

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

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THIRD BLOCK (6:1-18)

The Righteousness of God

Jewish Tradition Vs the Teaching of Jesus

The critical term of this text is “righteousness.” This is a term having a variety of meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. It is used in Scripture as having “a right standing or relationship with God.” To the Jews of Jesus’ time this standing had to do with being “right” with God ritually and morally in order to stand in the presence of God as a child of God or as a worshipper of God. The Jews believed the God of Israel to be “a Holy God,” and his holiness consisted of righteousness, justice, and intolerance of evil. He was also viewed as a God of lovingkindness or goodness, but this was not the emphasis on his attributes in the second temple period of the first century.

This singular emphasis on the holiness of God is what appears to be of uppermost concern to Jesus here in this text, as is reflected in his admonition to his disciples, “Be perfect (*telios* – complete) as the Father is perfect (5:48). The intent of his words is that they should be complete or whole in their lives as God is complete or whole; i.e. he is a Holy God and a Good God, and the two are not in conflict with one another. The religious person too often sees God in one light to the exclusion of the other. This is what the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes had done. They were so concerned with God as the Holy One, that they had lost sight of his Goodness. Jesus was concerned that man see God in the fullness of his

being, a God who was Holy and reflected his holiness in his righteousness, justice, and intolerance of evil, but he was also *omnibenevolent* (full of goodness), and this part of his nature was reflected by his love, his mercy, and his grace or lovingkindness.

If man is a being created in the image of God, then he must be a reflection of both natures of God. He must be a holy being and show that in his righteousness, justice, and intolerance of evil; but he must also realize that he must be good and show that in his love, his mercy and his grace or lovingkindness.

Man, when he is all that he ought to be he is a being that reflects the very nature of God in who he is. This is what is meant by the Genesis 1:26-27 expression "created in the image of God." Hence, throughout the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures there is this constant emphasis on righteousness, and what is meant by this term as it applies to man is that he is righteous as God is righteous if he is acceptable to God. In this context the Jews gave great attention to ritual purity but they left much to be desired in terms of their moral character.

Their morality consisted of their conformity to the moral codes of the *Torah* or Pentateuch, which they believed to make them righteous and this attitude Jesus challenged, as may be determined throughout this sermon as seen in the words, "blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled," (5:6), and as he says in 5:20, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter into the kingdom of the heavens;" and here in the opening line of this text, "Take care that you do not do your righteousness before men, to be seen by them," and his admonition of 6:33, "but seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these things shall be added to you." Ritual purity was not the meaning of the word "righteousness" as used by Jesus here.

In this sermon, especially in this text, Jesus contrasts the righteousness that comes from the interpretations or traditions of the Jewish scholars (the scribes and the Pharisees), with the righteousness of God. At the outset of this block of teaching he cautions them concerning the motive of their acts of righteousness.

Acts of Righteousness in Jewish Tradition (6:1)

Take care that you do not do your righteousness before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in the heavens.
(6:1, author's translation)

Prayer, alms, and fasting were considered the true expression of one's piety or righteousness in ancient Israel. An interesting comment is found in the apocryphal writing called *Tobit*, written prior to the first century AD. It is a collection of ancient Jewish folklore and wisdom teaching. In this document the angel Raphael, in a speech to *Tobit* and his son, gives them insight into the true nature of righteousness; especially those acts in which one expresses his thanksgiving to God for his prosperity. The following passage from *Tobit* gives us some understanding of the ostentatious nature of Jewish acts of righteousness as taught in Jewish tradition:

Then the angel called the two of them privately [Tobit and his son] and said to them, Praise God and give thanks to him in the presence of all the living for what he has done for you. It is good to praise. Do good, and evil will not overtake you. Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. Those who perform deeds of charity and of righteousness have fullness of life; but those who commit sin are the enemies of their own lives," (Tobit 12:6-10).

The reason for calling attention to one's giving was that one was, supposedly, showing the greatness and goodness of God by showing how greatly God had prospered him. This was his way of "giving thanks to God in the presence of all the living for what he has done for you" (*Tobit* 12:7). Alms also gave one long life and the promise of life in the world to come. Also taught by the rabbis (cf. *Rosh Hashanah* 4:1; *Bava Bathra* 10:1; and throughout the Babylonian Talmud). In fact, in Acts of Apostles 10:31, the angel says to Cornelius, "Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor." Jesus is not here condemning

the giving of alms to the poor; rather, he is addressing the motive for giving; i.e. to earn a greater reward from God and to receive praise from his fellowman, the latter being the most immediate concern to Jesus.

