

Main Idea: In Matthew 6:14-18, Jesus teaches us about two evidences of righteousness which are important for us if we are to please God: forgiving and fasting.

I. Our forgiveness is to be seen (14-15).

A. We learn about vertical forgiveness.

1. We must receive it.
2. We must imitate the One who gives it to us.

B. We learn about horizontal forgiveness.

1. We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us.
2. If we fail to forgive, we will fail to receive forgiveness.

II. Our fasting is not to be seen (16-18).

A. Jesus warns against the abuse of fasting (16).

B. Jesus teaches the proper use of fasting (17-18).

1. Don't fast so others see it.
2. Fast so your unseen Father sees it.
3. Fast to show your Father how much you need Him.

Take Inventory: Is there evidence of grace in my life?

1. Is it obvious to others that I forgive?
2. Is it not so obvious to others that I fast?

This morning we have the privilege of returning to Jesus' sermon on the mount. This is Jesus our King speaking to us about how we are to live for His fame. This is Kingdom Living 101. Today our Savior is going to teach us about two often-neglected evidences of true righteousness.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:14-18

How can you tell if someone is truly a child of God? Is it what they say? No, the Bible makes it clear that a person can claim to be something that they aren't. So, is it their actions? Well, yes, actions are important, but no, actions don't tell the whole story, for a person can do right things, but from an unrighteous heart.

We have a problem today, and it's been around the church for a long time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it *cheap grace*. “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”²

I've been listening to an audio book, *The Cost of Cheap Grace*, and the authors, Bill Hull & Brandon Cook, have this to say: “At the most basic level, a Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ. And yet many Christians today couldn't tell you what a disciple of Jesus Christ is, or would even think of themselves as disciples. And yet in the Great Commission, Jesus specifically called us to make disciples. Everything else is secondary.”³

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the series preached at WBC in 1988.

² From *The Cost of Discipleship*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/423945-cheap-grace-means-grace-sold-on-the-market-like-cheapjacks>

³ *The Cost of Cheap Grace*, by Bill Hull & Brandon Cook; quote taken from promotional on Amazon

This is serious, to separate “child of God” from “disciple of Jesus,” as if the latter is optional. Others have offered similar warnings:⁴

-A. W. Pink, “The nature of Christ’s salvation is woefully misrepresented by the present-day evangelist. He announces a Savior from hell rather than a Savior from sin. And that is why so many are fatally deceived, for there are multitudes who wish to escape the Lake of Fire who have no desire to be delivered from their carnality and worldliness.”

-J. C. Ryle, “Nothing, in fact, has done more harm to Christianity than the practice of filling the ranks of Christ’s army with every volunteer who is willing to make a little profession, and talk fluently of his experience. It has been painfully forgotten that numbers alone do not make strength, and that there may be a great quantity of mere outward religion, while there is very little real grace. Let us all remember this. Let us keep back nothing from young professors and inquirers after Christ. Let us not enlist them on false pretenses. Let us tell them plainly that there is a crown of glory at the end. But let us tell them no less plainly, that there is a daily cross in the way.” [Matthew Commentary, Matthew 8:16-27]

-David Wells, “We have turned to a God that we can use rather than a God we must obey; we have turned to a God who will fulfill our needs rather than to a God before whom we must surrender our rights to ourselves. He is a God for us and for our satisfaction, and we have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well. And so we transform the God of mercy into a God who is at our mercy. We imagine that He is benign, that He will acquiesce as we toy with His reality and co-opt Him in the promotion of our ventures and careers.” [God in the Wasteland, Eerdmans, www.eerdmans.com, 1994, p. 114]

-Jerry Bridges, “We abuse grace when, after sinning, we dwell on the compassion and mercy of God to the exclusion of His holiness and hatred of sin.” [from *The Pursuit of Holiness*, p. 65]

Let me clarify something. All of us are sinners, and our good deeds do nothing to remove our sin problem. God must remove our sins, and He does so, He says, by His grace alone, through faith in His Son and His atoning sacrifice on the cross alone.

But faith, when it is genuine, is never alone. When Jesus enters a person’s life, He begins to transform that person inside out. There is evidence of His presence. What kind of evidence? Many kinds. Jesus Himself identified these evidences in His sermon on the mount, and this morning He’s going to talk to us about two, very compelling evidences.

