Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen F. Felker,
Pastor Emeritus, Swift Creek Baptist Church, Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Interim Pastor, Skinquarter Baptist Church, Moseley, VA (est. 1778)
Sunday, October 5, 2025

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 "Doing the Right Thing for the Wrong Reason"

Intro. Parents, suppose some Saturday your teenage child is especially nice and respectful to you. They clean up their room, they do what you ask without whining, and they even offer to do extra chores around the house. But then, that evening you find out why they have been so nice and respectful. They ask to go to a late-night event with their friends, and they know that you would not normally permit them to go. They were doing the right thing all day, but they were doing it for selfish reasons.

The same thing can happen in our relationship with God. We may do the things that a Christian ought to do, but for the wrong reasons. So I want to ask you a series of questions. Why do you attend church? Is it because you love God and want to worship Him, and learn how to be a better Christian? Or do you attend to please a family member, and things will be better at home? Or do you attend to be with your friends? Or do you even attend church primarily to be seen by others?

Why should this matter of motivation concern you? The most serious issue is this: If you do righteous deeds for self-glorification, that may reveal that you have the same problems that Jesus talks about in this text of Scripture. It may reveal that you are a hypocrite, that what you do is just an outward show, and not an expression of an inward faith. You can *appear* righteous, but as Jesus says in Matthew 23, there is still wickedness in your heart (see vv.25-26). Another problem with selfish motivation is that it can rob you of an eternal reward even when you do the right thing.

I want to point out something else about this text. In chapter 5 Jesus as shown that we can commit murder or adultery in our hearts. Here we see that even when we do the right thing, our sinful hearts can do it for the wrong reason. So once again Jesus is going to expose our need for the salvation He will provide.

Now let's look into this text of Scripture and see what Jesus has to say about the issue of motivation. It does matter greatly *why* we do what we do. First, let's lay the foundation for this subject by considering the fact that:

I. WE *SHOULD* PRACTICE RIGHTEOUS DEEDS

In v.1 Christ mentions the practice of righteous deeds. Based on textual evidence I believe that's the way it should be translated.[1] James says that faith without works is dead (2:17, 20, 26) and a Christian certainly should do deeds of righteousness. After all, inner transformation should manifest outward acts of righteousness. Then in this text of Scripture Jesus mentions three righteous deeds that were commonly practiced among the Jews. These three are also included in the 5 pillars of Islam.[2] These were commended by our Lord and with each example

[1] Translated incorrectly "alms" in KJV, based on weak textual evidence for *eleemosune* in the Byzantine text. Yet "merciful deed" is used in v.2. So "righteous deeds" is inclusive of all that follows, giving, praying and fasting.
[2] The other 2 are citing the Muslim declaration of faith, similar to the Jew citing the *Shema* each day, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca, similar to the Jew going to Jerusalem 3 times/year for the major feasts.

He did not say "if" you do them but "when" you do them (vv.3, 5, 16). I want you to look with me at these examples and see if you are practicing them. First of all:

A. Christ's Commends the Practice of Giving - In v.2 Christ says, "when you do a charitable deed." Jesus assumed that God's people would give. Do you? By nature we are more interested in getting than in giving! But when we are born again with a new nature, we learn the grace of giving. Giving is a Godlike activity.

But notice the particular kind of giving indicated here. Literally, it means, "Whenever you practice (present tense) acts of mercy." That is when you see someone in need, and from a merciful heart you give to meet that need. Poverty was widespread in that society, so giving to the poor was demanded by the Law of God (Ex. 23:10, Dt. 15:11, etc.) and exhorted by the prophets (Jer. 22:16; Micah 6:8; etc.). Jesus also taught such giving (Mt. 5:7; 7:12, Acts 20:35, etc.). Of course, the Jews gave tithes to support the priests and temple worship. But giving to the poor was considered the most praiseworthy form of giving.[3]

At the close of the morning worship service each communion Sunday you have opportunity to give to our benevolence offering. I would also encourage the church to consider giving to our Southern Baptist's annual World Hunger offering each August. Then there will be times when you come in contact with someone who has a financial need. Will you offer to help them, especially if they *ask* for help? As a Christian, you should!

