The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION EIGHTEEN — Giving in Secret

Part Four: The Practices of Piety · Text: Matthew 6:1–4

The Texts

> **Matthew 6:1** *Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*
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> **Matthew 6:2–4** *So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do… But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

The Camera Turns Around

For seventeen sessions, Jesus has been talking about how we treat other people — the poor and the grieving, the neighbor and, at the summit, the enemy. Now, at the top of chapter six, he turns the camera around. Away from the neighbor, toward the closet. From how we love others, to how we practice our devotion to God — the three great acts of a faithful life: giving, and praying, and fasting.

And he opens this whole new section with a single bracing warning that will hang like a banner over all three: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them."

Because there is a peculiar danger that lurks in the religious life and almost nowhere else — the temptation to take our holiest, most beautiful acts and turn them into a performance. To give, and pray, and fast… for the applause. The enemy Jesus names here is subtle, and it is universal, and if we are honest it lives in every one of us: the hunger to be seen. And it can quietly hijack even the best things we ever do.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

A Turn in the Sermon

Notice the shift. Everything up to now has faced outward — how Kingdom people treat their neighbors, and even their enemies. Here the Sermon turns to the inner life of devotion: the three classic practices that framed a faithful life in Jesus' world — giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. These were good and assumed; every devout person did them, and Jesus expects his followers to do them too. Notice he says "when you give," not "if." The question he raises is never whether to practice our devotion. It is how — and, above all, for whom.[1]

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew 6:1–18 (giving, prayer, fasting) has no parallel in Luke; these three were the

The One Warning Over All Three

Verse one is the header over the whole section: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." And look carefully at exactly what it targets. Not the practices — giving and praying and fasting are all good, all worth doing. The target is a motive: doing them "to be seen." The performance of devotion for an audience. Here is the strange and sobering thing. The very acts that are designed to draw us toward God can be quietly turned inside out — into a way of drawing attention to ourselves. Righteousness itself can become a stage.[2]

The Actors

Three times in this section, Jesus reaches for one particular word for the people he is warning against: hypokritēs. We translate it "hypocrite," and we usually hear "someone who says one thing and does another." But the word's first and plainest meaning was different and sharper: an actor. A stage-performer. Someone playing a part before an audience. That is the danger here — not, mainly, the liar whose walk doesn't match his talk, but the religious performer who does the genuinely good deed for the applause; who has quietly turned the sanctuary into a stage, and made their own devotion a role to play before a watching crowd.[3]

It is the mask again — the same mask we met with the pure in heart, the divided self performing a part — only now it is being worn in church. And the unsettling thing about this particular mask is that the deed underneath it is often genuinely good. The giving is real. The prayer is real. It is only the heart that has gone to the theater.

"They Have Received Their Reward"

And Jesus makes the cost of it startlingly plain. When you give to be seen, he says, "truly I tell you, they have received their reward." That little phrase — "received their reward" — was a commercial term in Jesus' day, the words you stamped across a bill: paid in full. Receipt issued. Nothing owing.[4]

Here is what he means. If you gave for the applause, then the applause is your payment. You wanted to be seen; you were seen; the room admired you — transaction complete, receipt in hand, account settled. There is simply nothing left for God to add, because you have already collected, in full, exactly what you were after. And what a ruinous trade it is: cashing in the

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classic, honored acts of Jewish piety, which Jesus assumes his followers keep ("when," not "if"). On hidden, costly giving, compare the widow's two coins (Luke 21:1–4).

[2]Matthew 6:1 is the heading over the whole section (6:1–18). The target is not the practices, which are good and assumed, but the motive—doing them "to be seen" (theathēnai). See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 6:1.

[3]Hypokritēs, translated "hypocrite," first meant a stage-actor or performer. The danger named is the performance of devotion before an audience—the mask of Session Seven's undivided heart, worn now in the place of worship. Jesus critiques a universal human temptation from within his own tradition, not the good practices themselves.

[4]"They have received their reward" renders apechousin, a commercial term meaning "paid in full," as stamped on a receipt. The applause is the full payment; nothing remains for God to give.

Father's eternal regard for a moment's fickle flattery — trading the applause of heaven for the applause of a room that will have forgotten your name by supper.

Give So Secretly You Forget

So Jesus turns to the first of the three practices, giving to the poor. Do not sound a trumpet before you, he says — do not announce your generosity with fanfare so the room will turn and praise you. Instead — and here is one of the most beautiful, almost impossible images in the whole Sermon — "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

Give so quietly, so free of any self-congratulation, that even you barely register it. Give so that it is not a performance even in the privacy of your own heart — so secret that not even your own applause can reach it. "So that your giving may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." The goal is a generosity so pure, so unselfconscious, that it leaves behind no residue of self-regard at all — no little glow of "look what I did," not even in the quiet of your own mind. And remember: he says when you give. Almsgiving is not optional for Kingdom people; everything this Sermon has said about the poor makes generosity simply a given. The only open question is the heart you bring to it.