I’ve entitled today’s message, “*Evidences of Righteousness: Forgiving and Fasting.*” I could have called it, “*Evidences of Grace: Forgiving and Fasting,*” for true righteousness comes from the experience of divine, saving grace. Or, the fuller title might be, “*Evidences of Grace and Righteousness That Are Often Neglected: Forgiving So That Others Can See It, and Fasting So They Can’t.*”

⁴ The following quotes taken from <https://gracequotes.org/topic/grace-cheap/>

So, one of the evidences of grace is something people can see, in fact, *must* see or grace is being misused, and that's forgiving. Truly saved people treat others the way they've been treated. They forgive. And it's obvious they forgive. People can see it.

But there's another evidence people can't see. Only God sees this one. It's called fasting. In fact, if we do this evidence of grace in order to be seen by people, it's another indication that grace is being misused.

So here's where we're going this morning. Two points from Jesus, two evidences of grace-produced righteousness. First, forgiveness that is seen. Second, fasting that isn't.

I. Our forgiveness is to be seen (14-15).

We've obviously jumped right into the middle of Jesus' sermon, so we need some context. He's talking to His disciples, with crowds listening in (5:1-2), and He's just given the warning, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20)."

So, righteousness matters. The righteousness of the Pharisees will take a person to hell, says Jesus. God's standard is higher. In fact, it's perfection (5:48), and we obviously have missed that standard.

Yet that's why Jesus came. Through His perfect life, He achieved the divine standard, and through His death on the cross, He paid sin's penalty, and now, as the risen Savior who has conquered death, He offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who repent and put their total trust in Him.

Yet He has more to say. In Matthew 6, Jesus makes it clear that when it comes to righteousness, motives matter. He gives a basic warning in verse 1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people to be seen by them." And then in the verses that follow, He applies this warning to three specific acts of piety.

First, to alms-giving (2-4). Then to prayer (5-15). And then to fasting (16-18). These three acts of righteousness put faith into practice in three directions: towards our fellow mankind (alms-giving); towards God (prayer), and towards ourselves (fasting).

These are important activities. *Giving. Praying. Fasting.* Jesus assumes His disciples will do these activities. He says "when", not "if" in verses 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 16, 17. To *not* do so is evidence of cheap grace rather than the saving grace He offers.

When He saves, it shows. People can see it. And there's one particular demonstration of His grace they must see in us.

Jesus says we are to pray these words in verse 12, "Forgive us our debts." So while we are still sinners like everyone else in the world, here's where we are different, by grace. We admit our sin, and ask God for forgiveness.

But how can you tell if this prayer for forgiveness isn't just another form of cheap grace? Here's how, says Jesus. Don't stop with, "Forgive us our debts." Say something else. What?

"Forgive us our debts, *as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" So by grace, we seek forgiveness, and people see it. And enabled by grace, we share forgiveness, and people see that too. We choose to give people who sin against us the very same thing we're asking our Father to give us when we sin against Him. *Forgiveness.*

But there's more. While Jesus teaches us to pray six petitions in what we call the Lord's prayer, there's one that is so important, perhaps so challenging, that Jesus elaborates on it in His very next words.

Verses 14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

We learn about two directions of forgiveness. First...

A. We learn about vertical forgiveness. I'm calling it vertical forgiveness because it comes from God, top down. "If you forgive others their trespasses, *your heavenly Father will also forgive you*, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, *neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*"

Notice a couple of realities regarding vertical forgiveness.

1. *We must receive it.* We don't earn it, for sure. We simply ask our Father for it. Again, as in the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our debts." And that's what He does. On the basis of His grace, because of what His Son has accomplished as our substitute, He forgives us our debts.

Allow that to sink in for a moment. God forgives us, and all we did was ask? Try that on your boss this week! "Um, excuse me sir. I've been falsifying my time card for six months now, and I feel terrible about it. Would you forgive me?"

Most of us don't appreciate as we ought the forgiveness God offers to us. Perhaps one reason is because we have a deficient view of sin. We know the guy dealing crack is a sinner, and the inmate on J-block at the prison. But we're not like those guys, are we? We've lived respectable, decent lives, haven't we?

What does God think? This might help us. He uses five Greek words in the New Testament to spell out what sin is.

1. *hamartia*—this is the most common word. It means, "to miss the mark; to miss the target." So sin is the failure to be what we might have been and could have been and should have been. We are all sinners because we have all failed to be all that God wanted us to be. We could all be better husbands, wives, sons and daughters, employers and employees.

