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Pursuing the Kingdom: The Hidden Life of the Kingdom

Matthew 6:1-4; 16-18

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...I hope you're still basking in the light of Holy Week and the truth that we serve a risen savior. Over the past few weeks, we took a pause from our theme to focus on the what the Lord Jesus accomplished for us through his death and resurrection. And it seems fitting that as we get back into our routines and rhythms of life we pause, once again, to come together around the Lord's table and share communion which we will do to conclude our time together this morning.

But, for now, we're going to turn our attention back to the Book of Matthew and our theme, "Pursuing the Kingdom," as we continue to look at what it means to be part of God's kingdom here and now as we await the eternal kingdom when Christ comes again.

Now as a quick reminder, we began our journey in the Gospel of Matthew in ch. 3, where the message of the kingdom began being preached by John the Baptist when he began to declare, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And we discussed that repentance is not just about changing our behavior only but it is about turning from sin and toward God and allowing him to reign in our lives. John was urging the people to prepare themselves for the coming of the king. And its during this time that Jesus approaches John at the Jordan river and is baptized.

Then, in ch. 4, Jesus steps into active ministry, but not before facing temptation in the wilderness after fasting for 40 days in preparation for what he had come to do. And we see in his example that where humanity failed when tempted, Jesus remained faithful. And his victory over the great deceiver, Satan, defines the nature of the kingdom. It is not achieved through might and power but through submission to God's will. And as Jesus begins to preach, again declaring that the kingdom of heaven is near, he begins to call ordinary people, his first disciples, to follow him, forming the beginnings of a community shaped by the pursuit of kingdom righteousness.

And all of this builds up to the Sermon on the mount in chs. 5-7. In ch. 5, Jesus describes the character of those who belong to the kingdom in the beatitudes. The beatitudes turn worldly values upside down. In the kingdom, it's the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful and the persecuted that are called blessed and kingdom righteousness goes beyond external obedience to the transformation of the heart. Anger, lust, retaliation and hatred are all addressed by Jesus not merely as outward actions, "you have heard it said...", but as conditions of the soul, "but I say to you." Meaning, to pursue the kingdom is to pursue a deeper righteousness, one that reflects the very heart and character of God.

And as we come to ch. 6, the focus shifts from the character of kingdom citizens to the practices that sustain life in the kingdom as Jesus moves from what righteousness is to how it is lived out in everyday life.

So, as we make our way into Matthew 6 this morning, I want to do so by asking a question. When was the last time you did something good but secretly hoped someone would notice? To be honest, we've all been there. This desire to be have others see and

acknowledge the things we do is common to all of us. From a very young age, a child will do a cartwheel and immediately looks around and asks their parents, “Did you see that?” And if we’re honest, we don’t outgrow that instinct, we just refine it. As adults, it shows up in more subtle ways. Especially in the era of social media, we post, we share, we mention, we hint, hoping that someone notices, comments or likes what we share. Deep down, we all long to be seen.

That’s the kind of life Jesus is confronting in our passage today. And as he speaks, he is inviting us, once again, into something deeper than chasing likes or the approval of others. He is calling us away from outward performance and into inward authenticity. And if we are serious about pursuing the kingdom of God, then we must understand this. The kingdom is not built on what is visible, but on what is hidden. And to get a better glimpse of this, let’s look together into God’s word this morning. If you are able, please stand as I read the word of God from Matthew 6:1-4 and then verses 16-18. [Read Passage]

Jesus begins with a warning, and it is a strong one. He says, “Beware.” That word should get our attention. Like a “Beware of dog” sign hanging on someone’s door. But Jesus is not addressing obvious rebellion or blatant sin, he’s speaking to people who are doing the right things but for the wrong reasons. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.” That’s the issue, not righteousness itself, but the reason behind it.

You see, it is possible for you to do all the right things and still miss the heart of the kingdom. You can give, you can pray, you can fast, you can serve and, all the while, still be living for yourself. That’s what makes this point not so subtle. Jesus is not just concerned with what we do. He is deeply concerned with why we do it. Because in the kingdom of God our motive matters.

And then Jesus says something that cuts straight to the heart of the matter. If your goal is to be seen by others, then their approval is your reward. And that’s all you get. And that’s a sobering thought. Any applause we get from others gives immediate gratification, yes, but it’s fleeting. It feels good for a moment but it doesn’t last. It cannot sustain your soul. It cannot fill the deeper hunger within you. It fades as quickly as it comes. That’s why so many people, especially celebrities and athletes, after achieving all that they set out to achieve, in the end still feel empty because at the end of the day none of it lasts.

To make his point, Jesus gives us his first practical example in vs. 2. He says, “When you give to the needy...” Notice He doesn’t say “if.” Giving, here, is assumed. Kingdom people are, by nature, supposed to be generous people. The mandate to give is woven throughout Scripture, but here Jesus clarifies that the heart behind the gift is just as important as the gift itself.

Biblically, giving flows from God’s own character. From the law to the prophets, God’s people were commanded to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. But by the time we reach the time of Jesus, the practice of giving had, in some cases, become a means of public recognition. Jesus confronts this wrongful thinking directly. Giving must not be used to elevate one’s status, but to honor God and serve others.

