

The Life With God

by Harris Franklin Rall

Jesus' concept of religion is fellowship with God in the service of men, living as a son with the Father and a brother with men, and is characterized by humility, desire, decision, devotion, trust, and prayer.

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-6, Mark 10:15, Mark 11:22, Luke 11:5

Topics: "Inner Righteousness", "Fellowship With God"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches about Jesus' conception of religion, emphasizing fellowship with God in the service of men. Jesus taught a righteousness that was inner, social, and ethical, focusing on the heart rather than outward actions. He highlighted the importance of sonship, humility, and a whole-hearted surrender to God, demanding a life of singleness and sincerity. Jesus warned against the perils of wealth and the love or fear of the world, stressing trust in God alone. He encouraged prayer as a natural expression of trust, teaching the disciples the power of faith and fellowship in prayer.

Transcript

Jesus' conception of religion may perhaps best be stated in the phrase, fellowship with God in the service of men; to live first as a son with the Father, second as a brother with men.

The central idea of religion for the Jews of Jesus' day was righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount Matthew has brought together the teachings of Jesus in which his idea of righteousness is set forth in contrast with that of the Pharisees, who were the acknowledged leaders of the people. The life with God that Jesus taught demanded righteousness also, but it is something far different from the keeping of rules which the Pharisees taught, (1) It was an inner righteousness; not many laws but one spirit. They had criticized him for his practice (Luke 15:2); he declared that it was simply a higher righteousness for which he stood (Matt 5:20). Outward deeds may do for a servant, but the son must have an inner spirit like his father. The angry spirit is a sin as truly as the deed of murder. The lustful glance is as truly wrong as adultery. It is not enough to avoid profanity; there must be a simple sincerity back of our speech. The mere rule of give as you get, both good and evil, will not suffice; there must be an inner spirit of good will such as our Father shows to all men (Matt 5:21-48). Long before this, Jeremiah had spoken of the day when the law was to be no more an outward rule but an inner spirit (Jer 31:31-34), and the psalmist had prayed for inner purity (Psa 51:10). Such teaching Jesus was completing, or "fulfilling" (Matt 5:17). (2) It was a social righteousness; men were to show it in serving their brethren. That was to be the test in the judgment (Matt 25:40). The way to show love to God was by showing it to men: "Whosoever shall receive one of such little

children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever receiveth me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me" (Mark 9:37). To be reconciled to one's brother was more important than bringing a gift to the altar (Matt 5:21-24). (3) It was an ethical righteousness. Mere religious rules and ceremonies did not count. Jesus protested against the Pharisees that they were defeating morality by their very rules (Matt 7:1-13). It was the heart of a man that counted, not the ritual (Mark 7:14-23). (4) This righteousness in one word meant sonship, "that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:45). Higher than that it is not possible to go: "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). In a mere religion of law such a demand would be impossible. But Jesus' religion is one of grace, and not simply of demand. God does not ask men to become sons before he will receive them. Sonship is a gift, not simply a task. That is the meaning of forgiveness: God receives men as sons, though they are sinners, that by his help they may live as sons.

It is the term "sonship," not "righteousness," that gives us the best description of Jesus' idea of religion and the life with God. The first characteristic of this religion of sonship is the spirit of humility and desire. That follows from its very nature as God's gracious gift to us. God's first need is to find in us an openness and a longing for what he has to give. That is the meaning of his word about the child: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein" (Mark 10:15). "Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). It is the same spirit that he praises in the Beatitudes. The Kingdom is God's gift, but men must have the humble spirit and the earnest desire in order to receive it. And so his beatitude is for the poor in spirit, for those that mourn, for the meek, for those that hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matt 5:3-9). It was this spirit that he found wanting in the Pharisees and in so many others. They were too well satisfied with themselves (Luke 18:11); for Jesus there is a divinity in discontent. That is the meaning of the parable of the great supper. It was called forth by a pious ejaculation on the part of some man who was at the supper table with Jesus: "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." In reply, Jesus tells the story of those that refused the great invitation (Luke 14:15-24). As a matter of fact, he says, when the great invitation comes men refuse it. That, as we have seen, was what stirred him with joy in his contact with so many sinners: these were humble and eager, were pressing into the kingdom of God, were even taking it in their eagerness by storm (Matt 21:31; II. 12).

