

**WHY DO WE DO WHAT WE DO?****MATTHEW 6:1 – 18**

by Elaine Poproski

It's weird to me that *Amazing Grace* continues to be a massively popular song in this part of the world. I don't know if it's the music or something else, but I'm kind of surprised that no one has ever substantially changed the words, especially those in the first verse.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...  
so far so good...  
...that saved a wretch like me.*

That's the thing I can't believe people haven't changed: *a wretch like me*. That word – *wretch* – is a really strong word. Dictionary.com defines a wretch as 'a deplorably unfortunate person' or 'a person of despicable character.'

*That saved a deplorable person like me...  
That saved a despicable person like me...*

That's what this verse says.

It's not that there aren't deplorable and despicable people out there, but how many of us would actually use those words to describe ourselves? We tend to like to look at ourselves better than that. And if someone did come up to us and describe themselves this way, we'd probably try to assure them that they're not all that bad.

It does make sense that the guy who wrote this song used the word because he was deplorable; he was despicable; he was a wretch. His name was John Newton. He was a slave trader. He made lots of money kidnapping men, women, and children and carting them across the sea to be sold, to be killed, to be harmed in ways most of us can't even imagine. We aren't wretches, but we are singing his words. We aren't deplorable. We aren't despicable. We aren't like the guy who wrote this song. So why haven't we changed the word in the song?

It's a hard selling point for Christianity that we profess to believe in people's general wretchedness. It's not a message people want to hear. Even if someone genuinely believes themselves to be a wretch, that's what therapy is for – to help them feel better about themselves.

But didn't we all just sing, *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me?*

I'm pretty sure the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day wouldn't have called themselves wretches. They certainly thought of other people that way, but as for themselves, they were the righteous ones – the ones all about living exactly as God required. At least, that's the way they liked to think of themselves. And that's the way they tried to present themselves to the world – as anything but wretched, as anything but deplorable or despicable. They were the righteous ones – the holy ones.

But Jesus saw through them. Jesus saw that for all their talk about following the Law of God, their following only went skin deep. They ignored the spirit behind God's Law. They used God's

Law for their own gain and their own comfort. They manipulated it so that other people were harmed while they were always elevated.

You might remember that a couple weeks ago we read Matthew 5:20, where Jesus said this: *Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* Then, to unpack what he was talking about, Jesus went on to offer a whole list of examples. He said, “You have heard it said... But I say to you...” He took their misinterpretations of the Law and reinterpreted them so they accurately represented God and the things God cares about.

This week, we’re moving into chapter 6 of Matthew, which is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. But even though we’ve moved into a new chapter, we haven’t moved into a new subject. Jesus is still talking about righteousness – *real* righteousness, as opposed to that presented by the scribes and Pharisees.

This is how chapter 6 begins: *Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

This is the thesis for the rest of this chapter. It’s the theme statement – it’s the point that Jesus is going to illustrate and unpack through the rest of this chapter and into chapter 7 as well.

It’s a simple point, really: *beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them.* Pay attention to how you’re doing the things God would have you do. Pay attention to why you’re doing the things God would have you do. Are you doing it for God’s glory or your own? Are you looking to be admired for your humility, or celebrated for your frugality?

The first three illustrations Jesus uses have to do with a person’s religious life. These are the three pillars of Jewish piety – of Jewish righteousness. Next week we’ll get into the non-religious righteousness, but this week, we’re focusing with Jesus on these three religious pillars. They are almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Interestingly, these three pillars also help form the Christian practices around Lent. Almsgiving is the first one he talks about. Almsgiving is a demonstration of the kind of selflessness that Jesus embodied. It’s about giving money or food or anything else to those who have need of it. It’s about giving, not out of our excess, but sacrificially. Prayer is the next one; it’s about growing our relationship with God so that we might know God as intimately as Jesus did. Fasting is the third one and it’s about deepening our awareness of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. It’s all about identifying with Jesus.

