

# The Dangers of Theatrical Righteousness

[Read passage]

Several years back, I decided to organize a **small luncheon** with a handful of pastors from our city. All these pastors had successful churches, but many of them didn't know each other, or at least didn't know each other *that well*. So I wanted to get them all together for lunch where they could develop friendships with each other, and hopefully where greater partnerships and kingdom unity could happen between them in the future. I had no clue how it would go, but I wanted to give it a shot.

Really, to my surprise, the **lunch went really well**. Conversations were happening, friendships were forming—there was even some loving poking fun of each other happening—it was all really good. So I decided, while they were all still enjoying talking to each other, to sneak up to the counter and **pay the bill** for everybody's lunch. And as I did that, I could almost feel the self-congratulatory thoughts coming into my mind: “way to go, Kent.” “What a successful lunch.” “These churches and the kingdom are better off because of what *you* did here today.” “You're the hero that Gotham needs *and wants*.” You know, the normal stuff you say to yourself? I'm not saying those things *should have* been going through my head. Just that they *were*.

So I **head back to the table**, and a few minutes later, all the pastors start to get up, continue their conversations all the way to their cars, exchange contact info, and head home. They were so into these new relationships they formed that *not a single person* 1) thanked me for setting up the lunch, or 2) even realized that I *paid for* the lunch. Not only did they not realize I *had* paid—they didn't realize that *they hadn't* paid! They just accidentally dined and dashed! I was deeply offended and if I'm honest, a little disappointed. I even remember thinking to myself, *well that was a waste*.

And **just like that, the Holy Spirit taught me a very important lesson about doing the right things for the wrong motive. In that moment he showed me that in my heart at least, that lunch was less about unifying those pastors, and more about being seen as the guy who unifies pastors.** And those are actually very different things. And that, really, is **what today's passage is about**. It's a passage about the *dangers* of doing things with the wrong motive. Doing *good* things for a *bad* reason.

Today our plan is to cover the first **eighteen verses** of **Matthew 6** (if you want to go ahead and turn there, you can). And if *eighteen verses* sounds like a lot to cover, it's

because *it is*. To my knowledge, I think that's the longest passage we've covered in Matthew, and maybe ever on a single Sunday teaching. But here's why I have faith that we can make it happen. Even though there are eighteen verses in front of us, there is really just one, very simple, point being made several times. **Jesus has one central idea, that he illustrates with three different scenarios.** And the big idea we find articulated very plainly in v. 1. So take a look there with me, if you will:

*Beware [says Jesus] of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

There's the concept. If we get what Jesus said there, we understand what he's saying for the rest of our passage. So, let's figure out what he means. First, what does it mean to "practice your righteousness"? **Righteousness** in Jesus' vocabulary involved doing anything that was "right," from God's perspective. So it's pretty *broad*. But then he mentions a few specific examples in the verses that follow. Two of them are *prayer* and *fasting*. Those are considered ways of "practicing righteousness." If we were making a list today, we'd probably loop in things like reading and studying our bibles, practicing the Sabbath (a day of rest once a week), things like generosity towards other people, attending a corporate worship gathering like this one, things like relationally investing in other followers of Jesus. All of *that* is included in what Jesus means by "righteousness"...

But we also mentioned several weeks back that "righteousness" in Jesus' mind **also** included a lot of **what we often call "justice"** today. Things like speaking up on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed, raising a voice for the unborn, tangibly helping those who are racially discriminated against. Jesus even highlights one such practice right here at the beginning of our passage: he mentions *giving to the poor*. In Jesus' day, there were no state-run welfare systems in place. So if the poor and the marginalized were going to be cared for in tangible ways, it was going to happen through the local community of believers. And Jesus says *those* types of things are included in *righteousness* as well.

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So **any and all of that is included** when Jesus talks about *practicing righteousness*. Which means any and all of that is included in Jesus' warning *about* practicing righteousness.

So let's talk about the **specifics of the warning that he gives**. Jesus says "beware of practicing your righteousness before other people, that you might be seen by them." So

a couple important clarifications first on **what Jesus isn't saying**. First, he doesn't say "**beware of practicing righteousness**." **He doesn't stop there**. Nor *would he* say something like that. In fact, if you remember back from the *last* chapter of Matthew, Jesus actually makes righteousness a *requirement* for entry into his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> And in these eighteen verses he's going to say over and over again *when* you practice righteousness. *When* you give, *when* you pray, *when* you fast. Not *if*, but *when*. He *assumes* that his people will indeed participate in righteousness. Jesus is a big fan of practicing righteousness.

