

Jesus Explained the Actions of Religion

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to grow and mature spiritually so that they are led by the love of Christ, instead of driven by their own fears. Christ wants them to enjoy a personal relationship with Him and not develop the actions of those who have religion but not a personal relationship with Christ. That will be the focus of this topic.

Jesus went on to point out the fact that people who have religion do their religious acts to be seen by men. In contrast, Jesus said that those who have true faith will do what they do to be seen by God. Matthew 6:1-4 says, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.”

In Matthew 5:19, Jesus had warned about breaking the Law. Then, He went on, in Matthew 5:21-48, to explain the true meaning of some of the laws. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” As we come to the first part of chapter 6, we see that in these verses, Jesus explained what the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was like to help the disciples understand why that righteousness came from a selfish, sinful heart.

First, Jesus talked about the charitable deeds practiced by the scribes and Pharisees. The word translated “charitable deeds or alms” speaks of *the gifts that people gave to the poor and needy*. We see that Jesus did not deal with the action of giving. Throughout the Bible, we see that we are to share with the poor and needy. Israel was told, in Deuteronomy 15:11, “For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, “You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.”” Then, Deuteronomy 24:14 adds, “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, *whether* one of your brethren or one of the aliens who *is in* your land within your gates.” The Jews were to share with the poor, whether they were other Jews or aliens. The apostles told Paul and Barnabas, in Galatians 2:10, “*They desired* only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.” Here, we see that remembering the poor was very important in the church.

Instead of talking about giving, Jesus was talking about the motive for giving. Jesus said that there were many who did their charitable giving to be seen by men. Jesus said that those who blow their trumpets or make announcements about their giving in the streets or the synagogues are hypocrites. Such individuals are seeking the glory of men. Jesus said that individuals who give with wrong motives are hypocrites and have their reward. The praise they receive from other people is their reward. However, they will not have an eternal reward, because their giving is based on wrong motives.

Jesus then went on to tell how we should give as we carry out charitable actions. Jesus said that we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Jesus gave an illustration about sharing with the poor, in

Luke 14:12-14, when He said, “Then He also said to him who invited Him, ‘When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite *the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.* And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.’” The poor and needy cannot repay and usually such actions will not even be noticed by others. However, God looks at the motives of the heart and He will reward those who minister to the poor and needy with the love of Christ. This reward will be in heaven and will be given by God for all there to see.

Then, Jesus went on to talk about the way the scribes and Pharisees prayed. Matthew 6:5-6 says, “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” In the dramas of that day, one actor would play several different parts by wearing a different mask for each person he played. Such actors became known as “hypocrites” because they were not acting the way they normally acted. As a result, the word “hypocrite” is used in the New Testament to speak of those who deceive themselves and try to deceive others. Jesus used that word to describe the prayers of the scribes and Pharisees. In these verses, we see that the scribes and Pharisees often did certain things as they prayed. They loved to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets. However, they did not pray there to talk to God. Instead, we read that they would pray in these places so they could be seen by men. Here, we see that Jesus was again dealing with the motives in their hearts. Jesus said they had already received their reward because they had been seen by other people and that was their desire.

Jesus then told His disciples what they should do when they prayed. Jesus told the disciples to go into their room and shut the door. Then, they were to pray to the Father. In this way, they would truly be talking to the Father, instead of trying to impress the people around them. Jesus often went to pray and talk to the Father where He would be alone. Mark 1:35 says, “Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.” Matthew 14:23 says, “And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.” Then, Luke 22:39-41 says, “Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him. When He came to the place, He said to them, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation.’ And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed.” In each case, we see that Jesus left even the disciples as He went to pray alone to the Father.

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand and taught the importance of spending time alone with the Father, in prayer. In the other passages, we see that He taught this same lesson to His disciples by His own example. Jesus also gave the promise that if we spend time alone in prayer to the Father, the time will come when the Father will reward us openly. The Holy Spirit led John to record the prayer that Jesus prayed as He was talking to the Father, alone in the garden, in John 17:1-26, so that we would have an example of His prayer.

Jesus went on to point out the fact that the heathen also pray. Matthew 6:7-8 says, “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do.* For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.” Here, we see that the heathen had a very different way of praying than the scribes and Pharisees. The word translated “heathen” was the word the Jews used to speak of a person who had a different language or customs and came to refer especially to those who did not know and worship the true God. This is a reminder of the fact that even people

who have no knowledge of God may pray, even though they do not know to whom they are praying.

Sometimes, such people pray to their idols or false gods. 1 Kings 18:26 says, “So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared *it*, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, ‘O Baal, hear us!’ But *there was* no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made.” Here, we see an example of vain repetitions, as they repeated the same phrase over and over. We also see the results in 1 Kings 18:29, “And when midday was past, they prophesied until the *time* of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice. But *there was* no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.” They prayed all day and received no answer.

At other times, people pray to a god they do not know. Acts 17:22-23 says, “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.’” The problem such people have is the fact that they are praying to a god they do not know. The only ones who will hear such prayers are the other people who are standing there and listening. Such prayers change nothing.

Then, Jesus explained why our prayers to the Father are very different. God knows the things we need even before we pray. He chooses to answer our prayers for our needs to help us grow in our faith. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.” As a result, we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to pray according to the will of God. This means that we should help our children learn, from the Bible, the things God says are His will. We help them learn that God speaks to them through His Word. They learn that they speak to God as they pray. They come to realize that God knows the things they need and answers according to His will. As we help our children to understand these things, they learn that prayer is talking to God and not just saying prayers. This also equips our children to help others learn to pray and communicate with God. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to communicate with God.