This leads to the second quality that Jesus demands--a certain decision of character, a whole-hearted surrender of life. Religion was no incident with him; it meant a man's whole life. What God gives is everything; he demands everything in return. Jesus has a fine impatience with the superficial life: it is not saying, "Lord, Lord," that counts, but doing the will of his Father (Matt 7:21). He has as little place for the divided life: "No man can serve two masters." Such a life means anxiety, and anxiety means wickedness (Matt 6:24, 25). Jesus' own life was all of one piece. It had the strength that comes with a great and dominant purpose. The double life, he saw, meant not only weakness but darkness. Moral vision comes with singleness and sincerity of soul. "If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness" (Matt 6:22, 23). The stern demands that Jesus makes do not mean narrowness or asceticism, but simply spiritual vision and moral earnestness. "Narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life" (Matt 7:13, 14). "He that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:34-39). The foundation of a strong life is not a passing impulse but a clear decision that counts the cost. The man who builds or the king who makes war ought to look to the end and not simply the beginning. A man must deliberately decide that if necessary he will sacrifice the closest tie or give up life itself. That is what Jesus means by the startling word, "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren,

and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:25-33), This is not asceticism. Asceticism is the denial of life. Jesus' attitude toward life is everywhere affirmative. Cut off thy right hand, he says, pluck out the right eye, but make sure of life (Mark 9:43-48).

These demands of Jesus raise the question as to his attitude toward the world in general and toward riches in particular. As to the world of nature, Jesus' teaching as we have noted it so far shows his simple pleasure in birds and flowers and growing grain and all the life about him. It was his Father's house, and it spoke to him of his Father's wisdom and goodness. There is no dualism here. But his clear vision showed him that all about him were men who were losing their life because they saw and loved only the world of things. No more searching words are found in his teaching than those that warn of the peril of riches. But it is not hatred of the world that sounds in them, only the love of men. Three stories bring us this lesson, each in some special aspect. The first shows us how wealth blinds a man to the real meaning and the real riches of life. It is the story of the rich farmer joining field to field and adding barn to barn, as though that were the end of life. Jesus writes his epitaph in two words: "thou fool" (Luke 12:13-21). The second shows how wealth dulls a man's ears to any spiritual appeal and hardens his heart toward his fellows. Dives feasts and has no thought for Lazarus. Dives thinks that his brothers would repent if Lazarus were sent back to earth, but Abraham points out that his brothers have what he had on earth, Moses and the prophets (Luke 16:19-31). Riches tend to make a man self-sufficient and proud. The rich man is used to having men defer to his judgment and bow to his will. He is usually far removed from that humility and sense of need which Jesus set forth. It is hard for such a man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The third is the story of the rich young ruler. Here, at least, is a man of wealth and station who seems wholly in earnest: "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Mark says that he ran to meet Jesus and knelt before him. But he cannot meet the final test. Jesus finds his point of weakness. He would fain have eternal life, but there is one thing that he rates still higher. And so he turns away (Mark 10:17-27). A man's wealth so easily becomes his master, and "No man can serve two masters.... Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

The third principle of the life of sonship is trust. If the love of the world is wrong, as we have just seen, so also is the fear of the world. Jesus puts them side by side (Matt 6:19-34). Both of them are paganism, putting something else up as a god, or as a power to stand beside God. For Jesus God stood not only first but alone. When a man really loved God everything else was given to him with that (Matt 6:33). When a man really feared God, there was nothing else of which to be afraid. Anxiety, therefore, was a sin. In beautiful pictures Jesus shows us the God who cares for all the world, even the little worthless sparrow. His own life showed the strength and peace which came from such a trust, as he moved on sure of God and fearless of all else (Luke 13:31, 32).

Prayer is the simplest and most natural expression of this life of trust. How important it was for Jesus himself we have already seen. The times of crisis in his life show Jesus at prayer. This is in connection with the days of meditation and temptation before he begins his ministry. It appears again at Capernaum. He spends the night in prayer before he chooses the twelve. It is the same at Cæsarea Philippi, the turning point in his work, and again at Gethsemane, when he faces the cross and death.

