

LESSON III

(Sermon on the Mount—Continued)

Matthew 6 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.¹

Giving to the Needy

²“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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Prayer

⁵“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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,^[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]

¹⁴For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Fasting

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¹⁶“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others 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.

COMMENTARY

The teachings in Matthew 6 seem to set God against the world. In the first teachings about practicing righteousness, the world is represented in a social context. That is, the world is represented by other people. Jesus teaches that we are not to put on a show of our good works for other people to see. Later, Matthew contrasts God with the world by talking about heavenly treasures versus earthly treasures, culminating in the verse that contrasts God and money. Finally, food, drink, and clothing—seemingly the basics for survival—are contrasted with God’s kingdom. We are not to worry about food, drink, and clothing. Instead, we are taught to seek God’s kingdom first. However, the promise is that we will receive food, drink, and clothing if we put God first. In this lesson, we will talk about the first contrast between God and the world—the world as society versus God’s secret awareness of private good deeds.

First, some attention needs to be given to what kinds of things Matthew highlights as good deeds. Matthew talks about 3: giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. There are undoubtedly more ways to do good. But these 3 practices can serve to illustrate doing good in general—holy ways to be good versus worldly ways of doing good. Notice, again, that Matthew gives us the number 3 as examples of good.

Jesus’ teachings about righteousness are called “meritorious good works” in Swedenborg. “Meritorious good works” are good works that we take credit for. When we take credit for doing good, we tarnish the good deed. When we do something truly good, our minds are on the good, or the person, or the service itself. We love doing good; we love helping another person; we love being of service. But if we take credit for doing good, then our minds are on ourselves. We are serving self, through the appearance of serving others. We are doing good so that our ego is massaged.

There are several, in fact, many ways to do meritorious good. One way is to make sure that others see our good deeds. Make a show of them. Then others will think well of us. The good deed itself doesn’t matter as much as how we look in the doing of the deed. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).

God wants us to do good, to be good. We are stewards of the world. If we don’t bring goodness to earth, who will? God is Good. When we do good, we are showing our love for God, for good, for Good. When we love good, love doing good, we are in heaven; we are “in” God. When we love selfishness, self-interest, we are not loving God, we are loving self. Taking credit for doing good is loving self. And doing good in the public eye *for the purpose of inflating self-image* is self-serving, not neighbor-serving, not God serving. We don’t know what is going on in Bill Gates’ heart. He is doing good in the public eye. But everything Bill Gates does is in the public eye. He can’t do private good. But I bring Bill Gates up because he is an interesting instance of doing good in the public eye. If Bill Gates is doing good so people will respect and honor him, then he is not doing spiritual good. But

if Bill Gates really cares about the hungry children he feeds, or the diseased people he sends medical aid to, then his good is spiritual good—whether it is in the public eye or not.

Another way to do meritorious good is to reflect on our good deeds and privately take credit for them. We may even think that we deserve heaven for the good deeds that we do. I was at a Coptic Orthodox Church, and I noticed a pamphlet that actually read, “We will merit heaven by our good deeds.” Thinking that we deserve heaven because we do good deeds inserts self into our deeds. That tarnishes our good with thoughts about self, not the service itself, or the neighbor him or herself whom we are helping. But doing good so that we will come into heaven, as a motive is not meritorious good. We can do good because we want to go to heaven. We just can’t think that we deserve heaven.

For these reasons, some Protestants say good deeds do not contribute to our salvation. We are not saved by doing good, according to these Protestants. Faith alone saves. They use Isaiah 64:6 for support, “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” Everything we try to do is self-generated, and self pollutes good. We are saved by God’s grace. We can do nothing to merit God’s grace. It is a freely given gift to believers. “Amazing grace.” “How precious did that grace appear/ the day I first believed.”

The Swedenborgian view is subtle but brilliant. Two words. “As if.” We do good as if from self, as if it is our effort. We do good as if it is by our own effort, **all the while acknowledging that God does the good.** We are a vessel that holds God. In an Indigenous creation story, humanity is formed from the earth of Turtle Island (North America) as a vessel. Then the Creator fills humanity with His thoughts and makes our hearts beat in time with His heart. Swedenborg echoes this ancient world-view. We are vessels for God’s Love and Wisdom. Our thoughts and feelings are God’s Wisdom and Love in us. So the truths we think are God’s Wisdom in us. The love we feel is God’s Love in us. So when we do good, God-in-us is actually doing the good. The good we do is not meritorious good when we acknowledge that God-in-us is doing the good. Then we are united with God—God in us and we in God, “Abide in me, and I in you.” (John 15:4).