

“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. 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. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:1-4

Nome, Alaska, on the edge of the Bering Sea, is like many villages of the Arctic. The ground on which the community sits is frozen, sponge-like tundra. If you visit Nome in summer you’ll see front yards full of broken washing machines, junked cars, old toilets, scrap wood, and piles of non-degradable refuse. Tourists who visit Nome in the summer are amazed at the debris and shake their heads at how could anyone could live in the midst of such junk. Yet what those visitors do not realize is that for nine months of the year Nome sits under a blanket of deep, white snow that covers all the garbage. During those months, the little town is a quaint winter wonderland of pure, beautiful, white landscapes.

In our text for this morning, Jesus continues to point out and expose the spiritual junk and garbage that lies deep down within our hearts, beneath the surface of our everyday lives. Throughout the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus has been revealing the truth about who he is and his expectations for us. He has also revealed the truth about who we are and how far we have drifted from his standards, values and principles – by telling us what it truly means to be a member of the kingdom of God/Heaven. Jesus does so throughout Matthew 5 by first speaking of what Kingdom character should look like in the Beatitudes (verses 1-12), and then he looks at what kind of Kingdom conduct he expects to see produced by that Kingdom character (verses 13-48). The heart attitudes and resultant behaviors Jesus spoke of in those verses was that of being spiritually-poor; grief-stricken by sin; humbly-dependent; passionately in pursuit of God; merciful; pure-hearted; peace-making; joyful in persecution; salt and light in the world; committed to the truth of God’s Word; continuously pursuing reconciliation; seeking to be physically, emotionally and spiritually pure; always speaking the truth; showing sacrificial grace to those who offend us and take from us; and loving those who hurt, harm, oppose and attack us.

In looking at these attitudes and behaviors it is abundantly clear that Jesus is telling us that the standard by which Kingdom character and Kingdom conduct is measured is *the perfection of righteousness*. What that means is that everything we think, say and do must measure up to the standard of the perfect righteousness of God. But of course, we know that standard is way beyond us. But Jesus also told us that when we truly surrender our hearts and lives to him as Lord and Savior, he becomes the standard of perfect righteousness by which God measures our lives. And so, last week we learned that when we seek to live in conformity with the heart attitudes and resultant behaviors spoken of in Word of God, we are pursuing the very perfection of God - which means that we can know the perfection righteousness of God by joyfully following Jesus - *because* we are never more like God than when we obey the Word of God like Jesus and love others as Jesus sacrificially loved us.

Today, as we step into Matthew 6, in the context of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:48 *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”*, Jesus leads us ever deeper in the Kingdom of God/Heaven by challenging us to consider *what Kingdom conduct grounded in Kingdom character looks like in the way that we worship God*, specifically in three areas of our Christian faith: giving, praying and fasting. In Jesus’ day, these three were the pillars of the Jewish faith and these three were also the most abused in the Jewish faith. One could argue the same today, as all three of these areas are the most confused and misunderstood and distorted and misused dynamics of our faith in Jesus Christ. But all three – giving, praying and fasting – are part of the greater and deeper picture of how we worship God.

Worship is our response to who God is, in view of who we are. In worship, we express how we feel about God in how we see God. All aspects of our Sunday morning worship service are all about God - prayer, singing, reading scripture, preaching, giving offerings, getting baptized, taking The Lord's Supper together. We worship God because of who He is – and because of who He is, God becomes all things in true worship. He is the creator, the source, the beginning and the end of all things that were, are, and ever will be. We worship God because He is the love, mercy, grace and forgiveness that we know in Jesus Christ. We worship God because God is over and above and beyond all things in the glory of His presence, power and preeminence. There is no one, there is nothing, greater than God!

Worship is our response to who God is, in view of who we are. In viewing who we are and who God truly is, we then realize our position, our need, our utter, desperate dependence upon Him. With our faces in the dust, we hear a voice calling us - and in humble surrender we look up and see a broken Jesus on a bloody cross. He cries out: *"It is finished"* (John 19:30) and as the last breath of life leaves his body, he breathes into our souls the first breath of eternal life. And as his new life begins within us - our hearts soften and open; our souls are stirred and filled; our spirits rise up and touch His Spirit - and we worship! When we finally grasp a vision of the depth of our weakness before the greatness of God; we become lost in His presence, which ignites the flame our spirit to passionately worship before His throne of power and grace with tears, praise, songs, shouts, bowed heads, raised hands, giving, prayer and fasting. Because worship is our response to who God is, in view of who we are we – the Kingdom character of followers of Jesus will produce the Kingdom conduct of worship through *giving*.

