

Authentic Spirituality

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 March 2012

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Since early January, we have been following Jesus of Nazareth into his wonderfully and radically transforming Sermon on the Mount.

And have you noticed that with each new section of the sermon, Jesus is taking us deeper and deeper? And have you noticed that with each new section of the sermon, our world is getting bigger and bigger?

That's the way it is with Jesus. The deeper we go with him, the more expansive our sense of the world is. He's taking us deeper and deeper into the kingdom of heaven, which he is bringing upon the earth.

He's taking us deeper and deeper into his understanding of and relationship with the one he calls father. He's taking us deeper and deeper into a world that is shaped by the real presence of his father.

[1 : 22] He's taking us deeper and deeper into his understanding of what it means to be a human in a world that is filled with the presence of the father.

Beware. Beware. Beware. Beware. Beware, he now says in this next section of the sermon. Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them.

Otherwise, you have no reward with your father who is in heaven. Righteousness. Righteousness.

Up to this point in his sermon, Jesus has been speaking about righteousness.

Righteousness is the major theme of the whole sermon. Righteousness. And I've been emphasizing that this word righteousness is a relational term. It means right relationship.

It means right relatedness. And up to this point in his sermon, Jesus has been spelling out what this righteousness of the kingdom of heaven looks like in everyday earthly situations in which he calls us to follow him.

[2 : 31] And he has promised that one day we are going to live out this right relatedness. We are going to live out this righteousness in all of its fullness.

We're going to live it out wholly, totally, undivided. One day you are going to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. He promises us. And now, beware.

Beware of practicing your righteousness. Beware of practicing your right relationships. Beware of practicing your right relatedness in order to be seen by others.

Otherwise, you have no reward with your father who is in heaven. You can see then that Jesus is taking us deeper and deeper into our own hearts.

He's taking us into the subterranean movements of our hearts. And in the process, he's taking us deeper into his more expansive understanding of the world.

[3 : 36] We will see, as we continue following Jesus into his Sermon on the Mount, that the section we read today, Matthew 7, 1 to 18, is tightly connected to the next section.

Matthew 6, 19 to 34. Where Jesus will speak about anxiety, which is one of the dominant marks of our time. And these two sections of Matthew 6, these two halves of Matthew 6, are brought together.

And Dallas Willard, I think, makes the connection clearest. He writes this. Having shown us, in the previous sections of the sermon, true well-being and the goodness of the kingdom heart, Jesus now, in Matthew 6, alerts us to the two main things that will block constant interactive with God and block healthy growth in the kingdom.

These two things are, one, the desire to have the approval of others, especially for being devout.

And two, the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth.

Two great obstacles to growing in intimacy with God and growing into the kingdom of heaven on earth. The desire to have the approval of others, especially for being devout.
[5 : 03] And the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth. If we are not careful, if we are not attentive to these two desires, as Professor Willard says, they will pull us out of the sway of the kingdom.

So beware, says Jesus. Be on guard is the better way to render that. Be on guard against the tendency to practice your righteousness before other people in order to get their applause. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. Father. There simply is no way to understand Jesus of Nazareth apart from his constant reference to and focus on Father. Jesus' whole life in ministry is driven by his relationship with Father. At the beginning, at age 12, did you not know that I needed to be about my Father's business?
In the middle, often slipping away again and again to be with Father, saying again and again, I only say what I hear my Father say. I only do what I see my Father do.
[6 : 20] And then on the cross, Father, forgive them. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Jesus lives for and with and in the Father.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wants us to realize that we will finally understand this world in which we live and move when we, like he, recognize the presence of his Father, who, because of Jesus, has become our Father.
Or to put it differently, the preacher on the Mount wants us to live with his sense of the universe. He wants us to consciously live in a world where the Father is, well, everywhere.
In the text, Jesus says, The Father knows everything. The Father sees everything. The Father hears everything. And the Father rewards. Now, I'm aware that for many people, Jesus' constant reference to and focus on the Father is uncomfortable.

[7 : 42] I'm aware that for many women, it feels too patriarchal. And that for many women, this focus on the Father feels like there's no place for the feminine. I'm aware that for many people, this whole Father image is very, very painful because of our earthly fathers, because of things like absenteeism and neglect, of hyper-demand and even of abuse, both psychological and physical.

So for many of us, Jesus' Father orientation is uncomfortable. And I think that Jesus responds to this discomfort by saying, I understand.
And by saying, If you will let me, I will heal the wounds around this image of Father. And saying to us, I know a different kind of Father.
And if you will follow me, I will teach you this different kind of Father, and I will show you how good He is. This He has especially done for me in His parable of the prodigal sons, recorded in Luke 15. Parables through which Jesus has brought me much healing and frees me to embrace His embrace of this Father. Jesus wants us to know a different kind of Father, and then He wants us with Him to then experience a Father-full universe.
[9 : 18] Therefore, beware. Not beware of the Father. But beware that you do not miss out on what the Father wants to give you.

