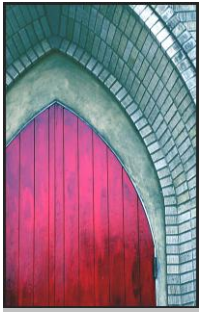


The Problem with Religion

TEXT: MATTHEW 6.1-8, 16-18



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ARE YOU RELIGIOUS?

When was the last time someone asked you if you are religious? How did you respond? Many scholars and pundits have observed that the events of 9/11/01 have resulted in a resurgence of public discussions of religion. More and more, it's becoming 'okay' for people to talk about their religious beliefs and practices in public ways. But it's still a funny subject for us. On the one hand, we want religion to be a private matter: have fun believing what you want, but don't force it upon me. At the same time, our world is quick to 'judge' religion based on its public

value. Religion that does not result in a changed life that can lead to public benefits is deemed 'quaint' at best. We want religion to be something that stays inside a person, but also something that will have a positive effect outside of a person. Are you religious?

These verses in Matthew 6 sit in the middle of Jesus' teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount.^{Mt 5-7} In this sermon, Jesus is speaking to his 12 disciples in the presence of a larger crowd of people,^{Mt 5.1-2} and He's addressing these issues of 'religion' as they relate specifically to those who follow Him, those who are Christians. He describes the truly religious life, both as a way of life that isn't simply outward, formal adherence to a set of rules,^{Mt 5.21-48} but also as a way of belief that evidences itself in a changed life.^{Mt 5.13-16, 7.1-6, 7.12-20, 7.24-27} In the passage before us, Jesus drives to the heart of the religious life of the Christian, challenging us to consider not only our religious actions, but also the motivations behind what we do. Are you religious?

MATTHEW 6.1-8, 16-18

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."

²"Thus, 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."

⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

⁷"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

¹⁶"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

GIVE. PRAY. FAST.

Matthew 6 begins with a summary statement of this section of this sermon: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." In Jesus' day, as it is in ours, religious standing was often defined by one's ability to maintain conformity to a list of do's and don'ts (which assumed one had the right list, of course). And so, when God's law said "You shall not murder,"^{Ex 20.13} detailed instructions had been developed through tradition as to what this would and would not include. Jesus challenged the instructions of tradition, but declaring that God's intention in that command includes unrighteous and unresolved anger.^{Mt 5.21-26} Faithful practice of the religion of the God of Israel wasn't simply about outward appearance; the motivation of the heart was at the center of the matter.

Yet Jesus refuses to reduce religion to an inner experience, to only matters of the mind and heart. He first warns His followers of doing 'religious' things "before other people in order to be seen by them . . ." Notice the repetition in these verses: "when you give to the needy^{6,2,3} . . . when you pray^{6,5,6,7} . . . when you fast."^{6,16,17} Jesus assumes his listeners are in pursuit of outwardly religious lives. "Giving to the needy" isn't simply taking up an offering, it is literally 'doing acts of mercy' or as Jesus says elsewhere, "loving your neighbor."^{Lk 10.25-37} Prayer is speaking to God and asking Him to act in His world for His glory and our good.^{Mt 6.9-13, 7.7-11} Fasting is an expression of utter dependence upon God's mercy, often a visible expression of repentance^{Jon 3.5; Neh 9.1-2} and also a practice of self-discipline in order to seek after God and His will with one's whole being.^{Mt 4.1-2; Ac 13.1-3} These are also practices of those deemed 'religious' in Jesus' time, whom Jesus criticized directly for their empty shows of religion.^{Mt 23.23-24; Mt 9.14-17; Lk 18.9-14} Taking all of this further, Jesus is guiding us in living religious lives—lives in which we are transformed both inwardly and outwardly, in which our religious practices drive us more deeply to the heart of God.

At this point, though, each of us needs to be interrogating our own hearts. Some find comfort that Jesus has given us specific things to do. We have done some or all of these for years. We've got it. Others (not excluding the first group), already feel uncomfortable twinges of guilt with regard to your practices of these. You already feel like your efforts are "not enough" and you hope guilt might spur a change in your life. It is in those responses where Jesus meets us through these verses. He calls us to a religious way of life in pursuit of Him, knowing well the weakness even of our best intentions. But He still calls us to something more.

DESTROYING RELIGION

Jesus talks through each of these religious acts—and in so doing brings to light the true problem with religion: it's us. Religion is not dangerous for humanity; humanity is dangerous for true religion. Jesus brings this to the front in these verses through repetition. First, he warns against giving, praying, and fasting as hypocrites do.^{6.2, 5, 16} A hypocrite is one who pretends to possess what is not truly his. It is someone whose life is on display, but has no substance. The goal of the religious behavior of the hypocrite is that others would be watching him in awe. Jesus says that they give to the needy in such a way that everyone knows they're doing it. What they're after is the praise of those watching.^{6.2} Likewise, they pray and fast "that they may be seen by others."^{6.5, 16} Their behavior simply can't be ignored. The religious hypocrite is in love with himself. His gaze is not upon serving others, pursuing God's will, or subduing his own heart; His gaze is on increasing his standing before others.

