PRACTICE YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS TO BE SEEN BY YOUR FATHER

Matthew 6:1–18

Key Verse: 6:1

“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.”

Who’s looking? What a question! Often we pretend like we don’t care, but we really do. Some adults crave attention, just like little children. Psychiatrists call it histrionic personality disorder. Such people have always got to be the center of attention. They make the people around them tired with their constant nagging. But actually, we all have a normal desire to be recognized for what we do. Today’s passage speaks to this: Whose recognition are we seeking?

As we’ve seen, when he begins his ministry Jesus has to start in an already very religious society. It’s not easy, because he sees some serious problems in what’s going on. Jesus wants his disciples to be better than the so-called religious leaders of the day. Basically, he wants us to respect the Bible, learn what it says, practice it, and finally, teach it. Jesus has a great hope that his disciples will grow to be godly Bible teachers, and that through their Bible teaching, countless people will also come to God’s kingdom. Through six practical examples Jesus showed us that practicing God’s commands isn’t just about outward behavior but about what’s in our hearts. Ultimately, practicing God’s commands means loving even our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (5:44). Now Jesus moves on to three other forms of piety—giving, praying and fasting. Every good Jew was already supposed to be doing these things regularly. Jesus didn’t tell his disciples to *stop* doing them, but to be *careful* about *how* they did them.

Read verse 1. He’s teaching a major principle, which he’ll apply to giving, praying and fasting. What is it? It’s to live before God, not before people. In 5:16 he said to let our light shine before others, that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. But here he says to be careful not to practice our righteousness before others, but only before our Father in heaven. At first, these two sayings seem contradictory. But he doesn’t mean we should be hiding all the time what we’re doing. He simply means that we should be seeking not people’s recognition, but God’s glory. There are some key things to note in this verse.

Look at verse 1 again. First of all, it’s not easy to understand the phrase “your righteousness.” Often we don’t feel like *we* have *any* righteousness. We easily associate practicing righteousness with self-righteousness. What *is* “your righteousness”? Jesus said back in 5:20 that our righteousness needs to surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He meant we have to go deeper than them. We can’t just know the Bible or keep it outwardly; we have to grasp the spirit of God’s law. We can’t just teach it to others; we have to show it by our personal example. Jesus taught us to show ourselves as children of our Father in heaven, meaning we have to be generous, kind, and loving like God, even toward those who hate us. Jesus concludes that we have to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48)—perfect in character, perfect in holiness, perfect in maturity, perfect in love. Obviously, that’s going to require lots of struggle and a life-long discipline of seeking God and imitating him. We’re righteous not by works but only by faith in his grace (Eph2:8,9). But by faith we need to be pursuing God’s righteousness that changes and sanctifies us. We should encourage one another to be pursuing this righteousness and practicing this righteousness. Instead of asking, “How’s your studies?” or “How’s your health?” we should be asking one another, “How’s your righteousness?”

Read verse 1 again. Jesus says that by practicing our righteousness, we’ll have a “reward.” In chapter 5 he’s already mentioned a reward twice (12,46). In today’s passage he mentions it seven more times (1,2,4,5,6,16,18). He’s serious: the reward is important. What’s he talking about? In verse 20 he says it’s like storing up “treasures in heaven.” So it can’t be money or material or human benefit on earth, which eventually perish; he’s talking about an eternal reward. But what’s that? The Bible calls it the reward of being close to God forever (Ps16: 11). It’s the reward of experiencing God’s love, peace and joy even now in this life (Eph3:19; Php4:7; 1Pe1:8). Ultimately, it’s the reward of sharing his glory in his kingdom (Ro8:17; 1Th2:12; 1Pe5:10). Many people think it’s not good to be doing something just to get a reward. Of course we should serve God purely, out of love for him. But Jesus repeatedly promises God will reward us—if what we’re doing is truly for him. So we all should learn to be seeking God’s reward.