2. *parabasis*—this means "to step across." Sin is stepping across the line which is drawn between right and wrong. God set the standard. He Himself is the standard. "Be holy for I am holy." His Word records the standard. And we are guilty of sin when in our lives we cross the line He has established. We say that cutting word to prove our point. We lust. We covet.

3. *paraptoma* (used in 6:14)—it means "to slip across" (like slipping on a piece of ice). It is not quite so deliberate as parabasis. Like when we say, "You know, I don't know where that came from. Those words just slipped out." Or, "Man, I just slipped up and got in trouble." Yes, we all do. And that is sin in the sight of a holy God.

4. *anomia*—which means "lawlessness." This is when we see God's standard in black and white, yet think we know better. Love God, and love neighbor. This is the essence of God's law. But we go *against law*, against *His* law. Like the person who says, "I can't stay in this marriage any longer. I know what the Bible says, but I'm through." That's anomia.

5. *opheilema* (used in 6:12)—it means a "debt, a failure to pay what is due." The truth is, we owe God. We owe Him a life of joyful obedience. He is our

Maker and Provider. But every day we ignore Him, or slight Him, or fail to live for his glory, we add to our indebtedness.

This is what sin is, and this is our problem, beloved. We have missed God's mark. We have stepped across God's line. We have slipped up. We have broken His law. We've indebted ourselves to Him by our transgression. Who has done this? We all have. We are all sinners. In the words of Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way."

But praise God, there's hope! And the rest of the verse explains why. "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

This is why we can pray, "Forgive us our debts," and know He will. Because He has already laid on His Son the iniquity of us all. So when receive His Son, we receive full pardon.

Have you? It's my privilege to announce to you, as a spokesman for the Living God, that though your sins are as scarlet, you may become white as snow. He will forgive you, if you will approach Him through His Son, Jesus, and simply ask.

But this brings us to a second reality regarding vertical forgiveness. First, we must receive it.

2. *We must imitate the One who gives it to us.* Notice again verses 14-15, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

So forgiveness is a family matter. We ask our Father to forgive us, and He does, graciously, mercifully, all for His Son's sake. And then our Father says, now be like Me. I wiped your slate clean, when you asked. Now do that with your brother, when he asks.

This brings us to the second direction of forgiveness.

B. We learn about horizontal forgiveness. This is the arena in which we let people see our righteousness. They can't miss it.

1. *We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us.* The vertical leads to the horizontal. Or to put it another way, when we pray, "Father, forgive us our debts," we really mean what we say. *Our* debts. We have our debts in mine when we ask God for forgiveness, all of our debts. Yours as well as mine.

"Father, I'm a sinner. Please forgive my debts. And my brother's too. He needs what I need. And by Your grace, I'll do what You. I'll forgive Him, the same way You forgave Me. By Your grace. For Jesus' sake."

This is one of the most compelling arguments for Christianity. We forgive those who wrong us. The world can't do this. Frankly, we can't do this in our own strength. But we have a Savior who now lives in us, and enables us to do impossible things, like forgive our enemies.

But what is we don't? Jesus is clear.

2. *If we fail to forgive, we will fail to receive forgiveness.* "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Wait a minute. Is God's forgiveness conditional? The answer is, *yes*. If you call out to God right now and say, "Oh God, I've sinned against You, but I'm basically a good person, and I've done a lot of good things too that earn me the right to ask you this question. Will You forgive me?"

If you ask for His forgiveness on the basis of your merit, He will not forgive you. You must ask on the basis of His mercy. Period.

So why do we struggle to forgive? It's because the other person hurt us, or hurt someone we love, right? We don't think they deserve for us to let it go. We want them to remain indebted to us.

And Jesus says, if we approach God with that attitude in our hearts, we will not receive what we need.

Jesus' point is that forgiveness can't be a one-way process. It brings responsibility. It must be passed on. To ask for God to forgive us, and then to not be willing to forgive another person, is hypocrisy.

