

The Sermon on the Mount – Part 3

Brynmawr Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 19th March 2011

Intro-

- We've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most well known teachings of Jesus, but not always easy to interpret, as it contains some hugely controversial and shocking statements. We saw how Jesus started by giving the qualities of those who will enter the kingdom of heaven. We previously noted that these qualities were not the qualities the world considers blessed, but with God, things are different.
- Perhaps the most shocking and controversial statement was the one that Jesus made when he said that unless your righteousness was greater than the Pharisees and the teachers of law you would certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. We noted that it was necessary to have a greater righteousness than we could exhibit ourselves; a righteousness which is a gift from God- i.e. the righteousness of Christ.
- Jesus then went on to give examples of the ways in which the teachers of the law were misinterpreting the law. Although they appeared to so many others to be great law keepers, in reality they were making up their own laws and were not obeying God's laws from the heart.
- In this session we will move on to look at the conduct of the Pharisees. Jesus has first shown to gaping holes in their interpretation of the law, and now he shows the gaping holes in their conduct. To help our understanding of this passage we will first look at a passage in Matthew, which speaks about Jesus's condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees.

Read Matthew 23:1-28

Read Matt 6:1-18

The Pharisees were famous in their charitable work for the poor and in their prayer lives and also in the dedication to God through fasting. They seemed to be the model as to how everyone should live their lives. Jesus here blows their cover in these three areas of dedication to God. We will look at each one in turn and see what lessons we can learn today.

Giving

- Jesus starts with a warning that we should not do our acts of righteousness in order to be seen by others. He starts off with something that everyone would consider to be good; the act of giving.
- Firstly, Jesus does not denounce giving, but rather says 'When you do, a charitable deed'. Here he is clearly saying that there is an expectation upon someone who says they are a follower of God, that they should be someone who is a giving person. When someone looks at each one of us would they describe us as being a giving people?
- Jesus gives a hilarious caricature of the person who really wants others to know that they are doing a good deed. Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse used to parody famous disc jockeys with their caricatures named "Smashie and Nicey". They would forever go on and on about their amazing work for charity saying "All for charidee mate" Are we secretly a little bit like that? Do we like people to know that it was us who gave the gift? Do we like people to know that we tithe?

- Jesus gets to the heart of our motivation. Are we a God-pleaser or a man-pleaser? Do we like to play to the camera? The true definition of a gentleman is one who behaves the same when no one is watching him- he holds his knife and fork properly etc. when alone.
- If what we do is to impress others then Jesus says we will have no reward from our Father in heaven. The Bible is clear that there are rewards in heaven. Later on in verse 20 Jesus encourages us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. I wonder how many times in our lives, we have lost our reward in heaven because we have 'let the cat out of the bag'. Sometimes it is impossible to give without others knowing, but God knows what is in our hearts and will reward us accordingly. I was once at a meeting where the leader of the meeting announced that he was going to put a certain amount into the offering and challenged others to match that. This may well have motivated others to give more, but I can't help thinking that the person may have lost a reward in heaven on this particular occasion. How is your bank account in heaven doing at the moment? There used to be an advert on television about a secret lemonade drinker. He would get up in the middle of the night, whilst others were asleep and go downstairs and sneakily open the fridge and help himself to a bottle of R. Whites Lemonade. Jesus says that we should be just a sneaky as this. He says that we should not even let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. This is sneaky. Are you a sneaky giver? Jesus promises open reward for those who are secret givers.
- Charles Spurgeon and his wife, according to a story in the Chaplain magazine, would sell, but refused to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, "You may have them if you pay for them." As a result, some people labelled the Spurgeon's 'greedy and grasping'. They accepted the criticisms without defending themselves, and only after Mrs Spurgeon died was the full story revealed. All the profits from the sale of eggs went to support two elderly widows. Because the Spurgeon's were unwilling to let their left hand know what the right hand was doing they endured the attacks in silence.

Praying

- Jesus goes on to talk about praying. He warns us not to be like the hypocrites (He says don't be like the hypocrites for each of these three areas- v2, 5, 16). The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word which means "play-acting". Greek actors would take on multiple roles in their place. They used different masks to change role. They would be adept at quickly changing from mask to mask and from role to role. Can we be like them sometimes? Are we adept at shifting into the prayer voice? Do we act differently at church to how we really are at home? Where do we pray the most? Is it in the secret place, or is it only public prayer? Are we habitual in our praying? If you love someone you want to spend time with them. We could spend time with someone because we are forced to or because we love them. Love should be our motivator. Grace motivates far better than legalism.
- Jesus encourages people to pray in their room with the door shut. He is not against prayer in a group context, but makes it clear that this should not be at the expense of private prayer. He tells us to shut the door so that others cannot see, so that our motivation is towards God, rather than for show. We often admire great ministries within the church, but we don't know the cost behind these ministries. The cost for Jesus was a life characterised by prayer alone with the Father. We have a choice: impress the crowd, or have intimacy with God. The Pharisees impressed with the crowd, but they had no intimacy with God. What about us?
- The Pharisees were good at praying. They were really good. They were professional. They could craft a good prayer. They could craft a long prayer. Sometimes in church people are put off praying, because they feel they cannot pray, as well as someone else. This is crazy. Prayer should be from the heart, and it should be simple and to the point. Jesus illustrates this principle here. This is the context here of the Lord's prayer. It is a very simple prayer, and gets straight to the

point without waffle. It is a very sincere prayer. It is a humble prayer. It is a prayer which glorifies God, and asks Him for His help. When we pray We need to remember the KISS principle. Keep it simple stupid.

