

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 13”

Matthew 6:1-18

Many of you here will recognise the name Roy Clarke – and even if you don't, you'll have seen his work. Roy Clarke is one of the best and most prolific sitcom writers to have been featured on the BBC in recent years. His work includes *Last Of the Summer Wine*, *Open All Hours* and *Keeping Up Appearances*. That last one starred Clive Swift and Patricia Routledge as Richard and Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced “Bouquet”) as the social climbers who were constantly trying to ignore their poorer relatives and give an appearance of culture and wealth. Hyacinth Bucket has become a byword for snobbery and hypocrisy in the minds of many people. And this next section of *The Sermon On The Mount* could easily have been subtitled *Keeping Up Appearances*, because it deals with very similar attempts to show off and give a different impression.

Jesus has been talking to his new followers about righteousness, about doing things God's way. He's shown how it's all to do with attitudes and values, not just with ticking things off on a list of rules and regulations – not just sticking to the letter of the Law, as many of the religious leaders of his day seemed to be doing. People who kept God's Law but had made keeping it an end in itself and lost sight of what was behind it. They killed off relationships rather than people, allowed their imaginations to spoil their marriages, forfeited the trust of their fellow citizens and kept any hint of generosity and hospitality strictly between themselves.

Now Jesus turns to what they consider their acts of righteousness, what we might translate their “piety”. These are the things that they think mark them out as holy people, as those who are following God's ways. But there's a warning here for them – and us – that there's more to being pious, to being religious or holy or whatever you want to call it, than just being seen to do the right things. The previous section ended with “*Be perfect*”. This one begins with “*Be careful*”. Be perfect, but be careful!

Jesus talks here of three things that were key to Jewish piety and were adopted by the new Christians – encouraged by Jesus – as part of their sacrifice of praise and worship. These were three things that were absolutely key to the lifestyle that was to be the hallmark of the Christian community over the next centuries: giving to the needy, prayer and fasting – the first and last of those now sadly neglected by many Christians.

And, as befits a sermon, Jesus communicates his teaching in a way which is memorable in its structure as well as in its challenge. Did you notice the very clear repetitive rhythm in what Jesus was saying? He says each of these things three times: “*Do not be like the hypocrites*” – “*to be seen by men*” – “*They have received their reward in full*” – “*Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*” (And notice that in this translation there is no “*openly*” at the end of the sentence – that was added in the Authorised Version to balance it up stylistically and is not there in the Greek.) Jesus is here talking about people who do the right things but for the wrong reasons. He obviously assumed that his followers would do these things – give, pray, fast – and, again, you can tell by the language he uses. He says “***When*** you give/pray/fast”, not “***If*** you give/pray/fast”. And says “***But when*** you ...” as he tells them what they should be doing. These are things that are very much at the heart of the worship, work and witness of the followers of Jesus.

Once again, Jesus is drawing clear lines between the way in which his followers behave and the way in which other conventionally religious people behave. There is to be a distinction between the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and the citizens of the kingdoms of the earth. Remember that he finished the last section by telling them that they were to do far more than the pagans and the other non-believers (5:46,47). And in the section before that he tells them that they should exceed the Pharisees in authentic righteousness (5:20). It is again all to do with attitude, with the motivation behind our words and actions, with a desperate desire to do things God's way that should infuse all that we do. You see, the hypocrites, literally the “play actors”, do all this stuff as an end in itself – like keeping the Law. They take no notice of what is behind it, of the way God wants it done. Their main motivation is so that people will see them

doing their acts of piety and think what wonderful worshippers they are, what holy fellows they must be. And Jesus points out that they do actually achieve that goal – others do look up to them and hold them in high regard – so they have effectively got their reward. That was what they wanted and they've got it. They're satisfied. Nothing more is needed.

But that's not actually the point, says Jesus. These acts of piety are again supposed to be acts of righteousness, they are supposed to be the believers' way of trying to do what God wants and it is his approval that they should seek, not the approval of men. So he picks apart what he means with these three examples.

1. GIVING (vv1-4)

Giving is important, especially giving to the needy. Not everyone has your advantages. Not everyone is able to sustain their life in the way you can. So be prepared to give of your bounty to help them in their poverty. That has always been the bedrock of a fair society and it is enshrined in the Law God gave his people through Moses – and it's an integral part of pretty well every other religion you care to examine. But some of the people whom Jesus is criticising were really “blowing their own trumpet” when it came to dispensing their alms. They might not literally have “*announced it with trumpets*” as he says here – scholars are pretty certain that people didn't actually use a fanfare to announce their giving in Jesus' day – but they liked to make jolly sure other people knew what was going on. Benefactors would make a great show of giving out money, either to demonstrate just what generous people they must be or to show just how rich they were. One of the characters on Harry Enfield's sketch show used to be a Midlands man who went around saying, “I'm considerably richer than you” – it was bit like that.

