

Introduction

Several years ago, a man handed me \$250 and instructed me to give it to a person in our church who was struggling financially. He cautioned me, however, that **"Mum's the word."** He didn't want the recipient or anyone else for that matter to know he gave it.

That man was right. When it comes to practicing righteousness, **"Mum's the word."** Jesus teaches us just that in Matthew 6:1-18.

Practice Righteousness

Verse 1 reveals what this text is about. It's about **"practicing righteousness."** **"Practicing righteousness"** here refers to doing things that are commendable, valuable, or devout. I'm talking about things that, by their nature, are worthy of admiration and praise. Jesus gives us three examples of such things in verses 1-18.

The first, in verses 2-4, is giving money and property to the poor. According to Abraham Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs model, the most basic of all human needs are biological. They include food, drink, clothing, shelter, and warmth to name a few. That makes giving money and property to meet those kinds of need a fundamental act of love. I know a Christian who gave a needy neighbor of his a good used car. That's an act of charity that all of us would admire and praise.

The second example, in verses 5-15, is prayer, asking God to give or do something for Him, others, or us. Richard Foster claims that prayer is **"the main business of our lives"** and the case can be made that it is. That's why the church, from its inception, has viewed a devoted prayer life as a signal of spirituality. A member of my family arises at 5:30 and prays for two hours every morning before going to work. Most of us would conclude from he doing so that he's a godly man.

The third example, in verses 16-18, is fasting, abstaining in some significant way from food and drink for spiritual purposes. Because food occupies the pervasive place it does in human life, most people view

fasting as a particularly disciplined act. A Christian I know fasts three days a week, consuming only fluids on those three days. Most of us would regard him as spiritually advanced for doing so.

Those three examples Jesus gives demonstrate what it means to practice righteousness. It means to do things that are commendable, valuable, or devout – things that are worthy of admiration and praise.

Now, Jesus makes an astute observation about practicing righteousness. It's that we can practice it in one of two ways.

Before Men

The first way, according to verse 1, is **“before men to be noticed by them.”**

Verses 2, 5, and 16 illustrate what that means. In verse 2, people blow a trumpet so others will know they give money to the poor. In verse 5, they pray in public so others will know they pray. And finally in verse 16, they purposely look downcast and weak so others will know they fast. Those acts illustrate practicing righteousness **“before men to be noticed by them.”**

We use a colorful idiom to express that. People toot their own horns. They make themselves their own public relations department. They advertise the commendable, valuable, or devout things they do so that others will know they do them.

A Christian physician, for instance, did a commendable thing. He provided free medical services to laid off steel workers back in the 70's and 80's. How do I know he did? It's because he told me. And I've heard him, on separate occasions, tell at least 10 others as well.

A family member of mine did a devout thing. He went on a 40-day fast. How do I and almost every other member of my family know he did? It's because he, on separate occasions, told us.

That then is the first way we can practice righteousness, **“before men to be noticed by them.”** We toot our own horns. We do what we do in a way that others will know. Or if we can't do that, we just go

ahead and tell them we do or did it.

In Secret

We can practice righteousness in a second way, **“in secret.”** Those are the key words in this text. In verse 4, Jesus tells us how to give to the poor, **“in secret.”** In verse 6, how to pray, **“in secret.”** And in verse 18, how to fast, **“In secret.”** **“Mum’s the word”**, in other words, when it comes to practicing righteousness.

Don’t misunderstand what that means. When my wife was growing up, her Pioneer Club and Sunday school teachers quoted Jesus’ statement in verses 4, 6, and 18, **“And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”** They then taught her that if she did something, even in secret, but people found out about it, she lost God’s reward. You can see that her teachers mistakenly defined **“in secret”** as an outer consequence. No one knows but God.

But that isn’t what it means in this text. **“In secret”** has to do with intention not consequence. We see that in verse 3. Jesus says here that when we give to the poor, we shouldn’t let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. I’d explain that by way of analogy.

When I type, I don’t have to think about where to place my hands or how to move them. As a result of sheer repetition over the years, each hand naturally “knows”, so to speak, where to go and how to move without me being conscious of that. Each does its own thing independently of the other. In that sense, my left hand doesn’t know what my right hand is doing – or vice versa. It did when I first started typing but it doesn’t now.

That explains, by way of analogy, what Jesus is saying in verse 3. Become the kind of person who just naturally gives, prays, fasts, and so on. Possess an inner condition from which those things automatically flow, with little or no conscious thought on our part.

When we possess that, we don’t give, pray, fast, and so on in order to be seen by others. We do those things instead because it’s our nature

to do them. We don't consider whether others notice them or not. Whether others notice them or not isn't a factor for us and I mean *at all*. That's what "**in secret**" means.