Salt, Light, and Secrecy — a Tension Resolved

Now, some of you are feeling a tension, and it is a real one. Only a few sessions ago Jesus said, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." And now he says: do not do your righteousness to be seen. So which is it — shine, or hide? The answer is the same one we found back then, and it hangs on a single question: whose glory. "Let your light shine," he said, "so that they may glorify your Father in heaven." Do not parade your giving so that they may glorify you. The visible act can be word-for-word identical; the two hearts behind it are exact opposites. Shine, so the world sees and praises God. Never perform, so the world sees and praises you. And secret giving is simply the training ground for that pure heart — because when you give where literally no one can ever applaud you, you strip the audience out of the room completely, and your heart learns, at last, to give for love's sake alone.[5]

You Are Already Seen

And now the tender heart of it — because underneath the hunger to be seen is a deeper, more human ache. It is the longing to be noticed, to matter, to be known. We perform because, somewhere down low, we are afraid that if no one sees us, we are no one. And Jesus meets that ache — not with a scolding, but with the best news in the whole passage: "your Father who sees in secret."

You are seen. Not by the fickle crowd whose applause fades by supper, but by the Father — who misses nothing done in love, who noticed a poor widow drop two small coins into the temple box that no one else in the whole crowd bothered to count. You do not need the

[5]The apparent tension with 5:16 ("let your light shine… that they may glorify your Father") resolves in the aim: visibility that directs glory to God versus performance that draws glory to self—the same act, opposite hearts. See Session Ten.

audience, because you already have the only Audience that has ever mattered, and he sees the hidden thing, and he will never once forget it. And there is enormous freedom in that. You can put down the exhausting performance. You can stop auditioning for a love you already have. The One whose regard actually counts is already watching you — in the secret place, in the small unseen kindness — and he is glad.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and here is its sharpest edge yet — for a Sermon so relentlessly about others. Performative giving actually uses the poor. It takes a person in real need and turns them into a prop for my reputation, an occasion for my applause, a flattering backdrop for my virtue. Secret giving refuses that utterly; it will not make a stage out of someone else's need. It gives for the sake of the one in need and not for the sake of the giver's image — which means the secrecy Jesus commands protects the dignity of the one receiving, too. So ask with me: whose good does my giving actually serve — my neighbor's, or my reputation's? And what applause, what credit, what little glow of being admired might I need to lay down, so that my giving can become pure gift? *Freedom for others may cost us the credit — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Jesus warns against turning our devotion into a performance "to be seen." Where do you feel the pull to be noticed for the good you do?
- "Hypocrite" first meant "actor." Where might you be tempted to play a religious role for a watching crowd — and what would it mean to take the mask off?
- "They have received their reward." Why is human applause such a bad trade — and why is it so tempting anyway?
- Jesus says "your Father who sees in secret." How does it change the hunger to be seen to know you are already fully seen and loved?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Whose need have you been tempted to use as a stage — and what would pure, hidden giving look like?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, give in secret. Do one genuinely good thing this week that no one will ever know about — give, help, or bless someone with no possibility of credit, so secretly that not even your own applause can reach it — and notice honestly what it stirs in you, how much of you wanted to be seen. That noticing is the whole lesson. Second, redirect the glory. In the good you do that is visible — and some of it should be — practice quietly pointing past yourself to God, so the light lands where it belongs. And when the ache to be noticed rises, as it will, answer it with the truth: your Father sees. You are not invisible. You never were. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, the second of the three practices — prayer. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray so that they may be seen… and do not heap up empty phrases." The same warning, aimed now at our praying — and it opens directly onto the greatest of all prayers, the one Jesus himself taught us: "Our Father in heaven…" We are about to arrive at the Lord's Prayer.

Benediction

So go this week and do your quiet, hidden good — the giving no one sees, the kindness that earns no applause, the devotion practiced for an Audience of One. Take off the mask; you are tired of it anyway. Stop auditioning for a love that is already yours. And when you are tempted to sound the trumpet, to make sure the room notices your virtue, remember the widow and her two small coins that only heaven counted — and remember that the Father who sees in secret is already watching you, and already glad. Blessed are those who give in secret, for they have learned to love without an audience — which is very nearly to love the way God loves.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION EIGHTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. For seventeen sessions, Jesus has been talking about how we treat other people — the poor, the grieving, the neighbor, and at the summit, the enemy. Now, at the top of chapter six, he turns the camera around. Away from the neighbor, toward the closet. From how we love others to how we practice our devotion to God — the three great acts of a faithful life: giving, praying, fasting.

