

40-06-07.wpd —The Hiddenness of True Devotion

giving, prayer, fasting, Kingdom, love, listening, guidance, obedience
Mat 6:1-8, 16-18

To change an alienated world, God's Kingdom must begin in the heart.

INTRODUCTION: text as Scripture Reading

–Christians should never think they live in *two worlds*, one ruled by man and one by God. God is King over all worlds. From the beginning we were to live, work and find joy in this *physical* world **through an intimate and open relationship** with Him. As Creator and King, God wanted to direct our activities and goals in the world. The *forbidden fruit* not only brought us independence from God but *alienation* in our relationships with Him, with each other, with creation, and with our own bodies. That alienation *distorts* God's purposes for creating us.

–Adam and Eve's very first independent act was both *concealing* and *revealing*. By making *fig-leaf* clothing, they tried to conceal their true selves from God and from each other, which *revealed* a deep insecurity brought on by their new independence from God. But as they ran away from Him, God caught up with them, and the *story of salvation* began.

–The message of the Sermon on the Mount is *singleness of devotion to God*. Jesus confronts our independence and tells us to submit to God for guidance and direction. He calls for us to live out God's Kingdom in the midst of an alienated world. But He knows our bad habits. We try to mask our internal condition with external "*fig leaves*." We try to display our "*right standing*" with God through religious activities for others to see, while trying to hide the real state of our hearts. Jesus shows how to reverse this habit by "**the hiddenness of true devotion.**" **HOM.idea.**

I. Acts of Righteousness Directed Toward Others (v.1-4)

A. The practice of giving to others in need is well established in Scripture and almost universally acknowledged as an act of virtue. (This common understanding makes giving a dangerous activity for true devotion to God, because Jesus says *the divine reward for generosity can be lost in the social reward of recognition.*)

B. Humans expect to be recognized for their *generosity*. We feel snubbed if it goes *unnoticed*. **BUT** in the Kingdom of God, we are only stewards of what we own. God wants us to know this, live this, and give in this understanding. If we do, we'll ignore how our

giving appears to others. Our motivation will be our obedience to the King as faithful stewards of the resources He entrusts to us.

C. When this Kingdom attitude controls us internally, God's rule in the world is demonstrated externally... And His guidance may not always be what's expected. [Backing up a bit... v.5:42, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." This commands us to get involved, not necessarily to give exactly what a person asks for. God wants us to really lead us in how to meet these requests.]

TRANS: To change an alienated world, God's Kingdom must begin in the heart. Don't talk about your giving. Don't make a show of it. [Magnificent Obsession: Lloyd C. Douglas put this principle of giving in a novel. The point of the whole story was how miraculous things happened as a reward of secrecy in generosity.] Giving from the heart is what God blesses. If all you want is worldly recognition, then that alone will be your reward.

II. Acts of Righteousness Directed Toward God (v.5-8)

- A. The practice of prayer is **also** well established in Scripture and almost universally indicates a person's devotion to God, but for that reason it can **also** be dangerous to our true devotion to God:
1. Since talking with God makes it look as if we have a close relationship with Him, *praying aloud* can tempt us to pretend a "righteousness" that we don't really have— Isa 29:13a, The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (The better the lip-service prayer sounds, the holier the praying person seems to be....)
 2. Another common temptation in prayer is to teach or preach while praying [My own problem, too, more than I care to admit.]
- B. The simple solution to this problem is to remember that God is in charge, even over what we ask for in prayer. So when we pray, we should let Jesus teach us how [the "Our Father" (discussed in the next sermon) is a general guide, but we need to let our King direct us specifically in prayer, for true Kingdom power to be released in us and through us to others.]

TRANS: Silent listening is the most important part of our conversation with God. God knows what we need before we ask, but often we only think we know what we or others need. He could tell us, if we'd be still a minute. *Listening prayer* is effective, because it allows us to pray in His will. Prayer *does* change things! But it starts in the *hiddenness of*

the heart where we listen to and obey our King. **When God's Kingdom begins in the heart, an alienated world can be changed.**

III. Acts of Righteousness Directed Toward Self (v.16-18)

- A. Although fasting from food is a spiritual practice in Scripture, it is poorly practiced in our culture today. Most who do *fast* do it for health reasons, and sometimes it helps. But more familiar to us is the concept of *self-denial*. (Because selfishness is a major cause of sin, *self-denial* seems to be a source of righteousness.)
- B. Again, *self-denial* can be dangerous to true spiritual life, because it has a way of drawing attention that appeals to the ego [E. Stanley Jones reported this from India: "I saw a sadhu standing all day immovable, unattracted by the things going on around him. But he always chose a very prominent corner on which to stand! I visited a sadhu who sat on a bed of spikes and he was contemptuous in his indifference to me and to everyone else, but his bed of spikes was at the crossroads where the multitudes surged—and saw! One would think that a man who had no possessions, and no clothes but ashes, would care little for appearances, yet when I was about to take a picture of such a man, he objected, saying that his ashes were not on properly!"]
- C. 1 Cor 13:3, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."— Jesus says to "take up the cross" of *self-denial* and follow Him, but His steps don't usually lead into the limelight of a glorious martyrdom. Instead they call us into the mundane, day-to-day struggles of letting His love pour itself out in this world, just as the rest of 1 Cor 13 describes.

CONCLUSION:

—That's it, isn't it! Our *giving*, our *praying*, our *self-denial* must come from an obedient love relationship with God. Any change we bring to this alienated world, must begin from a heart where Jesus is not just the Savior but the Lord. The external Kingdom activities of *giving*, *prayer*, and *self-denial* must come out of an internal submission to the rule of the King. There, in the **hiddenness of true devotion**, we can learn to listen and obey, and our prayer, "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*" will begin to be answered *in and through* our own lives.

Matthew 6:1-8 (NIV)

1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

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 honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

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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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

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Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV)

16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.