v. 1: "... before other people in order to be seen by them."
 - a. The concern is the desire of some to be seen by people.
 - i. The phrase is, πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι (*pros to theathēnai*), the verb an aorist infinitive.
 - ii. The same construction is used five times in Matthew, each time denoting purpose (5.28; 13.30; 23.5; 26.12).
 - b. To speak of the *audience* for these righteous actions is appropriate; θεάομαι (*theaomai*), "to have an intent look at something," is the word from which our "theater" comes.
 - c. The point is not that righteous acts are never to be seen, but that they are never to be done *in order to be seen*.
3. Reward: do these things just to be seen, and you'll accomplish your mission, getting the appropriate reward from people, and none from God.
 - a. Note the irony: "We human beings are a strange lot. We hear high moral injunctions and glimpse just a little the genuine beauty of perfect holiness, and then prostitute the vision by dreaming about the way others would hold us in high esteem if we were like that."⁴

Righteous Deeds Considered

1. Giving to the needy (6.2-4) had a long history in Judaism and was considered a most sacred act of piety (see Dt. 15.11; 24.19-22; 26.12; Ps. 41.1; Prov. 19.17).
 - a. Whether the "trumpeting" was literal or not,⁵ the point is obvious: the temptation to give "that they may be praised by others" (subjunctive aorist passive from δοξάζω, *doxazō*; see 5.16 and note the contrast).
 - b. Employing another word suggestive of the theater (ὑποκριτής, *hypocritēs*), Jesus calls them to account for the impure motive (cf. 5.8).

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10, Two Books in One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Global Christian Publishers, 1978, 1987 [Global, 1999], 59.

⁵ Carson, 60, reports that trumpets did sound in Jerusalem to call citizens together to contribute to a particularly urgent need. Our text brings to mind the popular phrase "blowing his own horn."

- i. Whatever the specific display of hypocrisy, the word's use in 6.2, 5, 16 refers to those who do not practice undivided loyalty to God.⁶
 - ii. Jesus' issue is not with seeing another give (any more than he had an issue with public prayer – vv. 5-8), but with giving for the *purpose* of making it known.
- c. As with the principles of murder and adultery, his prescription is strong: do whatever it takes in order to maintain pure motivation.
2. Fasting (6.16-18) also had a long history: for moral and religious self-discipline, a sign of repentance and brokenness, or along with intense prayer petitions.
 - a. Notice that Jesus fasted (Mt. 4.2-11), that he said the practice of his disciples not fasting would be temporary (Mt. 9.15; note the word "then"), that 6.16 expects disciples to fast (ὅταν, *hotan*, when, at the time that; the same word is used of giving and praying in vv. 2, 5), and the early Christians had occasions of fasting (Acts 13.2-3; 14.23).
 - b. Again, the motive was the issue: not, "don't ever be seen fasting," but "don't fast *in order to be seen*" (play-acting).
 - c. The prescription: do what it takes to fast from the right motive.
3. Prayer (6.5-8) is a subject of the same concern.
 - a. Again, the play-actor prays to perform, and will be rewarded accordingly.
 - b. The first solution is the same as with giving and fasting: do what it takes to not be tempted by the praise of people.
 - c. In this case, however, Jesus elaborates (perhaps because there are more opportunities for public prayer than for public giving or fasting?), giving guidelines for prayer.
 - i. They were not to pray like "the Gentiles," "babbling like pagans" (NIV; βατταλογέω, *battalogēō*, an example of onomatopoeia, literally "say batta"), piling up meaningless phrases, prayers that are "statistical" rather than heartfelt.⁷

⁶ Frank Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 68.

⁷ "Some pagans thought that if they named all their gods, and addressed their petitions to each of them, and then repeated themselves a few times, they would have a better chance of receiving an answer" (Carson, 64).

- ii. The issue is not “long prayers,” but empty praying for show;⁸ we’re not trying to impress the Father (v. 8), but depend on him.
- d. Notice the real issue, which introduces Jesus’ example of prayer: “Do not be like them” (μὴ οὖν ὁμοιωθῆτε αὐτοῖς, *mē homoiōthete autois*).
 - i. The real issue is whether we have completely surrendered to God’s way, or are being pulled into practices that reflect the world’s way.
 - ii. Such complete loyalty to and trust in God is the theme that holds 6.9-15 together, and is reflected when we follow Jesus’ example in prayer.

Exhortation

William Barclay relates the story of the greatest plastic surgeon in Britain in the 1940s. During World War II, he gave up a lucrative practice to devote full time to mending the faces and bodies of wounded airmen. When asked to identify his ambition, he said, “‘I want to be a good craftsman.’ The [money] was nothing compared with the satisfaction of a selfless job well done.”⁹

Disciples who strive for heaven’s reign (6.33, NRSV) will publicly do religious deeds – but only because they have accepted God’s blessed grace and want the satisfaction of serving and pleasing him. Let us grow to such perfect discipleship (5.48)!

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⁸ Having heard occasional complaints about someone’s long prayers, a couple of thoughts are in order.

First, Jesus elsewhere does say something derogatory about “long prayers” (Mk. 12.40 = Lk. 20.47). Of interest is that the statement is made in a warning about scribes liking to be noticed (Mk. 12.38-39), and is followed by the story of the widow who gave just two coins, but that amounted to more than all those who contributed out of their abundance (Mk. 12.41-44 = Lk. 21.1-4); in other words, he is addressing two of the three issues found in our text. But, notice that he doesn’t just speak of “long prayers,” but of those who “for a pretense (πρόφασις, *prophasis*; NIV has “show”) make long prayers.”

Second, in light of Jesus’ emphasis, I am reminded of an older preacher I heard who was asked by a boy why he preached so much longer than the younger preacher the boy was accustomed to hearing. The older preacher said, “Son, that’s all he knows.” One wonders whether the concern of some with long prayers says something about their purpose in assembling, but also about their spiritual growth.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 2nd Ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 182.