

Scripture Reading
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

¹"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

¹⁶"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Message
**“The Good and Beautiful Life:
Life through Humility**

This summer it has been my goal to cause us, week after week, to consider ways in which we can discover and participate in the good and beautiful life God always intended for us to live. We are reminded from the earliest stories of scripture that “in the beginning” God’s creation was perfect, but was quickly marred by the choices of human beings to live apart from God’s will.

The Gospel (“good news”) we get to share today and every day, is that through the grace of God in Jesus Christ we have opportunity and empowerment to turn back to God; to choose God’s way and experience that “good & beautiful life” again. (In Christ we get a “redo”/“a Mulligan”)

And so, this summer we have turned to Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” teachings to find the correctives we need to make in our own lives; for all of us have sinned; all of have strayed and we all need to examine our ways and humbly repent and change our ways before God.

And today God’s Word reminds us that **two of the most powerful forces in our world which keeps us from walking in God’s way are the affirmation and the positive appraisal we desire from others.** In his second book on spiritual formation, subtitled “Putting on the Character of Christ”, James Bryan Smith notes the following about the way these powerful forces are developed and fostered human beings:

The narrative that gives rise to our need for affirmation is a story we learn early in our lives. When we do well, we receive affirmation; when we do poorly we receive no affirmation, and may be criticized. “You ate all your peas – you are so good.” Or, “You did not finish your peas – off to your room, and no dessert!! Life continues this way at each phase, from school to sports to jobs. Do great things and your value increases; fail and your value decreases. Over time we begin to hunger for other’s affirmation because it seems to establish our value. Positive appraisal can become more important than actually being good or doing well.

Listen again to that last statement:

*Positive appraisal can become more important
than actually being good or doing well.*

In other words:

“Someone else’s flattering opinion can become more important to us than actually doing what is right in God’s eyes.

This is certainly nothing new. Even St. Augustine tells the story of youthful indiscretion when he joined with friends to steal a neighbor’s pears and throw them to the pigs. He did so, despite knowing it was wrong, because he wanted to look brave in the eyes of his friends.

So, a positive worldly appraisal sparks that temptation to make ourselves the focus, rather than keeping our focus upon God.

- How easy it is to allow others to applaud our talents rather than to humbly offer praise to God for the abilities He has given us. How easy it is to

receive honors for the money we donate to charity rather than publically acknowledge God's abundant provisions for our lives.

Today Jesus calls us, through three examples, to discover the good and beautiful life by learning to live humbly; to live in a continual recognition that our orientation to life will not to be defined by the applause of people, but by a desire to please God.

So far this summer, Jesus has been challenging us through His teachings to discover a righteousness that exceeds the Jewish Law; a "moral" righteousness. Now remember, while "righteous" is a very churchy/religious word, it simply meaning "doing what is right". As followers of Jesus Christ we discover what is "right" by examining Jesus' teachings. Therefore,

- Not only do we not murder, we also control our anger by seeking to live at peace with others,
- Not only do we not commit adultery, we rein in our lust and seek to establish healthy relationships, and
- Not only do we not lie, but we establish a life defined by integrity.

So far in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been calling us to moral righteousness; again, a life lived above the legalisms of His day; a righteousness that gives us the framework into which we can build and discover our own unique good and beautiful life.

But, as we get into the 6th chapter of Matthew, Jesus challenges us in a different direction; He wants us to recognize a “religious righteousness” .. a right way of practicing our faith.

For when we practice our faith, our hearts are tempted to apply that same hunger for worldly approval and positive world appraisal we spoke of earlier; a sin referred to, over centuries, as vainglory.

Vainglory develops when we allow the narratives of worldly praise and esteem to be applied to public and private acts of religion.

In short, vainglory would take the Christian bowed before God in a relationship of humility and servant hood, and make of them a religious “star” seeking honor, respect and service. But Jesus says, “Don’t go there!!”

In this morning scripture reading we hear Jesus describe three common religious activities; giving alms, prayer and fasting. All three, when done rightly, draw us closer to God and His Kingdom. However, if done wrongly; if affected by vainglory, will lose the true reward of these religious disciplines.

Let’s take a look at them:

1. Giving Alms / Give to the Needy

In Jesus’ day, the synagogue had a system in place to care for the poor, much like a welfare system. When someone gave a significant gift, it was common for that to be acknowledged in the synagogue.

What is interesting is that Jesus was not critical of such public acknowledgements but rather, in this teaching He is asking whether we give such gifts in order to be praised by others. For as a religious act; an act of mercy defined by the Greek words used in this passage, such an act had the power to draw the giver closer to God's heart. However, if the motive for giving us wrong, then the praise of others will be the only reward the giver will experience:

²"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

"have received"... *apecho*...a technical Greek term used in commercial transactions; "to receive a sum in full and give a receipt for it".

If you practice this religious devotion motivated for worldly praise, that is all you will get. You will not experience what God had in store for you.

Another interesting phrase is Jesus reference to our left hand not knowing what our right hand is doing. Some have noted that the temple box into which alms were given for the needy was on right side of a door which meant that the right hand could act without the left hand "noticing".

What Jesus is referring to here is a second poor motive for giving alms. For **while some give alms for the praise of men, others give alms to think well of themselves.** In a strange way Jesus is trying to encourage persons to not even be conscious of their giving, for Jesus knew that self-consciousness will readily deteriorate into self-righteousness.

How many people do you know who have based their salvation in heaven upon some generous gift they gave to some church 20 years ago? Rather than getting to know a God whom they can never out-give; a God who gave us His Son's life for the forgiveness of our sin, these person's self-righteousness becomes their imaginary key to heaven's gate.

do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

Consider, if you dare, why you might give money to our Benevolence Fund.. a Fund which specifically seeks to aid those in financial need.