I bring that up because **in some Christian circles**, it seems like we've turned righteousness into a *bad thing*. Sometimes we call it by its other name: *good works*. We say things to each other like "be careful about *good works*, brother." "Watch out for doing *good works*." It's almost like we think *good works* is something to be scared of. **I had a buddy in college who really struggled to regularly spend time in the Scriptures. So he asked us to check in on him about it. So one morning I said, "hey were you able to read some this morning?" And his response was "I thought about it, but when I woke up I didn't really want to, and I didn't want to be legalistic, so I didn't."** In his mind, for some reason, the danger worth guarding against wasn't his lack of a desire to spend time with Jesus. The danger in his mind was "good works"—what he called "legalism." And I think if we're not careful, it's easy to buy into that logic—that *righteousness* is something to *look out for*, rather than something to *pursue*. But **that's not what Jesus says**—he doesn't say "beware of *practicing* your righteousness."

And **the other thing he doesn't say** is "**beware of practicing righteousness before others**." He doesn't say simply, "beware of doing good things in public, where other people can see it. So it's not wrong to pray in public. **Next week we are hosting a night of prayer and worship. If doing those things in public are wrong, that is a very pointless—and maybe even sinful—event for us to host.** Similarly, it's not wrong for *other people* to be aware that you're fasting or giving. *Jesus* lets people know that he is praying *frequently* in the gospels. Again, back in chapter 5, it even says "**let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**" So the problem isn't even with doing righteous things *in front of* other people. *That's* not what he's warning against.

**The warning Jesus gives** is against doing good things in front of others, *to be seen by them*. **His concern is not with *doing* righteousness or even with *where* we do**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:20

**righteousness—it's with why we do righteousness.** That phrase “to be seen” in the Greek is actually just one word: the word *theathēnai*. It's where we get our word *theater*. And it means quite literally to “put on a show or spectacle” for other people. It's when you do something for the express purpose of being noticed, recognized or applauded by an audience. *That's* the thing Jesus warns against: not *righteousness in general*, and not even righteousness in *public*—but *theatrical* righteousness: doing righteous things for the primary purpose of being noticed doing it.

And **Jesus actually has a name for people** who regularly practice theatrical righteousness that he uses several times in this passage. Take a look with me:

- **6v2:** *Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.*
- **6v5:** *And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.*
- **6v16:** *And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.*

So the people that practice their righteousness in order to be seen by others, Jesus calls *hypocrites*. Now to me this is **really interesting**. At the time when Jesus starts using this word, it wasn't really an insult or a knock like it is to us today. It was another term derived from the world of *theater*. Generally, actors in a play would wear *masks* to portray their various characters. And the *word* to refer to an actor wearing a mask was the word *hypocrite*. Best we can tell, *Jesus* was actually the first one to take that word, and use it to call out a *negative behavior* in the lives of certain people. His point is that when we participate in *theatrical righteousness*, it is like we too are wearing a mask. It's like we are actors in a play. And Jesus' point is that that is no way to go about being his disciple. Does that all make sense?

So **the question, then**, for *us* to wrestle with, is are there any **ways that we engage** in this type of theatrical righteousness? Are there ways that we are *hypocrites*, practicing our righteousness before others, in order to be seen by them?

So think back over **our list from earlier**: *prayer, fasting, Bible reading, attending worship gatherings, discipling other people*—whatever it is. **Are there any of those arenas in your life where there is a disconnect between your public passion about those**

**things, and your private commitment to them?** The people in your life that view you as *mature* in any of those areas—people that see you as a passionate worshiper, or a well-versed bible reader, or a powerful prayer..er—would those same people be confused if they had a 24/7 glimpse into your life? Would they be confused if they saw your private commitment to those things, and your public passion for them? **The people that view you as a person *passionate* about prayer and seeking the face of God: would they be confused if they saw what your private prayer life looked like, or the lack thereof? The people that see you here on Sundays, hands lifted in the air as you worship Jesus, would they be surprised if they saw the types of things your time, energy, and money go to on a regular basis—which are fantastic measures of what you *worship*? Are there any areas where people would spot a *misalignment* between your “public righteousness” and your “private righteousness”?**

So just this week, **as I was wrestling** with this passage, I'll tell you what I was convicted of. I felt like the Holy Spirit showed me that often, I work a lot harder to study a passage when I'm going to teach it to you guys, than I do when I'm just studying it on my own. Now maybe there's some of that that makes sense—the stakes are a little higher to get it right when it affects other people. But at the same time, if I regularly *cultivate a habit* of studying a lot harder to teach a passage than I do to understand it on my own, that can really easily become theatrical righteousness—where I am curating this image of myself in front of you guys as smart and well-read and knowledgeable of the Scriptures, when that isn't necessarily true of my *private* commitment to those things. Does that make sense? That's what we're asking here.