Secondly:

B. Christ's Commends the Practice of Prayer - In v.5 Jesus says, "And when you pray…." Here again, Jesus assumes that we will pray. Most Jews prayed privately or publicly at least three times a day (Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1). Prayer is one of the most important duties we have as believers. How can a person know the Lord and never talk to the Lord? Prayer is so important that in vv.7-13 Jesus taught us how to *not* to pray and how we *should* pray. I will share that Scripture next Sunday.

Do you pray on a regular basis? Most of us pray at meals, at church, and when we are in trouble. But do you pray privately on a *daily* basis? I can't emphasize enough the importance of prayer in the life of our church. We could see God save more souls, change more lives, and do greater things in our church if His people would pray more often with a right heart. I would like to see more participate in our weekly prayer meetings.

Finally:

C. Jesus Commends the Practice of Fasting – In v.16 Jesus says, "When you fast…." Christ taught that we should deny self (16:24), and fasting is one form of self-denial. Fasting is an experience whereby one denies himself something in the physical realm in order to achieve something in the spiritual realm. Fasting should be a period of time when you *de*tach yourself from earthly things and attach yourself unto God.

Yet the only fast *required* by the Jewish law was on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:31; 23:26-32). There are, however, other notable Old Testament examples of fasting. Moses fasted (Exodus 34:28). The Jews fasted as a means of expressing national repentance (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1). By the time of Jesus many Jews even fasted twice a week each Monday and Thursday (Luke 18:12)[4].

---

[3] Tobit 12:8 says, "Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteous" (NRSV).

[4] This would be from sunrise to sunset.

The Lord Jesus fasted for 40 days prior to His temptations by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2). I found five examples where the New Testament church practiced fasting (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23; 23:12; 27:9, 33). The apostle Paul commended fasting for certain situations (1 Cor. 7:5[5]).

With the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, fasting is no longer an absolute requirement for Christians (cf. Col. 2:14). Yet New Testament Christians can and should fast if it is voluntary and private. Some fast in preparation of a special spiritual emphasis, such as a revival. Fasting is appropriate in conjunction with an extended time of repentance and prayer. I think it is something serious Christians need to take another look at, at least occasionally. There are also some health benefits of fasting.[6]

There certainly are other righteous deeds we should practice. Many Christians practice daily Bible reading, weekly church attendance (Heb. 10:25) and serving in one or more ministries of the church. You have the opportunity to observe communion today. How many of these spiritual disciplines do you practice on a regular basis? If you say you believe in Jesus, does your life show it?

So Christ commends righteous deeds. We *should* practice them. Yet notice from our text my second main point:

II. BEWARE OF IMPURE MOTIVES IN THE PRACTICE OF SUCH DEEDS

We may do the right thing for the wrong reason. In v.1 Christ gives the general principle. He says, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable [or righteous] deeds before men, to be seen by them." The original Greek indicates that we should not do our righteous needs *for the purpose of* being seen by others.[7] Here the issue is motivation. We *should* do such righteous deeds, and at times they will be done in public, but we should not do them for the express purpose of being seen and praised by others. Furthermore, the word translated "seen" (*theaomai*) is the word from which we get our English word "theater." Do you do religious deeds *only* when others are watching, as if you are performing on stage, hoping for applause? If so, your motivation is self-serving.

This is especially the case of the hypocrite. Three times in this text of Scripture Jesus refers to the practices of the hypocrites of His day. Our English word comes from the Greek word, *hupocritai*, which originally was used to refer to a Greek play actor who would hold a mask in front of his face, and play the part of someone else. So there are some people who do religious deeds, but it is nothing more than an act. They do not do them out of love for God, or out of love for their fellow man, but because they love *themselves*. They love the praise and recognition that they get from doing these outward deeds. Such hypocrites demonstrate that you don't have to become a Christian on the inside to act like one on the outside.

