

Are you Authentic?

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[0 : 00] Well, who is the real you, your authentic self? As they say, these days we probably care more than ever about what other people think about us.

And I think this is especially true for young people and teenagers. Just think of the challenge of setting up a social media profile. You've been there, you know. Or think of the challenge of changing your profile picture and what new picture you go for.

You want to look beautiful or handsome, but not too fake. You want to look nice, but not too boring. You want to look confident, but not too arrogant.

You want to be authentic, but not too untidy or messy. You want to be popular, but you don't really want to be the same as everybody else. You want to be cool, but not because you're trying to be cool. That's what it's like, isn't it? Trying to cultivate your best self in a digital format on social media. And it's difficult trying to present the real you, your authentic self, because social media is full of beautiful pictures, isn't it? Smiling faces, fun times with the family, exciting adventures, unblemished beauty.

[1 : 23] On social media, you don't often see depressed faces or children in absolute meltdown. You don't see mundane life. You don't hardly ever see spots and wrinkles.

And yet, which is more true to real life? The reality is, we like to present our best selves to the world, whereas we all know, actually, the real self, our authentic self, can be very different indeed. And the reason is, I think, that we want to look good to other people and we want to be well thought of by other people. But that best version of our self is often not the real and authentic self.

We can wear a mask that hides who we really are to the world. Now, in these verses from our Bibles, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is challenging us to be real by warning us against hypocrisy.

And hypocrisy is a real danger. It was then, and it still is today, of pretending to be something that we're not in order to gain approval from others.

[2 : 31] And Jesus here is calling us to authentically live lives that please God. And not live lives that are more concerned about how we look to other people and how much we can impress other people.

And so we're going to look at this passage under three headings this afternoon. The first is the practice of religion. The second is the problem of hypocrisy. And the third is the priority of the Father.

Practice of religion, problem of hypocrisy, and priority of the Father. So first of all, let's look at the practice of religion. Because that's what Jesus does now as we turn into chapter 6 on the Sermon on the Mount.

He turns his attention to the practice of religion. How to live out your faith in God in this world. So just look at verse 1. Again, he says, Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So Jesus here gives the principle or the executive summary, if you like, for what he's about to teach.

[3 : 37] And so the fact that Jesus has to say, Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them, means that some were trying to practice their righteousness in front of others in order to be seen by them.

So it means that some people just wanted to be seen. What mattered more to them was not what God thought of them, but what other people thought of them.

And so Jesus is not saying here that it's wrong to practice your righteousness. No, it is right to practice your righteousness. And he's not even saying that doing this in front of others is wrong.

No. What he's actually saying is, if you notice, Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

That's the problem. So it's all about the motivation, isn't it? Jesus is getting to the very heart of why you and I do what we do. Why do we do the religious things that we do?

[4 : 44] Why do we do what we do in church? Why do we do what we do at home as we seek to relate to God? Are we practicing our righteousness for God as an expression of our heart's devotion for him?

Or are we doing it so that we look good to other people? Who is our audience? Is it God or is it people?

And what kind of reward are we after? If we live this way, because Jesus says, If we're doing all this stuff to be seen by people, Verse 1, You will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

And so when Jesus talks about practicing your righteousness, What he's really doing is referring to the religious practices of the day. Giving, verse 2 to 4. Praying, verse 5 to 15.

And then fasting, verse 16 to 18. And these were the three main practices of Jewish piety. If you were a good Jew and you claimed to worship God, You would give, you would pray, and you would fast.

[5 : 51] And so Jesus assumes here people will be doing these things. Look at verse 2. So when you give to the needy, not if, but when. Verse 5, And when you pray, not if, but when.

And verse 16, when you fast. Again, not if, but when. So Jesus takes it for granted that people would be giving, They would be praying, and they would be fasting.

And so he is expecting his followers, That's you and me, to do the very same things. To practice our righteousness, To put our religion into practice by doing these things.

And yet, in practicing them, Jesus here warns of the danger of doing them for human approval. Because if they're done for human approval, Then he's saying they're of no value to God.

And so we'll come to the spiritual practice in a moment. But I think the modern equivalent of what Jesus is saying here Is what we call virtue signaling. You know, that kind of pretentious way of showing off.

[6 : 59] So you just jump on the latest bandwagon Of the latest moral or social issue within the culture. Just to show others how good and virtuous you really are.

And so you do it by making sure that you're for all the right causes. That you do all the right things. You say all the right things on social media. You fly all the right flags.

And you sport all the right lanyards. Just so everybody around you can see that you are a good person. You are virtuous. You are virtue signaling. And in Jesus' day, people showed this kind of virtue signaling In a spiritual way.

