

Sermon on the Mount

Message 9

True and False Piety

Matthew 6:1-18

America's Greatest Sin

What is the greatest sin in America? Is it idolatry? Hardly! Who cares whether you worship idols or not? Is it adultery? Of course not! You can even get elected to public office these days after committing adultery. Perhaps the most admired American after 9/11 was Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York, for his masterful handling of the Twin Towers disaster. He left his wife for another woman, but it hardly hurt his public image. Is the greatest sin murder? No, not even murder. Even if we discount the daily murder of unborn babies, murderers are often excused due to the difficult circumstances of their lives. But the one sin which is unforgivable is the sin of insincerity. Bill Clinton got away with adultery, but when he attempted to cover up his actions, even his supporters turned against him.

You can do or believe pretty much anything you wish in American society, but the one thing which will cause you to lose all respect is to act insincerely. And nowhere is insincerity hated more than in Christians. The Catholic Church is in serious trouble today because some of her priests have been sexually abusing children. (I hasten to add that Catholics are not the only Christians who have had these problems. They're just the most visible lately.) This is a very serious problem by itself, but what has caused an uproar even among the most loyal Catholics is the growing sense that the church has been covering up the crimes. Christians are held to a higher standard than the world, and when they fail and then lie about it, everyone turns against them. It's the insincerity that pours fuel on the flame of public disgust.

This is one of the few issues on which Jesus and the world see eye-to-eye. Jesus hated insincerity, too. He called it hypocrisy, and it was perhaps the sin which He opposed more than any other. Jesus was gentle with thieves, adulterers, and all manner of sinners – but He was unfailingly severe with hypocrites. If you are a sinner, Jesus gives you a warm welcome – but if you are pretending to be righteous when you aren't, Jesus has some rough things to say to you.

Let's get our bearings before we plunge ahead into tonight's passage. This Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' vision of His Kingdom. This is a picture of what His people will look like. It's not what we are now, but what we are becoming. The key component of Jesus' Kingdom is not power, or wisdom, or wealth – but righteousness. Jesus' followers must be more righteous than the holiest people on earth – the Pharisees – because Jesus' followers must be righteous all the way through. It's not enough simply to do the right things, our hearts must be right, too. Good behavior is of no use unless you have a heart of love for God and man to back it up. So far Jesus has shown that true obedience to God's law involves – requires – an obedient heart as well as right behavior. Now in this next section He turns our attention to religious activities. As we look at charitable giving, prayer, and fasting, Jesus highlights the difference between true and false piety.

True and False Piety

What picture does the word "piety" bring to mind? Do you see monks in long robes, hands folded in prayer? Do you see nuns caring for the poor, like Mother Theresa? Do you see holy men fasting in desolate places? Piety is not a commonly used word these days, and the popular images attached to it are hardly what Jesus had in mind when He taught His disciples godly living. Among us we tend to divide into those who think of piety as compassion for the needy versus those who think of piety as religious duties. Which is it? Attitude or action? As with most such questions, the answer is both. The tendency to divide life into these compartments can be traced to a Greek idea – the division of man into body and soul. The Greeks thought of the body as the prison of the soul, and most of Greek religions involved the effort to separate the

“good” soul from the “bad” body. If you are thinking this way, you will end up valuing “spiritual” activities more than “physical” ones. You will be more interested in prayer than serving the poor. But this is a pagan idea. The Biblical concept of man is not a soul imprisoned in a body, but a unified body-soul complex. Attitude and action go hand-in-hand. They are two sides of the same coin. There is no pleasing God without both righteous attitudes *and* righteous actions. What’s needed is compassion on poor *and* giving to the needy; delight in God *and* a regular schedule of prayer; valuing God above all else *and* periodic abstinence from food. Heart and hand go together. True piety is to love Jesus and man, *plus* to give alms, pray and fast.

Jesus lays out His argument right in the first couple of verses. He says, do not do your good deeds before men so they will be seen by men. People who do this are hypocrites. They have already received their reward. Instead do your good deeds in secret. Your heavenly Father sees in secret, and He will reward you.

Now, why would anyone do good deeds so everyone can see? Do you go into the middle of the dining hall to pray so everyone can see you? Do you wait until your friends are around to write a check for the homeless shelter? I doubt it! But isn’t it true that those who give big donations are often featured in the news? And you know that Drinker and Mudd Halls are not so called for the resonance of their names! Why are there Mudd Halls at Lehigh and Johns Hopkins and a dozen other universities? It’s because Mr. Mudd enjoys having his name displayed in universities across the country. People do their good deeds in public because they get a reward that way. Appreciation, fame, status all come to those who do good. American society is so secular, few people value prayer, so there is no reward for praying in public. But in religious societies such as India or Medieval Europe or first century Judea, prayer was highly valued and people who prayed much and well were greatly admired. It was very gratifying to be seen as a man of prayer, or generous to the poor, or one who fasted – and people sought to be recognized for their deep piety.

