Folly vs Freedom

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Date: 29 December 2024

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[0:00] I think many of us will be familiar with the really modern faux pas of virtue signalling. I don't know if you've come across that term before, but virtue signalling is basically this modern thing whereby you show how right on and progressive you are, maybe to use the dreaded word how woke you are by doing things like updating your Facebook status.

People don't really use Facebook anymore. It's more like TikTok and Snapchat now doing things online, maybe changing your profile picture in support of some worthy cause to show people how great you are because you support all the right things.
The thing that irks people about virtue signalling is that they suspect it's just that it's sending a signal which doesn't map on to the reality.
We don't quite trust that everyone cares that deeply about these causes. They care more about showing or giving the impression of how great, how morally upright they are no matter what the reality that lies behind it is.
Well if virtue signalling is a modern problem, we might be surprised to find that Jesus himself warns us this evening against virtue signalling, but maybe actually a better term for us would be righteousness signalling.
[1:31] We are famous Matthew chapter 6 that we are one chapter into the most famous sermon ever preached, Jesus' sermon on the mind and throughout this famous sermon the word righteousness is a really key term.

If I were Thomas this is where I would get it up and I'd highlight it all in red and show you but I'm not nearly as technically proficient as your minister is so you'll just have to bear with me. Righteousness we are told at the start of the sermon in Matthew chapter 5 is what people should hunger and thirst for if they are to be truly blessed.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. That is one of the key entry requirements to the kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus is teaching about throughout the sermon.
At the end of chapter 6 as Jesus summarizes this section of the sermon he will say, famously seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and in our current section Jesus has just been teaching on a need that his followers have.
Jesus provocatively says that his followers need a righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees.
[2:53] The Pharisees were renowned for their public displays of holiness. Here we have Jesus saying if you want to be my follower, if you want to be in God's kingdom your righteousness needs to far exceed the level of the most righteous people you think you know.

So righteousness a key term throughout the sermon, a key term for us to reflect on the seething because as he continues in Matthew chapter 6 to expand on the values of his kingdom and expand on exactly what a Pharisee plus level of righteousness should look like, Jesus shows his followers that the righteousness they need is different in substance from that of the Pharisees but it is also very different in how it presents itself practically.
That's why we get this headline warning in verse 1 of chapter 6. Beware now when Jesus says beware we should listen shouldn't we?
Here we have our Lord saying beware that should make our ears prick up. We should listen to what Jesus has to say beware or practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.
It's not saying that every public display of righteousness is wrong again earlier in the sermon Jesus has been teaching that his people need to live such distinctive lives in view of the outside world that

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they're like salt and light in the world.
[4:39] So it's not public righteousness which is the problem it's not doing ever doing anything good in public it's the heart intention that lies behind it that's what Jesus says is the key here.

Practicing your righteousness before others to be seen by them that's the key. To drive that home then Jesus gives three examples three areas in which the righteousness of his people can be practiced either for others to be seen by them or for God their Father to invite his pleasure.
And in each case what Jesus is doing is ex-comforting folly of performed religion and revealing for us the comforting freedom of true righteousness.
So our aim in looking at this passage together is that when we go home this evening we do feel challenged. Jesus says beware and Jesus like an expert surgeon with a scalp bug gets right to the heart of the human condition there will be things which we need to reflect on in our own practice and our own beliefs things which we may even need to repent of.
But also the aim is that we go home comforted as we take our eyes away from our own and from each other's righteousness and instead delight and rejoice in the righteousness which can only come from above the righteousness which is ours by faith.
[6:18] That's our aim and so we'll hopefully get there by considering this passage under two headings and the first is this the folly of performed religion and performance is an appropriate term because you may have noticed as I read the passage earlier there is a pattern in all of the examples that Jesus uses and one of the things that he repeats throughout is this warning don't be like the hypocrites.

My hypocrite that is a term which originated in Greek theatre and so the sense is of wearing a mask in a performance literally taking on a persona which is not yours and using it to cover over what you're really like.
That's why we see these ostentatious public displays of performative religiosity and we see them first of all in the area of giving.
So verse two, thus when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may be praised by others. Really I say to you they have received their reward.
The Pharisees are experts at taking good things commanded by God in his law and twisting them ever so slightly but so they end up beyond all recognition.
[7:48] Here's another example of it. Jesus has been exposing this kind of thing throughout the sermon but here we have another example. God commands his people to be generous, to care for one another, to look out for one another's needs but when the hypocrites give they want everyone to know that they're doing it.