Beware of living out your new, right-relatedness of the Kingdom of Heaven in order to be seen by others. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in Heaven.
You can see, I think, that Jesus' concern in this section of the sermon is authentic spirituality. Jesus' concern is authentic interaction with the living God.
And so, He calls us to attend to the movements of our hearts. To the deep movements of our hearts. To the subterranean movements of our hearts.
He calls us to pay attention to how we practice the so-called spiritual disciplines. And in particular, He calls our attention to three spiritual disciplines which are common to most religions of the world.
[10 : 32] They are almsgiving, or charity, prayer, and fasting. And Jesus brings up these three because these three disciplines especially enable us to be attentive to Father and enable us to live in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Notice that Jesus, therefore, does not say, if you give alms, if you pray, if you fast. But He says, when you give alms, when you pray, when you fast, He is assuming that those who follow Him, that those who enter into the Kingdom of God will want to be generous to others, will want to pray, and will want to fast.
When you give, when you pray, when you fast, be on guard. Be on guard not to do these acts of righteousness in order to be noticed by other people.

Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in Heaven. Now, this exhortation seems to contradict an exhortation He gave us earlier in the sermon.

In Matthew 5. In Matthew 5:16, He said, Let your light shine before others. Remember? I'm the light of the world. Let your light shine before others.

[12:05] Is this not in conflict with what He now tells us in Matthew 6? In Matthew 5, Jesus seems to call us to visible discipleship.

And in Matthew 6, He seems to be calling us to invisible discipleship. But these two things are not in conflict. It all turns around motive.

In Matthew 5, the motive for visibility is bringing glory to God. Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.

In Matthew 6, the motive for visibility is bringing glory to ourselves. In Matthew 5, the motive is to display how good God is.

In Matthew 6, the motive is to display how good we are. I like how the 19th century New Testament scholar A.B. Bruce once put it.

[13:07] We are to show when tempted to hide and we are to hide when tempted to show. Show when tempted to hide God's righteousness and hide when tempted to show our righteousness.

In Matthew 6, Jesus is protecting these disciplines of the Spirit, these spiritual disciplines, and therefore, He's protecting our relationship with the living God.

The acts of giving, praying, and fasting are to deepen the relationship with Father. Yes, people might notice the disciples of Jesus giving and praying and fasting.

And people might be moved by those acts, but that will be a side effect. Now, in Matthew 6, Jesus is not saying no one should ever know.

Robert Gullick. The issue is not public worship, but worship for publicity. The issue is not public worship, but worship for publicity.

[14:19] Again, the issue is motive. Why do we put the money in the offering plate? For whose ears do we speak our prayers? For whose eyes do we do the act of devotion?

For whose glory do I work so hard on a sermon? Charles Talbert makes the point most clearly. He says that the aim in Matthew 6 is not the privatization of piety, but the purification of motive in relating to God.

Stay on guard, says Jesus. Do not do your acts of righteousness before others to be seen by them, otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

Now, as I said earlier, as Jesus takes us deeper and deeper, he causes our sense of the world to get bigger and bigger. And in this section of his sermon, Jesus helps us understand the real world in which we live and move and work.

He, first of all, helps us realize that we are all actors. We are all actors in a grand drama. And to make this point, Jesus uses some words from the acting world.

[15:40] the verb in verse 1, the text, in order to be seen, is the word feia, feitai, feitai, from which we get the word theater. And it means performing for the audience.

The noun hypocrite is a word that means, refers to, actors who take a mask and then play the part of another person. We are all actors in a grand drama.

And the question always is, whose part are we playing? Our own or someone else's? C.S. Lewis begs God, may it be the real I who prays and may it be the real you to whom I speak.

Jesus is further helping us realize that we are always acting before an ever-present live audience. We are always and everywhere being seen.

Three times in this section Jesus says, your father who sees what is done in secret. The writer of Hebrews, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.

[16:52] Everything is uncovered and laid bare before his eyes up to the one to whom we must give an account. O Lord, you have searched me and known me, says the psalmist. Psalm 139, you know when I sit down and when I rise, you perceive my thought from afar, you discern my going out and my lying down, you are familiar with all my ways.

There are no secrets. The father of the Lord Jesus Christ knows everything, everyone, every thought, we think, every emotion, we feel, every word we speak, every move we make.

Father knows the contents of every top secret file. Father knows the whereabouts and movements of every undercover agent. Father knows where every drug smuggler and terrorist think that they are hiding.