"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" (Matthew 6:1). *What we worship, the way we worship, why we worship* reveals what we truly value and treasure in the deepest depths of our souls. Jesus will challenge us with this today regarding our giving – and he will do the same next week in Pastor Eric's message on prayer and fasting. In these verses, Jesus seeks to get us to open our hearts and ask ourselves the hard questions about what we value and where we get our worth. The question we will be asked is: "Do you seek the approval of God or the applause of others?" While we tend to live as if we can have both, Jesus tells us that it just doesn't work that way in the Kingdom of God. By warning us about *"practicing . . . righteousness"* Jesus challenges our fallen, sinful tendency to think we are right before God when we follow the rules and do the right thing before God and each other. Remember that in Matthew 5:17-20 we saw that *"righteousness"* before God is not about doing the right thing, but rather about being so keenly aware of our sin, so grieved over our sin, so completely surrendered, so totally submitted to God, so hungry and thirsty to be filled with the character of God, so overwhelmed by the mercy of God, so committed to purity in God, so dedicated to making peace between God and others - that we become persecuted for the Kingdom character of God within us.

"Practicing . . . righteousness" in the context of the gospel of Matthew always refers to our joyful obedience to God's commands and our humble conformity to the character of Jesus Christ expressed in everything we think, say and do. In other words, Kingdom character manifested in Kingdom conduct. *"Righteousness"* here on earth is our heart, mind and body response to the transforming, recreating and perfecting work of the Holy Spirit in those who embrace the reign and rule of Jesus. Jesus never just commanded us do the right thing; rather he always commanded us to *do the right thing for the right reason*. What we do is never truly righteous - unless we do it with the proper motivation – and the proper motivation for every truly righteous thought, word and deed on our part should always be to please and glorify God. But because we all still possess a fallen, sinful nature – *everything* we do is still tainted and twisted and warped towards ourselves to some degree or another with a self-righteousness that seeks self-glory. In Jeremiah 17:19 God Himself said: *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* Throughout the gospels, we read of Jesus constantly teaching and exhorting his followers to resist the urge to glorify themselves. Humility, Jesus said, is the key to our *"righteousness"* in coming to faith and in growing in our faith.

In his book, *Gospel-Powered Humility* William Farley writes: “God has designed the gospel to produce the kind of faith that humbles men and women, that brings them face-to-face with their moral and spiritual bankruptcy, that confronts them with God’s gracious solution. . . . Like Paul, humble people are intensely aware of their sin, but because they are humble, they are even more aware of God’s mercy and grace. That is why they enjoy peace with God and man. Ultimately, they know that nothing depends on them. In the same way, humility precedes the other fruits—patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is . . . why we should pursue humility. And it is why Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with an exhortation to display poverty of spirit. . . . After the first beatitude, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ seven more follow—mourning for sin, meekness, hungering for righteousness, the capacity to be merciful, purity of heart, peacemaking, and the willingness to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake. They all have this in common: they require poverty of spirit, the idea conveyed by the first beatitude. In other words, they require humility.”

The bottom line of what Jesus is addressing again today is the heart attitudes that he addressed in the Beatitudes, where he clearly and categorically condemned spiritual arrogance, which is better known in the Bible and in our lives as pride. Our Lord is telling us today that more often than not the self-centered motivations of our hearts take root and grow out of the spiritual arrogance of pride of the remaining sinful nature that still lives within us. He is also us calling to acknowledge our duplicity here, so that we might confess and draw near to God to receive forgiveness and empowerment to live beyond our constant tendency to disguise our pride as some sort of righteousness in our relationship with God. The truth be told, our sinful nature has the expertise to blind us from our true motivations. A woman hired two men to do some yard work. The day they came, she was having coffee with some friends. At one point a guest looked out the window to see one man raking and the other performing majestic leaps and spirals in the air. "What a wonderful gymnast," she thought. "I'd pay him a hundred dollars to perform for our aerobics class." She called out the window and asked the guy who was raking if his friend would like the job. "Hey, Fred," he yelled to his partner, "do you think for a hundred dollars you could step on that rake one more time?" Our motives are not always what we think they are. In Psalm 19:12-14 King David wrote: *“Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”* Jesus’ calls us today to consider what really matters and to ponder why as we do what we do. He is also challenging us who claim him as Lord and Savior to examine our motives in the way we practice our faith in worship.

“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” (Matthew 6:1). The general principle here is that if we practice our faith in order impress people with religious acts we will miss out on God’s reward. The phrase, *“Beware”* means “to take heed, to focus the mind on a matter.” Jesus used a similar expression when he warned people about greed in Luke 12:15: *“Take care, and be on your guard.”* The phrase *“practicing your righteousness”* refers to anything and everything that we do in regard to our faith in Jesus Christ. And the phrase, *“to be seen”* is the word from which we get “theater.” It’s the idea of making a spectacular performance, but it’s all an act. In 1996 Ted Turner announced that he was giving a billion dollars to the United Nations. But before he made the gift, he notified talk-show host Larry King so he could start circulating the news. His announcement was then made in a New York City ballroom filled with tuxedos, evening gowns, reporters and cameras. We can look down on Ted Turner for this but we need to *“beware”* because our motives can be more misaligned when it comes to living out our faith in Jesus Christ. We should never give or serve to try to gain favor with God or to impress others. Even the apostle Paul struggled with this: *“For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God”* (1 Cor 4:4-5).

