

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

April 18, 2021 | *The Sermon on the Mount Part 2*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Write down the meaning of *hypocrite*.
- Write down how you would describe an authentic Christian.
- Read Matthew 6 (again, if you feel ambitious, read Matthew 5–7 to gain a full picture of the Sermon on the Mount).
- Pray God will use this lesson to produce authentic righteousness in you and your group.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus desired for His followers to pursue authentic righteousness.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Our lives should demonstrate how we have been transformed by the gospel, but these demonstrations must be authentic. Hypocrisy will undercut our witness.

☒ MEDITATE

“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).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.*

Q: *Why is hypocrisy universally condemned?*

Q: *What does it mean for us to practice our righteousness?*

Even in our relativistic age, hypocrisy is universally condemned. To say one thing while doing another destroys our credibility, even among those who would otherwise be supportive. False motives will likewise subvert the authenticity of our actions. As Christians, our lives have been radically transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The influence of the gospel affects every part of who we are because the gospel changes our very nature. Such transformation should be evident in the way Christians conduct their lives. We put our Christian faith into practice through righteous deeds. True righteousness always draws attention because of how countercultural it is. Jesus was aware of how seductive this kind of attention can be, even for His followers. Thus, He warned them against replacing God by putting themselves at the center of their righteous deeds. Such hypocrisy would undermine the very transformation they were trying to show.

Q: *How do you see hypocrisy at work in our society?*

Q: *Why are Christians or church people often labeled as hypocrites?*

APPLICATION POINT – Over the past few centuries, there has been a growing consensus that churches are epicenters of hypocrisy. If you are committed to Jesus Christ, you should find this concerning. Given Jesus’s teaching in this passage, the church is the last place we should encounter hypocrisy.

The problem appears to be twofold. First, many people outside the church misunderstand the nature of the church. The church is not a gathering of those who have their lives completely in order and always act in accordance to God’s will. Quite the opposite. The church is a gathering of confessed sinners. A true follower of Christ recognizes that all Christians, no matter how committed, are still sinners. A Christian is simply a sinner who has acknowledged the need for Christ. Thus, when outsiders observe sin within the church, they should not automatically presume that the church is full of hypocrites. The truth is that the church is full of people who need Jesus.

Second, those within the church have often failed to adequately express the content of what they believe to those outside the church. When the church leads with moral obligations that are untethered to the gospel, we undermine the central pillar of their confession. Non-believers are left with little alternative but to assume being a follower of Christ is centered on a list of dos and don'ts. Christians are prime examples of hypocrisy when they don't abide by their own rules or when they ignore glaring instances of injustice in favor of their own shallow moral code.

The good news is there is one solution for both of these misunderstandings. Christians need always to lead with the gospel. If we lead with the gospel, the world will know we are not perfect but are in desperate need of a Savior. If we lead with the gospel, outsiders will not think our moral code is the center of our belief but will know it is Christ crucified and raised to life that everything else stems from.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 6 covers a lot of subjects, but the entire chapter is predicated on the first verse. Jesus promoted authentic righteousness among His followers by warning them against hypocritical actions and false motives.

1. AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:1-18)

2. ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:19-34)

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 6 in further detail to understand how Jesus advocates for authentic righteousness.

1. AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

▣ MATTHEW 6:1-18

Q: *What was Jesus warning against in Matthew 6:2-4?*

Q: *Why did Jesus want giving to be done in secret?*

Jesus knew the sinful nature of humanity better than anyone. He also knew His followers would continue to struggle with sin even while seeking to follow Him. They were even capable of sinning by trying to follow Jesus. Jesus warned His followers that truly following Him demanded authenticity. If, in performing actions done to show the world the excellence of Christ, we also seek our own gratification, we are sinning by falling into hypocrisy. There is no authenticity to our actions. We are really seeking our own glory rather than the glory of Jesus.