Do we see how that's taking a good thing but making it into a me thing? When Jesus talks here of trumpeting, sounding no trumpet before you, we don't quite know if that's something the Pharisees, the hypocrites were literally doing so we don't know if it's a real image but it's certainly a ridiculous image.
Just imagine if you were off to set up a standing order for a mission partner or for church here and as you were doing it going into the bank and store it away I guess. You got one of the musicians from this evening to come along next to you playing one of their instruments so that people would look at you, see you going into the bank, wow they must be off to give.
They're really generous. That's the kind of thing that the Pharisees were doing. Even if they weren't doing it literally with actual trumpets they were definitely trumpeting their good deeds.
So when they gave to the needy a good thing to do they needed everyone to know theirs and so they turned something which should be between them and God and for the good of others into something that's about them and how they look and their reputation.
[9:33] One of the things that we need to be confronted with as we go through these examples this evening is how easy it is to spot hypocritical behaviour in other people, how much more difficult and uncomfortable it is to reflect on where we see it in our own hearts and in our own lives.

But a bit later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus will say, remove the plank of wood from your own eye before you take out the speck of dust from someone else's and so before we rush to think of examples of other people and where they fall foul Jesus would have us reflect on where we may be guilty of these kinds of things.

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I'm going to go out on a limb. I'm going to assume that nobody here goes down the trumpet route when it comes to bragging about how much we gave. If that's what you are doing just stop it really. That's ridiculous hiring a trumpeter to come with you when you gave. But if none of us are doing that how could we be guilty of this? What about the humble brag?
Have we ever found ourselves maybe slipping into conversation with other people at church? Things are a bit stretched just now. We were actually giving to quite a lot of causes.
[10:50] I'm not sure if we'll be able to support this new missionary, this new church work. Maybe when we've got a visiting missionary coming to do a prayer meeting or to join us in a church service we might slip in that I know that person quite well.

I've actually been partnering with them for quite a while. Partnering is just Christian ease for giving isn't it? We want people to know that we are one of the first people to enter into partnership with them.
I know that in a church I used to go to hospitality was a really big thing. A thing that many people myself included benefited from throughout the years.
It was a really good thing that on a Sunday if you tried to invite people for lunch they'd all say no I've already been invited by somebody else. That's a great thing. What's not great is how much I wanted people to know how much I loved practicing hospitality.
How much we might find ourselves wanting to say I love Sundays. We always have people from church right and they stay all day. The table is always full. We had a great Christmas.
[12:04] I knew there were lonely people in church and in the community I had them all right into my house. It was great. It is great. It's a good and godly thing to be generous, to be hospitable.

But do we see how easy it is to turn a good thing into a me thing? To take something which God has commanded of his people for the benefit of those in need and to turn it into something a bit more grubby.
Something that's all about me looking good in front of other people. Well Jesus would say beware. Don't turn a good thing into a me thing. That's the area of giving. Jesus turns his attention next to the area of prayer.
And interestingly there are two warnings against performance based prayers that Jesus gives here. First of all, verse 5, when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.
[13:15] Truly I say to you they have received their reward. Remember there's nothing wrong with praying in public or with standing to pray.

I did both of those things this evening so if that was what Jesus had in mind I'd be in trouble already. But once again it comes back to the motivation, the motivation to be seen by others.
The motivation in prayer life of wanting applause and a claim from other people rather than just wanting God's glory. So here's the caution.
It's a caution against making a big and public show of our prayers. And once again I don't think many of us would go down the route of marching into the middle of time and standing and praying in a really loud and obvious way.
But we must be guilty of the seam attitude sometimes. Think of prayer in our own context, in our own church cultures.
[14:23] Maybe we find ourselves in a context, maybe at a church prayer meeting, maybe at a less formal gathering or a fellowship at somebody's house where fellow believers were praying together and it should be and it is a wonderfully encouraging time, a really godly time of uniting hearts and minds and prayer.

But also a time when it's really easy to turn it into something that's about me. Have you ever found yourself in that kind of setting, waiting for your turn to pray?
And when you should be listening and giving your amen to the prayers of other people, actually what you're doing is thinking of the thing that you want to pray for, the words that you're going to use to make yourself sound really good, really impressive, theologically knowledgeable, whatever it might be.
And actually then if somebody else in the group prays for the thing you were going to pray for before it's your turn, suddenly you find yourself annoyed because that was my thing.
Now how am I going to look good in my prayers when they've taken all the things I was going to say? It sounds ridiculous when we call it out.

