

Practicing ‘Righteous Acts’

In the Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5-7 in Matthew’s Gospel), Jesus had just called the disciples to “be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48b, NKJIV) when he introduced an interesting term: “righteous acts” (Matt. 6:1b, BSB). The New Living Translation just calls them “good deeds” and warns of doing them publicly to get the attention and approval of others.

“Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:1, NLT).

These were not just religious beliefs but morally good actions and efforts. As James, Jesus’ half-brother, taught, faith and works are inseparable, and “faith without deeds is useless” (James 2:26b, NIV). These “righteousness” assignments align us with the words and ways of our perfect heavenly Father. They are pleasing to Him.

Righteous Ways

Jesus instructed the disciples about three areas of righteous activity: 1) giving (Matt. 6:2-4), 2) praying (Matt. 2:5-15) and 3) fasting (Matt. 2:16-18). Each area was expected (“When you ...”) and promised to be the context of a future reward from our Father in heaven. Each was contrasted with the potential selfish actions and intentions of hypocrites, who only pretended to follow righteous ways. They preached one thing and practiced another.

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Some who give to the needy do it with a lot of self-serving fanfare “in the synagogues and on the streets” to be honored

by men. Jesus taught the preferred way to give to the needy is to do so “in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:6b).

Other hypocrites prayed in public ways and places “to be seen by men.” Their unrighteous motives squelched any future reward from the Father. Instead, righteous prayers should be presented privately to God and kept free from meaningless jargon, “babbling like pagans” (Matt. 6:6-7).

Finally, fasting from food for spiritual purposes was a righteous practice commanded in the Mosaic law to be observed annually on the Day of Atonement. However, some hypocritical Pharisees pridefully fasted twice weekly and tithed ostentatiously (Luke 18:9-14).

The Disciple's Prayer

In Matthew 6, Jesus instructed His disciples regarding righteous prayer and modeled a pattern for prayer that can guide us today. Although it is sometimes called “The Lord's Prayer,” it is perhaps better to think of it as “The Disciple's Prayer.”

Peter wrote to his disciples (and us today), explaining the trinitarian efforts God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit initiated for our redemption and sanctification. He said we have been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:2; NIV).

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Jesus outlined our disciple's prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), beginning with adoration and honor directed to “our Father in heaven.” We must learn to lavishly glorify our heavenly Father for who

He is and what He has done.

Our next focus should be on the future kingdom of God (v. 10), which we learn is a “now, but not yet” paradox. The kingdom is wherever the King is. To the degree the King is ruling and reigning in us today, His kingdom has “come,” and to the degree we submit to His lordship over our lives now, His will is being done here, “on earth as it is in heaven.” We also look forward to the millennial reign of His kingdom here on earth and His eternal reign to follow (Rev. 20-22).

Verses 11-13 of Matthew 6 contain petitions we may want to ask of our Father in heaven. We may rightly request resources for recurring needs or our “daily bread.” Then, we may ask for forgiveness of our moral debts (sins), even as we initiate forgiveness toward those who have wronged us/ As Pastor Jack Hayford once wrote, “Forgiveness is the key to everything!”

Also, Jesus guides us to pray in order to stand firm in spiritual warfare. Each day, we may be tempted and tested and need spiritual deliverance from “the evil one,” who has come to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10). Jesus assures us He is “greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4c, NKJV).

Jesus said, “I am coming soon!” Let us continue to perform loving “righteous acts” as we await that day.

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