Jesus makes fun of such people by saying they blow a trumpet before they give to the poor, and go into the streets to say loud prayers. This sounds silly. It’s *supposed* to sound silly, because these people are foolish. They are lusting for a reward and they get what they want, but it’s a poor return for their effort. Jesus says they have all the reward they are going to get. But those who do not seek public acclaim will receive something much, much better. They will get a reward from God Himself. This is a very important point. Three times in this passage Jesus says of the hypocrites, “Assuredly I say to you, they have their reward,” and three times He says to his followers, “Your Father who sees in secret will (Himself) reward you openly.” You know whenever Jesus repeats something it is important, and this He repeats three times! Well, think about it. Which would you rather have, a reward from your friends and neighbors, or a reward from God? Even asking the question is a bit ridiculous. Surely anything God gives would be infinitely more valuable than the best that man could give. No one in his right mind would prefer man’s gift to God’s. The message is very clear: don’t be an idiot. Seek God’s favor. Do your religious activities in private.

Now when Jesus said, “Do not do your righteous acts before men to be seen by them,” He seems to exclude public acts of piety. Does this mean, then, that you should never pray before meals in the dining hall? Should you refuse to help someone if there are people around to see you? Must you sneak off to another country to hold your fast so no one can find out about it? Of course not! If you remember, Jesus has already commanded public obedience for His followers. In chapter 5 verses 14 to 16 He said,

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

No, we must live openly as Christians before the whole world, and this will at times include praying and ministering to others in public. Jesus doesn’t exclude all public religious acts, just those designed for display. The point is not to avoid prayer in public, but not to blow a trumpet before you pray. Go to the

homeless shelter, but don't brag about it to your friends. The principle is this: "Don't hide out of cowardice, and don't show off for human approval." So don't ignore the beggar out of callousness, greed or impatience, but don't give to show how good you are. Don't sleep in on Sunday to avoid teasing from your roommate, but neither should you go to church so you look good to your parents and campus minister. Don't call or write to your parents simply to get a reward (maybe financial in this case!), but because you genuinely love and honor them. Regarding religious practices the bottom line is this: "Don't hide out of cowardice, and don't show off for human approval."

The Practice of Piety

Hypocrisy is the subject of this passage, but did you notice what is assumed all the way through? Jesus assumes that His followers will do the things He is discussing. We must not seek public praise for our piety, but piety *is* expected. You would think this needs no mention, but we all fail, don't we, and we do need to be reminded of the obvious from time to time. Yes, we *are* supposed to care for the poor and needy. Yes, Jesus does expect us to pray. And yes, He does assume we will fast. In every case He does not say, "If you pray, etc.," but "When you pray. So do you? Do you care for the needy? Do you pray? Do you fast?"

Caring for the needy is easy to neglect at Lehigh. We don't have beggars and homeless people on campus, so we tend never to think about serving the poor. But there are two ways for us to apply this passage as university students. First, we can ask, who are the needy among us? At the university needs will more often be social and emotional than physical. You are surrounded by deeply hurting people – people who have been ignored by their parents, used by their lovers, and abandoned by their friends. They don't show it. They wash their face, put on make up, work out in the gym – but inside there are raw sores that can't be healed, except by Christ. In your class there is someone who longs for love and has never found it. In your dorm there is someone who has had an abortion and is tormented by the memory of killing her baby. And you know someone who got a girl pregnant and is haunted by the guilt of abandoning her and their baby. These are your friends, and they try to drown their sorrows in high grades and popularity and drink and sex, but they never find rest. These are the needy at Lehigh. These are the ones Christ sends you to. Ask God to open your eyes and make you notice them. Go to them in the name of Christ and heal the wounds of their souls.

The second way we can care for the poor is to go to them where they are. From time to time you should go with us on one of the RUF service projects where we minister to the physically needy. When you can't go, support those who do. There are thousands of Christian organizations ministering to the poor, and they can always use financial support. But also consider this. Perhaps you should devote your life to the poor. Perhaps God will call some of you here to graduate from Lehigh and then spend your life in the urban slums, or caring for AIDS patients, or ministering to orphans in eastern Europe. Lary LaBrie is a Lehigh grad. He served in the military for four years, then got a masters degree in business. For the past ten years he has been caring for orphans in Romania. It's a thankless task. It is brutally hard and emotionally exhausting, but he is there because no one else is. Elliott Tepper was a Lehigh wrestler. He was not a believer when he was here, but God called Him into His Kingdom and called Him to serve in Spain where he has spent his life among drug addicts. Thousands have broken their addiction and come to Christ through his ministry. What about you? Is God calling you to a whole life of service to the poor? One way to find out is to go on our RUF mission trip this spring break.