Jesus doesn't say that his followers shouldn't get involved in giving to the poor and needy. He just tells them that they should do it discreetly, almost secretly, so that they are aware of the real point of it all. It's to help others who are in need and to honour God, rather than to advertise their own largesse. It's a reminder to consider why you're doing it at all. You don't need to make a song and dance about it. You don't need a little brass plaque on your gift – as you see in so many churches, for example. You don't need to let anyone know what's going on, really. I've often been really touched when people have passed gifts through me to ensure that their anonymity is preserved. Just get on and do it. God will see what you're doing and he will see that you are rewarded appropriately and in his good time.

2. PRAY (vv5-8)

Then, of course, there's praying. I don't suppose anyone here would quibble with the fact that prayer is an integral part of life as a follower of Jesus. And prayer in some form or other is key to most other religions too. The important thing, though, is what do you do it for? Jesus here is talking about the dangers of praying in public – he's not talking about the problems of praying with other people. When he says that you should go off in secret, that isn't to say that there is no place for corporate prayer – for prayer meetings and the like (despite what our practice here seems to suggest). If he did mean that then the Early Church completely misunderstood him – and the church has done ever since.

Jesus is saying here that public prayer can be a great platform for showing off – and the hypocrites, the play actors, love to capitalise on that. Their long and loud prayers are designed to win the approbation of others rather than to touch the Father heart of God. Such people loved to be seen praying in the synagogue and standing on street corners. The reason for the street corner business was that Jewish people were required to pray at set times – as they still are, and as, for example, Muslims do today. They were supposed to stop what they were doing and pray at those given hours of prayer and there is evidence that some people would time their activities so that at 3 o'clock they would actually be in a very public place – such as a street corner – and others would see just how pious and holy they were.

And they would pray expansive, loud and eloquent prayers. Followers of other religions too – the pagans – would go on at considerable length in the mistaken belief that their gods would respond to lengthy pleading rather than short and succinct requests. I think I've mentioned before one of the occasions when I was in the synagogue in Tottenham for a friend's son's Bar-Mitzvah and seeing a large Jewish man in the front row with an extravagant prayer shawl standing up all the time to pray, looking round at everyone else and clearly showing off his knowledge of the Hebrew liturgy. But I've also been in prayer meetings at a Brethren assembly, not far from that synagogue – and, indeed, in many other church prayer meetings – where one or two of the participants have clearly loved to show off their holiness by long, involved and loud prayers, spoken very obviously for the benefit of the other, less holy, attendees, rather than for the ear of God. One of them I remember from my boyhood used to pick up a chair and bang it on the floor in front of him to emphasise his points – just in case God didn't quite catch it! They are like some preachers I know who mistakenly equate length with depth, and volume with sincerity.

So Jesus says again that such people have got their reward. People do admire them, which is what they're looking for. But he wants his followers to look to God for their reward. So, to avoid the temptation of showing off in public prayer, he says that they should pray in private: then there's no possibility that you'll mistake the real audience. And to avoid the temptation of long and rambling inconsequentialities, he gives a short and succinct template for prayer that anyone can use. We now call it *The Lord's Prayer*, and I don't propose to go into that in any detail this morning, other than to say that it neatly encapsulates all that we might need to bring before God in public or private. Get real with God on a one-to-one basis before you start showing off to others. As several commentators on these verses point out, if you're praying aloud in public more than you're praying quietly to God in private, you've got a problem. One of the things which impresses me about Rowan Williams is that he spends at least an hour in private prayer at the beginning of every day, before he does anything else – and there are plenty of other examples of that among the great men and women of God down through the centuries.

3. FAST (vv16-18)

Fasting – voluntarily abstaining from food – is another act of piety that is at the heart of most religions and was very much a part of the Jewish way of worship. Although there was only one compulsory fast each year – on the Day of Atonement – many Jewish people would fast more frequently, and the Pharisees used to fast on two days each week. The Christian Church until recently also observed fasting as a spiritual discipline. It's a way of encouraging self-control, of helping to focus on God and a reminder of our reliance on him. Unfortunately, in recent years we have managed to discover all sorts of excuses for not doing it any more, from reasons of health to pious platitudes about being free from all that legalistic kind of thing. And over the past two or three decades scholars have discovered the lost word that was in Jesus' original pronouncements – when we thought Jesus spoke of “*prayer and fasting*”, there was actually a “*break*” before fasting, so we have managed to get back to the primitive idea of prayer breakfasts, rather than prayer fasts!