This is living a religious life without an object of worship outside of the self. God is nowhere to be found. When our faith becomes about us, it ceases to be about God. He isn't needed to accomplish anything and He isn't even necessary to think about. Jesus' repeated declaration seals it: "they have received their reward."^{6.2, 5, 16} In the extended section on prayer, Jesus warns praying like those who pray with many words who assume they will be heard because of a formula and word count.^{6.7-8} This means that God is one we can bribe or impress into action. Those who declare a knowledge of God but for whom such knowledge is focuses on an ability to perform before people, or even before God, do not know God.

The essence of hypocrisy in this context is the destruction of something that is good. If you want people to think much of you based on your ability to appear religious, it is possible. But please don't think that such religion has anything to do with the God of the Bible. If you don't have a personal faith when you're all by yourself, don't pretend that you do when you're around other people. We need to be careful, not only with regard to ourselves, but also for those around us. Is it possible that we are creating human standards by which to measure the spiritual growth of friends, spouses, children, parents, and fellow Bible-study members? It's not that there aren't standards—of course there are. But are we nurturing a culture in which the highest value is placed on our performance instead of an actual pursuit of God and His will for us in His world?

BUILDING RELIGION

All of this feels like we're still walking on a tightrope and that the bar we're holding for balance is pure guilt. But Jesus doesn't leave room for that. More than anything else in these verses, we need to hear Jesus describe God to us as our Father, over and over again.^{6.1, 4, 6, 8, 18} Theologian J.I. Packer has said that you "sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of one's holy Father." A Christian is one who has been declared to be a child of God, adopted into God's family, who calls upon God as Father based on the work of Jesus alone.^{Gal 3.26-29; Jn 1.12-13; Jn 14.6} The religious life, then, when God is our Father, is not based on our ability to perform for Him or for others. It is founded in our adoption into His family, a status that will not change.

Not only are we not in a position of needing to perform for God or others in order for God to respond to us, but our

hypocrisy is useless before the one who "see in secret."^{6.4, 6, 18} Our Father who is in heaven^{6.1} rules over all things, and even the dark corners of our hearts are not dark to Him. He knows our thoughts, He knows our reasons. He "knows what you need before you ask Him."^{6.8} As such, Jesus completely removes from our vision the need to perform for others. God sees us; He knows us. Is that enough?

Jesus also rebuilds honest religious living with the reminder that God our Father, who sees what we do in secret, "will reward you."^{6.4, 6, 18} We must be careful to read this in contrast to the reward the hypocrites receive for their religious activity. In the name of God, they give, pray, and fast to receive glory before men. They receive what they seek. And yet it is of no value before God. It is the work of a hired hand. It is a paycheck and nothing more. The rewards for those who give, pray, and fast, not for their own name before men, but instead to pursue God and His will and work in the here and now, are rewarded in the sense that God meets them in their pursuits. Those who give secretly learn the joy before God of giving of themselves to show true mercy. Those who pray in secret know the joy of answered prayer that is not manipulated by others. Those who fast in secret know the true joy of God's provision. In all occasions we know God for who He is, that He himself is our greatest good, our reward.^{Gen 15.1; Ps 16.2}

So, why do you do, what you do, in the name of God? Do you know God as your Father? Not as a human father who seems to give or withhold love and affection based on grades, chores, or batting average. But as your Father in Heaven, who has power over every circumstance in your life, and who knows your thoughts, intentions, hopes, and dreams, and loves you. The truth of the Gospel is that Jesus came to earth so that we might have "life and have it abundantly"^{Jn 10.10} which we have by knowing God and Jesus His Son.^{Jn 17.3} The promise of the Gospel is that "to all who did receive [Jesus], to those who believed in His name, He gives the right to become children of God."^{Jn 1.12} Do you know Him?

LIVE.

There is a great temptation for many of us when it comes to living a religious life. We have been burned. We ourselves have found great self-justification by our ability to accomplish a list of tasks 'for God.' We have known the hopelessness when those things fall short. And so we either try harder on our own (and risk bitterness), or we simply give up. As children of the Father in Heaven, I want to challenge you to pursue God through a religious life:

- **Give.** Look for someone in need and reach out with mercy. Don't over-think you actions; don't dwell on it so long that you become self-conscious about it. Give.
- **Pray.** Find a quiet place by yourself. Use fewer words, but ask honestly. Allow Scripture to guide you. Ask with confidence to the One who knows your needs. Pray.
- **Fast.** Consider places in your life where a lack of self-discipline may be hindering your pursuit of God and service to others. Turn off the TV. Walk away from your computer for a time. Fast.

Do nothing apart from pursuing God's rewards in all things. What lies behind each of these acts is the call to live them in pursuit of God Himself. When the Christian religion loses sight of God, it loses everything. And yet, through Jesus we can know the Father, and therefore gain the whole world. Give. Pray. Fast. Don't run from religion. Run to God.