And **don't forget** to loop in the **justice side of things**. The people who scroll through your social media feeds and see you raising a voice and raising awareness about any number of different social issues—would any of them be surprised to find out how little time, energy and money you put into those same issues when nobody's *watching*? Would they spot a disconnect between the things you advocate for, and the things you're actually involved in doing something about?

~~In more recent years, our society has actually **coined certain terminology** for the person who advocates for causes online, but doesn't do much else about them. *Virtue signaling*. *Slacktivism*. I know that sometimes those terms can be politically weaponized against one party by the other. But usually what they're calling out is actually this same critique from Jesus: “practicing your righteousness in front of others, to be seen *by* them.” They're all show. They're all theater. They're all us playing a part like an actor in a play.~~

It makes me think specifically of that time over the summer, following the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, when a lot of people posted those **black squares** to their social media feeds. It was a black square, accompanied by a caption that said something like “I’m listening.” It was a way to publicly say that we are listening to the voices of people of color throughout our country. I posted it, I know many of you did too. And that’s great. But when it happened, I think a lot of people of color in our nation couldn’t help but think, “but *are you* listening, though?” Posting something on social media about how you’re listening doesn’t actually mean you’re listening. And **I got the vibe that a lot of us cared more about *being seen as a person who listens*, than we did about *actually listening*.**

And listen, **again, the problem *isn’t*** us *doing* those things. The problem *isn’t* that we’re posting things like that. The problem *isn’t* that we are publicly calling for justice or righteousness. The problem *isn’t* that we are passionately worshiping here on Sundays or passionately praying with other people around. The problem isn’t us *doing any of that*. In fact, Jesus’ point is that we *should do* things like that. So the *solution* isn’t to stop praying, stop worshiping, stop reading your bible, stop raising a voice against injustice—and it’s not even to stop doing those things in *public settings*. **The *solution* is to be sure that our *private commitment* to those things *matches* our *public commitment* to them. The solution is to make sure that our *good works* come from an overflow of what’s in our heart, and not in the form of a mask that we *put on* when the mood hits us.**

So next let’s just ask: **what is the *danger*** of theatrical righteousness? What’s the *risk*, at the end of the day? Jesus actually answers that here in the passage. He repeats it several times—but it’s subtle. Take a look at a few different verses with me:

- **6v2:** “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, **they have received their reward**.” Again, in the next example:
- **6v5:** And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, **they have received their reward**. And then one more time in the last example:
- **6v16:** And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, **they have received their reward**.

So **here's the problem** with doing good things primarily to be *seen doing them*: **that's your only reward**. That's as good as it will ever get. That momentary rush you get, that temporary boost in self-esteem, that quick hit of dopamine when someone approves of you—that is as far as it goes. Now there's no use in lying about it: *that is a good feeling*. I think we can admit that when other people notice us doing something good, that is indeed a *reward*. That's probably why Jesus calls it...a *reward*.

But at the same time, if we were honest, I bet we would also admit that **we often put an awful lot of effort** in to *obtain* that reward. Maybe even a *disproportionate* amount of effort. *Some* of us have spent our *entire lives* working *tirelessly*, just to hear the occasional “good job” from another person. Or maybe to hear the occasional “good job” from a *specific* person. And maybe you've hit moments where you *achieved* that. Where you were on top of the world because you had so many people speaking well of you, saying good things about you, *praising* you. And it felt *fantastic*.

But at the same time, it's **never quite enough**, is it? Do you want to know how I *know* that? Because **we never stop chasing it**. I would bet there has never been a moment in your life, or in mine, where we went “you know, I think after people recognizing *that* thing that I did, I don't think I need any more human approval for the rest of my life. I'm good now.” That never happened. Because the approval of people doesn't ever seem to *last*. It can't ever provide *enduring joy*, *enduring* self-esteem. You will *always* need more.