And he says, “when you give, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do.” That word “hypocrite” is striking and it’s very intentional. Jesus uses the word often in

the gospels and it's the same word used for an actor, or someone who wears a mask or performs a role. In other words, here in this context, it is possible to give generously and still be acting or just playing the part.

Jesus paints this picture of people who give in a way that draws attention to themselves. They want others to see. They want recognition. They want their generosity to be known. And Jesus says if that's their goal then "they have already received their reward." In other words, the applause they get in that moment is the full extent of their return.

But then Jesus offers a radically different way of thinking. He says but as for you, Christian, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Here's another striking image. Obviously, it's not meant to be taken literally but it communicates something powerful. It describes a kind of giving that is so restrained and unassuming that even you, yourself, are not dwelling on it. You're not replaying it in your mind. You're not subtly reminding others. You simply give and you move on.

Why? Because your focus is not on yourself, and it's not even on others. Your focus is on God. For Jesus goes on to say in vs. 4, "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you." That phrase is the central point of this passage. Your Father sees in secret. He sees what others miss. He sees the quiet act of generosity that no one applauds. He sees the sacrifice that goes unnoticed. And he sees the motives behind your actions.

Then Jesus moves to another practical example in vs. 16 of fasting, and don't worry, we're going to circle back to vs. 5-15 and the Lord's Prayer starting next week. But Jesus says, "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites." Again, the issue is not the action but it is the motive behind it. And again, we see Jesus uses the word hypocrite here. In other words, don't just put on a show.

Fasting during the time of Jesus was a well-established and meaningful spiritual practice within Jewish life. It was rooted in the Old Testament and at its core, fasting meant abstaining from food, and sometimes drink, for a period of time to seek God with greater focus.

Fasting was associated with several key purposes. Repentance from sin, mourning or grief, seeking God's guidance and expressing deep dependence on him. By Jesus' day, however, fasting had, in some circles, become performative. Just like our giving, this are just another examples of the main point of not just putting on a show to look more spiritual, but instead, doing what is right to honor God and point others to him.

As for fasting, some would visibly disfigure their faces or appear somber to make it obvious they were fasting, drawing attention to their spirituality. Jesus addresses this directly, not by rejecting fasting itself, but by correcting it. He again assumes, "when you fast," affirming it as a valid practice, as it is today, but he commands his followers to do it quietly, without seeking recognition. Instead of an outward display, he calls for inward sincerity. The goal is not to appear spiritual, but to genuinely seek God.

And again, he offers the kingdom alternative in vs. 17, "Anoint your head and wash your face." In other words, go about your life normally. Don't draw attention to what you are doing. Let it be between you and God. Why? Because, again, your Father sees in secret.

Here, again, we see the main point and it's the truth that reshapes everything. God sees what others cannot. He sees beneath the surface. He sees the hidden places of your

life. He sees your thoughts, your motives and your desires. And that reality is either deeply unsettling or deeply comforting, depending on where you stand.

If you are living for appearances and worldly applause, it can be unsettling because God sees through the act. But if you are truly seeking him, it is incredibly comforting because even when no one else notices, he does. Nothing is wasted. No act of quiet obedience goes unseen. No moment of hidden faithfulness is overlooked.

Now, notice that Jesus twice promises a reward, first in vs. 4 and then in vs. 18. But what is that reward? Well, clearly, we know from the context and the topic of conversation here, it's not public recognition or even material blessing. The reward is deeper than that. The reward is genuine intimacy with God. It is a heart that is being transformed. It is freedom from our need for approval. It is a kind of joy that is not dependent on what others think. It is a life that is aligned with the kingdom and its purposes.

And there is incredible freedom in living this way. Imagine being free from the need to impress people. Imagine doing good simply because it is good and the right thing to do. Imagine serving without needing to be thanked. Imagine showing others love without needing any recognition at all. That is the kingdom life Jesus is inviting us into, a life lived before an audience of One, our Heavenly Father.

Now, that's not to say that we shouldn't recognize people's good deeds or thank them for what they do or even that we shouldn't accept people's praise and applause for a job well done. The point is we just don't do it for those reasons only.

So how do we pursue the kingdom in this way? Well, we need regularly examine our motives and we ask ourselves questions like, "Why am I doing this? Who am I hoping will notice? Would I still do this if no one ever knew?" And as we do that, we deepen our awareness of God. We remind ourselves daily that God sees us and knows us. Not the public version that everyone else sees but the real me.

As we come to the end of the message today, let me leave you with this thought. Everything we do in life is lived out before an audience. The only question is which one? One day, the applause of people will fade. The recognition we chased will feel small and distant. But what will remain is what was authentically done before God.

Jesus is not calling us into a smaller life, secluded life. Or even a life of self deprecation where we deflect all thanks and praise for a job well done. He is calling us into something deeper, something more. A life where the unseen matters more than the seen. A life where the Father's approval outweighs the crowd's applause. A life rooted in the quiet, steady pursuit of the kingdom of God.

So, we are to pursue the kingdom, not for recognition, but because of our relationship with God. Not to be seen by others, but to be known by your Father. Because in the end, the most important words you will ever hear are not the praise and applause of people, but the quiet, eternal affirmation of the One who has known you all along. Let's pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's table.