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[15:41] But I think I'm not the only person who does that, who turns a good thing. One of the best things, prayer, something which by nature should be about me communicating with my Father in heaven.

And I turn it into something about me wanting to impress people for a couple of seconds. That's one of the cautions here. There's also the caution against giving a better impression of our prayer life than is true.
And I find this to be a challenge all the time. How easy it is to say, I'll be praying for you. And how easy it is to then not pray.
When we say that and mean it, prayer is the best thing we can possibly do when we find people in need, when we find people facing hardship, needing encouragement, actually praying for them is the best thing we can do.
So why do we turn it into something, I mean Sunday by Sunday, where we say at church, I'll be praying for you brother or sister. I mean Sunday by Sunday goes by and we haven't prayed for them at all.
[16:52] How often do we want people who are listening to think, well there's a man, there's a woman of prayer. But that's not who we are when nobody's looking.

She's would say beware. Don't turn a good thing into a you thing. We need to beware of our performative prayers.
He also says in verse seven, when you pray, do not heap up empty freezes as the Gentiles do for they think they'll be heard for their many words. So you have the hypocrites on one side, the Pharisees, and on the other side you've got the pagans.
If the Pharisees were trusting in their performance in prayer, the pagans were trusting in the mechanics of their prayers. They seemed to think that they would win the favour of their gods by praying in a certain way.
Actually it's possible for us to slip into that mode of thinking too, to trust more in the mechanics of our prayer life and therefore to find confidence in whatever the latest good book on prayer that we read is to find more confidence in what Don Carson says about prayer or about what my minister says about prayer or about praying in the way that the elder of my church when I was growing up used to pray because he is more godly than me.
[18:12] And so if I pray like him, God will have to answer me and people around will think that I'm godly too. You can see how easy it is to turn prayer, a relational thing, into a mechanical and performative thing.

I remember being told once as a young Christian, really, really helpful advice. Here's where you could pray. You could pray acts, ACTS, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication.
That's good advice. Those are four good biblical categories in which we can pray. That's not good advice is when we hear that as you must pray in this way.
And if you do, then God will have to reward you because you've prayed in the right way. Now, that's simply not biblical.
And Jesus would say, beware of this too. And beware that if anyone is insisting that their way of prayer is the one right way of prayer or that they have the key formula to follow for a blessed and an abundant life, run a mile.
[19:24] Simply not true. That's the area of prayer. Jesus last turns his attention to the area of fasting.

Verse 16, and when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.
Life, hungering and thirsting for righteousness is a hallmark of those who are in God's kingdom. Then fasting makes perfect sense. Maybe some of us after the excesses of Christmas are thinking that fasting might be a good thing to do next week or for our New Year's resolution.
But Jesus isn't talking about five and two or any fatty diet like that. Fasting in essence is willingly going through a short period of physical hunger and allowing that felt physical need to lead you to express more your complete spiritual dependence on God.
So it's a deeply personal and intimate thing whereby I am committing to leaning more total dependence on Him, more into the arms of my Father in heaven and expressing my total dependence on Him.

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[20:42] And so we see where the hypocrites are going wrong with this because they're turning what should be a personal and intimate thing into a kind of ghastly comedy sketch that we might remember the Snickers adverts from a couple of years ago.

You're just not you when you're hungry. That's what the Pharisees long to hear. You're just not you today. What's up? Well, I'm fasting. Of course I'm miserable. I'm fasting. I'm so holy. Well, I'm going without food.
That's how much I'm devoted to our Lord. I think it's fair to say that we, for some reason in our church cultures today, we don't tend to practice fasting as much as we should or to talk about it as much as we probably should.
But when we do, it's really easy to get it wrong. I know this in my own Christian experience because I think back to my days as a student and when I was involved in the Christian Union, we got it in our heads that if everyone in the Christian Union was to fast and pray on an appointed day, then in our upcoming mission week, we would see 100 people converted off the back of the week.
And so cue the Friday before mission week, 80, 85 old Christians, and I mean old Christians running around campus, looking gloomy, looking grumpy, turning up in dining halls and halls of residence and saying, oh, I wish I could eat, but actually I'm fasting today.
[22:17] It's like we never read Matthew chapter six. Turning a really good thing into something which Jesus would not recognize at all, turning it into a me thing, turning it into a aren't I so holy, unimpressive thing?

