

SECRET, SECRET, SECRET A SERMON ON MATTHEW 6:1-18

by Robert Barnes

There are more questions than answers raised by this densely packed, glorious passage of Scripture upon a first reading. First, Jesus appears to be contradicting himself; then he appears to shatter most of the modern ideas about him from, oddly, one of the most famous passages of Scripture to the unbelieving world. And he assumes some things about his audience's practices that are unusual to us, so we have to work a bit more to answer these questions.

*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. 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. 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**. Then your Father, who sees what is done in **secret**, will reward you.*

*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. 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. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

This, then, is how you should pray: " 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

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

*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.*

First, this section of Scripture is held together by a repeated theme, one we'll address in a few minutes. But this section starts in the middle of a larger section — verse 1 is obviously preceded by other thoughts, including the information about the time and place of this sermon. If you will look back at the beginning of chapter 5 with me, and we'll do this several times, you'll note that Matthew 6:1-18 falls in the section of Scripture known as the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus is speaking to those who had followed him from the surrounding towns, in this case, Matthew 8:5 and Luke 7:1 point out Capernaum was the closest city. If we assume Jesus was very close to Capernaum, then it was likely a grassy slope I visited when I was in Israel known as Tabgha (tab-ka). If church tradition is correct, it was a larger mountain a little further away, known as Karn Hattin, or the Horns of Hattin, because the peaks resembled horns if you saw them from a distance.

In either place, Jesus was using the landscape as a natural amphitheater to broadcast his message to a large crowd. But what was his message?

In general, Jesus' entire Sermon on the Mount can be summarized by saying: "Life in my Kingdom is radically non-intuitive. It is very different from life in this world. Love, rather than hate, rules. Mercy triumphs over revenge. Pious-sounding prayers go unanswered while secret hunger strikes for God earn great reward."

New Life Presbyterian Church, would that you would learn that Kingdom living is often non-intuitive, contra-mundum, a terrorist act against the gods that claim to rule this world.

Let me apply this directly to this church's pastor-less situation this morning.

Don't go looking for a CEO to pastor this church. Charismatic leadership will likely not build the kingdom of God, only the kingdom of man.

Don't go looking for an accountant to pastor this church, because you can have money stored up in banks all over Lake County and yet be empty of spiritual rewards.

If Jesus were here, and he is through his word and his Spirit, he would likely advise you to look for someone who will preach treason in the devil's kingdom, who will preach the Gospel; foolishness to our culture, but life and breath to those of us who know Jesus and love Him."

You need a revolutionary, a radical man like Jesus, to lead this church. These little sayings of Jesus in the Beatitudes fit nicely on the side of collectable figurines and coffee cups, but they were radical, a sharp knife at the throat of the current religious and political structure of Galilee. With that in mind, let's look at our text this morning and see what dangerous ideas we can discover and deliver to our lives.

Jesus has dealt with some of the ethical and relational matters of kingdom living in the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, and in Matthew 6, he answers an unspoken objection, an unspoken reply from the current religious establishment towards Jesus' message — "Jesus, we already live that way! No one needs to follow you to live radical, religious lives. We are already very committed, thanks for the pep talk, now everyone step away from Jesus and come back over to our sermons."

In Matthew 6, Jesus begins to contrast true kingdom ethics and heartfelt, sincere devotion to God to that of the current religious leaders. And it is devastating to the very core of the works-righteousness, the legalism, which Jewish leaders taught and practiced in the first century.

Jesus points out three areas of righteousness to his audience:

- Giving (1-4)
- Praying (5-15)
- Fasting (16-18)

Jesus' point was not to shake a finger at his audience for not giving enough money, praying enough, or fasting. Jesus assumed that anyone who was remotely interested in following God would understand that money can be an idol, and to kill that tendency to worship money, you must give it away to the poor and the church. Jesus assumed that his audience would understand that prayer is the lifeblood of a sincere relationship with God, and that while we all need to know more, any spiritual person knows you ought to be praying. And Jesus also assumed that his audience knew about fasting — it was mandatory that they fast for the day of atonement each year, and first century Judaism had added many other fast days to the year; the Pharisees were up to twice weekly, over 100 times a year. Notice that nowhere in this text is Jesus encouraging his audience to give more, pray more, or fast more. Jesus wasn't trying to get his audience to out-give, out-pray, or out-fast the religious leaders of his day.