In this text of Scripture Jesus gives three illustrations of religious hypocrites who do religious deeds from a selfish motivation. We need to make sure that we are not guilty of such motivation. Consider first of all:

---

[5] It may be significant that this is the only reference to fasting in the New Testament epistles!

[6] The primary health benefits include improved heart health by lowering blood pressure and LDL cholesterol, metabolic improvements like better insulin sensitivity and blood sugar control, and support for weight management by increasing fat burning. It also helps reduce inflammation and oxidative stress, protects the brain, supports the digestive system, and may strengthen the immune system (Google AI overview).

[7] In the Greek text it is *pros* with the articular infinitive showing purpose.

A. An Example of a Wrong Motive in Giving - Jesus says in v.2, "Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets…." Sounding the trumpet may have been the custom of wealthy Jews who would go to a street in Jerusalem and have someone blow a trumpet to announce that alms were about to be given to the poor, who would certainly gather to receive them. This afforded a fine opportunity to let others see their good works. Or it could be symbolic language for advertising their gifts in whatever manner brought about attention to their giving. I can just imagine a wealthy man sending someone ahead to announce that so and so is about to make a generous gift. He draws a crowd to the scene. When the rich man gives, his advance man leads the crowd in applause. Such "giving" is actually "buying" some recognition.[8] So whatever is the exact meaning, they wanted to call attention to their giving "that they may have glory from men" (v.2).

Years ago I had a deacon in a former church who was a big giver and he wanted others to know it. He often said, "He that tooteth not his own horn[9], the same shall not be tooted." So he would frequently tell people about his giving, contrary to the command of Jesus in v.2. I think he did give around $100,000 toward our building project. He portrayed himself as a fine Christian, but when he lost a controversial vote in a church business meeting, he showed his true self.

Few in our churches today would be so blatant about seeking publicity regarding their own giving. But does it make a difference to you if people know how much you are giving? Do you place your offering envelope up, or face down in the offering plate? Do you tend to give more when people know about your gift? If so, your motive in giving is probably not as pure as it should be.

Next, Jesus gives:

B. An Example of a Wrong Motive for Prayer - In v.5 Jesus says, "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets…." Perhaps they would arrive at the synagogue early and stand near the entrance praying as people arrive. Or they would go to the street corner to pray. The word for "streets" is different from the word in v.2, where it refers to a narrow street or alley between buildings. Here in v.5 it refers to the main street through town. It that case they would stand praying where more people would see them. Jews typically prayed 3 times/day, and when the time arrived for prayer, they were to stop what they were doing and pray wherever they were at the time. Evidently, some just "happened" to be near a major street corner at the time of prayer where they would be seen or heard by many. They would pray standing with uplifted hands (Ps. 28:2; 141:2; Lam. 3:41; 1 Tim. 2:8) and head bowed (Isa. 58:5), so everyone knew what they were doing.

Why would they pray at such locations? Jesus could see right into their heart's motivation. They were doing it to appear to be righteous and receive commendation and praise for their piety.

---

[8] Some believe this could be a reference to the receptacles in the Court of Women in the Temple that were used to receive the offering for the poor. On top of the chest was a trumpet shaped receptacle: Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 196. However, Christ says this "sounding of the trumpet" is done in the synagogues and streets, so that seems to exclude this idea, unless such receptacles were also placed in synagogues, and on the streets outside the temple and synagogue.

[9] It is interesting that such would be said when Jesus condemned "sounding the trumpet" prior to giving!

Now Scripture nowhere condemns public prayer in a worship service[10], or before a public meeting or event. I think it is great for Christian students to gather at the flagpole for public prayer, as a witness to others. And when we engage in public prayer, we need to be careful that we are truly praying *to* God and not praying to be admired by the people who hear us. But what is condemned here is having your personal prayer time in a very public place, with the intention of being seen and honored by the people.

