

Righteous Performers?

Originally, when Pastor Stan asked me if I would be interested in preaching this passage, my first thought was, “Great, hypocrisy and giving is everyone’s two favorite things to hear about” But then as I was studying this passage... I still thought... hypocrisy and giving... great... With that being said, what Jesus has for us in these verses is incredibly special and challenging and gospel filled if we will lean in and receive the truth from Him.

What is hypocrisy?

We live in a performative culture. Facebook, Instagram, twitter, the news, if you take a second to be even a little cynical, you can see that most everything has an element of performance and egotism. We curate and display what we want to display in front of people and delete the rest of the pictures. People on both sides of the aisle are not just telling us the news, they are adding editorial comments to make things sound better or worse in order to perform. We are people who crave attention and recognition. Perhaps you don’t think you are – ask yourself this question: who is the first person you look at in a photo with you in it? Another question, how do you feel when you are being helpful, doing something helpful, and someone else, who isn’t actually doing much of anything, gets thanked for the work? Perhaps you don’t like being the center of attention, but how does it make you feel when someone else is? We are performative people. In the late 50’s, early 60’s, there was a TV show called ‘leave it to beaver’ and this entire show was based around what America perceived to be basically the perfect American family and their lives. But part of the main part of that show was Wally and the Beav trying to hide what they did from their parents and try to act like everything was fine at the dinner table. That was in the 1960’s and that’s not a new idea. We perform! It’s what we do! All of the pictures of our founding fathers have them wearing those horrible wigs! Women wore corsets! There is no practical reason to wear a wig or a corset... our hearts want to perform. It’s what we want. And our culture enables us to do it! Even in our church culture, we are encouraged to perform – and this is what Jesus is talking about – we are encouraged to *perform* righteousness. The Bible knows this, and the Bible has a solution. Because even in the 1st century, people were performative and their culture enabled them to be. Let’s take a look at a passage that has a confusing explanation of this performative lifestyle and a solution for it.

Let’s read Matthew 6:1-4

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

I. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by

them.

I want us to understand the structure of what is going on in these verses. What Jesus says in verse 1, He reinforces with three examples in the following three passages. Let me read “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your father who is in heaven.” Then He restates it using the specific example of giving to the needy. He says, “So” which is saying, “for example” or “Therefore” and He isn’t going to stop with giving to the needy, He is going to talk about prayer and fasting too. Anyway, these are things you’re supposed to do. Don’t get this mixed up, these are things that you are supposed to do, but these are things that you can be a hypocrite while you do them. It’s all one thought but we get to have the fun paragraph headlines to make us chop up what Jesus said.

- i. Verse 2 – when you give to the needy.
- ii. Verse 5 – and when you pray.
- iii. Verse 16 – and when you fast.

These three principles are absolutely central to a religious life. They are called ‘spiritual disciplines’ by Richard Foster. For those who follow the Muslim religion, these are three of the five pillars of Islam. In Hinduism, charitable giving is called Dana. Putting it simply, these were common religious activities then and now. You just *do* these things if you are a religious person. That’s what Jesus says. So it’s not a matter of whether or not you do something, it’s a matter of where your heart is when you’re doing that thing. That’s a little more scary.

So, our problem is a problem of motivation; our problem is a problem in the heart. But it is very important that we understand the heart of hypocrisy. Jesus is making a very clear distinction between what He calls hypocrisy and what we often call hypocrisy. Hypocrisy to me – or what people mean when they call Christian’s hypocrites – is people who go to church and claim to be Christian but are living in sin, living lavish lifestyles while hoarding their resources, claiming to be people of forgiveness and compassion while judging everyone they see – that’s what I think of when I think of hypocrisy. Jesus calls hypocrisy the act of giving to the needy *in order to* be praised by others. So Jesus’ issue with hypocrisy, at least in this verse, is not claiming to be something and acting differently, but instead doing the right things with the wrong motivation, and as I think about hypocrisy in that way, I find myself guilty of this sin. I find myself guilty of being a righteous performer.

II. Jesus’ definition of hypocrisy, I want to say this again, is doing the right things for the wrong reasons. That is hypocrisy. But there is a foundation already laid for us in the earlier verses.

Jesus’ explanation of murder is not just killing but unholy anger in your heart. His definition of adultery is not physical adultery but lust in your heart. So Jesus’ definition of righteous actions are not just the action but the heart behind the action.

Jesus makes it clear that God is not interested in outward appearances. We know even from 1 Samuel that God is looking at the heart. He knows who you’re working for. He knows what you’re pursuing. He knows if we are seeking the approval of man or of God. Ultimately, our hearts are God’s concern – *therefore* – our hearts should be our primary concern. It is possible to avoid evil *actions* and still sin against God. It is possible to do righteous *actions* and not be approved by God.