Read verse 1. He’s already mentioned “your Father in heaven” three times (5:15,45,48). Here he mentions him ten more times (1,4,6, 8,9,14,15,18). So in today’s passage his teaching on our Father in heaven may be most important. The Old Testament addresses God as “Father” 15 times. But Jesus takes this truth about God to a whole new level. He wants us to think about God not as if he’s scary or remote, but as our loving heavenly Father. In verse 8 he says our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask him. In verse 9 he tells us to call him, “Our Father in heaven.” He wants us to have the utmost respect for God, but also he wants us to be sure of his love and to feel totally secure in him.

Jesus also repeats that our Father “sees what is done in secret” (4,6,18). It tells us that God our Father is everywhere. He knows everything. We can’t hide from him (Ps33:13–15; Ps139). He made everything, including our hearts, and that’s what he’s really looking at. He wants to see not just our actions but also our motives (Ro2:7,8). Because of who God our Father is, Jesus later predicts, “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be brought out into the open” (Mt10:26). We may try to hide our motives from others, and we might succeed, but God our Father sees and knows everything.

This truth isn’t meant just to scare us. When we live in the presence of our Father God, we can come to him, confess our sins, repent and be forgiven, and then, live transparently, without pretense, as forgiven sinners. Before our Father God we can be confident of who we are and unafraid of people, no matter who they are. God our Father sees not only the bad but also the good. The Bible repeatedly teaches that God our Father will repay each person based on the truth of what he sees (Mt16:27; cf. Job34:11; Ps62:12; Pr24:12; Ecc12:14; Isa3: 10,11; Jer17:10; 32:19; Ro2:6; 1Co3:8; 4:5; 2Co5:10; Gal6:7,8; Rev2:23; 20:12; 22:12). People may never notice the good we’re trying to do, but God our Father sees it all. By saying, “your Father sees what is done in secret,” Jesus wants to motivate us to do good before the eyes of our Father in heaven. Though people often misunderstand and even hurt us, we should commit ourselves to our faithful Creator and continue to do good (1Pe4:19b). To really live like this, we’ve got to fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, and persevere because we see him who is invisible (2Co4:18; Heb11:27b).

Read verse 2. In this passage Jesus repeats the word “hypocrites” three times (2,5,16). “Hypocrites” has several meanings. Originally, it meant to be an actor, someone who wears a mask, who has two faces, a faker. Jesus said elsewhere it means not practicing what we preach (23:3). But here he says the “hypocrites” are those seeking personal glory while pretending to be serving God. They actually do a good deed of giving to the needy, but they announce it with trumpets, to be honored by others. They get human honor fully, but not God’s. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were seeking human honor through all their activities, such as how they dressed, where they sat, and the titles they expected others to address them with (23:5–7). Why is Jesus telling us this? He’s warning us that we all can be just like such hypocrites. Outwardly it can look like we’re serving God, but inwardly we can be seeking our own glory. We can understand people seeking personal glory through their own human achievements. But how could people possibly be trying to gain personal glory through church activities? It’s weird, but we still do it. For example, we can always be sure to tell others at church whenever we go out to invite people to Bible study, so that we’ll feel more powerful, or even superior. We can love to be seen teaching the Bible to a student or sitting with a student at church or at a conference, secretly hoping others will be impressed with us. At meetings we can talk a lot about the Bible students we’ve had, not because God was working in them but because we want the reputation of being fruitful. We can even write and share a reflection on a Bible passage not to grow, but just to look good. We can exaggerate small things to sound way better than they really are. We can talk a lot about ministry, when in fact we’re doing very little ministry.

How does Jesus help us? Read verses 3,4. He’s telling us to do it in secret, only for our Father in heaven to see. Of course he doesn’t mean to always be going out of our way to hide what we’re doing. Instead, he gives us a simple tip: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” It can mean not to calculate about any benefit we might receive. It also can mean to immediately forget about any good we’ve done. It’s the opposite of our tendency. We like to gloat over anything good we do. But with this expression “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” Jesus is telling us to quickly put it out of our minds, to act like it never even happened. It reminds us of the righteous people Jesus describes later, who did many good things in their lives but couldn’t remember any of it (25:37–40).