“To Be Seen of Men!”

The word in the Greek text for “see” is not the ordinary word for seeing. Rather, the word used is *theoreo* (from which we derive theorize), which can mean to see in the sense of mental vision (contemplation). This suggests that the meaning Jesus’ intends is that their deed is done to provoke an interpretation, which is appropriate to do in some instances (cf. 5:1), but not here. The one who is truly righteous gives to those who are in need, not because he wishes to be thought of a righteous, but because of his moral character, which does not display itself.

The fact that one’s moral behavior influences others is clearly not the issue here for Jesus. What is at issue is that the behavior should not be done for the consequences (i.e. whether positive or negative) or self-concern with reference to how one is perceived by others.

A Series of Contrasts (6:2-18)

Alms as an Act of Righteousness (6:2-4)

Therefore, when you do alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the street, that they may be glorified by men. Truly, I am saying to you, they have their reward, 3 but doing alms, do not let your left [hand] know what your right [hand] is doing, 4 so that your alms may be in secret, and your Father, the one seeing in secret, will reward you (6:1-4, author’s translation).

Alms as a gift to the poor was a commandment of *Torah*, the Law of Moses (Deut 15:7-11). The Jews had a very organized system of collecting for the poor. Collectors appointed by synagogue elders carried the alms basket through the village or quarter of a city, and the alms collected were distributed to the poor the same day. In the synagogue was an “Alms Chest” in which alms were placed for distribution to the poor on Sabbath-eve. Every synagogue had a trumpet or *shofar* (ram’s horn), which was

blown six times at the coming in of the Sabbath; this was also the time of alms collection. In the Temple there were six trumpet-shaped receptacles for the receiving of alms; there were also the street beggars (Mark 10:46; Acts 3:1-10). The opportunities for giving alms were numerous and various.

Codes and Consequences Vs Moral Character

Jesus' concern is not with the giving, but the motive behind the gift and the display associated with the giving of the gift. The word in the Greek text for hypocrite is "*hupokrites*," which is the word used for wearing a mask in the role of an actor in the theater (cf. Matt 23 and John 5:44). In Jesus' thinking, this is what one is doing when he is giving alms under the pretence of giving out of his goodness when, in reality, he is giving to impress those who are watching. Jesus says that they are receiving (Greek present tense, continuous action) their reward. This is all they will receive for their performance, the applause of men. They are doing alms as a moral code, and their receiving the consequences of "doing the code;" there is nothing more to come from God.

Where the hypocrites of Jesus' illustration give in order to receive some personal reward (desirable consequence), the disciple of Christ is to give out of different concerns; namely, concern for others, a by-product of his moral character. Giving to those in need is a part of who he is. Implied here is the idea that God does reward our giving if it is an unselfish manifestation of concern for others; what that reward is God determines and then rewards the giver in secret (cf. 1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Cor 4:16-18; Phil 3:14; Heb 11:6).

Prayer as an Act of Righteousness (6:5-15)

And whenever you pray, do not be as the hypocrites, for they love (philousin - to have affection for) to pray in the synagogues and standing on the corners of the streets so that they may be seen by men. Truly, I am saying to you, they have their reward, 6 but you, whenever you pray, enter into your hidden place [or secret room], having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret [place]; and your Father, the one seeing in secret, will answer (apodidomi - to give an answer, to respond to) you; 7

and praying, do not use repetitions (*battologeo* – to stammer or repeat words) as the nations/gentiles, for they think that in their many words they will be heard. **8** Therefore, do not be like them; for your Father knows what things you have need of before you ask him. **9** In this manner, therefore, pray:

*Our Father, the one in the heavens, let your name be Holy, **10** let your rule/reign (*basileia*) come, let your will be [become], as in heaven so also on earth. **11** Give us this day our daily bread **12** and forgive us whatever we owe, as also we have forgive those who owe us, **13** and do not bring us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one [missing from the oldest manuscripts is: “For yours is the reign, the power, and the glory forever”],*

14 For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, **15** but if you do not forgive men their transgressions, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions (6:5-15 author’s translation).