Father hears the cry of every broken heart. Father sees the drop of every tear. Now, how do you react today to what Jesus is revealing to us?

You might know that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was repulsed by that idea. And many find it too much to endure and so find ways to ignore it.

[18:11] Am I right when I say that all of us at one time or another in our life try to hide from this ever-present all-seeing God?

Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we sense the presence of the wind and the spirit and we scurry beneath the bushes. Some of us hide behind noise.

We keep the radio and television on all the time or we keep plugged into our cell phone or to the iPad to drown out this gentle but haunting call of God.

Some of us hide behind busyness. We just keep going from one thing to the next ignoring these footsteps in dogged pursuit of us. Some of us hide behind chemicals.

We just numb ourselves to all of this or hide behind relationships or relationality or cynicism. And some of us even try to hide behind religion.

[19:10] Religion is the ultimate hiding place because it can be done in the name of God. We create a God in our own image, a God who expects little of us and a God who simply lets us go on with our lives the way we want to live them.

But none of those hiding places work. For one thing, we were made by God for God and God is not going to give up on the plan. He's going to come after us as He does in the garden when He calls out to Adam and Eve, where are you?

And for another, it's simply impossible to hide. Apparently, the author of Psalm 139 tried to hide and discovered it didn't work. Where?

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your face? If I go to heaven, you are there. If I go into Sheol, behold, you are there.

If I go to the wings of the dawn, take the wings of the dawn and settle in the far part of the sea, even there, your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, surely, the darkness will hide me and the light around me become darkness, even darkness was not dark to you.

[20:22] The darkness is as light to you. God even sees in the darkness. We are always acting in a grand drama and we're always acting before a real, live audience.

And in this text, Jesus is helping us understand that we all want to be seen. Not, of course, by the lustful dehumanizing look, but by the look of love, which is why it is so tempting to give and pray and fast to be seen.

We long for attention. We long for affirmation. We long for approval. We long to be admired. Even the introverts among us, even the shy among us, we want to be noticed, right?

We're all like Shrek. Pick me, pick me, pick me. Is the desire to be seen wrong?

No. It gets twisted, but it's not wrong. I like what Dale Bruner says. We are made to want notice. One of the most characteristic remarks of a child is watch me.

[21:38] The child's verbal watch me becomes the adult's more unspoken, but just as deep watch me. This drive to be noticed is not only the result of sin, it's also part of being in the image of God.

We were made to notice and be noticed by God, to imagine and image his pleasure. And in his sermon, Jesus is redirecting this great desire to be noticed.

He's saying, in effect, turn your desire to be noticed to the right audience, towards your Father, and your Father will notice. He will see. He will hear.

He will reward. We are all actors in the grand drama. And we are always acting before a real, live audience.

And we all want to be seen. Jesus is helping us realize, therefore, that we have to choose. Before whom will I act?

[22:39] For whose acclaim will I perform? Whose affirmation and admiration am I going to seek? You realize, do you not, that we can do these spiritual disciplines to be seen by ourselves?

I often have shared this with students when I was teaching at Regent College. We can do the disciplines, the spiritual disciplines, to be noticed by ourselves.

It's awful. I get up in the morning to spend time alone with God. And at first, I'm aware of the presence. I sit in this chair in my office at home, and at the beginning, I'm aware of this divine audience.

I'm aware that it's present. But before long, I become my own audience. I pray best at the end of a pen.

And so, I write out my prayers in my journal. And sometimes, as I'm writing these prayers to the Lord, I realize I'm no longer writing the prayers to communicate with God.

[23 : 55] I'm writing these prayers for my own applause. Wow, that's a fine prayer. Look how poetic it is.

Look how rhythmic. Wow, look at the chiasmatic structure of that. These prayers one day could be published. Which is why I have taken to the discipline at the end of the year, I get rid of the journal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this. I can lay a very nice show for myself, even in the privacy of my room. The publicity I'm looking for is then provided by the fact that I am the one who at the same time prays and looks on.

And this is the line. We take note that we have prayed suitably well. And this substitutes for the satisfaction of answered prayer.

We are all acting in a grand drama. We're always acting before a real live audience. We all want to be seen and we have to choose for whom are we acting.

[25 : 19] And Jesus helps us to help us realize that we get the reward we seek. We get the reward we seek.

Three times in the text Jesus says they have their reward in full. Verse 2, 5, and 16. They have their reward in full. The hypocrites says Jesus, the play actors says Jesus, announce their act of charity in order to be seen by others.

I tell you the truth, they have the reward in full. The hypocrites say Jesus stands in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by others. I tell you the truth, they have the reward in full.