Jesus also teaches us to apply this same principle when we pray. In fact, he spends the most time here, verses 5–15, teaching about prayer. Read verses 5,6. He doesn’t mean we should never pray in public, but that our motive should not be to impress others, but to sincerely talk to God. It’s good to pray together at church meetings, if it’s for the right reasons. But we should be spending even more time alone with God in secret prayer, as the mainstay of our spiritual life. If we pray only when we’re at church or with others, but not really when we’re alone, it’s likely that our prayers are only part of a show we’re putting on for others. On the other hand, going to God alone in prayer is one of the greatest privileges we have, through faith in Jesus. In him and through faith in him we can approach our Father God with freedom and confidence (Eph3:12). We can cast all our anxieties on him, because he cares for us (1Pe5:7). Through personal prayer we won’t be anxious about anything; in every situation we just present our requests to God, and God’s peace guards our hearts and minds (Php4:6,7).

Jesus teaches us something else about prayer. Read verses 7,8. Here he says the pagans keep on babbling in prayer. Why? He says “they think they will be heard because of their many words.” They’re trying to use prayer to manipulate the spiritual world, to get what they want. Some even shout at God, demanding him to do something. Ecclesiastes 5:2 reads, “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” It means to take time to quiet ourselves before saying anything, to meditate on who it is we’re talking to. We should remember that we’re talking to our Father in heaven, who knows what we need before we ask him. It means our prayers should be full of faith. In the next chapter Jesus says we should not passively sit back, but ask, seek and knock, trusting our Father in heaven wants to give us good gifts (7:7–11).

Often we don’t know how to pray; we feel like scatterbrains, overwhelmed by our situation, our problems and our feelings, confused and weak. To help us form a healthy spiritual life, Jesus goes on. Read verses 9–13. This prayer it not meant to be a magic incantation we say when we’re in trouble; it’s a model of how to order our prayer life. The first half focuses on God and his concerns; the second half is about us and our needs. We don’t naturally even think about God, and we naturally tend to depend on ourselves. We need spiritual discipline in prayer to learn to truly focus on God and to truly depend on him in our practical lives. It’s called “spiritual formation.” Over time, it actually changes our hearts to be God-centered and humble enough to truly depend on him.

Read verse 9 again. Our first prayer request should be, “hallowed be your name.” “Hallowed” means to make holy. God’s name is already holy, whether we pray or not. But when we pray like this, first and foremost, a genuine desire for God to be glorified replaces our desire for our own glory. We stop trying to steal God’s glory for ourselves, and we really start longing for God to be glorified, that people would really get to know him, “even through me.” Ezekiel 36:23 reads, “I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.” If we don’t make this prayer request, “hallowed be your name,” our very first priority, we end up profaning God’s name through our hypocrisy. But when we really do pray it from our hearts, people can begin to see the great and holy God, “even through me.” It’s a prayer for God to help me to glorify him by truly living a holy life. It’s also a prayer for our world, that people would stop ignoring him and truly get to know this awesome God who’s real.

Read verse 10 again. Jesus wants our prayers to focus on God’s kingdom coming. It’s the best prayer topic in this fallen world. No human utopia, no human success in this world, could ever be better than God’s kingdom coming. When we repent and believe in Jesus, God’s kingdom becomes our real destination, our eternal home. Praying this prayer helps our hearts not to get engrossed by the things of this world, like possessions and pleasures. We also pray this prayer because it’s what God really wants to do for all people. God our Father longs to bring all people back to his eternal kingdom, where there will be no more sin, no more curse, no more death. As we pray for people, we shouldn’t be trying to fix their immediate problems; we should be praying for them to know the glorious hope of God’s kingdom. This prayer request keeps us from focusing on trying to build our own kingdom. When we’re not sure about this hope, we even try to use ministry to build our own kingdom. But when we’re sure of the hope of God’s kingdom, we’re free to serve and help all kinds of people, whether they stay with us or go somewhere else. We may not see visible fruit in our ministry, but we firmly believe God’s invisible kingdom will surely become real someday, and whatever we do for his kingdom is never in vain.