The Rewards

Those then are the two ways we can practice righteousness and each, as Jesus makes clear, has its own reward.

The reward of practicing righteousness before men is found in verse 2. It's to "**be honored by men.**" To be honored by men means that people admire and praise us. They think and speak highly of us.

The truth is that's what the vast majority of people desperately want in life. They want others to recognize and esteem them, which is why they practice their righteousness before men in the first place.

I don't know about you but I've been there and done that. I've always had a passion for God's written word, the Bible. So much so that by the time I was a senior in high school, my Bible was filled with underlined passages and handwritten notes. And you know what? I displayed that it was, when I opened it in church, for instance. I'd position it so that others would see how marked up it was. I wanted them to admire and praise me for that, which they did.

But notice the haunting statement in verses 2, 5, and 16, "**They have their reward in full.**" When you and I practice righteousness *in order to* be seen by others, we'll likely get their admiration and praise. But as Jesus points out here, that's all we get - nothing more.

But notice, in contrast, what the reward for practicing righteousness in secret is. Verses 4, 6, and 18 tell us, "**your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.**" That inspiring statement teaches us three things. God *knows*, *admires*, and *rewards* literally every act of righteousness we do in secret, no matter how big or small.

The dynamics of that are spectacular. When we practice righteousness in secret we're engaging something that is also secret – God and His kingdom. God let's loose His presence and the powers of His

kingdom inside us and outside us. Inside us, they enrich our mind, heart, and soul so that we become continually more functional. Outside us, they enhance our efforts so that the effects of those efforts are more than we ourselves can achieve.

In January one year, a pastor began fasting secretly every Saturday into Sunday morning when he preached. The result was that God gave him a power in his preaching that he had never had before. One day, the lady who ran the church's tape ministry told him that her order for sermon tapes had doubled since January. **"I can't explain it,"** she then said, **"But whatever it is, keep it up."**

That pastor knows it by experience. What Jesus says is true. When we practice our righteousness **"in secret,"** our God who sees in secret will reward us.

How to Practice Righteousness

So, let's practice our righteousness in secret.

Doing that though is a challenge. That's because the inner condition of secrecy I defined earlier isn't a natural state. It's a supernatural state. It's one that only the Holy Spirit can create in us. He can create it in us and will, if we do three things.

First, get people's admiration and praise in perspective. Examine them realistically. We'll recognize two things if we do.

#1 - Admiration and praise are short-lived. Think about it. People have lives of their own. They have their own goals to pursue and problems to solve. How much time do you suppose they spend during a typical day thinking about our good qualities or deeds. It's very little, if any at all.

#2 - Admiration and praise are unaffecting. The great 15th century monk, Thomas a Kempis, said it well, **"Thou are not the holier though thou be praised nor the more vile though thou be blamed or dispraised."** He was absolutely right. We are what we are irrespective of how much or little admiration and praise we get.

Recognizing those two things is transforming. It makes us grasp the vanity, the valuelessness, of admiration and praise, which in turn diminishes our craving for them.

We cooperate with the Holy Spirit by doing a second thing, practice secrecy. Secrecy is one of the spiritual disciplines that Christians have been practicing for centuries. In it, we place our public relations department completely in the hands of God. We purposely abstain from making our good qualities or good deeds known. We may even take steps to prevent them from being known, if it's appropriate and doesn't involve deceit. Opportunities to do both of those things arise all the time and we embrace them when they do.

An elder at Barberton Friends Church came late to an Administrative Council meeting. He had oil and grease all over him and we asked him what happened. He replied that he had been working on a car and changed the subject. We assumed that it was his car but I found out from his wife later that it wasn't. He had passed by a broken down car on his way to the meeting and stopped to help. He spent almost an hour in 20-degree temperatures getting it to run. You can see he purposely prevented his good deed from being known. He practiced secrecy.

The third thing we do to cooperate with the Holy Spirit is to pray. We persistently ask Him to remove our craving to be noticed by men and to replace it with the craving to be noticed by God and God alone.

If we're faithful in our part, doing those three things, the Holy Spirit will be faithful in His part, creating the condition of secrecy in us.

Conclusion

That then is the message of Jesus in Matthew 6:1-18. The word "mum" refers to the humming sound made with a closed mouth. Shakespeare popularized it in his play *Henry VI, Part 2*, in 1592. A character named Hume declares, "**Seal up your lips and give no words but mum.**" That's often sound advice, especially when it comes to practicing righteousness. When it comes to that, mum's the word.