Jesus offered His audience three examples of how hypocrisy can infiltrate even deeds done out of devotion to Him. The first concerns deeds of charity. Jesus warned His followers against giving in order to be seen by others and gain their admiration. Instead, He told His followers to give in secret. This would guard them from the temptation of giving to earn the admiration of others.

Q: *Why should Christians give out of their accumulated possessions?*

Q: *How do many modern donation practices undermine the point Jesus was making?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus taught that there was a direct connection between how people spend their money and what they value most. This commonsense principle helps us evaluate how we use our resources and guides us to seek God’s glory with our wealth. The one loophole in this principle is inauthenticity. If we give to impress others with how much we love God, then our giving is a charade masking how much we love ourselves. Thus, the giving principle can be validated if our giving is done in secret. This week, consider how you can protect the anonymity of your giving, both to your church and to others. Although there is a value in visibly placing an undisclosed amount of money in an offering plate or container, it is possible for this action to be done to impress others. It is a question of intent. If our intent is to signify that faithful church members should promote the church and its ministries financially, we have an authentic motive, but if our intent is to impress others with our giving, we have an inauthentic motive. If you struggle with inauthentic giving, perhaps you should consider giving online. If this anonymity robs you of the joy of giving, you need to repent of inauthenticity.

Q: *What two prayer practices did Jesus condemn in these verses?*

Q: *Why did the Gentiles emphasize the length of their prayers?*

The second illustration Jesus gave has to do with prayer. Public prayer offers another opportunity to make a spectacle out of our religious devotion. Jesus highlighted two dangerous prayer habits. The Jewish religious elites used public prayer to draw attention to themselves. They were not even content to limit their hypocritical prayer to religious settings. They took their hypocrisy to the streets, putting their “piety” on display before the whole world. The Gentiles likely followed similar practices and even added the element of longevity to their prayer rituals.

Jesus would have none of this. He advocated the importance of private prayer to protect His followers from the dangers of inauthentic prayer. He also drew attention to God’s omniscience as a theological guide to prayer. His followers could not tell God anything He did not already know. Furthermore, God would not be impressed by how many times or in how many different ways they made their requests known. Such efforts could only be intended to draw attention.

Q: *Why is praying to gain the admiration of others particularly insidious?*

Q: *Does Jesus’s instruction in this passage prohibit public prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – The application for this passage is built into it. This week, devote time to a private prayer. If you only pray in public, it demonstrates that you either do not really believe in the power of prayer or that you believe prayer is a means for impressing others. This week do exactly what Jesus said. Find a place to pray privately. This may be an issue of timing as much as space. I can pray privately in my living room at 5:00am, but by 7:00am that is no longer an option. So, for me, the issue is whether private prayer is worth getting up earlier. Many of you may have the space in which to pray privately. It is a matter of breaking yourself away from the place at home you would normally occupy. For you, it may be an issue of sacrificing your routine or your normal leisure activities.

Q: *How does the Lord's Prayer exemplify authentic righteousness?*

Q: *How does the Lord's Prayer address both vertical [God and Man] concerns and horizontal [person to person] concerns?*

Matthew 6:9–13 is widely known as the “Lord’s Prayer.” It is often studied and quoted on its own, apart from its surrounding context. There is little wonder why this is so. The Lord’s Prayer is as extraordinary as it is simple. The prayer is, however, intricately related to the idea of authentic righteousness, as is the rest of Matthew 6. The prayer begins by prioritizing the glory and the will of God, strongly echoing the concern for authentic righteousness in the rest of the chapter. In Jesus’s prayer, the believer is shown to seek God and His glory first before moving on to personal concerns. The prayer concludes by asking God for forgiveness, but only after claiming to have been forgiving of others. Thus, to pray the Lord’s Prayer will demand a measure of authenticity. If you are unwilling to forgive others, you cannot beseech God for forgiveness. This requirement for authenticity is given a fuller expression after the Lord’s Prayer concludes (Matthew 6:14–15).