There’s a story in Matthew 4 that happens right after Jesus was baptised. He went into the wilderness, where he fasted for 40 days. It was at the end of that time of fasting that the devil showed up to tempt him. Jesus came out of that temptation and began his ministry. It was after all of that time in the wilderness that Jesus started wandering through Galilee declaring, *Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.*

Lent is meant to mirror that time that Jesus had in the wilderness when he was fasting. And so, when we fast, we identify with Jesus in it.

The first illustration begins at verse 2, which reads this way:

<sup>2</sup> “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Probably most of us, when we hear the word alms, think of giving money. But it’s a broader word than that. Originally, it encompassed any acts of mercy. It’s about charity; it’s about giving. The problem Jesus was facing wasn’t that people weren’t giving, people were giving, but they weren’t giving because it was the right thing to do, so much as for the accolades that would follow. They wanted their names on buildings; they wanted to be celebrated for their generosity at banquets. As a result, as one commentator put it, they weren’t really giving; they were buying the praise of others.<sup>1</sup> Let’s think about that for a moment. When we buy something, there’s a transaction that happens – I give you something and you give me something back. When we give in the way that God asks us to give – in the way Jesus gave himself – there is no transaction. It’s just giving.

Here’s the thing: if I’m on the receiving end of someone’s giving – of someone’s mercy or compassion or generosity, it doesn’t really matter to me if they’re giving out of humble obedience to God or because they want everyone to think they’re great. If I were the guy from the story of the Good Samaritan who was beaten up, robbed, and left in a ditch to die, I wouldn’t care even a little bit why he was helping me. I’d just be thankful for the help; I’d be thankful that I wasn’t dead; I’d be thankful that my wounds were bandaged; I’d be thankful that I was in a place where I was being taken care of and that I wasn’t going to be saddled with a massive bill that I had no way to pay. I would be thankful, regardless of the other person’s motivation. But this that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 6 isn’t about how I receive what’s given. It’s not about the receiving at all. This is about the giving. And it’s about the hypocrisy of claiming to give as an act of righteousness – as an obedient act of faith – when, in fact, you’re giving because you want people to honour you.

It’s the same thing with praying, which is Jesus’ second illustration, which begins at verse 5.

<sup>5</sup> “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>7</sup> When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus is warning against that showy kind of prayer where people pray as a performance. They may use all sorts of fancy words or elaborate, flowery language; maybe shout their prayers, speaking in a way to get people’s attention – to turn all eyes and ears to them. They aren’t really seeking God as they pray because their audience is people, not God. This is what Jesus was

speaking against – when our prayer is performance. When our prayer is performance, we’re not actually interested in listening to God as we pray. When our prayer is a performance, we probably don’t even leave any opportunity for God to speak, because it’s not about him, it’s about us. Doing that – taking the time to listen – would take the spotlight off of us.

I find this thing about praying for the attention and accolades of others to be weirder than the almsgiving one. I can understand how someone might want to give millions of dollars to have a building or a hospital wing or the like, named in your honour (or, say, a new Walmer sanctuary named in your honour), I can understand how that might be a temptation. But with prayer? to get attention on yourself? That one seems weird to me.

People can be generous or helpful regardless of whether or not they believe in God. There are lots of people out there who are generous and compassionate, but who have no relationship to God whatsoever, or who follow Jesus, or who are inclined toward any religion. But praying is literally about talking to God. It’s about having a conversation with God. So if a person is all showy in their praying – if a person is praying in the kind of way that draws attention to themselves – then it’s not praying at all. It’s a performance. And the reward for the performance is the audience’s applause. When we go to the theatre and people put on a performance, we applaud them. If someone does something really well, we applaud them. Because it’s a performance and they’ve performed for us. But prayer is a conversation between us and God.

This is the point in Jesus’ sermon where he offers an example of how we should pray. You probably recognize the words. He says,

This, then, is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed [which means holy] be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today 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 the evil one.