The hypocrites says Jesus disfigure themselves when they fast in order to be seen by others. I tell you the truth, says Jesus, they have their reward in full. This phrase, reward in full, comes from the business and banking world of the day. And the phrase simply means receiving full payment. It's what you stamp on the receipt, payment in full. If I give to demonstrate how generous I am, or to show people how caring I am, I get what I seek. People apply. And that's it. Payment in full. If I pray to demonstrate my theological and spiritual depth and insight, people will notice. My, what a prayer. People will apply. That's it. Payment in full. If I fast to demonstrate how self-disciplined or sacrificial I can be, people will notice. That's it. Payment in full. People notice. But, says Jesus, if we give simply because this is the right thing to do and we know it pleases God, and if we pray because we want to know the mind and heart of God, and we know there's no place else to turn, and if we fast because we want to deny ourselves in some way so that we're available to God, the one who is unseen sees and rewards us. Rewards? Father rewards us? You might know that many people are embarrassed by what Jesus says at this point in the sermon.

[27 : 34] Rewards us? I mean, they say authentic spirituality ought to go way beyond this concept of being rewarded. Jesus doesn't seem to think so. He speaks often of rewards. William Barclay once remarked, we ought to be careful that we do not try to be more spiritual than Jesus in this.

The Father rewards. What is the reward? Listen carefully. Matthew 6.1, the very first line of the text. Reward from your Father. Other translations have it, reward with your Father. Which is it? From your Father or with your Father? Those are two very different things.

Reward from your Father. Is the reward from your Father or with your Father? It is with. For you students of New Testament Greek, it's para plus the data, which means near, with, by the side of, paraclete, para-legal.

The reward of the Father. The reward of exercising these acts of righteousness in order to relate to the Father is to be with the Father. To be drawn to his side. To be taken into his company. To enjoy his presence.

[29 : 01] What greater reward? What greater reward is there? What could we possibly get from God that would be greater than being with God?

So Jesus warns us. Beware. Stay on guard. Be vigilant. When you give. When you give. Do not announce it to anyone. Not even to yourself. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Just give.

Many people say that this sounds the death knell of the old humanity. This crucifies the old egocentricity. Just give.

Do not keep any record of the giving. Like, I'm working on my tax receipts. Don't keep a record of what I gave. I'm not supposed to do that and give it to the tax man.

Well, I doubt that my tax accountant is really interested in my piety. I don't think that's what he thinks when he reads what we wrote down. Well, and I do know, as I said in the sermon I preached on Malachi 3, that if the day ever comes when contributions to the church or charity are no longer tax deductible, the church will not suffer.

[30 : 28] For one thing, gifts that truly bless the ministry are freely given. And for another, the Father loves to multiply freely given gifts.

And for another, unrecorded giving will enrich the giver and we'll be free to give even more. Just give, says Jesus. And your Father, who sees, will notice and reward you. And when you pray, says Jesus, do not stand in the sanctuary and in the marketplace and pray in order to be seen by others.

Go into your closet. The value of the closet is that it shuts out the eyes of other people. And just simply focus on the unseen one who is in that place.

And, says Jesus, you don't need many words. Many words makes us very self-conscious. And more to the point, Jesus says, many words don't do a thing for the Father.

[31 : 40] The Father already knows what you need before you ask. Father does not need to be informed. And Father certainly doesn't need to be told how urgent these needs are. Just ask like a child.

And then, says Jesus, if you need a prayer to pray, try this. Our Father in heaven, you who sit on the throne, hallow your name on earth as it is in heaven.

Bring your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Cause your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And all the other people in the world their daily bread. And cancel our debts as we cancel the debts of others.

And when you lead us to the test, do not let the test become a temptation. But rescue us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Just pray.

As a child. And when you fast, do not look somber or gloomy. Do as you normally do.

[32 : 43] Brush your teeth, wash your face, brush your hair, go about your normal activity. Just fast. Follow your inner resolve to deny yourself in some way to make yourself more available to God.

And the Father who sees secret things will see, will notice. He will meet you. And He'll feed you with the bread of life and quench your thirst with living water.

Jesus comes on so strong about these acts of righteousness. Jesus comes on so strong about the movements of our hearts because He wants us, like Him, to live in a Father-full universe.

Let us pray. Thank you that you love us and that you want the very best for us.

you want us to live. Thank you that you know us and that you tell us what it is you know about us.

[34 : 05] So we ask that you so move in us that all we do, we do aware of you. So move in us that we do not miss out on all that you want to do with us and in us and for us and through us.

And most of all, thank you that our desire to be with you is nothing compared to your desire to be with us.

Amen. I answer to that.

Amen. I love it. I do that. I do that.