



WHEN RELIGION BECOMES THEATER

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

16th Message

Gary Vanderet

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One of the disturbing things about Jesus was his inclination to push morality beyond what seems possible. This was especially true with regard to his teaching on humility. In Matthew 23, he warned believers to not take titles too seriously. We should not let these things go to our heads. Here is how he put it: "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled." That fundamental principle concerning pride and humility occurs a number of times in his teaching. It was one of his favorite sayings.

C. S. Lewis pointed out that pride is the essential vice, the ultimate evil. He said: "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of man." And because pride is at the center of our resistance to God, God himself resists it. As James put it in his letter: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." When we choose to be great, we forfeit God's grace.

If Lewis' observations are correct, then humility, the opposite of pride, releases God's greatness. In other words, if pride leads to every other vice, humility leads to every other virtue. Humility is the very basis of our relationship with God and our usefulness in this world. Thomas à Kempis said: "The more humble a man is in himself, and the more subject unto God, so much more prudent shall he be in all his affairs, and enjoy greater peace and quiet of heart."

The first step toward humility is realizing how proud we are. Pride can be demonstrated in very subtle ways. Let me suggest a few from my own experience: insisting on recognition, pouting when we aren't consulted or asked our opinion, dominating social situations, loving to tell our stories rather than listening to others, resisting authority, getting angry when we are challenged, harboring a grudge or nursing a grievance, wallowing in self-pity, and the one that is the center of our text this morning, wanting to be noticed, to be prominent and eminent.

So we return to our study in the Sermon on the Mount. This text is probably the best known of all of Jesus' teaching, and almost certainly the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and do. The Sermon on the Mount is the best explanation and the clearest illustration of what true Christianity is all about.

The key to unlocking this section is found in verse 1 of chapter 6, where we resume our study. Jesus said:

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. (Matt 6:1, NASB)

One of the things to look for in studying Scripture is statements that are repeated. In this section there are two,

which we will find are used three additional times in the rest of the passage. The first is "to be seen by men"; the second, "to have their reward." The primary motivation of the Pharisees, which is true of anyone who is committed to outward conformity, is to be seen by men. The Pharisees publicly and deliberately did what they did religiously, in order to be seen by men. They did it in their giving, in their praying, and in their fasting.

The phrase "they have their reward" means "to fully receive a transaction." If you buy an item in a department store and charge it, when the bill comes you pay for it, and you get a receipt. The piece of paper shows that it was "paid in full."

Jesus is not saying if you practice your righteousness before men to be noticed by them you don't have a reward. On the contrary, if you give to be seen by men, if you pray to be seen by men, if you fast to be seen by men, then what you have is a fully receipted transaction. You did what you did to be seen by men, and you were seen by men, end of deal. Remember this principle as we look at each section. Jesus is moving from the general to the specific. He begins with a warning: Don't do this! And then he shows three ways in which we can do what he has warned against.

First, in verses 2-4, Jesus says, we can do it in our giving:

"When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:2-4)

We don't speak of giving "alms" very much anymore. The word means a deed of mercy or pity, giving to the poor. The Old Testament has much to say about compassion for the poor. Since our God is merciful, as Jesus has just emphasized, and he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish, his people must be kind and merciful too. Jesus obviously expected his disciples to be generous givers. We might add that giving to the poor was relatively unknown among the pagan nations.

Luke records this saying of Jesus, in Acts 20:35 (it's not in the gospels): "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" This is one of the great lessons we need to learn in life.

But, as we have seen earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, God is concerned not only with our actions but with our motivation. The Pharisees had turned this hum-

ble, gracious act of giving into a self-centered show. The picture here is of a Pharisee going to a prominent place in the community, or on his way to put money into the special bowl at the temple or synagogue, preceded by trumpeters, blowing a fanfare and attracting a crowd. "They pretended, no doubt," wrote John Calvin, "that it was to call the poor, but it was perfectly obvious that they were hunting for applause and commendation." People would come running out of their homes to find the Pharisee giving to the needy. This practice became known as "sounding the trumpet."