Let's say you come into a lot of money, and you want to give \$10,000 to the Benevolence Fund.

- Would you do so for the praise you would receive from others?

- Would you do so for how it would make you feel about yourself,

Or for a sense of security in heaven? Or,

- Would you do so to simply thank God for His generosity in your life by giving in obedience to His will?

("Take care or the poor among you." "Okay God, I will.")

May you all have such an opportunity!!!

And, may you all experience the blessing God has for those who give to please only Him! For Jesus' warning is that the wrong motives will rob us of what God wants us to experience right now as well as in heaven.

Do you want the good and beautiful life? What is your motive in giving?

2. Prayer

A second common act of “religious righteousness” to which Jesus calls us is prayer. And like alms-giving, prayer is an act intended to draw us closer to God’s will, and not to generate vainglory.

Using an interesting word-play, Jesus instructs:

“... when you pray, go into your room, close the door
and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

Do you see the word play? Actually, you don’t see, and that’s the point!

Jesus is saying that because our Heavenly Father is unseen, so too we should be unseen when we pray to Him. And here Jesus is referring to private prayer. This teaching is in no way discouraging prayer in group settings.

Again, Jesus is speaking to the motives behind our religious acts. He is teaching us that “religious righteousness” does not turn such a sacred opportunity for personal prayer into an act of self-glorification.

- Whether that is done by deliberately placing yourself before other to notice you praying or to hear your prayers, or

- whether that is accomplished by babbling on and on before others, rather than simply presenting your petitions before God, Jesus again warns us that if we pray in order to receive human praise, we will forfeit God’s rewards.

Again, the wrong motives will rob us of what God wants us to experience. Do you want the good and beautiful life? Perhaps you need to change your motives for praying.

3. Fasting

Jesus' final example of "religious righteousness" is fasting.

While it is true of both giving alms, and of prayer, I want to highlight here that when Jesus presented these three "religious practices", he did not say "If you do these things,"; rather, Jesus says "When you do these things...".

I emphasize this now because in the Protestant tradition; specifically in the Evangelical Protestant tradition, fasting has never seemed to find a solid place among regularly-practiced spiritual disciplines. And yet, as much as we say that we follow in Jesus' ways, my guess is that few of us in this sanctuary have practiced occasional fasting; the deliberate denial of food for a given period of time.

While it may be because we love food too much, my guess is that we fail to fast because we don't know the merits of fasting. In brief, fasting not only helps a person to put aside the daily distractions of eating so that they might better focus upon God in general, or upon a specific issue that have placed before God, but fasting is also a discipline-training act which reminds us that there is a cost; a price to be paid in following Jesus. If we cannot withstand the discomfort of giving up food for a day, how can we expect to face anything approaching the 40-days in the wilderness that our Lord endured for our sake? How can we accept our crosses, if we cannot discipline ourselves with an occasional fast?

If you are not currently fasting, please take heed of Jesus' expectations revealed in His words "When you fast...." . But, remember to fast as he teaches us to fast; not for an audience of people, but humbly

before a God who seeks a closer relationship with you; who seeks to bless you, as He does through our alms-giving and prayer.

I know that there are people in our congregation who occasionally fast. If you don't know who they are, then that is good; they're doing it right. Join them. Again, Jesus teaches us that the right way to accomplish this spiritual discipline is privately; between you and God.

There is **an old Puritan saying** worth remembering and practicing. It goes like this:

Live for an audience of One.

That is Jesus' message for us this day.

Often times in church we use the phrase that a pastor is "preaching to the choir" to express the belief that the people who really need to hear the morning's Message are not those already sitting in church.

But, today's message really is for you... if you're a "regular" here; a member or a friend, or if you are a practicing Christian visiting from another church. For it is aimed at those who righteousness is not only exercised in how you deal with anger, lust and lying but also in how you practice your faith.

Is it possible that there might be some here today who regularly attend worship, who pray out loud, who participate in small groups or Bible studies; who go on mission trips, or volunteer to do this or that; primarily to receive the attention and praise of others?

Is it possible that there are those here today who practice their faith primarily to feel good about themselves?

If that is so... and I suspect that all of us do to some extent; please know that if that is your motivation (and God knows your motivation), then human praise, or a feeling of self-worth are all you will get.

¹"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Literally, Jesus is saying:

“Beware of doing your righteousness before men, to be seen by them.”
Beware of vainglory.

Earlier in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount he stated an apparent contradiction when referring to us as “light of the world”. He said

Matthew 5:16

... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

This however, is not a contradiction, for the difference here is motivation. Do we do what we do to bring praise to ourselves, or do our acts of righteousness yield praise for God; praise from our tongues and praise from the lips of the people of this world?

My Message's title today is “Life through Humility” because

Vainglory loses its power when we choose to live humbly; when we live our lives to bring glory & praise to God, and not to ourselves.

There is no doubt that when we live humble righteous lives, others will notice and we will hear accolades. But as we hear them, choose to live humbly as you remember what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 3:5

⁵Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

When you hear the world's compliments, choose to live humbly by remember Jesus' words:

John 15:5

⁵"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Vainglory loses its power when we choose to live humbly. It also loses its power when we remember the Bible's message of God's unconditional love for us. After all, who needs the world's approval and applause when we know just how much God loves us?

A "good and beautiful life" has again been offered to us by God through Christ. With great humility and with an awareness of God's love for us, let us love God and draw near to Him through righteous religious acts, even as we continue to serve His will by loving our neighbors as ourselves. AMEN

Take a moment to reflect upon God's Word for us today.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (r).
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