40-06-07.wpd — The Hiddenness of True Devotion

giving, prayer, fasting, Kingdom, love, listening, guidance, obedience
Mat 6:1-8, 16-18
To change an alienated world, God's Kingdom must begin in the heart.

INTRODUCTION: text as Scripture Reading
–Christians should never think they live in two worlds, one ruled by
man and one by God. God is King over all worlds. From the beginning
we were to live, work and find joy in this physical world through an
intimate and open relationship with Him. As Creator and King, God
wished to direct our activities and goals in the world. The forbidden
fruit not only brought us independence from God but alienation in our
relationships with Him, with each other, with creation, and with our
own bodies. That alienation distorts God's purposes for creating us.
–Adam and Eve's very first independent act was both concealing and
revealing. By making fig-leaf clothing, they tried to conceal their true
selves from God and from each other, which revealed a deep insecurity
brought on by their new independence from God. But as they ran away
from Him, God caught up with them, and the story of salvation began.
–The message of the Sermon on the Mount is singleness of devotion to
God. Jesus confronts our independence and tells us to submit to God
for guidance and direction. He calls for us to live out God's Kingdom in
the midst of an alienated world. But He knows our bad habits. We try to
mask our internal condition with external "fig leaves." We try to display our
"right" standing with God through religious activities for others to
see, while trying to hide the real state of our hearts. Jesus shows how to
reverse this habit by "the hiddenness of true devotion." HOM.idea.

I. Acts of Righteousness Directed Toward Others (v.1-4)
A. The practice of giving to others in need is well established in
Scripture and almost universally indicates a person's devotion to God, but for
that reason it can also be dangerous to our true devotion to God:
1. Since talking with God makes it look as if we have a close
relationship with Him, praying aloud can tempt us to pretend a
"righteousness" that we don't really have—Isa 29:13a. The Lord
says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with
their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (The better the lip-service
praying sounds, the holier the praying person seems to be....)
2. Another common temptation in prayer is to teach or preach while
praying [My own problem, too, more than I care to admit.]
B. The simple solution to this problem is to remember that God is in
charge, even over what we ask for in prayer. So when we pray, we
should let Jesus teach us how [the "Our Father" (discussed in the next
sermon) is a general guide, but we need to let our King direct us specifically in
prayer, for true Kingdom power to be released in us and through us to others.]

TRANS: Silent listening is the most important part of our conversation
with God. God knows what we need before we ask, but often we only
think we know what we or others need. He could tell us, if we'd be still
a minute. Listening prayer is effective, because it allows us to pray in
His will. Prayer does change things! But it starts in the hiddenness of
the heart where we listen to and obey our King. When God's Kingdom begins in the heart, an alienated world can be changed.

III. Acts of Righteousness Directed Toward Self (v.16-18)

A. Although fasting from food is a spiritual practice in Scripture, it is poorly practiced in our culture today. Most who do fast do it for health reasons, and sometimes it helps. But more familiar to us is the concept of self-denial. (Because selfishness is a major cause of sin, self-denial seems to be a source of righteousness.)

B. Again, self-denial can be dangerous to true spiritual life, because it has a way of drawing attention that appeals to the ego. E. Stanley Jones reported this from India: "I saw a sadhu standing all day immovable, unattracted by the things going on around him. But he always chose a very prominent corner on which to stand! I visited a sadhu who sat on a bed of spikes and he was contemptuous in his indifference to me and to everyone else, but his bed of spikes was at the crossroads where the multitudes surged—and saw! One would think that a man who had no possessions, and no clothes but ashes, would care little for appearances, yet when I was about to take a picture of such a man, he objected, saying that his ashes were not on properly!"]

C. 1 Cor 13:3, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."—Jesus says to "take up the cross" of self-denial and follow Him, but His steps don't usually lead into the limelight of a glorious martyrdom. Instead they call us into the mundane, day-to-day struggles of letting His love pour itself out in this world, just as the rest of 1 Cor 13 describes.

CONCLUSION:

—That's it, isn't it! Our giving, our praying, our self-denial must come from an obedient love relationship with God. Any change we bring to this alienated world, must begin from a heart where Jesus is not just the Savior but the Lord. The external Kingdom activities of giving, prayer, and self-denial must come out of an internal submission to the rule of the King. There, in the hiddenness of true devotion, we can learn to listen and obey, and our prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," will begin to be answered in and through our own lives.

Matthew 6:1-8 (NIV)

1 “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.
3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV)

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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 men 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.