Jesus found men ignorant of the life of prayer and indifferent to it; God was master and religion was keeping laws and earning rewards. Jesus' doctrine of prayer followed inevitably from the teaching about the character of the Father and the nature of the life of his sons. If the fathers that we know give good gifts to their children, shall not the Father who is all goodness do this and much more? Therefore take courage; pray. If you ask, it shall be given you. If you seek, you shall find. If you knock, it shall be opened to you

(Matt. 7:7-11). This confident spirit, he said, is the greatest power in our lives. He puts this truth in his usual picture speech: "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye would say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou rooted up, and be thou planted in the sea; and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6). "All things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23).

The same lesson of encouragement to prayer is brought by two parables that are often misunderstood. The first is the story of the unwilling friend, whose neighbor has had unexpected guests. These have come at night and there is no bread in the house. So he goes to his friend. The friend is in bed and does not want to be disturbed, but he gives in at last just because the neighbor keeps up his knocking (Luke 11:5-13). The second is the story of the unjust judge. He has no interest in the poor widow, and no impulse of justice moves him to hear her case. But he yields at last just to get rid of her (Luke 18:1-8). These parables do not teach importunity in prayer. It is the pagan heart that thinks it shall be heard for its much speaking (Matt 6:7). God is not an unwilling friend or an unrighteous judge who will hear us at last just to get rid of us. Jesus' argument is this: If such men, evil or unwilling, will yet give in the end, how much more will God hear us who is our gracious Father?

Jesus not only encouraged men to pray, and showed them the power of this attitude of faith, but he showed them what prayer was and how to pray. He showed them by his example, which moved the deeply impressed disciples to ask him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1-4). He showed them the difference between praying and making prayers. They are not to say prayers, as the Pharisees do, who are not averse to being caught upon the street corner when the time for prayer comes, so that men may see how devout they are. Prayer with him is fellowship, talking with God. Let them go apart, therefore, and let their speech with God be simple and sincere (Matt 6:5-15). Then he gives what we know as the Lord's Prayer. The spirit of Jesus' religion is nowhere more beautifully or truly expressed than in the Beatitudes and in this prayer. Here is the utter devotion to God, his name, his will, his kingdom. Here is the quiet and strength that comes with perfect trust. There is no clamorous petition here. The need of bread and forgiveness and daily help is brought to God, but only that it may be left with him.

Jesus' teaching as to prayer has often been misunderstood. The words that he used to encourage men to pray (Mark 11:22-24) have been taken as indicating a sort of magical power in prayer, that prayers themselves must bring certain results. And so men have talked about faith in prayer. But this was just what Jesus protested against in the Pharisees. With him it was not faith in prayers, but faith in God. Petition has its place in prayer, but trust and fellowship are the supreme words. This fellowship, for example, demands that we shall have the forgiving spirit when we pray to the forgiving God (Matt 6:12-15). What the trust means is shown us in the example of Jesus' own praying (Luke 22:42). Jesus does not say, "Thy will be done," because he cannot get what he asks, but because God's will is his supreme desire. It follows from his trust in God that God's will is the highest good. It is the same spirit of devotion and trust that breathes in the quiet words of the Lord's Prayer.

Directions for Reading and Study

Make a topical outline of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5 to 7).

Scholars agree that this is a collection of sayings made by Matthew, brought together here and arranged probably for purposes of use in instruction. Find the general subject, for example, of 5:21-48 and 6:1-18.

Using a synopsis or harmony, note that this material is wholly lacking in Mark, who deals more in incidents and less in teaching. Comparing Matthew and Luke, note several instances in which Luke seems to give

the correct historical setting for some saying included by Matthew in his collection.

As to the spirit of humility and desire, read in addition Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16; Matt 18:1-6; Luke 14:15-24.

As to the demand of decision and devotion, read Matt 10:34-39; Luke 14:25-33; Mark 9:43-48.

Read the stories of the three rich men: Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-31; Mark 10:17-27.

As to prayer, read Mark 11:22-25; Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8.

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