Jesus adds, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is not a surrender to fate; it’s an eager longing to see God’s will done. What is God’s will? Sometimes it seems vague, but it’s not. God’s will is his desire to save. He is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2Pe3:9). He wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1Ti2:4). To pray for his will to be done means to pray for his salvation to spread to the whole world. Personally, it means to pray for his will to be done, ahead of my own. Jesus later emphasizes that his disciples are those who do the will of God (7:21; 12:50). He himself showed the best example of how to pray like this just before his arrest. He didn’t want to go through with it because it meant so much personal suffering, but he prayed three times, until he could really overcome himself, “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (26:39, 42,44). To be godly, we need to seriously imitate his prayer, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Read verse 11 again. Now Jesus balances a focus on God and his greater purposes with a focus on our everyday needs. And the first of these is to pray for daily bread. Proverbs 30:8,9 reads, “Keep falsehood and lies from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” God’s basic training for his people is to depend on him for daily bread each and every day. This is how God trained the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years, to gather only enough manna for the day. We take our daily food for granted. We think we earn our own money and provide for ourselves. It seems unnecessary to pray for daily food when our refrigerator is full or we have plenty of money to pick up a quick bite or order food. We even think it’s unspiritual to pray for our daily food. But by really praying for this, we learn that it’s actually God who’s with us every day to sustain us. We learn to be thankful even for small things like a delicious meal or drink. We experience firsthand the loving care of God our Father. To ask for daily bread also means to pray to feed each day “on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt4:4). It means to have personal devotions each day, feeding our souls on his word. It also says not “my” daily bread but “our” daily bread, meaning we also should be praying for the material and spiritual needs of those around us. Praying for “our” daily bread keeps us from remaining in our natural selfishness.

Read verse 12 again. Here, “debts” is a metaphor for sins, and “debtors,” for those who sin against us. The spiritual reality is, our sins are like huge debts we’ve rung up and could never pay back, even over an entire lifetime of hard work. We should pray for forgiveness daily, not because we don’t believe Jesus has already forgiven us, but because we still sin against God all the time, often without even knowing it. Our sins, conscious or unconscious, cut us off from close fellowship with our Father God. Especially when we sin intentionally, we feel hopeless to approach God. But no matter how much we fall down, we can get back up and pray this prayer. Psalm 103:10–12 reads, “…he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” Our great Father God really wants to forgive us. And just as food is always a daily necessity for our bodies, so forgiveness is always a daily necessity for our souls. Asking God’s forgiveness every day keeps us connected to his grace, and it helps us grow deeper and deeper, stronger and stronger in his grace. The more we’re aware of his forgiveness, the brighter and happier we are. It’s also a prayer to help us forgive others. In this fallen world people sin against us all the time, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. We get hurt. We hold grudges. We fight back. We can’t seek fellowship with our Father God and at the same time, ignore our relationships with others. Read verses 14,15.

The final prayer request in the Lord’s Prayer is in verse 13. Let’s read it. This prayer request acknowledges how vulnerable we are. So many people think they’re invincible. People say, “I can handle it.” But nobody can really handle the devil’s temptations. He may not always tempt us with obvious sins, but he often tempts us with subtle sins, like doubt, unbelief and fear, bitterness and despair, pride and vanity. The devil is way more clever than we are, and he knows exactly where our weak spots are. He attacks us not just personally, but also in our families, in our church community, and even in our entire nation. We should never be playing around with temptation, but always be praying, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

In verses 16–18 Jesus applies the principle of living before the eyes of God our Father to fasting. Hypocritical people want to gain glory for themselves through fasting, even if it’s just one meal, or just chocolate for Lent. But true fasting should be done secretly, only for God to see. It’s to help us repent, to resist temptation, to mend broken relationships, and to pray more fervently for those in trouble. Fasting also helps us become more discerning to see God’s leading in our lives. Christian life is meant to be joyful like a wedding feast, with much eating and drinking, because we experience the grace of our Lord Jesus. But fasting also has its time and place, if it’s done before God.

Today Jesus challenges us. Let’s read verse 1 again. May God help us be careful to live before the eyes of God in all we do.