There was another way one could blow the trumpet, metaphorically speaking. In the Temple area there were six prominently located offering receptacles, each one constructed of metal. If one wanted to give, say, a dollar (in our terms) in order to impress the brothers, he would drop into the receptacle a hundred pennies, making a lot of noise in the process. This became known as "sounding the trumpet." As Spurgeon put it: "To stand with a penny in one hand and a trumpet in the other is the posture of hypocrisy."

And hypocrisy is the word Jesus used to characterize this display. The word translated "hypocrite" comes from the world of the theater. In classical Greek, the *hupokrites* was an actor; thus the word came to be applied to anybody who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is no longer himself; he is impersonating somebody else. In a play, nobody is hurt or feels deceived when the actors play their parts; the audience knows it is all part of the drama. The problem with a religious hypocrite, however, is that he deliberately tries to deceive people. He is like an actor in that he is pretending, so that what the audience sees is not the real person but a disguise; but he is unlike the actor in that he takes some religious practice and turns it into what it was never meant to be, namely, a piece of make-believe, a theatrical display before an audience; and it is all done for applause.

Human nature hasn't changed much, has it? It boosts our ego to see our name displayed as a supporter of various charities. We fall prey to the same temptation. We draw attention to our giving in order to be "praised by men." Seeing our names exalted in public is a great morale-booster. Every one of us has probably received a solicitation to give, based on this very motivation. If you give a certain amount, they will put your name here. If you give enough, you can probably have a stadium named after you. We may not employ a troop of trumpeters to blow a fanfare each time we give to a church or charity, yet, to use the familiar metaphor, we like to "blow our own trumpet."

Jesus says: "Don't do that." Don't scream for attention, like Tarzan swinging through the jungle. Stay out of the picture. Remain anonymous. Resist the desire to have your name plastered all over the place.

When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Normally, the right hand is the active one; so Jesus assumes that is the hand we use when we hand over our gift. Then he adds that our left hand must not be watching. It's not hard to understand what he means. Not only are we not to tell other people about our Christian giving, we are not to be self-conscious in our giving. In other words, don't make a big deal out of giving. Don't give to impress others, or yourself. It was Spurgeon

who said: "God observes, and he is enough of an audience."

Of course, it is impossible to obey precisely and literally this command of Jesus. As John Stott writes: "If we keep accounts and plan our giving, as conscientious Christians should, we are bound to know how much we give away. We cannot very well close our eyes while writing out our checks! But as soon as we give the gift we ought to forget it. Don't keep recalling it to gloat over it . . . Our giving ought to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self congratulation."

Prayer is the second area in which we can be hypocritical. Jesus gives the instruction, in vv 5-6, and an example of how to pray, in vv 7-16. (We will look at the example of prayer next week.)

"And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (6:5-6)

The Lord is not condemning public prayer; he is talking about praying as a hypocrite. The question we need to ask ourselves is: "When we pray, who is the audience?" Jesus pictures two men at prayer. Again, the basic difference drawn is between hypocrisy and reality. He compares the reason for their praying, and its reward. Stott writes: "What he says of the hypocrites sounds fine at first: They love...to pray. But unfortunately, it is not prayer which they love, or the God they are supposed to be praying to." They love themselves and they love the opportunity that public praying gives them to show off.

There was nothing wrong with their method or their discipline. All devout Jews prayed three times daily. And there was nothing wrong in standing, the usual posture for prayer. It's not even wrong to pray at the street corners as well as in the synagogues if our motive is to bring the awareness of God out of the holy places and into everyday life. But Jesus uncovered their true motive as they stood in the synagogue or street with hands uplifted to heaven: it was that they might be seen by men. Behind their piety lurked pride. What they really wanted was applause. And they got it: "they have their reward in full," said Jesus.