Some argue that the principle serving “outside of the limelight” contradicts what Jesus said in Matthew 5:16: *“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”* Well, that doesn’t contradict what Jesus is saying today because it’s an issue of motivation. It’s good to let your light shine in order to put the spotlight on God - but it’s not good to let your light shine in order to put the spotlight on yourself. In Isaiah 42:8 God declares: *“I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other.”* It’s unbiblical to equate the applause of humanity with the approval of God. If we want God’s approval, we must deflect any and all glory from ourselves to God. John Ortberg amusingly once said, “I know I’m supposed to be humble, but what if no one notices?” John the Baptist’s responded to that in John 3:30: *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

Pastor Marc Axelrod once shared about a new disorder that he’s discovered called AGD. He said: “There’s nothing wrong with being appreciated. But when we cherish the praises of men more than we cherish the praises of God, then we have a problem. When we care more about the applause of earth than we do about the applause of heaven, then we have an AGD - Attention Getting Disorder.” Eugene Peterson spoke of this in his paraphrase of Matthew 6:1: “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you, won’t be applauding.” Paul reminds us of this in Colossians 3:17: *“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

“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” (Matthew 6:2). The first thing that should strike us when we read Jesus’s words here is that he clearly says: *“WHEN you give.”* Jesus doesn’t say, *“IF you give.”* He says, *“WHEN you give to the needy.”* Giving to those in need was an essential part of ancient Jewish faith where farmers were told to leave some of the sheaves behind while harvesting so the poor could gather and have food (Leviticus 19:9-10). Proverbs 14:21: *“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.”* Proverbs 21:13: *“Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.”* Deuteronomy 15:11: *“For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.”*

The “giving” Jesus talking about today is *benevolence giving* in that benevolence means “an act of kindness, a generous gift.” and the word Jesus uses here for “giving” can mean “doing something kind for someone else.” But most often in the Bible, that same word is used for money given to poor people who didn’t have enough money. This would have included beggars and those who were so handicapped they were not able to earn a living. For us, today, these verses still refer to what we give to people in need – which in the corporate sense of the church means giving to local and world missions, as well as our church’s Benevolent Fund that we use to financially help people in need. But the spirit of giving that Jesus has been speaking about here goes far beyond financial support of the poor. Although the word for “giving” is used most often for financial needs, the meaning of the word “as act of kindness, a generous gift” is broad enough that it can also include other needs as well. For example, think about the money that you give to our church that we use to hire staff and keep the buildings open and fund our ministries. Those gifts provide counseling, teaching and training for people with spiritual needs. But we often dismiss giving to the general fund of the church because it’s not glamorous enough for us.

A story about a seven-year-old girl that came to church with her parents one Sunday morning. She watched her parents singing songs. She sat and listened through the sermon and the pastor’s prayer. She saw the offering go by, and watched her parents put something in the basket. And so, after church, as the family was driving home, her mother commented, “I thought the music this morning was just awful.” And her father added, “And the sermon was not only too long. It was boring.” Their little daughter in the back seat heard all this and it really made her think. Finally, after a few moments of silence, she said, “Well, Mom and Dad, you’ve got to admit it was a pretty good show for a dollar.”

Some of what we put in the offering today is just paying for whatever we get out of this experience. But I hope that that's not all you're giving. I hope that you're giving more to this church than what you're getting out of it—more than what it costs us for you to be here. And this is not about putting money in the offering plate. This is about the kind of giving Jesus is talking about here in our text for today. This is about the kind of giving that brings God's reward. This is about, by implication, the meaning of the word "giving" as "an act of kindness, a generous gift" that is broader than that of giving financially. This is about when we come to faith in Jesus Christ. This is about Kingdom character producing the Kingdom sacrifice of surrendering everything we are and everything we have to Jesus. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 16:24-25: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* This is the sacrificial giving that Jesus Christ demands from everyone who claims to follow him.

We see that even in the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-30 where the wealthy man asked Jesus, *"What good deed must I do to have eternal life?"* Jesus's response? *"If you would enter life, keep the commandments."* To which the young man replied, *"All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"* Jesus said to him, *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* And Matthew tells us: *"When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."* Outwardly the rich man had all the trappings and had done all the right things that would make for a great follower. But inwardly, he was holding back. Jesus recognized that. He will not accept a partial giving of ourselves to him. Jesus didn't then and he doesn't now. The apostle Paul provides a personal framework for this kind of sacrificial commitment in Romans 12:1-3: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."* Spiritual worship is sacrificially giving ourselves to God.

