

As we think about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and discipleship, we discover he's interested in something more than our outward behavior. The whole time he's really been addressing what's going on in here, in our hearts. This morning we're going to talk about that means and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 6:1-4: "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. ²Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Motives: That's what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel. Our motives are why we do the stuff we do when no one else is looking. Jesus said, **Matthew 6:1, "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."**

So what's the alternative to "**practicing your righteousness**" – or doing cool stuff in the name of God, to use modern parlance – to be seen by others? To do cool stuff to be seen by God, of course.

The phrase, "**practicing your righteousness**" may sound foreign to us. It rings of good works and earning points for heaven. In the Lutheran church we often error on the side of not talking about practicing our righteousness at all, for it's a slippery slope. After all, we wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea and to begin to think that God has any expectations of us!

But he does. **Psalm 106:3** reads, "**Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!**" The psalmist talked about what people who are

“**blessed**” do, which is to say, the people of God are blessed by virtue of God’s grace, and thus they/we do cool stuff in the name of God.

Here’s an earthly illustration to help us understand this statement, to better grasp what it means to be “**blessed**.” If I said, “Wealthy is the man who lives in Beverly Hills,” we would not think that a man became wealthy because he moved to Beverly Hills. Rather, we would say that a man must be wealthy if he lives in Beverly Hills.

So too, if we do righteous deeds we must be “**blessed**,” which is another way of saying, we must be saved. Thus, when we do cool stuff in the name of God, we are living our salvation. And this is where the rubber meets the road: Our salvation is our motive for performing acts of righteousness. When Jesus warns us not to practice our righteousness in order to be seen by other people, the reason is obvious: To do so would be to take credit for God’s work in our lives and to become puffed up with pride.

This is the introduction for Christ’s three acts of righteousness which he illustrates in this sermon. First, there are alms, next are prayers, and finally there is fasting. Each teaching follows a simple outline: First, there’s a warning about what not to do. Second, there’s instruction about what to do. And third, there’s the promise, which is the same for each act: “**your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**”

This week we’re going to talk about alms, which are charitable gifts. The Lord begins with the warning about what not to do. He said, “**when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you.**” Does anyone have a trumpet? (I didn’t think so.) This is a metaphor for anything we might do to bring attention to ourselves, and the point is clear: We cannot glorify ourselves and God at the same time.

But maybe we could go 40-60? 20-80? Maybe just a little bit of bragging? No way! God wants and deserves all the glory. To those whose motives were misdirected, Jesus said, “**when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward**” (v.2).

In other words, braggarts will receive nothing in this life nor in the next from God.

And then there's the instruction about what we should do. Jesus said, "**do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.**" Looking again? Bad hand! This is another example of Jesus' use of poetic imagery to make his point, which is, be discrete with your charitable gifts.

And finally, there's the promise. Jesus said, "**your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**" What's the reward? Jesus said to his listeners just a little earlier in the Beatitudes, **Matthew 5:11, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."**

Jesus was preparing his disciples for their future trials. They would lose everything, many, their lives. So the rewards Jesus was talking about was not temporal, earthly rewards. Rather, our rewards are eternal, heavenly rewards. He wants us to focus on our final destination, to keep this always before us.

I want to give you a real life illustration for how this may play out in the lives of real people. But I'm not going to use my own life. Rather, I'm going to give you a picture of the lives of people among whom I've ministered in the Third World. I've worked with Christians who live and work in trash dump ghettos in Southeast India and in the far flung villages of East Africa where there is no running water, electricity, or a sewer system, let alone medical services of any kind; and I've ministered among day laborers in Southeast Asia who live hand-to-mouth in the most squalid, rat-infested conditions imaginable. What I've experienced among these Christians is a faith which is deeper and more vibrant than anything I've ever observed in my own country which is filled to overflowing with affluence.

These Christians have nothing but the shirts on their backs and yet the outpouring of love, the generosity of spirit, the hospitality and hopefulness I've witnessed in their lives is other worldly. These brothers and sisters in Christ are absolutely confident the Lord will provide for their daily needs, and if he doesn't, they know he intercedes for them that they will have everything they need the next day. They do not associate their outward poverty with their inward joy. They know God has already redeemed them and declared them his sons, his daughters; they live with eternity in their hearts.

These living examples of faith and faithfulness encourage me, for whether I'm wealthy or poor in this life, I know my joy can and will always be full. If I should lose everything of earthly value tomorrow or inherit a great fortune, nothing of

any significance will change in my heart, for my inheritance in eternity is still the same.

If we can think like this, we can then understand God's peace, that peace which passes all understanding, a peace for this life and for the life to come. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us live with eternity in our hearts.

Jesus wants us to give alms or charitable gifts generously to our church and to other charities, but more importantly he wants us to give ourselves, our very lives to him. Alms are only a symbol of something much more profound. Our Lord Jesus gave us himself on the Cross, the ultimate gift. With this gift we have received everything we need to live our salvation for him.

This week let us live in gratitude for everything we have received from the Lord for this life and the next.

This week let us pray, "Dear Father in Heaven, help me to live my salvation today in your name."

And this week, let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.