And **going back to our passage**, I find it so interesting that Jesus' warning against theatrical righteousness is not *severe*: he doesn't threaten hell or lightning bolts from the sky—none of that. He just says “if you live your life for the approval of other people, that is all you will ever get.” You *have already received* your reward. So how does it feel? Like you finally have what you've always wanted? Or does it feel like probably tomorrow morning you'll start the pursuit all over again? Like you're probably going to spend the rest of your life just getting one more hit of it?

And that's true, **whatever “stage”** you happen to be standing *on*. Whatever *method* you are using to garner the praise and approval of other people, it will never be enough. You will never do enough good things, you will never be seen as spiritually mature by enough people, you will never speak out about *enough* social issues, you will never get *enough* praise from others to feel like you can stop. There will always be more to do, another injustice to correct, another oppression to condemn. There will never ever be a moment where you go “I'm good now. I've done enough things, I'm a good enough person in the

eyes of everyone else, I'm approved of by enough people—I think I'm going to take some time off from all that." Theatrical righteousness won't let you do that. **If you live by the approval of people, you will die still wondering if you have it. The danger, Jesus says, is that you'll spend your whole life living for the wrong reward.**

So **what should we do instead?** Well, Jesus is straightforward about how the only way to fight against this type of performancism...is to **stop performing**. **If your tendency is to do all kinds of things "to be seen by others," the only way to fight that temptation is to starve it out. Choose to regularly do those things where they can be seen by no one except God himself.** Take a look at how Jesus puts it in the passage:

- **6v3-4:** *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*
- **6v6:** *But when 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.*
- **6v17-18:** *But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Do you see the pattern? Jesus says the trick to fighting against theatrical righteousness is simply to make a **conscious, consistent effort to do those same things in secret**. He even uses this interesting phrase back in v. 3, **"do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."** In other words, do righteousness in such a way that even *you* don't fully realize you're doing it. Now it might be really easy to read that and go "what does that even mean?" "How would I do something in such a way that *I* don't fully realize I'm doing it?"

Think about it like this. Have you ever gotten **in your car**, driven to work or school or some place that you drive to all the time, and not remembered anything about the trip there? Sort of like you zoned out for the whole drive? And if you're like me, had a brief moment of panic, thinking "I hope I didn't cause any accidents on my way here because I was *out of it*"? Okay. So what's happening there is that you have done something so many times in your life that you now do large portions of it without *actively* thinking about it. Your brain processes everything you're doing almost *subconsciously*, because you have become so accustomed to doing it.



Okay, I think **that is a picture** of what Jesus is describing here. **He is suggesting that there is a way to do righteousness so frequently and so regularly that it becomes instinctive to who you are.** That it often becomes second nature to you, where even “Your left hand doesn’t know what your right hand is doing.”

One of the best examples of this that I’ve ever known was a guy named **Steve**. Steve was actually the late father of one of our City Church members, and while he was alive, Steve was one of the most generous people I’ve ever known. The crazy thing is that while we knew on some level that he was generous, I don’t think hardly any of us knew *just how generous he was* until after he passed away—in part because he did so much of it in *secret*, without hardly anybody knowing. But after he passed away, people started telling all these stories about just how generous he was.

**One of my favorite stories** came from a friend of mine named Adam. At one point, Adam’s A/C unit went out in his house in the middle of summer, and he and his family had no idea how they were going to pay to have it replaced. I think it was supposed to be something like \$19,000. So one night while they were trying to figure all that out, none other than Steve showed up on Adam’s front steps, unannounced. And when Adam opened the door, he said “Adam, I was thinking the other day about how difficult life was when I was in my 30s. The kids were small, none of us were getting much sleep, and we didn’t have a ton of money either. But when I was in my 30s, I put aside some money, and the other day I felt like God was telling me to give you some of it, because I realized that you’re in *your* 30s, and I wonder if life is difficult for you right now too. So I hope this helps.” He handed Adam an envelope, and in the envelope was a check for \$19,000.