You are not surprised that Jesus expects us to pray. Prayer is a huge topic, so we will just summarize the four main points that Jesus brings up. First, Jesus says pray sincerely. This is the topic of the whole passage. Do not pray just to impress other people. God is a person. Talk to Him honestly like you would talk to another person. Do not try to impress God with foolish promises or pompous words. Second, pray intelligently. By "vain repetitions" He means prayers that are prayed over and over in a trance-like manner – like some forms of meditation practiced by eastern religions. The problem with these prayers is that they

are insulting to God. God is not deaf, nor is He so distracted as to be swayed by idle chatter, as a harried mother might be. God hears very well, and will answer presently. State your prayers clearly and simply, and wait for God to answer. This does not mean that you may never repeat your prayers. Elsewhere Jesus urges us to pray persistently. In Luke 18 He uses a mistreated widow seeking justice as an example of how to pray. The widow pestered the judge everyday until He granted her justice. Jesus said we should pray with a similar persistence. So pray everyday, persuade, argue with God, but treat Him like an intelligent person, not an idiot.

Third, pray like Jesus. He gave us this prayer we call the Lord's Prayer as a model for our prayers. In our prayers we should worship our God in heaven, who is also our dear Father. We pray for God's Kingdom to come here on earth, and for all people to serve Him willingly, as the angels and saints in heaven do. We pray for all our daily needs. We pray for forgiveness, because we sin every day. We pray also that we might forgive those who sin against us, because we really don't want to forgive them. We pray for deliverance from temptation, for it is all around and within us. And we praise and glorify God who is incomprehensibly glorious. Prayer is very simple. It is merely talking to God. But as we grow up as Christians, our discourse should mature, and Jesus shows us how to talk to God in a mature manner.

Fourth, we pray with forgiveness in our hearts. Everyone who comes to Jesus is welcome in His Kingdom – even your enemy – and if Jesus forgives him, you must, too. Otherwise you set yourself up as a judge over Jesus. In essence you are saying, “Jesus is too lenient, but *I'm* not going to lower *my* standards.” This is foolish, and it will get you kicked out of Jesus' Kingdom. This may be the most difficult part of tonight's passage, but Jesus insists. So when you pray, pray sincerely, pray intelligently, pray like Jesus, and pray with forgiveness.

I would like to add something here. If you know God – or maybe even if you do not – you pray. Part of the intention of this passage is to help you to pray better, and that is a welcome teaching. But remember also that prayer is a powerful force in this world. When we pray we are in a conversation with the ruler of the universe. God is the High King of Heaven. He raises rulers and destroys nations. He saves the lost and punishes the wicked. And as the centuries roll by, He is steadily establishing His Kingdom on earth. Now here is the mystery: He uses us to accomplish this goal. God's Kingdom grows as we spread the gospel and care for the poor – and as we pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God does not ignore that prayer. God is answering it everyday. And in some amazing way, God listens to all our prayers and uses them to extend His Kingdom. Abraham prayed for God to spare Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Elijah prayed and God withheld rain for three years. Then he prayed again and God sent rain. Daniel prayed for the end of the Jewish exile in Babylon, and God moved Kingdoms to answer that prayer. You also can change history by your prayers.

One way to pray with more impact is to join us at Noon Prayer. We pray for all sorts of things. We pray for our needs, we pray for our friends, we pray for Lehigh, we pray for the world – and we pray for you! I think I can say this because both Josh and Mike are humble people, but Josh is not the most powerful person is RUF. Mike is. As the leader of Noon Prayer, Mike directs the most powerful thing we do. Join us one day this week.

The last act of piety Jesus mentions is fasting. Now don't wish to be a hypocrite. I will admit right now that I seldom fast. This is wrong. This is a weakness in my life. I say this not as an excuse, but I'm not alone. American Christianity has paid little attention to fasting. Consequently, we don't understand it, and we don't value it. Well, even if you aren't sure how fasting helps you in your spiritual life, here you see the expectation that you do it. The essence of fasting is to get your mind off physical things for a while so you can focus more clearly on God. So let's resolve right here to obey Christ. Let's agree to make fasting a regular part of our lives.

The Gospel for Hypocrites

Where do you stand in these matters? Are you a hypocrite? Is your life a sham? Do you put on a good Christian show, but deep inside you know you don't love God or man much? Do you go to church because you love to worship God, or because you have an image to maintain? In fact did you come here tonight simply because you were afraid people would think you less spiritual if you studied instead? Hypocrisy is hateful because it is lying. It mocks God, people, the church, the gospel and cross. In Revelation 21:8, liars are listed among those who will not be found in the new Jerusalem. Hypocrisy is a deadly sin.

But you know what? The gospel is for hypocrites, too. Do you think God is surprised at your bad attitude? Do you think you are the first person to try to fool Him? No, but it is for hypocrites that Jesus died and rose and sent the Spirit. Hypocrisy is the most prevalent sin, but it is the easiest to cure. All that's necessary is to admit the truth. Face up to your sin, and call upon Jesus to save you from it. You can change your behavior some, but there is nothing you can do to change your heart. But the gospel has the power to change you all the way through. So do not keep living a lie. Do not give in to sin. Confess your sin. Turn to Jesus and accept His forgiveness. Ask Him to help you serve, pray, and fast with sincerity. Your Father in heaven will see, and will reward you richly.

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