Prayer was the most common act of piety among the Jews, as is the case with most world religions. The word found in the Greek text is the most common word for this practice. It is a word-picture of what prayer is as visualized. The word is *proseuche*, which literally means: to proceed toward (*pros*) with requests or petitions (*echo*), the word-picture here is that of proceeding toward someone having or holding something – requests, praise, thanksgiving, etc. This is a very picturesque word when spoken in Greek.

Prayer is essentially communication wherein man addresses God. Jesus’ concern has to do with those prayers that are nothing less than indirect communication with those listening to the prayer. Much ceremony was associated with prayer among the Jews of Jesus’ time. Prayer in the synagogue was often a unison-prayer led by a member of the synagogue, usually a synagogue elder. He would stand before the Ark [Chest] or of the Scrolls, lift up his hands before God (indicating that they were clean), and offer his petition to God.

There were numerous traditional prayers associated with the

worship of the synagogue. The two most common were “the Eighteen Benedictions” and “the *Kaddish*.” The “*Eighteen Benedictions*,” which were to be cited three times a day, was a collection of blessings which were to be received by the Jew who was faithful to the *Torah* and the Traditions of the Elders. The *Kaddish* [hollowed] was a doxology cited antiphonally at the conclusion of each part of the synagogue service. One line would be read or cited by the leader of the service, which was followed by a congregational response. Following is an example of the *Kaddish* prayer:

Leader: Glorified and hollowed be his great name in the world which he has created according to his will.

Congregational Response: May his great name be praised for all eternity.

Leader: May he establish his kingdom in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, soon and in the near future.

Congregational Response: May his great name be praised for all eternity (George Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p 108; and *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, pp 221-222).

In addition to the congregational prayers of the synagogue there were daily prayers of the individual Jew. These were the morning and evening prayers that could be prayed in the street, at home, at the synagogue, and the Temple. According to George Strecker (*The Sermon on the Mount*, p 109), this prayer had a tradition as well, which was:

Bring me not into the power of sin,
Bring me not into the power of debt,
Bring me not into the power of temptation,
Bring me not into the power of what is shameful

Traditional prayers are not the concern of Jesus. What is of concern is making prayer an obsessive repetition of incantation-like invocations and pleadings, which appears to have been common in the first century world. This characteristic was not only present in such Jewish prayers as the “wailing wall lamentations,” but in pagan practices as well (Matt 6:7-8).

In a collection of pagan writings called "*The Greek Magical Papyri*" attests, the pagan invocation of deity consisted of an endless list of names and titles of deities or demonic beings so as to find the correct name to invoke the deity. If the correct name or title were uttered, the deity was supposed to appear. Also of significance is the Greek word *battologeo*, translated in some English versions as "babbling," "vain repetitions," and "empty phrases;" the word actually means, "to repeat oneself as one stammering."

Much of the liturgy of pagan religions consisted of cryptic speech (i.e. the utterance of unintelligible speech). This was common in the Mystery Religions, and also the Oracle of Delphi associated with the Temple of Apollo. Here the "oracle," a prophetic-like woman called a *pythion* (in English "python), would sit above a fissure in a rock out of which gasses would flow and there receive messages from the gods in the language of the gods that sounded like unintelligible gibberish. These utterances could be interpreted by a *hermeneus* (interpreter) for a gift of gold or silver. The unknown tongue was often used in prayers requesting an oracle from the gods. The practice with which Jesus is concerned here could be found in both paganism and Judaism as well. All of this sounds very familiar to what was going on in the church of Corinth (1 Cor 12-14), which was little more than fifty miles from the Oracle of Delphi.

Codes and Consequences Vs Moral Character

Jesus own prayer, given here in verses 9-13, reflects many of the same concepts present in the traditional prayers of the Jewish community of which he was a part. The major differences being the title by which Jesus invoked an audience with the God, "Our Father," and the attitude of access which every son or daughter of God should assume in his or her approach to God. Jesus doesn't appear to be critical of "much praying" in terms of words or duration. He spent entire nights in prayer as may be seen in Mark 6:46-48; Luke 5:15-16; 6:12; and in Luke 11:5-15 and 18:1 on perseverance in prayer. What does matter to him is one's concept of what prayer is and the attitude with which the worshipper engages in this conversation with God. An excellent comment on this is found in Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, p 147,

What matters is how the worshipper thinks of his prayer – whether, as the contemporary Roman philosopher Seneca puts . . . he seeks ‘to weary the gods,’ or whether he takes God’s promise of Isaiah 65:24 seriously; ‘Before they call I answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.’ Thus prayer becomes totally a gift from God and ceases to be an action performed deliberately to achieve a goal or support a claim. Jesus’ purpose is not to take the gift of prayer away from men, as his own example shows; but he releases them from having to make a special effort to guarantee access to God. He turns prayer once more into children’s conversation with their father.