How then should Christians pray? Jesus says: Go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. Or as the Jerusalem Bible clarifies it: "who is in that secret place." Our Father is there, waiting to welcome us. In fact, he is calling us.

This one thing has done more to affect my prayer life, my quiet times (or whatever one wants to call those times) than anything else. Prayer is not a discipline (like doing fifty push-ups a day) that I have to do to be a mature Christian. It is the Lord who is calling me, wanting to meet with me. Remember David's words in Psalm 27: "When you say to my soul, seek my face; your face O Lord I will seek." One scholar points out that the Greek word for the "inner room" into which we are to withdraw to pray was used for the store-room where treasures were kept. There are treasures already awaiting us when we pray. God wants to refresh our soul, satisfy our hunger, quench our thirst, and

remind us that we have been forgiven.

But our problem is that we live in a world where God is invisible. We think he doesn't exist. But he does. He is right here in the room with us. Heaven is not a place way off somewhere up there. It is another dimension. It is all around us, an unseen realm. Part of growing up is developing eyes that see, knowing that there is a realm of reality out there that is just as real as the realm that we can see. So God is here with us as we meet and he is seeking us.

Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. When we realize how inadequate we are for what he has called us to be and asked us to do, we are driven to prayer. Prayer is a response to his revelation. It is like having a conversation with a friend. As you read the Word you begin to see how much God loves you. When you see that underneath are the everlasting arms, how much you are forgiven, how God has given and continues to give of himself, you respond. Prayer is that loving, gracious response of our hearts to what God is saying.

David describes his times with God as a meeting. He says: "Where can I go and meet with you?" That is a wonderful way of looking at our times with God: it is a meeting. He invites us to come and meet with him.

The warning here is against showing off in prayer with syrupy words and high sounding platitudes in an effort to appear holy.

Ray Stedman told the story about a prayer meeting where one supplicational show-off stood up and began to pray one of those long theological prayers. He was scraping the Milky Way with phrases like: "O God who sitteth upon the circle of the earth for whom the inhabitants are like grasshoppers." He went on and on until finally, someone sitting behind him tapped him on the shoulder and whispered: "Just call him Father, and ask him for something."

God is our Father. We should pray to him and forget whoever else is listening. That is why I love to listen to the prayers of new Christians. Their prayers are so refreshing! I remember one man praying: "God, this is Ed. Do you remember me? I met you last week." It's wonderful to hear someone pray who is just himself, talking to God. Don't show off when you pray.

In Scripture we see that prayers in public are relatively brief, while prayers in private are often very long. Remember that our Savior spent an entire night in prayer on several occasions.

The purpose of Jesus' emphasis on "secret" prayer is to purify our motives in praying. As we are to give out of a genuine love for people, so we are to pray out of a genuine love for God. We must never use either of these exercises as a pious cloak for self love.

This brings us to the third area that Jesus mentions. Verse 16:

"And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you." (6:16-18)

The Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. We could spend a lot of time talking about fasting this morning, but that is not the point here. This passage of Scripture is almost ignored by believers. I suspect that some of us live our Christian lives as if these verses had been torn out of our Bibles. Most Christians lay stress on daily prayer and sacrificial giving, but few pay any attention to fasting.

"Fasting" here refers to abstaining from food partially or totally for a period of time. We call our first meal of the day breakfast, because that is when we break our night-long fast. But fasting can include denying ourselves things other than food. We can go on an information fast. We can turn off our computers and abstain from pouring information into our heads every day. We can turn off the television for a while and devote time to prayer and thoughtfulness. There are all kinds of ways we can make a choice to live with discipline in order to devote ourselves to what is important.

In Scripture, there are three major reasons given for fasting. One is sorrow for sin. When people were deeply distressed over their sin and guilt, they would both weep and fast. For example, Nehemiah assembled the people "with fasting and in sackcloth," and they "stood and confessed their sins." When the people of Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching, they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth. When fasting was first instituted in the Old Testament, it was required only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. People were to fast as they mourned, in confession of their sin.