- Jesus likens the religious people of his day with their long impressiven prayers to heathens. Their long prayers showed that they really had no faith at all. Their long prayers were like heathens trying to placate their gods. Jesus reminds us that our heavenly Father knows what we need before we even ask Him. He is not impressed by our long words and theological expertise. He longs to hear the cry of our hearts.
- This is a prayer of intimacy. God is addressed as Father, Abba, Daddy. The Aramaic term 'Abba' was an intimate term. Under Roman rule or a slave was never allowed to use the term 'Abba' or 'Imma' (mummy). However, if the slave was adopted, they had the privilege of using this term. This is what Paul speaks about in the book of Romans when he says that we are no longer slaves, but can cry 'Abba' to God. When we come to God in prayer, we need to remember that we are his children and he loves to give good gifts to us.
- This is a prayer full of worship. God's name is honoured. Our love for God will mean that we often can't help but express our praise to God. When we come to God, we need to remember that He is God and we are not. Our intimacy with God should not lead us to complacency. Our God is an awesome God. This is a prayer which contains daily worship because it mentions daily bread, so it is a daily prayer. I do not believe that God wants us to literally repeat this prayer word for word every day, as this becomes vain repetition, which Jesus has only just warned us about. Instead Jesus, I believe is speaking about the elements necessary for regular, healthy prayer times with the Father.
- The prayer asks for God's kingdom to come. This is the message which we preach. It is the coming of God's kingdom, the reign of Jesus in people's lives. Here we can pray for unbelievers to come to know God. We can pray for the advancement of the Gospel. We can pray for people to be healed.
- 'Give us this day our daily bread' means asking God for his provision. This may be physical provision in terms of finances, or food, or clothing. It may be the necessary word from God that we need, or wisdom in a situation.
- 'Forgive us our debts' means walking in close fellowship with God, bringing any sin before him and asking for his forgiveness. It means keeping a clear conscience before God.
- Jesus then points out the need to forgive other people. He makes the point that how can we expect God to forgive us if we are not prepared to forgive other people? As this is regular time alone with God, it can prevent bitterness from taking root in our lives. It is the antidote to anger. It is the antidote to gossip. It is the antidote to anxiety and paranoia. It is an ongoing time of getting right with God, and making sure that we are right with other people as much as it depends on us. The test of whether or not, we have really forgiven someone is whether or not we are prepared to pray for them. It might be tempting to pray for destruction and curse someone, but we are called to do the opposite; to bless and pray for our enemies.
- The prayer finishes with worship. As Christians we can sometimes slip into the habit of only worshipping God when we meet with other Christians. Jesus advocates here a lifestyle of daily, private worship.

Fasting

- Jesus speaks about fasting and uses the words 'When you fast'. This means that fasting is not weird, but a normal part of a godly life. In the Old Testament people were only commanded to fast one day a year, according to the law; on the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:27 'afflict your souls'). All of the other special days were feast

days. Despite this, the Pharisees used to fast twice a week (Lk 18:12). Jesus does not criticise the Pharisees for fasting twice a week, but for bragging about it.

- Fasting is a spiritual discipline and is useful when we are seeking God about an important situation, for guidance or for breakthrough. In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appoint elders and commend them to the Lord. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out after the leaders in Antioch had a word from God whilst they were 'Ministering to the Lord and fasting'. In response to this revelation, the leaders fasted and prayed and laid hands on them and sent them away. Paul says that he was in fasting is often 2Cor 11:27, 2Cor 6:5.
- In Acts 10 whilst Peter is in prayer and hungry on a roof God shows him in a vision that the Gentiles are to come to Christ, meanwhile, whilst a centurian, Cornelius had been praying and some manuscripts add fasting as angel appeared to him and told him to send for Peter to come, and where he would be staying. The result was the gospel came to the gentiles. This shows the power of fasting in the right way.
- Some people cannot fast for physical reasons; for example diabetics. However, there may well be other areas where we can fast as we seek God. Paul mentions that it is viable for couples in agreement to abstain from sexual relations for a limited period of time in order to commit to prayer. It may be appropriate to say that whatever takes our time and our energy, such as a computer, or some other hobby may be an area where we can fast in order to commit more fully to prayer 1Cor 7:5; Ex 19:15.
- The Pharisees were quick to tell people that they fasted twice a week. When we fast it should be to the Lord rather than to impress others. Often the temptation when we fast is to go around and tell as many people as possible. This defeats the whole purpose of fasting. Jesus says we have received our reward in full when we do this. However, there is a great blessing and reward when we secretly fast. We know we don't need to fast in order to be accepted by God or to earn his favour; we already have it. Fasting helps us to get in tune with God, and is a way of re-prioritising our lives. It can help where there are strongholds in us that need to be broken. However, fasting itself can become a bondage is done for the wrong reasons.

Summary

- The spiritual life is one which is humble, and God-directed. It can be so easy to slip into a show in front of other Christians. We might presently look really good to those who are Christians in this church, but how honestly, is our relationship with God?
- Are we a regular secret giver? Are we a regularly secretly committed to prayer? Do we set aside times, where we fast and seek God?
- Are we free from the shackles of legalism and simply serving out of our love for God?

Song: In the Secret, in the quiet place