Anyway, Jesus clearly took it for granted that his follower would fast. Not only is there this passage, but look at *Matthew 9:14,15* (“*Then John's disciples came and asked him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.'*”) and the practice of the Early Church in *Acts 13:2,3* (“*While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off”) and *14:23* (“*Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*”). We're not talking here about dieting or not eating for any other reason. You see, the hypocrites, the play actors, used to make it obvious that they were fasting by going about rather unkempt for the day. They wouldn't shave or comb their hair and they'd not bother to wash or use deodorant. Then everyone would know that they were so holy that they were taking their fasting really seriously. And Jesus says again, “*But when you*

fast ...". He clearly expected his followers to fast, but told them to keep it between themselves and God. Wash, tidy yourself up and don't let there be any outward show of this particular discipline. The hypocrites, the play actors, they've succeeded in getting everyone else to notice them – that's what they wanted, so they've got their reward. For you, the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, you fast so that God will know you're serious about him, that you're desperate for things to be done his way, so he'll reward you in due time.

You see, this is all to do with motives again, to do with attitudes. If you've taken what Jesus said about righteousness but you're concerned only that other people will notice, then you're going about it the wrong way. Donald Carson writes: "*To attempt to live in accord with the righteousness spelled out in the preceding verses but out of motives eager for men's applause is to prostitute that righteousness.*" There will, of course, be some outward sign of all this – it will be obvious in your manner, your spirit. You will live with an integrity that means your "*outward appearance is matched by an inner reality*" (Tom Wright). As we've said already, Jesus isn't forbidding these things – in each case he says "*But when you ...*" He is reminding us that we are doing this for God not for men. The hypocrites, the play actors, are out for show, as he says in *Matthew 23:5-7*, but that is not the way of the Kingdom.

[And, just an aside here, for any who might be thinking of ministry or involved in it – and so that you understand what is behind what I do – many people talk of ministers as being the "*servants of the church*", but we are no such things. We are servants of God. Above the desk in my study I have Paul's words from *1 Thessalonians 2:4*: "*We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men, but God, who tests our hearts.*"]

This is not just about "Keeping Up Appearances". This is not about showing off for the benefit of others and trying to win the approval of other people for our acts of righteousness. John Stott writes that "*We must choose God for our audience*". There is more than one song – and, indeed, a Christian rock group – called *For An Audience Of One*, that audience being God. Why are we doing this? Why are we trying to follow the way of righteousness? We are doing it for God, who will recognise and reward our righteousness. If we're doing it for other people, that's fair enough – that's your choice. But you'll get your reward – you'll get other people thinking what a great guy you are: for a while, at least – until they start to see through your sham piety and realise that it doesn't really add up. Jesus is very harsh on such people throughout the Gospels and in *John 5:44* he says this: "*How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?*"

Once again, you see, we are back to this desperate desire for things to be done God's way, to a "*hunger and thirst after righteousness*". And our desire for that must be greater than the desire of the Pharisees and the others – the hypocrites and shallow followers of sham religion – to win the approval of men. We need to be doing the stuff – "walking the walk, not just talking the talk" as someone has put it. Because if we do that, then people will actually start to see that what we've got is something authentic, that we are people of integrity, that we actually do believe what we say. As one person put it when they were helped by something here after failing to find it elsewhere, "Why can't all Christians be like you people at Wade Street?"

It comes down to a question we have asked before. Are you a lifestyle Christian or do you follow a Christian lifestyle? Is your religion something tacked on to your life along with your designer fashion labels, your season ticket to the theatre and your gym membership – just something else that you hope will help you make your way in life amongst the right people, make you look good and open a few doors? Or is it something that totally governs everything you do, every thought you have, every choice you make, every decision you come to, whether that keeps you in the mainstream of society or forces you to the very edge? It's your choice. "*Do not be like the hypocrites ... then your Father who sees the attitudes and motives of your heart, will reward you.*"

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Once again, this is to do with attitudes. John Stott writes that "*We must choose God for our audience*". But why are we trying to follow the way of righteousness? We are doing it for God, who will recognise and reward our righteousness. Those who are doing it for other people will get their reward – but Jesus is very harsh on such people throughout the Gospels (look at *John 5:44*).

Questions for discussion

1. If you had to choose three things that were key to life as a follower of Jesus, what would they be? Why?
2. How can we guard against doing good just to show off?
3. Jesus seems to suggest that we should always pray alone and in private. Where does that leave prayer meetings and the like?
4. Most Christians today probably don't take fasting very seriously. Why do you think that is? Have you fasted? What do you think is the point of fasting?
5. On the basis of these verses, should we be bothering with any public worship? Why/why not?