And he opens this whole new section with one bracing warning that hangs like a banner over all three: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them." Because there's a peculiar danger that lurks in the religious life and almost nowhere else — the temptation to take our holiest, most beautiful acts and turn them into a performance. To give, and pray, and fast… for the applause. The enemy Jesus names here is subtle, and universal, and if we're honest it lives in every one of us: the hunger to be seen. And it can hijack even the best things we ever do.

[The warning.]

Verse one is the header over the whole section: "Beware of practicing your righteousness to be seen; for then you have no reward from your Father." And look at exactly what it targets. Not the practices — giving and praying and fasting are all good. The target is a motive: doing them to be seen. The performance of devotion for an audience. Because here's the sobering thing — the very acts designed to draw us toward God can be quietly turned inside out, into a way of drawing attention to ourselves. Righteousness itself can become a stage.

[The actors.]

Three times here, Jesus uses one word for the people he's warning about — hypokritēs. We say "hypocrite," and we hear "someone who says one thing and does another." But the word first meant something sharper: an actor. A stage-performer. Someone playing a part for an audience. That's the danger — not mainly the liar whose walk doesn't match his talk, but the religious performer who does the genuinely good deed for the applause; who's turned the sanctuary into a stage. It's the mask again — the same mask we met with the pure in heart — only now it's being worn in church. And the unsettling part is that the deed underneath it is often genuinely good. The giving is real. The prayer is real. It's only the heart that's gone to the theater.

[The bad trade.]

And Jesus makes the cost startlingly plain. When you give to be seen, he says, "truly, they have received their reward." That phrase — "received their reward" — was a commercial term: the words you stamped on a bill. Paid in full. Here's what he means: if you gave for the applause, then the applause is your payment. You wanted to be seen, you were seen, the room admired you — transaction complete, account settled, nothing owing. There's nothing left for God to add, because you already collected in full. And what a ruinous trade — cashing in the Father's eternal regard for a moment's flattery, trading the applause of heaven for the applause of a room that'll forget your name by supper.

[Give in secret.]

So he turns to the first practice — giving to the poor. Don't sound a trumpet, he says. Don't announce your generosity so the room turns and praises you. Instead — one of the most beautiful, almost impossible images in the whole Sermon — "don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Give so quietly, so free of self-congratulation, that even you barely register it. So secret that not even your own applause can reach it. The goal is a generosity so pure it leaves no residue of self-regard at all — not even the little glow of "look what I did." And notice he says when you give, not if. Generosity isn't optional for Kingdom people. The only question is the heart.

[The tension.]

Now some of you feel a tension, and it's real. A few sessions ago Jesus said "let your light shine before others, so they see your good works." Now he says don't do your righteousness to be seen. So which is it — shine, or hide? Same answer as before, and it hangs on one word: whose glory. "Let your light shine so they glorify your Father." Don't parade your giving so they glorify you. The visible act can be identical; the two hearts are opposite. Shine so the world praises God. Never perform so the world praises you. And secret giving is just the training ground — because when you give where no one can ever applaud you, you strip the audience out of the room, and your heart finally learns to give for love's sake alone.

[You are already seen — tender.]

And now the tender heart of it. Underneath the hunger to be seen is a deeper ache — the longing to be noticed, to matter, to be known. We perform because, down low, we're afraid that if no one sees us, we're no one. And Jesus meets that ache — not with a scolding, but with the best news in the passage: "your Father who sees in secret." You are seen. Not by the fickle crowd, but by the Father, who misses nothing done in love — who noticed a poor widow drop two small coins that no one else bothered to count. You don't need the audience, because you already have the only Audience that matters, and he sees the hidden thing and will never forget it. There's enormous freedom in that. You can put down the exhausting performance. You can stop auditioning for a love you already have.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others, with a sharp edge: performative giving actually uses the poor — turns a person in need into a prop for my reputation. Secret giving refuses that; it gives for the neighbor's sake, not the giver's image — which protects the dignity of the one receiving, too. So: whose good does my giving really serve — my neighbor's, or my reputation's? What credit might I need to lay down so it can be pure gift?

Two things to practice. First, give in secret — do one genuinely good thing this week no one will ever know about, and notice how much of you wanted to be seen. That noticing is the lesson. Second, when the good you do is visible, redirect the glory — point past yourself to God. And when the ache to be noticed rises, answer it with the truth: your Father sees. You were never invisible.

Next time, the second practice — prayer. "Don't pray to be seen… don't heap up empty phrases." And it opens straight onto the greatest prayer of all, the one Jesus taught us: "Our Father in heaven…" We're about to arrive at the Lord's Prayer.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and do your quiet, hidden good — the giving no one sees, the kindness that earns no applause, the devotion practiced for an Audience of One. Take off the mask; you're tired of it anyway. Stop auditioning for a love that's already yours. And remember the widow and her two coins that only heaven counted — the Father who sees in secret is already watching you, and already glad.

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Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.