

The Challenge of Authenticity

Consistent Character 6

I want to reiterate our working definition of character this morning...

"Character is defined as strength of moral fiber. A.W. Tozer described character as 'the excellence of moral beings.' As the excellence of gold is its purity and the excellence of art is its beauty, so the excellence of man is his character. Persons of character are noted for their honesty, ethics, and charity. Descriptions such as 'man of principle' and 'woman of integrity' are assertions of character. A lack of character is moral deficiency, and persons lacking character tend to behave dishonestly, unethically, and uncharitably.

A person's character is the sum of his or her disposition, thoughts, intentions, desires, and actions. It is good to remember that character is gauged by general tendencies, not on the basis of a few isolated actions. We must look at the whole life."

In the previous two lessons, we have dealt with the big challenges, those which are often dealt with publicly, that test our character. And the private challenges, that test our character behind closed doors.

Today, we learn from Jesus about our public displays of character, and the private behavior that must certainly be present to make the public displays possible.

If we could choose a word to describe the kind of Christianity Jesus is describing in this passage, we could probably call it 'authentic.'

The adjective 'authentic' can be defined with these four statements:

- not false or copied; genuine; real:
- having an origin supported by unquestionable evidence; authenticated; verified:
- representing one's true nature or beliefs; true to oneself or to the person identified:
- entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience; reliable; trustworthy:

We are going to review our mandate to shine as lights in the world. We will also speak of things done in 'secret,' that it seems have much to do with making it possible for us to perform public acts of devotion to Christ with authenticity.

To do this, we'll be in a very familiar passage of scripture: Matthew 5 and 6.

Let's jump into the middle of chapter 5 to get started, at Matthew 5:14-16.

14. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

15. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

16. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Jesus must certainly be speaking to those of us who know Him as Savior. How can those that remain in darkness be described this way?

At the end of chapter 4 it says that multitudes followed Him, but "seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,"

Those of us who have light, based on our relationship with Him, must reflect this light.

This light-shining endeavor is one that is by its very definition and nature must be public! It is illogical, perhaps impossible, to hide light. It enters the world to illuminate darkness. To provide a way to see that wasn't previously available.

This is the assignment we cannot avoid. Light-shining is our mandate and it comes in the form of good works. These works are referred to in one commentary as "Noble works, works which by their generous and attractive character win the natural admiration of men." This is doing right in the world, based on the light we possess, due to our relationship with God.

I want to read the next portion of the passage, but not elaborate on it too much. There is one phrase in the Matthew 5:17-20 that I want us to hang on to...

17. Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

19. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

This idea of our righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees makes us think. We don't have to think long before recalling scriptures that would teach that we are made righteous through Christ, not developing our own righteousness through works.

Later passages will make us think about this further...

Let's jump ahead to Matthew 5:43-48:

43. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

44. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
45. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.
46. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
47. And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?
48. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

These are startling statements for the Lord to make. Counter-cultural, perhaps even counter-intuitive statements!

How is it that we can do this? The Pharisees never could. It seems something much deeper than the kind of righteousness the scribes and Pharisees had will be needed to make this happen.

Essentially, Christ is saying "be like God."

Simply loving those that love us is typically of all in the world, whether they dwell in darkness or light. It is not remarkable. It is standard.

The bar is higher for us.

Let's learn a little bit more about this standard from the next several verses in Matthew 6:1-4:

1. Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.
2. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
3. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:
4. That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Alms are charitable activities of a religious nature - charitable giving or donation. They are good deeds intended to help others. But they can be done for the wrong reason.

They can be done as a way of obtaining glory for ourselves. In fact, they are often done (by hypocrites) to obtain glory for self. We are not to behave in this way.

Our desire to help must be authentic. It must be done, never for the purpose of personal gain, but for God's glory and for the good of others.

This theme is continued regarding our prayers in Matthew 6:5-8:

5. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
6. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.
7. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.
8. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

These prayers are not for the purpose of making us appear to others as spiritual. They are in secret because they express a genuine reliance upon God. They reveal a need for Him and His blessing. They are personal. They are not vain repetitions, because they represent real communication between creation and Creator.

They are not a forum for appearing as though we love God, but expressing authentic love for Him, privately.

If we are to set aside a time to go without food to either petition God or worship Him with focused effort, we should behave in the same way according to Matthew 6:16-18.

16. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
17. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;
18. That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

All of this private activity is evidence that a saved person's righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, because it is real. It comes from the heart and leads us back to the light-shining portion of chapter 5.

Matthew 6:19-21

19. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:
20. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:
21. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Good character, as often represented by good works, begins in the heart of a true believer in Christ that is seeking those things which are above.

This is never for the purpose of self-glorification, but for the purpose of God's glorification.