Q: *The Lord's Prayer is a model for us to follow. How can you incorporate the Lord's Prayer into your personal prayer life? Into your corporate prayer times?*

Q: *What demands does the Lord's Prayer make on the one who prays it?*

As noted above, the “Lord’s Prayer” has become widely known among Christians and even within popular culture. It is common to hear the Lord’s Prayer recited in a variety of situations. But verbatim quotation may not have been what Jesus had in mind. He told His followers to pray “like” this, as in, use this prayer as a guide. Such an exercise would undoubtedly be fruitful, especially considering how it begins by acknowledging God’s glory and God’s will. This week, use the Lord’s Prayer as a model for your own prayers. The Lord’s Prayer can be summarized as 1) praise God, 2) pray for God’s will to be done, 3) request God’s provision, 4) confess, and 5) request God’s perseverance.

Q: *What assumption did Jesus make in Matthew 6:16?*

Q: *How does biblical fasting differ from a weight-loss diet plan?*

The final example Jesus gave of authentic righteousness is fasting. While religious fasting may have fallen out of popular practice, the concept is likely still familiar to most people. Fasting is even the focus of some popular diet plans. The difference, of course, is that biblical fasting is intended to strengthen the believer's dependence upon God and prayer, not to meet weight-loss goals. As with the other two spiritual disciplines noted in this passage, the practice of fasting was easily abused during Jesus's day by those who wanted to make a spectacle of their religious devotion. As with the other spiritual disciplines, Jesus advocated for practicing fasting discreetly. Unlike the other two spiritual disciplines, fasting cannot be easily practiced in private because it requires an extended period of time. Jesus does not alter His principle, however. He merely adapts it by urging His followers to take measures to conceal their fasting while in public. The dangers of inauthenticity were too real for His followers to chance.

Q: *Is fasting the least practiced spiritual discipline in your life?*

Q: *In what additional ways, beyond the three examples in Matthew 6, can you "practice your righteousness"? What are the inherent dangers of these practices?*

At one point in His ministry, Jesus defended His disciples for not fasting (Matthew 9:14–17). His defense would not seem to apply to modern Christians, and Jesus does seem to assume that His followers will practice fasting. Since this is the case, are you one among many of Jesus's followers who do not even consider this discipline? If so, it is time to put it into practice. Many have noticed that the other two spiritual disciplines noted in this chapter have also been on the decline among Christians. Could this be because we have become so accustomed to neglecting fasting that it has carried over into the other spiritual disciplines as well? Fasting does not always have to entail days and days of going without food, such as Jesus did prior to His wilderness temptation (Matthew 4:2). You can fast one meal at a time. In fact, this would likely be a much more reasonable and safer goal if you have not previously practiced fasting. Keep in mind that biblical fasting is more than just the refusal of food. It is the refusal of food for the purposes of strengthening your faith in God's provision and in prayer.

2. ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

■ MATTHEW 6:19–34

Q: *How are the “treasures” in this passage related to the “rewards” in the first half of Matthew 6?*

Q: *How are the “masters” in this passage related to the first half of Matthew 6?*

The second half of Matthew 6 answers two questions that naturally arise from Jesus’s demand for authentic righteousness. The first question would be something like, “If I am practicing my righteousness, does it really matter what my motives are?” Jesus’s words are a strong affirmative, and He gave two reasons. The first concerns the believer’s reward for a righteous life. Practicing one’s righteousness for others will produce the sought-after reward (Matthew 6:2, 5, and 16), but this reward is earth-bound, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves steal (Matthew 6:19). Inauthentic righteousness produces a reward that will not last and cannot compare to the reward for authentic righteousness. The second concerns the believer’s loyalties. Jesus drew an analogy of a servant serving two masters, saying the servant would naturally love one and hate the other. This “love-hate” language is a figure of speech, much like exaggeration. It is the same dynamic as when Jesus said following Him would require a person to hate his mother or father (Luke 14:26). The idea is not necessarily “hate,” but one of priority. Thus, the servant of two masters would not necessarily hate one of them but would inevitably have to choose which one he will follow when they make incompatible demands on him. In the same way, we cannot practice righteousness for both Jesus and the world. Motives really do matter.