Forgiveness is indispensable for you if you're a disciple of Christ. But what is forgiveness? Let's notice how the word translated "forgive" is translated in other verses:

5:24--Leave your gift before the altar. (forgiveness involves leaving)

5:40--Let him have your cloak also (forgiveness involves giving)

8:22--Let the dead bury their dead (forgiveness involves letting go)

Forgiving is not forgetting. If we say, "I could never forgive. . . because I can't forget what he did to me. . .", we need to realize that forgiveness is a CHOICE. It's a choice we must make by God's help not to hold it against that person any longer. When I choose to forgive a person, I am choosing to "let go" of the matter, to "leave" the matter with God. Forgiveness is a choice.

Perhaps a biblical illustration will help. There's a powerful one in Matthew 18:21-35. Peter asked Jesus a question (21), "How many times should I forgive my brother?" The answer, "70 x 7." In other words, there's no limit to Christian forgiveness. And then Jesus told a parable about a king and his servant (23-34).

Then He shares the parable of the servant (24) who owed 10,000 talents (in contemporary terms: from 12 million to over a billion dollars!). Slavery is inevitable. The servant begs for time, and promises to pay back everything (an impossibility!). The king has mercy, and cancels the indebtedness!

Then we meet another servant (28) who owed 100 denarii (represented 100 days wages for a common working man. The amount is trivial compared to the amount forgiven. The servant's attitude is appalling. He was forgiven of a debt he could not pay, but he was unwilling to forgive a fellow servant who owed him.

The point of the illustration is clear. If God has forgiven us of the debt we owed Him, how can we not forgive others the debts they owe us?! We must choose to let go of the matter, and leave it with God. But if we refuse to forgive others, Jesus tells us we have no right to expect God to forgive us, because we clearly aren't thinking about forgiveness. We see it as a matter of merit, rather than mercy.

Forgiveness is not easy, but neither is it optional for us. Failure to forgive has severe consequences. Let's consider two.

First, failure to forgive affects our effectiveness as Christians. Suppose someone said to you, "I go to church all the time. I read my Bible. I pray. I give my money to the Lord. I listen to podcasts. I read good Christian books. But I don't have the joy that I ought to have. I feel as if my life isn't all that it could be. What should I do?"

We might have an inclination to tell that person to pray MORE, read the Bible MORE, or to take a class on spiritual growth. Perhaps there's another more basic reason the joy is missing: Maybe there's a need for forgiveness. Maybe the person is failing to

confess sin to the Lord: "I admit I'm a sinner. Here are the sins. Purify me." Or maybe the person is failing to forgive others.

J. Oswald Sanders said, "Jesus is here stating a principle in God's dealing with His children. He deals with us as we deal with others. He measures us by the yardstick we use on others. The prayer is not 'Forgive us because we forgive others,' but 'Forgive us even as we have forgiven others.'"

Second, the failure to forgive affects our effectiveness as a church. If we're not right on the inside (if we're not willing to forgive one another), we'll never make the impact we should on the outside. There are some 30,000 people within a 15 minute drive of WBC who have no church affiliation, and no commitment to Jesus Christ. The potential is great. What gets their attention? Here's something. When they see this. Our forgiving is to be seen.

II. Our fasting is not to be seen (16-18).

Verses 16-18 "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.¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Remember, in Matthew 6 Jesus is giving us three illustrations of righteous living (giving to the needy; prayer; fasting). These three illustrations cover the bases of our Christian lives (alms--what I do with others; prayer--what I do with God; fasting--what I do with myself). And Jesus reminds us that in whatever we do as His disciples, motive is as important as action.

Verse 16 begins, "And when you fast." In a land where baseball, apple pie, and the hot dog are tradition, and where our landscapes are dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches, and where an assortment of pizza temples are waiting for our orders so their swift chariots can deliver, and where chocolate is fast becoming part of our balanced diet, FASTING seems out of place.

Why does fasting sound so foreign to us as Christians? Three reasons.

1. Our deficient view of God (we haven't grasped how dependent we are on God, and how much we need Him)
2. Our deficient view of grace
3. Our deficient view of the gospel (Our American culture is bombarded with the "health and wealth" gospel--"Believe in God and you'll make more money, have a bigger house, a better business, and you'll never be sick.")

A. Jesus warns against the abuse of fasting (16). Verse 16 (AV), "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites. . ."

What is fasting? It is the abstention from food for a period of time (eg. Breakfast means "break the fast" of the 8 hours of abstaining from food). But it's more than merely not eating. When a person fasts, he or she abstains from food for the sake of a special purpose (eg--prayer, meditation, seeking God for particular reason).