By giving. By praying. By fasting. Wanting others to see them and to take notice of them. And so in each of these examples, Jesus' teaching basically follows the same pattern.

Just look down. It's there in the giving verses, the praying verses, and the fasting verses. So first of all, each time he denounces the hypocritical religious practice In a vivid and humorous way.

[8 : 10] And then secondly, he affirms how this ostentatious practice is rewarded. And then finally, he contrasts this with sincere and religious practice that is rewarded by God.

So two ways of doing things and two kinds of rewards. And of course, this wasn't just an issue in Jesus' day, was it? Hypocrisy is always an issue.

Whether you call yourself a Christian or consider yourself to be religious or not. Because if you call yourself a Christian, you know how easy it is to simply go through the motions.

To do the right Christian stuff. So that others will think that you're getting on really well in your walk with God. And yet we all know within our hearts we can have the wrong motivation for doing all of these good Christian things.

Where we're motivated, actually not by a sincere love for God, but really a selfish love for ourselves. So we can give, we can pray, we can fast.

[9 : 20] For what we hope to get out of it, as opposed to what God gets out of it. And so we're more focused on getting glory for ourselves than we are in giving glory to God.

And so Jesus here clearly has a group of people in mind as he speaks about this hypocritical thing that's happening.

And the group of people he has in mind seem to be the Pharisees. The Pharisees. So let's move on to the practice of religion, first of all. And Jesus wants to teach us that true religion, true spirituality is

in fact focused on God.

Not you or me, but it's focused on God. So that's the practice of religion. And then let's think about the problem of hypocrisy. Because hypocrisy is a problem, clearly, when it comes to praying and fasting and giving.

So verse 2. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others.

[10:20] Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. So, okay, so Jesus clearly, clearly, clearly, clearly, clearly is thinking here of the Pharisees.

Because they were the hypocrites of the day. And they would practice their righteousness in this hypocritical fashion. They were famed for their righteousness.

They loved to show off just how studious they were by giving and fasting and praying. And they wanted other people to see it. But Jesus calls them hypocrites.

And it's interesting because the word that Matthew uses here in the original Greek, hypocrites, is a word that comes from the theatre. And it's describing an actor.

An actor who'd wear a mask for their performance. And so by putting on the mask, they were pretending to be somebody else. Which is exactly the problem that Jesus is talking about here.

[11:22] Where the Pharisees' religious practices had become basically a theatrical performance. They were putting on a show for other people.

They were doing it by giving and praying and fasting. So let's start with this giving. And we'll look at each. Giving, obviously, is part of our devotion to God.

As well as being a way that we help those who are needy. Isn't that what Jesus says in verse 2? So Jesus expects us to give. And so whether here the trumpets are literal, sounding from the temple. Maybe an urgent call because there's a need wanting people to come and to give their money. And so it was a bit of a fanfare as people processed down the street and then gave. So possibly literal trumpets or maybe even metaphorical trumpets.

As in the hypocrite just loved to blow his own trumpet. And we don't know. But whatever, Jesus is warning here against giving in order to be noticed.

[12:28] Where hypocrites give to the needy in order to be praised for their generosity. And Jesus says, you'll get praise.

After all, the needy will be grateful if you give them money. It will help them. But giving wasn't actually for the needy or for God, for the hypocrites.

Giving was for their own benefit. It was for good PR. And Jesus says, well, you'll get that. You will get the praise of men if that is really all that you're after.

But instead, look what Jesus says in verse 3. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. So Jesus is emphasizing how giving should be so private that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing.

It should not be before anybody else. And so we shouldn't draw our attention, shouldn't draw attention to our giving. Because, well, nobody needs to know that we give or what we give.

[13:42] Jesus clearly wants our giving to be kept between ourselves and God. Verse 4. So if giving is to be done in secret and is rewarded by the Father, then the ultimate motivation for our giving is our devotion for him.

Because it's his approval that matters. Nobody else's. And, of course, I'm sure we don't announce our giving with trumpets.

Hope not. But we can still take pride in others knowing that we give or even how much we give. And one obvious example, I think, these days is those just giving campaigns that you can get online where you get this option.

If you're giving, here am I being virtuous by telling you if you give online to just giving, then you have the option of putting your name against your donation.

Or you can just simply be anonymous. And so it's easy, isn't it, to show others how much we give. And, of course, you get kudos if your name is on there, but you get nothing if your name isn't.

[15:02] We can enjoy acknowledging what we give. You might say, well, I wonder if the treasurer knows or has received my gift to the mission fund in church.