To illustrate His claim that motives matter, Jesus gave another analogy. Motives matter in the same way that good eyesight is needed for the body to function properly. A person who loses their eyesight is not able to function as well as they could otherwise, if at all. In the same way, if our motives for righteousness are bad, then the integrity of our action is marred.

Q: *Why are your motives important?*

Q: *What would cause someone to want both heavenly and earthly rewards?*

APPLICATION POINT – We live in a “get-it-while-you-can” world. If you could double your investment, why wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t impressing others while pleasing God just increase your personal capital all the more? Our world drives us to compromise our beliefs in every way possible. In the face of these expectations, we must allow Jesus’s words to echo loudly in our minds. “No one can serve two masters.” If we try that juggling act, we will quickly drop the ball.

❓: *Why would Jesus’s demand for authentic righteousness cause anxiety?*

❓: *How does anxiety demonstrate a lack of faith?*

The second question answered in Matthew 6:19–34 would be something like, “Can I trust in God’s provision?” Again, Jesus answered strongly in the affirmative. He gave two illustrations of God’s provision, both of which operate on a lesser-to-greater principle. The first concerns the birds of the air. Birds do not seek provision for the future but take each day as it comes. If God provides for something as insignificant as birds, will He not also provide for His followers? In a similar way, the lilies in the field do not labor for their beauty. God provides it for them. The short-lived nature of the lilies’ beauty demonstrates how generous God can be with His provision. God does not worry that the beauty of a lily will not last long. The extent of His provision is unbounded. Since this is the case, why should followers of Jesus worry if God will provide for them? Matthew concludes this passage by summarizing its main point, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

❓: *Why is anxiety increasing within our culture?*

❓: *How can you fight anxiety in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – The progress of technology and human capability is amazing. With a few strokes of a keyboard, we can accomplish in a few seconds things that would have required weeks or months in previous generations, if they were able to do them at all. Humanity can accomplish more now than at any other time in our history. We can heal and eradicate diseases that previous generations succumbed to quite often. We can travel farther in a few hours than most people would have traveled in their entire lives. We can communicate with people on the other side of the world instantaneously. Despite all our progress, anxiety has grown at unprecedented levels.

It seems that no matter how good things get, people cannot escape feeling vulnerable and at risk. The explanation is spelled out quite easily in Matthew 6. Humanity—and that includes Christians more often than we would like to think—has submitted to the wrong master. If we only partially submit our lives to Him, we will always struggle to rest in God’s provision for us. What we need more than any technology, more than any medical advancement, and more than any worldly pleasure is to learn to submit to God’s reign over our lives.

NEXT STEPS

Giving, praying, and fasting are a few examples of what are known as spiritual disciplines. The word “discipline” in this instance is used positively. We do not practice spiritual disciplines because we are being punished. It may be more helpful to think of these things as “spiritual exercises.” They are intended to help us exercise our faith. There are many more spiritual disciplines Christians should follow, such Bible reading, evangelism, and worship. Of course, they are all subject to the same abuses we mentioned in this chapter, but that is no reason to avoid practicing our righteousness before God. This week begin practicing the spiritual disciplines. Start with the ones in Matthew 6. Do some research or discuss with your group what additional spiritual disciplines you could practice. Take every precaution possible, as Jesus advocates in this passage, to practice these disciplines authentically.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

- Lord, keep me from practicing my righteousness before others.
- Lord Jesus, if you have given your life for the sake of my sins, why would I ever doubt your provision in my life?
- God, I fully submit to your rule over my life.

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9–13).