Now—as *absolutely amazing* as that is, here is **what I love even more about that story**. A year or two later, Adam and Steve were hanging out, and Adam mentioned something about that \$19,000 and how helpful it was to him, and Steve just stared at him blankly. Adam just figured he had zoned out or something and said, “Steve—I just wanted to make sure you heard me: that money was so very helpful to me and my family.” Steve responded, “yeah, I’m so glad it was—I’m just sitting here trying to remember what you’re talking about. Are you sure it was me?” And Adam said “yeah, I’m sure it was you. I don’t forget the face of a man who gives me \$19,000.” To which Steve said, “well, I believe you, and I’m glad it was helpful—but I sure don’t remember doing it.”

So **maybe you chalk that up** to Steve having a bad memory, and *maybe* that was it. But you know what I think? **I think generosity and a kingdom heart was so persistently integrated into Steve’s life—it was such a regular part of his life—that he often**

**forgot having done it.** I think he had grown so accustomed to “practicing righteousness,” that at times his “left hand didn’t know what his right hand was doing.” For Steve, giving to people that needed it was kind of like driving his car to work. It was him doing it—he put forth the effort to do it—but it had become such a common practice in his life that he regularly *forgot* having done it. And that’s what we’re going for. That is the kingdom heart that Jesus wants to create in each of us. And the reality is that getting to that point **just takes practice.** The way we get there is through one small, *secret* act of righteousness at a time. Doing what is good and what is right in what Jesus calls “the secret place,” where only our Father sees it, and according to Jesus, where *he alone* rewards us.

Now let’s talk **briefly** before we’re done about this idea of **God “rewarding” us** for doing good things. Because I know that’s easy for some of us to get hung up on. I grew up in a church tradition that didn’t talk much about God “rewarding” us, because it felt theologically weird. We spent a lot of time talking about how salvation is a free gift, and there’s nothing we do to earn it. So saying that God then *rewards* us for doing good things felt almost *wrong* to say.

So **to clarify** here, Jesus is not saying that *if you do good things*, God will reward you with *salvation* for doing those things. That’s not his point at all. **The assumption here is that you are already a part of God’s family—hence Jesus calling God “your Father” in the passage. The assumption here is that you already know you are accepted by God based on what Jesus accomplished for you on the cross and not based on anything you do.**

**But this crazy thing happens when you realize you’re accepted by God no matter what: you start wanting to make your Father smile.** Let me explain. As I know I’ve mentioned before, we have a four year old, **Whit**. about a year and half ago, Whit became a big brother to a little sister named Norah. And for the first year or so of her life, Whit wasn’t the biggest fan of Norah. It wasn’t that he disliked her—it was just that he thought of her kind of like an alien. His posture was basically “it’s okay that she’s here, I guess—as long as I don’t have to be near her or touch her or interact with her in any way.”

And so we had to really work at getting him to **grow into the role of a big brother.** And as a result, over the past year, he really has. He’ll do things for Norah, he’ll give her hugs, he’ll check on her when she gets hurt—all sorts of great things for a big brother to do. And at least a lot of the time, when he does something good like that, he’ll go “Dad, look! I picked up her stuffed animal for her.” “Dad, look! I got her a snack.” “Dad, look! I could’ve pushed her down but I didn’t!” **He wants me to notice when he does things for her.**

But here's the thing: **he's not doing that because he thinks we'll kick him out of the family if he *doesn't***. Right? Like if you walked up to Whit and said "hey Whit—why do you do good things for your sister," I really doubt he would say, "well, my dad has made it very clear that if I don't, I will be out on the streets begging for money." That's not his motivation at all. Rather, Whit understands that not only is being a good big brother the right thing to do, but also that being a good big brother makes his dad *smile*. And he *wants* to make us smile. Not because his status in the family depends on it, but because his status in the family is *secure*, and as an established member of the family, he wants to make other members of the family smile. And he does just that.

And I say all that because I don't know if **some of you have ever considered** that God the Father *smiles* at you. I don't know if any of you know that right now, when the Father sees you and the things you do for the kingdom and for other people and for the world, he *delights* in you. Not because he didn't *accept* you *already*—he did—but because you're his kid and he's *proud* of you.

And I think **because some of us fail to see God** in that way, we are constantly trying to make the people around us smile at us. We *need their* approval, because we think that's the only place it can be found. We're operating, functionally, as an empty cup, continually needing another person or other people to fill us up with their approval. And we'll do whatever it takes for them to notice, for them to look at us and say we're doing something right, because otherwise we feel completely *empty*.