It's easy just to drop it into conversation, isn't it? Well, with my recent pay rise, I mean, I'm a minister, I don't get a pay rise. But with my recent pay rise, I maybe should reassess how much money I give to the church.

It's easy, isn't it, to make a show, blow our trumpet for what we give. And so just in case we are tempted to blow our own trumpet when it comes to our giving, Jesus reminds us we don't give to receive human reward.

He says the Father gives his own reward, which is far better. Okay, so that's giving. And then he moves on to praying, which is also part of our devotion to God.

But it can also be practiced in a hypocritical way. So he says in verse 5, And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray, standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen by others.

[16 : 11] Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. So Jesus says you can spot the hypocrites by the way that they pray. And so you've heard of playing to the crowd before.

Well, this is praying to the crowd. And obviously, Jesus is not condemning public prayer here. But what he is condemning is the kind of prayer that simply becomes a performance for other people to see.

Because it's not the Father the hypocrites love, but it's the chance that prayer gives them to show off to other people. And as they do it for the praise of people, Jesus says, Well, yes, that's exactly what you get.

But you have received your reward in full. And so Jesus tells us the right way to pray in verse 6. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen.

And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. So Jesus is not saying here, cancel the prayer meeting. But when it comes to our devotion to God, what matters is not what we are like when others are around.

[17 : 23] But what matters is what we are like when we're on our own with God. It's not about how pious our praying is or how spiritual we sound in front of other people, but how we relate to God in secret.

Because the real praying is done when nobody else is around. And we're on our own with our Heavenly Father. Because we forget about ourselves and we forget about others and we focus on Him.

That's why Jesus says, don't be a hypocrite when it comes to prayer. And it is so easy to do, isn't it? Well, I can't make any evening this week apart from Wednesday night, because that's when the church prayer meeting is on.

And of course, I'll be at the church prayer meeting as I always am at the church prayer meeting. So any night apart from Wednesday is good for me. Or, yeah, yeah, we were praying for her last night. Our family devotions this morning, we prayed for them then as well. And so it's worth asking ourselves, isn't it? Do I pray more frequently in public than I do in private?

[18 : 30] Do I pray more passionately in public than I do in private? Do I prefer the secret place of prayer with my Father in heaven than I do praying in public?

So giving, praying, and then fasting, which is also part of our devotion to God. And we're not talking about how to fast here, but Jesus is saying how fasting can also be practiced in a hypocritical way. So verse 16, So fasting is basically abstaining from food.

And you abstain from food, so the time you would spend eating is time spent devoted to God instead. And Jesus, again, clearly assumes that his people will fast.

But he says you can tell when the hypocrites fast by the way that they look. Because they love to draw attention to themselves, so people will be impressed by them. Ah, look, he must be fasting.

[19 : 41] He's got this disheveled look and he looks really sad and hungry. How holy and spiritual is he? And Jesus is warning here against fasting becoming the opportunity for self-righteousness.

Because the only benefit is to the one fasting. Because, well, Jesus says if you want admiration from others, and, well, you'll get admiration from others. Sure, they'll give it to you.

But fasting should be an occasion to draw near to God. And so God is not impressed by the motivation in your heart to do it, just so you look good to other people.

And yet the tragedy is we can behave similarly today, can't we? Not by looking somber or disfiguring our faces, like Jesus says. I mean, that's just basically being Scottish, isn't it?

Looking gloomy, somber, with a grumpy look on your face. But we can drop into conversation, can't we, at the community group. Well, I'm so hungry. I skipped lunch today because I was fasting and praying.

[20 : 48] I'm going to eat later on. Or I was so encouraged by my Bible reading this morning. When I got up, I just had a deep time in God's Word before I caught my 6 a.m. train to London.

How holy am I? See, the problem is going on about what we're doing, not the things themselves, because these practices, practicing our righteousness, spiritual practices, spiritual disciplines, they're all good.

And almost any Christian practice is always good, but it can become hypocritical when we're more concerned about how it makes us look or how it's used in order to help others see just how spiritual we are.

And yet all of these practices ultimately are meant to point to the God we worship. That's why we do these things. It's to nurture our relationship with God. And that's what comes up here in verse 17 and 18.

So Jesus says you don't need to do anything unusual if you're fasting.

[22 : 10] Just fast. Just be normal and do what you would do on any other day. Nobody needs to know that you're fasting.

If you're fasting. Because God already knows and he sees. And he knows the posture of your heart and your devotion for him.

So he's not fooled. And he will also reward you. And his reward is better than the rewards that comes from other people. And so as we apply this, well, we shouldn't be a hypocrite by practicing our righteousness in front of other people.