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

It is possible to fast and pray and give to the needy and not do any of those things for God. That's the first, and the most important principle, which is why Jesus illustrates it three different ways. So now, let's drill in on giving – on generosity.

III. So *WHEN* you give to the needy...

Jesus is not saying that we are now not supposed to do good or bad things. He is not saying that we are now incapable of moving, doing, serving, anything without sinning, He is saying that we are still supposed to do these things, just do them differently. Just because it's possible for someone to do this with the wrong heart does not mean that we are exempt from doing it at all. Acknowledge that Jesus is assuming that this is already going on, this giving to the poor is already taking place.

Remember this is in contrast with murder and adultery which are things that you are super not supposed to do, but there are actually stricter requirements than you thought. This is a thing, this giving, that we think of as good, that we are now supposed to do with a different heart. In fact, Jesus actually delivers this in the format of many of the old testament laws – in Deuteronomy, laws often start by saying, “So when...” “So when you come against a city...” “So when you see your enemy's ox...” Jesus is delivering this in the same way that they read the law. So let's be clear, Jesus is not saying that if someone sees you, it's over – He says don't do it *so that* men see it.

We can see that Jesus is saying that the hypocrites do not do charity because of love for the poor, but for love of themselves. They are taking the focus away from the provision, protection, and dignity of those who cannot provide or protect themselves on their own and have put the focus on their own action of provision and protection. This, in the sight of God, is sin.

So who does Jesus use as an example?

IV. What were the Pharisees doing? How was their heart leading them astray?

Let's talk about the Pharisees briefly...

Basically, John the Baptist, Jesus, Stephen all share a common refrain when talking to the Pharisees: You followed the letter of the law while you disregarded the spirit – Jesus calls this hypocrisy. We all know the Pharisees. Jesus does not seem to be super friendly to their way of doing things. So He uses them once again as an example. Actually, Jesus doesn't say the word Pharisee but outlines an action done by the Pharisee's and calls them the hypocrites. That stings.

When a Pharisee was going to give a major donation, he would do it with such fanfare that everyone could see what a large amount of money he had put into the Temple treasury for the needy. Instead of going up reverently and dropping his coins in the appropriate shofar, he would parade up with much fanfare and pray long and loud (making sure everyone saw and heard him) before depositing his money. Quite a spectacle. They would literally, as Jesus says, announce themselves with trumpets. So in response to the Pharisees actions, Jesus teaches His disciples the heart of righteousness and, specifically, generosity. And it is very different from the Pharisees. They were giving to the needy, but they were doing it for themselves.

So Jesus says, “Do it in secret.”

Jesus pushes so far on this ‘secret righteousness’ that He says, “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” Jesus is using hyperbole again to prove a point, but just recognize the seriousness of hypocrisy in Jesus' mind!

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

This is a hard saying of Jesus – it really is. Think about the implications – taking care of your kids? Is that the right thing to do? Yes, but where is your heart? Serving your brothers and sisters here at Emmanuel? Is that the right thing to do? Yes, but where is your heart? Taking care of the poor and the sick? Is that the right thing to do? Where is your heart?

C.S. Lewis says this, “There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him.” Charity, kindness, generosity, hospitality! Where is your heart?

V. My heart:

The first part of me that this comes up against is the part of me that wants to justify myself. I want to say, ‘I’m not that bad. God, you’re standard is just too hard... like, isn’t it good enough that I’m being a good person? This isn’t fair. It feels like you just keep moving the bar. You keep moving the bar so that I can’t meet the requirements. I’m trying, but you are making me fail’

But friends this is grace. All of my efforts to establish and conform myself to God’s standards are insufficient and inadequate. I want to say this gently, but if you have not been moved by these messages about murder and adultery and the beatitudes, to humility, then I don’t think you’re allowing them to do their job. The point of these sermons – last summer – was to show us that, at heart, we are all murderers and adulterers and we desperately need Jesus to save us. If you don’t grasp that, you can’t have Jesus. That’s why it’s grace! He’s showing us all how much we need Him. The point of the Sermon on the Mount is to produce the poor in spirit...

VI. Doing righteousness.

I want to try to explain why performative righteousness is wrong... because you might still have doubts/questions about the problem with this.

Jesus says absolutely not to this kind of righteousness. But why? Because when I do those things, I’m not thinking about God or the person I’m helping. I’m doing it because of what I will get out of it – either a good feeling or a pat on the back. And Jesus says no to this. If you’re going to do something for someone else, but you’re thinking about what you are going to get out of it, Jesus says no!