Fasting as an Act of Righteousness (6:16-18)

When you fast, do not be as the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men as fasting. Truly, I am saying to you, they have their reward, 17 but you, when you fast, pour oil upon your head and wash your face, 18 so that you may not appear to men as [someone] fasting, but your Father who is in secret and sees in secret will answer [respond] to you (6:16-17 author’s translation).

Fasting is a very common practice in many cultures; as a religious practice, it is a very esoteric and complex. In every language fasting carries the basic meaning of "to abstain from." It is an act of self-discipline and denial for the purpose of emptying oneself of thisworldly concerns in order to fill himself with otherworldly concerns. A form of it is found in most religions of man, ancient and modern. In Oriental religions it takes the form of yoga (discipline), herein the practitioners master the art of self-discipline, self-denial, and self-insight.

In Judaism and Islam it is a form of piety wherein one expresses his grief and anguish or displays a broken and contrite spirit in the act of repentance. In ancient times it was a practice wherein holy men, sages, shamans, seers or prophetic figures sought communication with deity or otherworldly powers. The rituals associated with fasting in these various cultures were often imitated by others in order to be seen as ones who had attained a special degree of holiness or spirituality.

As an OT practice, solemn fasts were commanded as a preparation for a high and holy day. During the designated period eating, drinking, bathing, or anointing with oil were forbidden. The nation of Israel is commanded to prepare for the Day of Atonement by fasting (Lev 16:29-31). Individuals also practiced private fasts as a means of moral and spiritual self-discipline or as a sign of grief, penitence, or as a way of gaining a special audience with God (cf. Neh 1:4; Dan 9:3; 10:2f). It is not fasting as an act of religious devotion Jesus is addressing here. Again, it is the problem of being religious out of motives of self-concern, because there is a desirable consequence in the doing of it - a hidden agenda.

Codes and Consequences Vs Moral Character

Here again Jesus is speaking to the *hypokrites*, the play actor; and in this case the player is truly "behind the mask" - the fasting costume of sackcloth and ashes. Fasting is a very similar practice to that of prayer. In fact, fasting may be considered an intensive form of prayer or meditation. It is a way of denying thisworldly concerns in order to give oneself completely to otherworldly concerns.

Food and drink are thisworldly concerns that are always before us; thus, they are the most obvious expressions of indulgence and the most obvious choices for denial. When one, however, only uses fasting to communicate a thisworldly message about himself to others, to portray himself as "one who is fasting," his fast is a mockery; the otherworldly realm will never be open to him. His reward is thisworldly and only thisworldly. The applause he receives from his thisworldly audience is all the reward he will ever know for his performance.

What Jesus says in correction of this practice is that rather than portraying oneself as fasting one should go about the day as one going to a feast or one who is full of joy in the presence of his God. His special preparation for communion with God has brought him fullness and joy rather than emptiness and grief.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the meaning of the word righteousness and how is Jesus using it here in 6:1?
2. What is meant by Jesus' instruction to his disciples to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect? 5:48, be pure of heart (5:8), "be sons of you heavenly Father (5:45).
3. What does being righteous have to do with moral character?
4. What did Jesus mean by "the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees?"
5. What do you think he meant when he told his disciples that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? What does the issue of moral codes vs moral character have to do with this?
6. Why do you think Jesus singled out alms, prayer, and fasting as "acts of righteousness" which exemplified the hypocrisy of much of the Jewish practice of his time?
7. Why do you think the Jews made such a display of their contribution? How does the passage from the apocryphal book *Tobit* inform us here?
8. Discuss alms, prayer, and fasting (separately) as acts of righteousness in Jewish tradition. What does this say about the kind of "righteousness" produced by ritual and moral codes?
9. What does Jesus say about each of these practices that shows us something of the relationship between our righteousness and our moral character?
10. Discuss the role of our moral character (i.e. who we are as moral beings) as relates to our role as worshipping beings; especially as relates to alms, prayer, and fasting, as well as singing, partaking of the Lord's Supper, and receiving the word in proclamation.