Now most of us understand the idea of giving a financial offering to the church. But I would guess most of us do not come to a Sunday morning worship service prepared to give our whole selves over to God. Instead, we bring sins that need to be confessed and cleansed before we leave. We bring questions that need answers and problems that need solutions. We bring burdens that need to be lifted and anxieties that need to be dispelled. And we bring the distractions of our frustrations, depression, boredom and preoccupations. That being said I would venture to say that most of us would find it easier to take out our checkbook, double our offering and put it in the plate *than it would be to give ourselves totally over to God.* But what that means then is - most of us will never truly worship God until we have totally given ourselves to God. Real worship happens when we give of ourselves completely and wholeheartedly to God - our bodies, hearts, souls, minds, time, possessions, finances, service - our whole lives.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 the apostle Paul writes: *"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price."* We are to sacrificially give of ourselves just as Jesus sacrificially gave of himself for us on the cross in our place to pay the price for our sin. But Jesus reminds that it is our tendency to do so on our behalf rather than on God's. It is significant to note in Romans 12:1-3 that after the apostle Paul exhorted us to spiritually worship God by sacrificially living out our lives, so we might be *"holy and acceptable to God"* and then *"discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"* - in following verse Paul then writes: *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned"* (Romans 12:4). In our text for today Jesus gives us two means to slay our pride.

"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. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:2-4).

A vital element of the Jewish faith were the commands in the “law” of Moses to give to those in need – but by Jesus’ day the religious folks had taken this to mean they should publicly announce their giving as proof of their “*righteousness*” in following the command of the Law to give. But Jesus described those who did that as “*hypocrites*” – which in the original language was a word that described an actor who performed a role on a stage for the entertainment of an audience. Jesus condemned and still condemns such public displays of self-righteousness. He speaks here of two humble correctives.

First, we are to humbly *give as privately* as possible: “*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.*” Jesus tells us that our acts of kindness in giving of ourselves must humbly be done *with the lowest possible profile* – just as he tells us in Matthew 18:15-17 that we are to personally and humbly go and privately speak with those whom we disagree with or who have offended us. Whenever we make sure that other people know what we give and how long we have been giving it – or even what we do and how long we have been doing it - Jesus tells us that we “*have*” already “*received*” our “*reward*” from those we have told, even if they are not impressed with what we have given or what we have done.

Second, we must *brutally slay our self-congratulation* when we give: “*When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” Even when we do humbly give as privately as possible, we must take care not to self-righteously become impressed with our own generosity. To “*not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*” speaks of two different hands from the same body that are not letting the each other know what they are giving, so they would not be tempted to pat each other on the back or get together to applaud their “*righteousness*” in giving. When we avoid being seen as spiritual celebrities in our own eyes and in the eyes of others - our “*Father who sees in secret will reward*” us.

We practice both of these correctives at Arrowsmith in the way we handle our offerings. We do not publish how much anyone gives at Arrowsmith and no one on the Leadership Team knows who gives or how much anyone gives to the church. No one, outside of our Financial Secretary, knows how much anybody gives. Part of the reason for that practice is for those of us on the Leadership Team. We don’t want to be tempted to treat anybody with favoritism because they give a lot of money and we don’t want to be tempted to treat anybody dismissively because they don’t give very much. And so, part that practice is for our Leadership Team. But the other part of the reason we keep financial giving information confidential is for the congregation. We don’t want any of us to be tempted to give to the church *so that* people will think more highly of us. This is what Jesus is talking about here. By implication Jesus is also speaking about how we should give of ourselves to God. Jesus calls us to sacrificially give of ourselves as Jesus gave himself for us - whether it be our bodies, our hearts, our souls, our minds, our time, our possessions, our finances, our service, our whole lives. The problem with these, for the most part, is that they cannot be lived out in secret without public notice - which means they are just more avenues in which the self-centered motivations of our can hearts take root and grow out of the spiritual arrogance of pride of the remaining sinful nature that still lives within us. The corrective? Worship God. Give yourself totally to God! Receive your rewards later. There is much speculation regarding what those rewards will be, but only one reward really matters. In 2 Timothy 4: 8 the apostle Paul says: “*There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*” History tells us that the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon and wife were called miserly because they sold all the eggs their chicken laid and wouldn’t give any away. Because they always made a nice profit, rumors circulated that they were greedy. The Spurgeon’s, however, took the criticism graciously, and only after the death of Mrs. Spurgeon was the truth revealed. The records showed that the entire profits had been used to support two needy, elderly widows. Charles Spurgeon and his wife had refused to defend themselves because they didn’t want to call attention to their giving. Andrew Bonar said: “The best part of all Christian work is that part which Christ alone sees.” Amen!

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Pastor Leland Botzet

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