Or even more cynically – I don’t want to, I don’t want to do those things, but I’m doing it because I have to. I don’t want to be at church, I’m not happy about it, but here I am anyway. Like the older son in the Prodigal son, I don’t want to be here with my father... I don’t want to celebrate with him, I don’t like my dad, and I just stay because I have to. Jesus says no to this! What we say is basically, “I want God to fix my life, and I think that if I don’t go to church, He won’t be happy with me, so I go to church to get something from God. I give to the poor to get something from God. I don’t love God or the poor, I just want people to notice me or I just want God to bless me” like it’s some kind of ATM. The older brother in the prodigal son did not need to confess the things he had done wrong, he instead needed to confess the reasons that he had done right. Many of us are this way too. You may think that I am being too harsh, but Jesus has just outlined for us the true meaning of murder and adultery. Where your heart is, where your mind finds itself, is where sin is creeping. Most often, our sin takes place in our hearts long before it comes out of our mouths or long before our hands move. For the bulk of chapter five, Jesus is encouraging us to avoid heart-sins, heart adultery, and heart murder, likewise, chapter 6 is about maintaining heart religion, doing what we do from an inward vital principle of intimacy

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

and generosity. But friends, if we don't allow this to break our hearts, we will never get to experience what Jesus says is the reward for those who understand what He has for us here.

VII. So how might we do charity without being hypocrites?

Do it for the people you are serving.

In a beautiful picture of Christ's coming in Matthew 25, Jesus asks His followers, "How did you treat the least of these?" To the sheep He says, "I was hungry, thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison. And you cared for me." And their response, it is so beautiful and innocent, "Lord, when did we see you?" See these people did not wait, they didn't wait for an organization, they didn't wait for a committee, they didn't wait for the Red Cross – they saw a need and they met it. They saw the hungry and the sick and they gave. They were not interested in themselves, and they didn't do it looking for a reward! "Lord when did we see you?" tells me that they didn't know that they were serving Jesus, they didn't know that they would get anything back from the people they were serving, they didn't know that they would get a tax refund, they just gave and gave and gave and gave. They cared, not about themselves, they cared about the hungry and the sick and the imprisoned and the naked. They cared. First. They just cared for the least of these. I think that this is a good place to start – by not judging the poor, by not judging the hungry, but meeting their needs. We must care for the poor – it's not an option.

Do it as a response for what God has done for you.

2 Corinthians 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.

Because of what Jesus did for us, generosity is a response. We should not be worried about earthly wealth because we are rich in Christ. Giving generously should be second nature for the follower of Christ, for the recipient of Christ's generosity. We should see what Jesus has done for us and it ought to make us generous.

You see the homeless person, the widow in our church, the struggling family, and you say, "When my spiritual poverty was killing me, when because of my decisions and my depravity, I deserved to be hell bound, Jesus gave up His divine privileges to make me rich. While I was His enemy, He made me rich. While I was His foe, He fought for me." Now it doesn't seem so bad to give. When you look at them, you see yourself, and remember what Jesus did for you and generosity flows out. And now you're not thinking about yourself. You're thinking about Jesus and His ability to save and transform. You know it's possible because He did it to you.

It doesn't matter if people see you.

You will not notice if people see you if those are the two things you first care about. Jesus doesn't say it is no good *if* people see you, He is saying it is no good if you do it *to be seen by them*. And in fact, you probably won't have too many people looking at you like you're a reasonable, awesome person... You might be the one running without a coat on. You might be the one sitting with undesirable people. You might be the one shivering because you gave your coat away in your joy. You might be the one who is eating a meal with 'those people.' The 'reasonable people' didn't think about Jesus in a very positive light... They all thought He was crazy... When you are radically generous, you'll have to give up on always trying to keep the right appearance because you are probably going to look ridiculous from time to time... You're going to look like a fool, and it'll be beautiful.

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

VIII. So let's talk about this reward:

Jesus has a great deal to say about reward. We have told ourselves for a long time that anything that comes with a reward should not be desired in our spiritual lives... Obviously, if you weren't paid, you would probably have to find a different job, but when it comes to spiritual matters, we shy away from the word reward. And partly it is because we read these types of verses and see that Pharisees have an earthly reward and that Jesus doesn't approve of them and we have told ourselves that real humility is in not receiving a reward and in rejecting any sort of praise, and a lot of that is good and true! And it gets compounded by other things as well... A non-Christian friend of mine who I have known for many years and have talked with about Jesus for many years recently told me that he still isn't sure if Jesus is real, and he doesn't want to follow Jesus just to get into heaven because he thinks that that is not the point. That he would just be being selfish... And in a way, I agree with him! But Jesus talks a lot about reward... Is there a way to seek reward and be approved by Christ? I'm going to make it worse before I try to explain, so stick with me here...

Seeking a reward is not an evil thing, but who are you seeking and why are you seeking it are the more important principles. C.S. Lewis has a great deal to say about reward as well, and I'm going to read some of that for you now.

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." He is saying, and I think he's right... that we are actually aiming our sights too low on our reward!

