So far, Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount has provided for us many good examples and teachings about Kingdom rightness and following after God’s own heart. It has provided us with a good framework and foundation for a transformed life. In Matthew 6, Jesus turns his attention to two major areas that might hinder people from growing and participating in God’s Kingdom:

- The desire for the approval of others
- The desire to secure oneself through material wealth

This week, we are going to focus on the first misplaced desire: approval from others. Just like in Matthew 5, Jesus calls us out on our empty actions – background practices that are wrong. Jesus names three things that were common pitfalls for religious people: doing good deeds, praying, and fasting. But Jesus describes them as doing good deeds for your own benefit, publicizing your prayers, and publicizing your fasting.

Religious people were doing these things to appear pious and gain approval from the people around them. And it was all kinds of religious people – rich and poor alike. Jesus was trying to help us understand that whatever our position in life, if our lives and works are to be of the Kingdom of God, human approval must not be our primary concern. We must lovingly allow people to think whatever they want. We may occasionally try to help them understand us – that could be an act of love. But in any case we can only serve them by serving the Lord only.

Jesus’ aim is whole-life transformation! Dallas Willard points out that we must never forget that Jesus points beyond action to the source of action in character. This is a general principle that governs all of what Jesus says. The kind of people Jesus is talking about are people that have been so transformed by their daily walk with God that good works naturally flow from their character. They are precisely the kind of people whose left hand would not notice what their right hand is doing!

Jesus is not here developing a new, legalistic moral code. Instead, he’s seeking to develop people who can truly serve God as whole-heartedly as possible. Jesus desires that, and that alone as their constant aim in all that they do.
Discussing the Text:
1. In verse 7, Jesus says, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”
   a. What does this verse tell us about what prayer is?
   b. What is prayer supposed to be like?
2. Verse 8 states that God already knows what we need before we ask. So why should we still pray? What does prayer do for our relationship with God?
3. Discuss how praying, fasting, and giving in secret helps to move us past the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Discussing the World:
1. When we read these verses, the whole idea of keeping our “acts of righteousness” to ourselves seems like a pretty good idea. But is this easy to actually do?
   a. Going further: In what situations are you most tempted to tell others about the good that you do?
2. Dallas Willard suggests that habits of Christian devotion in private lead us to the Spiritual Disciplines (fasting, prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, simplicity, etc.).
   a. What Spiritual Disciplines do you practice? Talk about why you practice them (if you do), and the impact it has on your life.
   b. Discuss how Spiritual Disciplines might help you cultivate the “inner goodness” that Jesus is after in our lives.

Going Further:
1. Have you ever been confused about the Lord’s Prayer? Talk about the different parts of the prayer. What do they mean?
   a. Use the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 118-129 to help understand it.
   b. Or see The Divine Conspiracy pp. 255-269

Action: Consider practicing the Spiritual Discipline of Secrecy.
   --“Purity of heart is to will one thing.” -Søren Kierkegaard
   • The desire with secrecy is to follow the simple and often hidden way of Christ.
   • Find acts of service that you can do without letting anyone know.
   • Hold back from the temptation to tell all you know.
   • Don’t compete for attention.