If you pray very little in private, and mostly in public, then you need to examine your motivation. Next we see:

C. An Example of a Wrong Motive for Fasting - In v.16 Jesus says, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting…." If a person is fasting, how would anyone know it, except for their household? They wouldn't know it unless you advertise it in some way! So they came up with ways to show that they were fasting. They would go around with a sad countenance. They would even disfigure their faces. They probably would go around groaning from hunger, making sure people knew what a great sacrifice they were making for the Lord. Why? They hoped that people would say of them, "Oh, how pious! What dedication!"

So I hope from these illustrations you have a clear picture of the kind of impure motives we should avoid. Don't broadcast your religious deeds and accomplishments. If you attend church, or pray, or give, or serve in the church motivated by a desire to be seen and applauded, then your motives are *self*-centered, rather than *God*-centered.

But in this text of Scripture Christ not only identifies the problems of self-centered motivation and hypocrisy but He also tells us how we can overcome these problems. So my next point is this:

III. WE SHOULD GUARD & PROTECT OURSELVES FROM IMPURE MOTIVES

Once again, v.1 gives the general principle. As much as possible, we should not do our "righteous deeds before men." If you can do them privately and anonymously, then that protects your motivation. Now let's review how this would be done in each of the examples given by our Lord.

A. In Regard to Giving – Christ says in v.3, "But when *you* (emphatic[11]) do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." Not letting "your left hand know what your right hand is doing" is a combination of hyperbole and personification, not intended to be taken literally [demonstrate?]. What it means is this: Not only are we not to give to receive praise from men, but we should also not do so to receive praise from ourselves! Have you ever congratulated yourself? So if you want to protect your motivation, then you should give without fanfare and publicity. Don't go around bragging about how much you gave.

This teaching of Jesus is why we do not list the names of the top donors in our church. We rely upon tithes and offerings that are given out of gratitude and love for the Lord and to benefit others.

---

[10] Jesus engaged in public prayer (see 14:19; 15:36).

[11] As is the case in vv.6a, 17a, referring to the followers of Jesus.

Must *all* giving be anonymous? Not necessarily. When the church members laid their money at the Apostles' feet in Acts 4, it was not done in secret, for the generous giving of Barnabas was widely known in the church. I believe it is good for leaders to share their stewardship testimony, if your motive is to encourage others, and be a positive example.

Now let's see how to guard our motivation:

B. In Regard to Prayer - In v.6 Jesus says, "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place…." "You" in v.6 is singular. So instead of praying on a street corner, you should do most of your praying in private. It is tragic that so few Christians really spend much time in private prayer on a regular basis.

So as an aid to guard against selfish motivation, Jesus says "go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray…." The word translated "room" (*tameion*) or "closet" (KJV) means "a private chamber." It could refer to the storage room in a house (cf. 24:26; Lk. 12:3). There we can shut out the world and be alone with God.

Jesus practiced in principle what He preached. His public prayers were brief. He did most of His praying privately, often getting up early to go to a nearby mountain or remote place to pray (14:23; Mk. 6:46; Lk. 6:12; 9:28).

So do you have a private, special place where you pray? For some of you it may be a rug by your bed where you get alone with God. I like to pray on my front porch in the early morning, mostly shielded by our shrubbery. Others may get to work a little early and pray at their business desk with the door shut. We can pray in secret almost anywhere you can shut the world out and be alone with God.

C. In Regard to Fasting - Notice what Jesus taught about how we should fast. He said in vv.17-18, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting…." We are not to call attention to ourselves. If you make yourself look bad, it's because you want people to know that you are fasting. But *God* is omniscient (see also vv.4, 6, 8). He knows you are fasting. You don't need to put on a show for Him or others. You don't need to go around talking about your fast.

One implication from v.17 is that there is nothing wrong with making yourself look nice! (Cf. Eccl. 9:7-8).