Because if we're doing it to be recognized by others, Jesus is saying that is the only reward that you will get. You certainly won't get any reward from your father in heaven.

Because we might do good works, praying, giving, fasting, but still do them with the wrong motives. But it's not about God at all.

[23 : 12] It's all about me. And so the question that we should ask ourselves is, well, through all of these religious practices, all of these spiritual disciplines, all of these things I do in my Christian life and Christian walk, am I doing them?

Am I doing them to please God? Or am I really doing them for myself? To feel good? To look good? What is the motivation behind them?

And that leads us on to our third point. So there's the practice of religion first. There's the problem of hypocrisy. And then third, there's the priority of the father. Notice in chapter six here in verse one to 18, how Jesus continually directs our attention to the father in everything that he says here.

So did you notice how God has called father 10 times in Matthew six, one to 18? I've underlined them all in red in my Bible, but verse one, from your father in heaven, verse four, then your father, verse six, pray to your father who is unseen.

Again, verse six, then your father, verse eight, for your father, verse nine, our father in heaven, verse 14, your heavenly father will also forgive you.

[24 : 35] Verse 15, your father will not forgive your sins. Verse 18, but only to your father. And then again, verse 18, and your father.

There's nowhere else in the entire Bible where we get such frequent references to God as our father.

And so Jesus is teaching us here how we relate to God as our father. Because knowing God as our father is one of the factors of righteousness in the first place.

And it is what provides the solution to our hypocrisy. Because Jesus wants us to know the intimacy of our relationship with the father.

God as our father. So I want you to please him becomes the priority of our lives. Where we care more about what our father thinks about us than we do about what other people think about us.

[25 : 38] Because the father sees what is done in secret. And so we care more about what he thinks than about what other people think. And so that impacts how we give, how we pray, how we fast.

Because it impacts the whole of our lives. Where our motivation is our love for our father. And our desire to glorify him and not ourselves.

Because when we know God as our father, then we're completely secure in him. Because our identity is as his child.

And when we don't know that we're accepted by him and that we are his, he is our father and we are his child, then we'll be insecure. And we'll worry about what other people think of us.

And so we will seek other people's approval. And so we will do stuff to make ourselves look good to others so that they will think well of us. But the child of the father does what they do for the father. [26 : 45] Even if nobody else in the whole world notices what we do, it doesn't actually matter. Because they can't reward us with a real reward.

Our father in heaven does that. So our father sees what you give. Our father sees what you pray. He hears you. Our father sees you when you are devoted to him. When you fast. He's not watching a performance like other people might be. He knows your heart. And so the father knows your desires when you fast. He's well aware of why you do it. He doesn't need an outward religious performance or a show. He sees the devotion of our hearts.

When we give, when we pray, when we fast in secret. And because we do it all in front of him, then he rewards it. And so while Jesus here highlights the hypocrisy that can come from the practice of religion, he emphasizes the priority of our relationship with our father.

[28 : 02] Because it's all about him. And it's all for him. It is not about me or for me. And it's not about how others see me or how others think of me.

Because they are not the audience that I am here to perform for. I'm not living my life for their applause or for their approval. My fans, my followers don't matter because they can't reward me. Well, yeah, they might give me a few likes on social media. But a thumbs up or a heart might make me look good or feel good for a moment. But it really is a paltry reward, isn't it?

But it's clear from what Jesus teaches here that we have an audience of one. And it is God, our father. And so we've got to remember that every single day and whatever we do, it's our father's opinion of us that counts.

It's the only opinion of us that counts. And it's through faith in Jesus Christ that God enters into a relationship with us.

[29 : 14] And it lasts for all eternity. And so when we're united to Christ, well, we could not be more accepted and approved of by the father. Which means there's no need for hypocrisy.

There's nothing to prove to anyone. And so we can live, live with a humility, but also live with a confidence, knowing that a relationship with God is the ultimate reward.

C.S. Lewis says this in Mere Christianity. He says, Now God designed the human machine to run on himself, meaning God.

He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion.

God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing. And so the father rewards.

[30 : 28] That's what Jesus says. Because he himself is our reward. He is the goal. He is the purpose. He is the reason for our existence.

We were made by God so that we could relate to him as father. And so if you're after the approval of others, you might get it.

You might not get it. But Jesus says you'll have no reward from your father in heaven. And yet if you truly seek the father, giving and praying and fasting and doing all things for him, then he will reward you with himself, with every spiritual blessing in Christ and with an inheritance to come.

Let's pray.