The second occasion when people fasted was in times of bereavement or national calamity. David spent many days fasting as he mourned the death of Saul. If there were no autumn rains, the Jews would commit themselves to fasting, because that was a national crisis. It is an interesting question to ask ourselves, if we live in a time of national crisis.

There is a third reason given in Scripture for fasting, and that is, as special times of concentration for spiritual purposes. In fact, "prayer and fasting" are often mentioned together during times when men and women sought God's direction or blessing. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai immediately after the covenant was renewed by which God had taken Israel to be his people. Ezra "proclaimed a fast" before leading the exiles back to Jerusalem, "that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from him a straight way." The Lord Jesus fasted immediately before his public ministry began, and the early church followed his example. The church of Antioch fasted before Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first missionary journey; and Paul and Barnabas themselves fasted before appointing elders in every new church they planted.

The issue here is not when, but how. Though fasting is not a part of Old Testament law, or a command in the New Testament, it is assumed by Jesus that Christians will practice it. That is what he did.

So whether it is to mourn over sin, or for prayer, self-discipline or direction, there are good Biblical reasons for fasting. Jesus' concern here was that, as with our giving and praying, we should not draw attention to ourselves when we fast. When the hypocrites fasted, they looked

gloomy and neglected their appearance. The word translated “gloomy” means literally to “make to disappear”—so they were unrecognizable. We are not sure whether that meant they neglected personal hygiene, whether they covered their heads with sackcloth or perhaps smeared their faces with ashes in order to look pale and melancholy and holy—all so that their fasting might be seen and known by everybody. The admiration of the onlookers would be all the reward they would get. “But as for you, my disciples,” Jesus went on, “when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face”—that is, “brush your hair and wash your face.” Then, once again, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. The purpose of fasting is not to advertise ourselves but to discipline ourselves; not to gain a reputation but to express our humility before God and our concern for others in need. If these purposes are fulfilled, that will be reward enough.

Once again, the point here is that when you fast, don’t do it to be seen by men. Don’t fail to put on your make-up. Don’t go about with a pious look on your face, trying to impress everybody that you are fasting. Don’t try to appear humble and sad, trying to look hungry and exhausted like someone who just finished crossing the Sahara that afternoon.

My friend David Roper tells a story about a man in a mission organization who always wore the same pair of brown wool pants. David said he never could figure out why the man always wore them, until one time he noticed that the nap was worn off the material at the knees. He said he never actually knew the man’s motivation, but he wondered if he wore the pants to give the impression that he was a spiritual person.

It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to look good instead of being good. We need to be natural, down to earth, ordinary people. As Popeye the cartoon character puts it: “I am what I am.” We need to be just what we are, transparent and honest.

In these verses Jesus has been contrasting two different kinds of life. One is showy, motivated by pride and rewarded by men; the other is secret, motivated by humility and rewarded by God.

The exhortation to us this morning is to carefully choose our audience. What is it that matters most to us, people’s applause or our heavenly Father’s approval? Jesus says that our Father wants to reward us and bless us. He wants us to know how much he loves us. When our children sing for the congregation on Sunday, all they can think about is their happy parents who are watching them. They want your approval, your smile, your love. That is how God wants us to live, as an offering to him. What our Father is saying is: “I am delighted about the things you think and the things you have done. You made an offering of your life to me and I accept it wholeheartedly!”

I want to close by reading a prayer that I keep close to my computer in my study. I have lived most of my life trying to look good, not realizing that God had already made me good and I didn’t need to act that way anymore. This prayer is a constant reminder to me of the attitude God is calling us to model.

*From the desire of being esteemed,
From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honored,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved;
From the fear of being humiliated,
From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebuke,
From the fear of being falsely accused,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected;
Deliver me, Jesus,
That others may be loved more than I,
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That in the opinion of the world others may increase and I
may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred before me in everything,
That others may become holier than I,
provided that I may become as holy as I should.
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.*

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