Isn’t it interesting that this prayer is probably the most well-known Christian prayer in the world? I can’t prove it to you, but just google the Lord’s Prayer sometime. I did it this morning and in less than a second there were 67.5 million results available to me. I googled the Lord’s Prayer song and in the same amount of time I got 8.6 million hits. I wonder what Jesus would think about all the places and all the ways this prayer that he used as an example of how not to pray as a performance, has been turned into a performance. Don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing wrong with this prayer turned into a song. Music is a powerful tool for meeting God. It can be an incredibly effective method of engaging with God. But it’s a prayer. God is the audience. As soon as anyone else becomes the audience, it stops being a prayer.

I need to pause here to make sure there's no confusion. Jesus isn't saying we should never pray in front of other people. Praying together is one of the most important things we do. It's something Jesus did with his disciples; it's something the disciples did with the churches and the communities that they planted all over the places that they went. It's one of the ways we care for each other. But when we pray in front of other people, it still needs to be directed to God. We can lead others in prayer, we can pray out loud on behalf of the group, much like we do every Sunday during our Prayers of Thanksgiving and Concern, we can even take great care with the words we choose and the way we speak – so as to help others participate, even if their participation is silent – but the audience must be God. When I lead in prayer, I hope that the words I use on our behalf, help you in your conversation with God.

That's Jesus' point in all this. *Don't be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so they may be seen by others. Don't be like the gentiles who heap up empty phrases, thinking they'll be heard because of their many words. Why are you praying? Why are you being generous? Why are you being compassionate? Why are you giving? Are you giving or praying because you want attention on you – because you want the world to see how great you are – how righteous you are? Or is it about you and God? Is it about the world around you and God?*

Jesus said, *Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.* Jesus' third illustration begins at verse 16.

<sup>16</sup> “And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.  
<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Fasting is a Lent tradition that's probably pretty well known to us. People often talk about what they're 'giving up' for Lent. Some people give up coffee, or chocolate, or social media. People use Lent to break out of habits that aren't all that healthy for them. But when we talk about fasting as a Lenten practice, we're talking about deepening our awareness of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We're remembering the one about whom the apostle Paul wrote this:

Christ Jesus..., being in the very nature God, did not regard equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!<sup>iii</sup>

This is our motivation for fasting. It's about identifying with Jesus. It's about following him, even when it means picking up our own cross. It's about sacrificing. It's about bearing the burden of that sacrifice. And in doing so, our awareness of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, for us, becomes deeper.

Fasting is an intimate act of worship between a person and God. It's not a thing to be put on display. It's not a thing meant to rob us of joy. It's hard, for sure, but it's about drawing us closer

to Jesus. And there is no better place to be than Jesus. That is the place of abundant life. Jesus is the source of all our life, all our hope, all our peace, all our joy.

Living in a way that honours God isn't always easy. There are all sorts of ways we can be distracted from what's right. And one of the most insidious ways we can be distracted, is by focusing on other people's opinions of us and response to us, instead of on God himself.

It's probably the case for most of us in here this morning, that we don't really identify with the scribes and the Pharisees. It may be that over the course of this week, God will have some corrections to make for some of us. But when Jesus says to us not to do all this for show, my guess is that that's not really what motivates us. We're not standing on a street corner, praying with loud, flowery language because we want everyone in Toronto to know how righteous we are. I think, for most of us, that goal of genuinely honouring God – of glorifying God – is really genuine. And so the question becomes, What do these words from Jesus have to say to us?

I think all of us are invited to check our motivations – to check why it's important for us to be righteous. Is it important for you to be righteous – to be holy – to live in a way that honours God? Is it enough if only God ever sees?

We are invited into the most extraordinary relationship with God who created all things and who nevertheless chooses to call us his children – his friends. That relationship, if we're to be part of it, requires that we nurture it. As with any relationship, it doesn't happen unless we participate in it – unless we nurture it. Lent offers an opportunity to focus on this relationship – to nurture this relationship. But let us be sure that we don't just concentrate on what we do. Let us be sure to equally concentrate on why we do the things we do.

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<sup>i</sup> Donald A. Hagner. *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Vol. 33A. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2000), 140.

<sup>ii</sup> Philippians 2:5-8.