Jesus would say beware, don't do that. Don't turn a good thing into a me thing. These are just three examples.
I trust that we all find them as challenging as I do, but here's the thing. There is good news in this passage, don't worry, we will get there. Before we do though, these three examples I take it are not exhaustive.
It's not that Jesus is saying, well here's three areas, but if you manage to be alright in these areas, then everything else is fair game. No, I take it that the three examples he uses are actually indicators of an attitude of the heart which goes much, much further and which can extend to pretty much anything in the Christian life.
I was thinking recently about an episode of The Office, the American version of what was originally a British sitcom. There's a famous episode of The Office called Scott's Tots.
[23:43] The premise of the show is that Michael Scott, he's the manager of this small paper company and there's a mockumentary being made about life of the company, Michael Scott desperately seeks the approval of other people.

That's basically the plot of every episode. What's Michael going to do this week to make people think he's cool? Well, you find out in this one episode that about 18 years earlier he'd gone to a nursery class and he'd made a promise that when these toddlers graduated high school, he would pay for them all to go to college, thinking that he would become a millionaire in the intervening years.
In the episode Scott's Tots, we find out that they've now graduated high school. He can't afford to tell these bright 18 and there's an excruciating scene where he has to go to their school and tell these bright 18-year-olds that none of them are getting the education they thought they'd been promised.
In a moment of complete lack of self-awareness, he turns to the camera and he says, you know, of all the empty promises I'd ever made, that one was by far the most generous.
We laugh and we think, well, that's ridiculous. How can you feel so smug about an empty promise? Well, I want us to reflect on our Christian lives and I want us to reflect on just how often we do the same, that we allow ourselves to feel smug, to feel self-satisfied, to feel self-righteous about a level of holiness which we are exuding but which isn't real.
[25:32] How dangerous and yet how easy it is to get to the end of a week of walking with Christ and to think, well, I got away with it this week because those people think I'm great at praying.

Those people think I'm really generous. Those people think I'm really holy. And we can turn basically any good deed, therefore, into something which is all about us looking good even if it's not true.
Maybe it's the extra few mugs that we wash up after the church fellowship. Maybe it's the busyness that we like to let people know that we feel, oh, I think I'm going to be at church every night this

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week. I'm doing so much to serve everyone.
Maybe it's the prayer request we share about somebody who we know is going through a hard time because we want people to know that we're involved in the situation and we want people to think that we are very caring and friendly people.
I know that in one church I went to, a church with lots of students, clear all the chairs away. That's good. After the evening service, we didn't own the building. We rented it. We needed to clear all the chairs away.
[26:47] That's good. But they had a competition to see who could sack the most chairs, who could carry the most at once, thinking, I think, that the girls would find it impressive. I'm assured that they didn't find that impressive.

I don't know what the equivalent will be in your church. I could think of some of the equivalents in my church. We could all do it. I'd be curious to hear afterwards where we think the danger areas may be for us in particular.
Now we need to hear that, of course, no good deed will ever be entirely perfect. We are sinful people. What's being asked of us here is not to make sure that we don't serve unless our motivations are 100% pure because we'll never get there.
If we took that away, then church would grind to a halt. But I do want us to see that much more often than we care to admit, we know the difference.
Much more often than we care to admit, we know, I know, when I'm doing something out of genuine love and devotion to the Lord, something for which I only seek his approval and his glory.
[28:03] And when I'm pretending to serve God, but actually I want all the glory for myself and I want people to think well of me.

I know the difference between those two things. And I therefore know how depressingly often I fall into the second category rather than the first.
So there's a word of caution for all of us. Jesus says beware. He would have us all reflect on where our motivations lie.
But the good news is that throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus is not teaching these things to chastise or to bribe or to guilt trip his people.
No, he's exposing sometimes painful things in order to show his followers how much better life in his kingdom is than what the world has to offer.
[29:19] Jesus says here in each case of the three examples he uses, they have received their reward in full. In each case, the reward that they receive is the fleetingly good opinion of others.

That's it. Something which comes and goes in three seconds. Wow, he's quite holy. That's their reward. It doesn't sound like a great reward, does it?
And we need to see therefore that if we ourselves keep chasing the good opinion of people around us, what will happen is that we will end up trapped. Even on our best days, the reward that we get disappears in seconds.
Now Jesus would rather we focus our attention, not on earthly reward of any kind, but on relating rightly to God our Father. And he promises us that as we do, we will know the freedom of true righteousness.
And that's our second heading this evening. As we move from a right word of challenge and caution to Jesus's kind pastoral purpose.
[30:29] A lot of the things we've been reflecting on so far, really what they stem from is fear. We are afraid what other people think of us.