This confuses a competitive culture like ours — if Jesus wasn't trying to win, trying to outscore, the Pharisees, then what was He doing? (I ask that question about the Tampa Bay Buccaneers almost every week!) We'll find out soon.

The second question that this passage raises, and what I believe is at the heart of a proper interpretation of it, is connected to Matthew 5:16, if you'll turn back with me. Matthew 5:16 says:

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Yet, throughout this passage, Jesus encourages his audience to do giving, praying, and fasting in secret. Look at Matthew 6:4, 6, and 18 to confirm this. Is Jesus trying to confuse us here?

No. Some of you have already found the answer by reading verse 1 of chapter 6.

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.

Jesus teaches that the best way to neutralize the hungry ego of men and women is to practice commonly abused works of righteousness in private, so that God and God alone will be praised.

So, in answer to our question, no — Jesus does not contradict himself. Matthew 5:16 is teaching that Kingdom living cannot be done in a secret society, cannot be done as a mental exercise, cannot be done in a vacuum. Kingdom living is rambunctious, rebellious, it's a party that no matter how many times you call the police, and they won't turn the stereo down.

But Matthew 6 is addressing a different situation — what about those who abuse normal religious practices so as to feed their own ego or reputation? The answer is to make abused religious practices private, so you can do these good things like give money, pray, and fast, but do them solely for God's glory.

Relating back to Matthew 5:16, my first application question for us this morning is this: What things are we hiding? Are we ashamed of the gospel? Are we hiding our love for Jesus when we, for instance, refuse to confront our elders, spouses, children, on their sins? What aspects of our kingdom living must come out in the open, so that the church and the world will give glory to God? What part of this church needs to be opened up, publicized, amplified, so that God's glory may be known in your area?

When I was in college at Belhaven in Jackson, MS, we had tiny dorm rooms and we could rent those little refrigerators. Sometimes, students would put things in those little boxes and leave them there — all semester long. And you were afraid to open some of those little doors by the end of the year.

Sometimes we are afraid to open the doors of our lives, the doors of our church, to the world. We wonder what people will think about us, worried about what people will find. This is fear talking, sin talking, plain and simple. As long as we preach the gospel, we have nothing to fear, because it's power perfects our weaknesses.

Second, what needs to be hidden? This is a two-part question. First, many of you have saved all your life for retirement, and you have many earthly rewards to show for your diligence, and I honor you for your efforts. But how many heavenly rewards have you lain up? You have been as wise a serpent in your investments, but how much time do you give to sneakily planning ways to give away your money, pray for people and situation that have nothing to do with your benefit, or deprive yourself of food or ordinary comforts so as to build a spiritual hunger?

There is a minister in Orlando who gets paid for part of his ministry as a seminary professor, but has another ministry he is involved with that he refused to accept payment for — he purposely remains unsalaried so he can lay up rewards in heaven.

Laying up heavenly rewards is hard for ministers because we get paid to be spiritual—almost everything we do is rewarded by a paycheck or person glory. Bible study, prayer, late nights — it's all on salary. The layperson has a distinct advantage. So, I recommend that for the spiritual benefit of your new pastor, you do not pay him a dime. He'll appreciate it when he gets to heaven.

Second, what acts of righteousness that you now do in public need to be taken in private so as to get your ego out of it? This may seem like an odd question, but the text raises it rather straightforwardly.

I was at the annual Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast at the Orlando Centraplex last week, and the award was given for the most notable young leader. He stood, thanked Pat Morely for the award, and announced he was stepping out of leadership for a while because his ego was getting in the way of his relationship with God.

In the eyes of the world, that was a backwards step. Downward mobility. But in God's kingdom, it was a work of upward mobility, spiritual growth. As surely as fasting from food can connect us to spiritual nourishment, fasting from fame, from public approval, can connect us to the unmerited blessings of God.

When we love someone dearly, and we want to be closer to him or her, intimate with him or her, we steal away. We find a quiet secluded place to be with them.

Find a secret place to be with God today. Go to the woods, the closet, the park, and apart from the approval and disapproval of others, lavish him with the praise

and honor and glory he deserves. From that holy time, spring to action in obedience, and build up rewards in heaven and a growing hunger to spread the good news of God's rule on earth, as it is in heaven.