Who are the hypocrites? Remember Matthew 5:20. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus day had the letter of the law, but they missed the spirit of the law. They were impressive on the outside, but on the inside their hearts were rotten. Such was the case in their practice of fasting:

They fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday. But guess what else happened on Monday and Thursday? These were the market days! Big crowds. Lots of people. Some took deliberate steps to let the crowds know they were fasting: with sad countenance; disfiguring their faces (lit. "make invisible"; translated "corrupt" in vv 19, 20. To say that they disfigured their faces means that they took steps to make themselves unrecognizable, by either covering their heads, or by smearing their heads with ashes and dirt!)

And why did they do this? Verse 16--"that they may appear to men to fast". They wanted to draw attention to themselves. Their motive for fasting was to impress people with their spirituality. Someone has observed, "They made themselves unsightly to make a sight of themselves!"

And do you know what? They succeeded. They did receive the attention and applause of men. But as in the case of almsgiving and praying, that's all the Pharisees would receive for their Religious Showmanship! Notice what Jesus said: "they have their reward." They wanted man's praise, and they got it. But they forfeited God's praise.

What kinds of things do we do to prove to others we are "spiritual"? Do we ever draw attention to our devotional life ("I haven't missed having my QT in 3 months!"). Or our church attendance, our opportunities to witness, etc? How about decorating our homes or offices at work to show how spiritual we are (place the big Bible out on display in our homes, at work, etc)

There are those of you in this room today who have much depth in your walk with God. I respect you, and so do others who know you. You know what it means to walk with God, talk with God, feast in His Word, and even fast. I don't know this because you told me with words, for you didn't need to. By His grace, it's apparent from your life!

B. Jesus teaches the proper use of fasting (17-18). So fasting was abused. But that's no reason fasting should not be used by us. In fact, God's people of all ages have practiced fasting:

--OT (Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel)

--NT (Anna, Paul, early church)

--Church History (Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, John Wesley, Jonathan Whitefield)

**Jesus Himself fasted (Mt 4:2)

Jesus told His disciples how to fast in the Sermon on the Mount. Verse 17--"But thou, WHEN thou fastest. . ." He assumed they would fast when He was gone (Matthew 9:15). Fasting is to be a part of Kingdom Living for us if we're a disciple of Christ. But when we fast, notice the procedure we are to follow. Jesus gives His followers three guidelines...

1. *Don't fast so others see it.*
2. *Fast so your unseen Father sees it.*
3. *Fast to show your Father how much you need Him.*

He says to anoint the head and wash the face. Washing and anointing were normal steps of hygiene and body care in Jesus' day. He's not telling us to go overboard when we fast ("Put on a three piece suit, with your Calvin Klein cologne!"). That would only draw attention to ourselves (the same problem the Pharisees had). To paraphrase Jesus' instructions: "When you fast, look normal."

Why are we to take these precautions when we fast? Jesus tells us in v 18, "that

thou appear not to men. . . but to thy Father." We are not to fast to advertise ourselves, but to discipline ourselves. Fasting is to be a demonstration of our humility and dependence upon our God. And our God loves "secret" actions which take place in "secret" places. He is impressed by the unimpressive!

Question: Why should we fast?

Dietrick Bonhoeffer, "How is it possible to live the life of faith when we grow weary of prayer, when we lose our taste for the reading of the Bible, and when sleep, food, and sensuality deprive us of the joy of communion with God?"

Biblical fasting is not the same thing as moderation in eating (although that is good). Nor is it simply skipping meals for health reasons. No, biblical fasting is motivated by spiritual concerns. Fasting opens the door for God's blessing on our lives. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Fasting is helpful before key decisions in our lives. In Acts 13:1-3, the early church fasted and prayed before they sent out their first missionaries (Paul and Barnabas). In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed before appointing leadership in local churches.

Fasting helps us remember how much we need God. In our materialistic society where materialism and hedonism are in, we need to be reminded of God's truth that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Jesus has talked to us in straight terms today about two very important evidences of righteousness, and of the grace of God that makes this righteousness possible. One is to be seen by all, forgiving. The other is to be seen by an audience of One, fasting. Both are evidences that we are not settling for cheap grace.

Take Inventory: Is there evidence of grace in my life?

- 1. Is it obvious to others that I forgive?*
- 2. Is it not so obvious to others that I fast?*

Closing Hymn: #201 "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" (all four verses)