And what we do in response to that fear is to try and perform. I don't want these people to think that I'm ungodly. I don't want these people to know how ungodly I really am or how insecure I am or how little I know about the Christian life.
And so I'm going to do lots of stuff to look more holy and impressive than I am. It's what the psychologists call imposter syndrome.
The nagging feeling that if anyone else knew what I was really like, they'd see that I don't belong here. Well friends, we need to hear the incredible assurance that Jesus gives that imposter syndrome need never, ever trouble us in the Christian life.
Jesus says, beware of these things and they don't need to define his people. Beware of them, but that's not you.

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[31:45] Don't be like the hypocrites because you're not. Just not who you are. Jesus says what does define his people is an incredible relationship which lies right at the heart of true righteousness.

So verses three and four, when you give, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you.
And verse six, when you pray, go into your room, pray to your father and your father who sees in secret will reward you. Verse eight, do not be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him.
Pray them like this, our father. Verse 17 and 18, when you fast, don't be seen by others but by your father and your father who sees in secret will reward you. Now doesn't this sound better?
Your father, your father, your father, your father, your father, your father. What Jesus says, what defines you, what defines us if our trust is in him is not the need to go through the religious motions but the relationship that we enjoy with the God of the universe, the God who made us.
[33:05] If you've joined us this evening as someone who's not a Christian, maybe as someone who's an insecure Christian, even if you've been coming to church for many, many years, someone who can't shake the feeling that actually that's what it is all about, the kind of religious performance route and looking good to impress other people, I want you to see how freeing it is when we realize that what's being presented before us is not an opportunity to come and put on over the top performances of holiness but instead to know and to be known by the God of the universe as intimately as a father knows and loves his children.

To those who know true righteousness, not the fake kind and not a righteousness which could ever be earned by any religious thing that we ever do but the true righteousness which is a gift lavished upon God's children, well the more conscious we become of that, the more we find that we don't need to be seen by other people because the more we find that there is only one whose opinion, whose prayers, whose affections we care about.
I don't know if anybody was seeing an nativity play over the last couple of weeks, I love an nativity play because the thing about toddlers doing an nativity play is that they don't care about the plot or about saying their lines or about standing in the right places, they just come out wearing their costumes and all they want to do is look out in the crowd and find the one person they know that matters.
Weaving at their parents, running up to them afterwards, did you see me dad, did you see me dad? It's quite instructive for us, they know instinctively there's only one audience member who matters and in the Christian life we need to follow that example.
And when we do we find that our giving becomes about being so satisfied in what a loving father has gifted to us that we are willing to share it quietly with others, to help them and to please him.
[35:36] We find that our praying becomes about relating rightly to a father who loves us and who knows our needs and wants to care for us.

We find that our fasting becomes about trusting so deeply that our loving father really does provide for every need that we want to lean not less but more into his care.
And by extension we find that all of our religious duties following Jesus is a life of religion, it is a life of Christian service, a Christian duty that is right but the more satisfied we are in our heavenly father the more we find that the performance of those duties is not about impressing other people around us but about bringing glory and pleasure to the father we know and love.
When we realise this it actually changes everything. It changes our approach I think to every single aspect of church life because suddenly we don't need to worry about how we're sounding when we pray at a prayer meeting, we don't need to worry about who sees us lifting how many chairs we're lifting that Sunday, we don't need to worry about any of that stuff, we don't need to worry about anything that's about people thinking well of us, we own delights in us, delights to hear our prayers, delights to see our fumbling and weak efforts of service.
It changes everything and the earthly reward for this way of doing the Christian life is non-existent.
[37:33] In fact the more satisfied we are in the relationship we have with our heavenly father and so the less we worry about what people think of us we may find that people do think we're silly, do think they didn't pray very articulately, do think I can't believe they asked that question in the Bible study are they a bit stupid, do think that we're a bit naive or should be acting in a certain way, it doesn't matter that's the key, it doesn't matter what other people think of us at all.

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What does matter is that our father sees us, that he cares and that he is the one who rewards us now with the satisfaction that can only be found in being secure in him and in the life to come with riches beyond imagination as our desire to serve him and to know him now is replaced by the heavenly reality of praising him forever.
That's the freedom of true righteousness, the righteousness which is ours by faith which is given to us from above through what Jesus has done, it frees us from a Christian life lived to please and to impress other people instead it releases us into living out a relationship now in which we will delight for all eternity.
This is hard so let me pray and ask for God's help as we draw to the close.

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