



## **WHEN YOU WORSHIP**

So far, we've looked at what it takes to be a part of Jesus' mission, and how to interpret and follow the OT. Now we come to the central section of the Sermon on the Mount – which just happens to be the central point:

Worship.

But before we go there, how about a riddle: when is an act of worship *not* an act of worship?

- When it's about ritual rather than relationship.
- When it emphasises style over substance.
- When it centres on us rather than God.

All of which can happen far too easily.

Keep those thoughts in mind as we look at what Jesus has to say about worship. Let's turn to:

### **Matthew 6:1-18**

OK, so Jesus here zeroes in on 3 'acts of righteousness' which were important aspects of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish worship (vs1):

Giving, praying, fasting.

These practices are still important today – to observant Jews, who refer to them as *mitzvot* or 'good deeds'; to observant Muslims, who count them as 3

of the 5 pillars of Islam (in addition to the *shahada* and the *hajj*); and to observant Hindus, as elements of *dharma*, 'duty.' And by placing this in the very centre of the sermon, Jesus is saying:

"This is what you were made for, as God's people. For worship."

However, there was also a risk attached.

Jesus lived in a culture where this stuff could earn you 'community brownie points.' And the danger was that people could become what He warns against here (3 times): hypocrites. A word derived from the world of Greek theatre, where actors would play different roles by exchanging one mask for another. So, 'mask-wearers.'

Jesus says, "Don't." And then He offers us instructions on these things, with the same promise attached to each:

**1) Giving.** "When you give to the needy, don't announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do ..."

Giving was a way of celebrating God's love and spreading it around, and it's something the Bible encourages – a lot. In fact, you can see it throughout the OT: in the Law, the Wisdom books, and the Prophets.

But it could also become a way of promoting yourself. What today we might call 'virtue-signalling.' "Hey, everyone, look at me! See what a wonderful, generous, kind-hearted person I am." Which is why Jesus tells us to do our giving in secret: a foolproof way of knowing whether what you're doing is out of love for God – and others.

But didn't Jesus tell us to let our light shine? Yes, He did. And we should. But the focus there is on God, and the recipient of your generosity. What Jesus is warning against here is doing that with an audience in mind.

All of which requires us to be self-aware. And if we notice hypocrisy in ourselves, to make our giving, private.

**2) Praying.** "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues ..."

1<sup>st</sup> century Jews would pray 3 times a day: this would usually entail downing tools or whatever they were doing, then praying the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6:4). But the temptation was to head for a busy place at just the right time, pray in public – and draw attention to yourself.

Which is why Jesus says, "Be careful." If that's what you're after, fine. You got it. But if you want to meet with God, talk to Him, and hear from Him, your focus needs to be on *that*. So, Jesus says, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret (code for 'don your prayer-shawl, close it over your face, and pray').

Again, this is not a blanket ban on public prayer (Jesus did it, and so did His followers). Nor is it a prohibition against long prayers (John 17, anyone?). It's all to do with motive. Any self-doubt, pray in private.

We'll look at Jesus' prayer-template next time.

**3) Fasting.** “When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces ...”

Fasting was a way of saying ‘no’ to your physical needs, setting aside time when you’d normally eat, and inviting God to meet you there. And plenty of biblical characters did it – sometimes in desperation (David, Daniel, Esther), sometimes in preparation (Moses, Elijah and Jesus Himself, during the temptation in the wilderness).

But fasting can also be risky. It can become a performance, a “See how holy I am.” In the 1<sup>st</sup> century there were ways of doing that. Today it might be publicly denying myself lunch while you enjoy a toasted panini. Or declaring, “I’m taking a break from Netflix. Or Spotify. Or social media.”

Jesus says, “If your focus is on what others think of you, congratulations! It’s yours. But even so, that attitude needs to change. And that’ll mean hiding what you’re doing.” Because this is between you, and God.

Unless there’s a reason for telling someone, they don’t need to know.

### **What Makes Us Tick**

Now as well as hypocrisy, there are 3 danger zones we can fall into on this subject:

- Interpreting this as a scrapping of almsgiving and fasting. Jesus says, “*When* you do these things,” not “*if* you do.” I.e. Jesus assumes that giving and fasting, like prayer, will be a part of what His followers do.
- Believing this is what makes you right with God, or the alternative to being saved by faith (and one that doesn’t work). Jesus isn’t talking about getting into heaven – He’s talking about bringing heaven, here.
- Practicing these things as a way of getting our own way, of twisting God’s arm. Listen: you can do all this and still not receive what you’re asking for. The emphasis here is on pleasing God. *That’s* the reward.

And this is just as relevant today as it was then – especially for those of us involved in teaching, worship-leading, or some other ‘public’ ministry, where it can easily become about us. But that can be true of church as a whole.

All of which calls for wisdom. From all of us.

Jesus knows that we will be most effective when we stop caring about what others think about us and focus instead on living the way God wants.

So let us be the people God designed us to be, and worship Him –

As He deserves.