Let me apply this to our passage today – we are possessed with the idea of a retirement account or with having a nest egg in our savings account or in investing correctly and sometimes what we call stewarding is actually hoarding... but we are pleased with that. We are pleased with our bank account. God says, why are you pleased with that? I can give you more! He says, be generous, give, invest in my kingdom instead of in building yours. The satisfaction, the pleasure, the happiness, the joy that comes from giving has always been greater than the joy from getting. That's what He promises. He promises a reward to His children who acknowledge and believe that He is greater and worth more and more beautiful than anything that this world – especially money – can offer. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field! It was his joy to sell everything; to give everything away; to wave goodbye to this world so that he could have the reward of the kingdom.

And you're still saying, my heart is still saying, well 'isn't it still selfish? Isn't it still just for you then? For your joy, for your pleasure for your reward?' and Lewis responds, "Apparently what I had mistaken for humility had, all these years, prevented me from understanding what is in fact the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures—nay, the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure a dog before his master, a child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator. The satisfaction of having pleased those whom I rightly loved and rightly feared. And that is enough to raise our thoughts to what may happen when the redeemed soul, beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, learns at last that she has

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

pleased Him whom she was created to please. If God is satisfied with the work, the work may be satisfied with itself.” This is the reality of our approval. We are never free from the desire to try and please something with our work – it’s just a matter of what we do with that desire. We are supposed to desire the approval of God. That is good. To desire the approval of man over God, that is sin.

And this is the beauty of Matthew 25! They are living their lives, giving away, being radically generous, and Jesus, unbeknownst to them, is pleased with their work. Imagine the relief of those people, I pray it is us, to whom He looks and says, well done good and faithful servant, enter into my rest. Your work is done, you have gained your reward! You have this reward by forgetting yourself entirely, being lost in the beloved, being overtaken by the worth of the kingdom the worth of our king, and forgetting entirely who else might be watching.

Jesus says of the hypocrites, “they have their reward.” It is a reward, but it is a present reward. They have it; and there is none reserved for them in a future place. They now have everything that they are going to receive from God; they have their reward here, and cannot have a hope of one later! What rewards the godly have in this life are just a small taste, but there is more, much more waiting later on. Hypocrites, Jesus says, have their reward in full here on earth. Put it this way, for the Christian, for the true worshipper, the earth provides only basic physical provision, for the hypocrite, the earth provides payment in full. Which reward do you desire?

So let me ask you now about your motivation -

Why are you here? What made you come here this morning? Are you here because of duty? Are you here because coming to church feels like the right thing to do? Are you here because people might judge you if you missed three weeks in a row? Or do you come to church because you can’t stay away from the gathering of God’s people? Are you here because the thought of staying home and sleeping in is actually a worse thought to you than the idea of rejoicing and worshipping with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Why are you here? Why do you give? Do you give because you have to? Do you give because you interpret the passages about tithing to be commands? Or do you give because you cannot wait to see the Kingdom advance? Do you give because you cannot imagine valuing money more than you value Jesus? Do you give to the homeless and the widow because you love them and can’t stand to see your brothers and sisters suffer? Are you like the guy who finds the treasure in the field? Do you give out of the joy in your heart from what you have found in Christ.

And friends. Jesus came into this world to seek and to save the lost, He came into this world to die for sinners, the more that we reject the label of lost and sinner, the longer we keep ourselves from Christ. The more we think that we can pacify God’s wrath by giving, by fasting, or by praying on our own strength the more we are going to push away Christ. But the more we allow the conviction of the Holy Spirit to permeate our hearts, the more we allow the words of Jesus and the Law of God to work in our hearts, the more we realize that we are indeed as bad as He said we were and in just as desperate a situation as He said we were from the beginning, so the longer we push off the labels and argue with God about our moral standing, the longer we keep ourselves from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ our Messiah and king.

There are tons and tons of commands in the Old Testament – Jesus is not here to get rid of the law, in fact He has made it harder! But He is going to fulfill it. He is going to be the one who

Cole Flanigan

December 3, 2018

sets our example and acts as our substitute for all of the times that we have not given or have not been willing to give or given so that we could experience wholeness and relationship with God, He is going to fix it. But don't then take what He is saying lightly. Jesus is not messing around here. Our hearts really matter to Him, and like I said, this hurts me. I know what it means to try really hard to be 'good' in order to get the approval of other people. I am a performer to the core. But this must make us cling to the cross. This must make us latch on to Jesus – terrified by our propensity to sin, terrified by how deeply our sinful nature goes, terrified by the holy standard of God, and make us cling to the cross. Make us latch on to the salvation that only Jesus can provide, because it's just not going to happen if you are the one that it is counting on. And respond to his generosity and faithfulness with extravagant giving.

Cole Flanigan
December 3, 2018

"RIGHTEOUS PERFORMERS?"
Matthew 6:1-4

Hypocrisy

Giving

Reward