So if you want to guard against selfish motivation for doing religious and righteous deeds, Christ advises doing them secretly, without calling attention to yourself. In fact, Jesus began this text with the command in v.1, "Take heed…." Watch out for improper, self-centered motivations in your life.

But we need to be careful that we do not take this teaching too far. He is not telling us to *never* do good works publicly. After all, in 5:16 Christ *commanded* us to do our good works before men to bring glory to God, and yet here we see that we are not to do them for the applause of men. This is not a contradiction when we have the right motive.

Finally:

IV. BY FAITH LET US SEEK THE *BEST* REWARD

The Lord uses the word "reward" 7 times in this text of Scripture. The Jews were taught a contrast between rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience in Deuteronomy 28

and elsewhere (cf. Isa. 65:6-7; 66:6). From the time we were children we learned that certain behaviors are rewarded, while bad behavior is punished. So we tend to do things that are rewarded and avoid doing things that are punished. But I want you to think about the two kinds of rewards that Christ talks about in this text of Scripture. First of all, as we have seen:

A. You Can Seek Temporary Praise from Men – In v.2 we see that some give publicly "that they may have glory from men." But notice what Jesus goes on to say about such giving, "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward." When Jesus says "have" here (also vv.5, 16), the Greek word (*apecho*) was commonly used on business receipts to mean "payment received in full" (cf. Lk. 6:24; Php. 4:18). So Jesus was saying that those who trumpet and parade their good works receive their reward the moment someone applauds or commends them, and that's *all* the reward they will get.

I will show you how temporary earthly rewards really are. Raise your hand if you remember who was the MVP of the 2024 World Series? [Freddie Freeman; no one raised their hand]. That was one of the greatest rewards the player could receive, but it doesn't take long before hardly anyone remembers or cares. Earthly rewards do not last!

So Jesus wants you to know about a better reward. Notice from our text:

B. You Should Seek an Eternal Reward from God - Jesus says in v.4 that if you do "your charitable deed … in secret… your Father who sees in secret will Himself[12] reward you [openly[13]]." It is far more important that *God* notices your good work than other people see your good work. God's reward is far superior to man's reward, for it is greater and eternal. You can also be rewarded in this life, such as with Godlike character and inner satisfaction.

So do the right thing as an expression of your love and gratitude for God, then you shall receive an *eternal* reward. It does require faith to be motivated by the *promise* of an eternal reward you do not see, but we Christians live by faith, not by sight.

Conclusion: I have been a pastor for over 40 years. Occasionally someone quit serving the Lord and I have wondered why. Did they quit because they did not receive enough recognition and appreciation for their service. If so, they were not serving for the right reason. Jesus teaches that you should guard your heart from the wrong motivation.

One of the most important applications of this teaching on hypocrisy is this: Is your Christian faith real and genuine? Have you been acting and looking to others like a Christian, but deep in your heart you know you are not? I will not judge you on Judgment Day. The Deacon will not judge you on Judgment Day. Your parents will not judge you. You may fool us regarding your Christian profession with outward Christian practices. You may even fool yourself, but you can't fool God. He has eyes as flames of fire that penetrate right through outward appearances. If you only practice Christian deeds for an *earthly* reward, such as praise and recognition, then you need to question whether you are a *true* Christian. When I ask you to bow your head in just a moment, ask God to reveal to you the true condition of your heart. If you have been *acting* like a Christian, instead of *becoming* a true Christian, repent of your sins and trust in Christ today!

---

[12] The word translated "Himself" may be emphatic.

[13] The words translated "openly" (εν τω φανερω) are not found in most ancient manuscripts.

Sources: H. Leo Eddleman, *The Teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5-7* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1975); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 2, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1972); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*: *Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

 The author credits the sources listed above and footnotes for much of the content. The "live" recording of this sermon will be more completely in the author's own words. To obtain an audio or video recording of this message, go to www.sermonaudio.com/pastorFelker. Dr. Felker's email address is S+Felker&2@aol.com (remove signs).