But **what is offered to each of us through the good news of Jesus is a Father who accepts us based on the cross, and who smiles on you *constantly***. Even when you try to do what's right and you fail. Even when you try to do something good and it doesn't have the impact you thought it would. The God of the universe, your Father who's in heaven *and* in the secret place, *smiles* on you. And when you understand that, you're no longer an empty cup constantly needing to be filled by people's approval and recognition. You are a *full* cup, ready to overflow with righteousness into the lives and people and issues around you. **You're working from a place of recognition, rather than working for others' recognition.**

So here's my prayer for our community here at City Church. My prayer is that **each of us would be so laser-focused** on working to *please* the Father with what we do, that there is virtually no difference between who we are in *private* and who we are in *public*. Because in both places, we are aiming to please the same person: our Father. Let's pray together.





I've noticed a trend within evangelicalism lately that I just call the "Instagram bible reader." So the way this works is that you sit down somewhere to spend time in the Scriptures, but at some point while you're doing that, you feel the urge in you to stage a *photo* of you spending time in the Scriptures. And I do mean *stage*. So maybe the photo is your bible at a perfect 45° angle on this side, you've got a pumpkin spice whatever on the other side (bonus points if you can capture the steam coming up from the drink in the actual photo). And then maybe you've got some fall leaves on the ground in the background that you then use the blur tool on to help with your depth of field. Or maybe you grab a leaf or two, and place it carefully on the table next to your coffee. You've got your journal sitting down below your bible, with just enough of it showing in the frame so that people see that you're journaling, but not enough that they can see what you've written. Maybe there's a solar flare coming in from one side, and you post it to your feed: *#blessed #bible #christian #jesus*—you know, just to make sure people who don't follow you can stumble upon your post. Maybe something like that's your deal.

Or maybe

Again, it's not necessarily

It's easy to miss, but this is the first time in *weeks* that Jesus *hasn't* started off with his formulaic intro, "*you have heard that it was said.*" Here, he starts not with a reference to the Old Testament, but with a *warning*: "beware." That word means to give your full attention to something, to pay attention, to look out for something *dangerous* in some way, shape or form. So what is it that we should watch out *for*?

"Beware," Jesus says of practicing your righteousness in front of other people, in order *to be seen* by them." Now, before we go any further, let's point out one thing Jesus *isn't* saying. Jesus *isn't* saying "beware of practicing righteousness." *Righteousness*, in Jesus' worldview, is a *good thing*. He has just told us, back in chapter 5, both "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...**" and that "**...unless [our] righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, [we] will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**"

So suffice it to say, Jesus is a *big fan* of righteousness. Such that he makes it a requirement to enter this new reality he calls the kingdom of God. So he is not now saying that righteousness is a *bad thing*. That wouldn't make any sense. *I bring that up because in some corners of evangelicalism, I think we have begun to treat righteousness as if it's a bad thing. We've effectively made "good works"—a synonym for "righteousness" a bad word. It's become popular to start warning one another about good works and cautioning people about good works.*

And if you mix that with a high cultural value of what we call *authenticity*, what you often get is a mindset towards faith that views good works as a bad thing. As if God would rather us not do anything good *at all* unless we can do it from an entirely pure heart, with no mixed motives at all. *I had a friend in college who struggled mightily to put into practice regular time in the Scriptures each morning, learning from them about following Jesus. And when I would ask him how his time in the morning was going, he would often say, "well, I woke up this morning to read, and my heart just wasn't in it. And I know if I read my bible when I don't feel like it, that's legalistic—so I just decided not to do it this morning.*

Which is a funny story, but I think it's also representative of how a lot of people tend to think when it comes to doing "good works." It's like we think God is more honored by our willful disobedience than our half-hearted obedience. Now, God does want to generate a heart in you that *wants* to obey—that's his end goal—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't obey until our heart is 100% in it. *If I waited until my heart was 100% pure and 100% into reading my bible, I would never read my bible.*

*And on an even bigger scale, you won't find any negative talk in the sermon on the mount about righteousness or good works.* What you *will* find is a warning about *where* you do good works, and about what your *motivation* is in doing them. That's what Jesus gets into in Matthew 6.

So that said, what *is* righteousness, exactly? We haven't defined the word yet. The Greek word used is *dikaionuné*. It can be translated *righteousness*, or *justice*, or *good works*. It was a way of describing anything that is (or was) just as God *wants* it to be. In the passage, Jesus mentions three types of *dikaionuné*: giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. Those cover what we might call *pious*