

No More Selfies

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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Worship: Omniscient God

Key Sentence: When you do good to be seen, that's all you get

Outline:

- I. The principal (Matthew 6:1)
- II. First Example: Giving (Matthew 6:2-4)
- III. Second Example: Praying (Matthew 6:5-6)
- IV. Third Example: Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)

Matthew 6:1–4 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:5–6 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16–18 “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. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that 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.

No More Selfies

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Eight weeks ago we started our journey into the Sermon on the Mount. We heard Jesus teach that his blessing is given to those who approach life from the weak side, recognizing poverty of spirit, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, seeking to be meek, merciful and pure in heart. We were told we were to be salty salt and lighty light to a world in decay and darkness. Because Jesus came to fulfill the law and prophets, we would, through his Spirit, be able to have a deeper righteousness than the Pharisees. We've seen six contrasts between the surface righteousness of the Pharisees and the deeper kind that comes from dependence on Jesus and relationship with him. Now, as we begin chapter 6 of Matthew, Jesus wants to distinguish between righteousness that is a just display for others and the same deeper righteousness, from and for God. This week we'll look at three spiritual disciplines: giving, praying, and fasting and learn that if we do these good things to be seen, that's all we get.

I'm calling this message "no more selfies." One year I was going for the second half of the Slovakia trip and ended up with an afternoon in Vienna. Nice. I had a great time taking pictures of the city. Later I bought dinner from a stand, then an ice cream cone. I tried to use my new iPhone to take a selfie, but when I sent it to my family, they were not enthusiastic about my skills. That's when I decided "no more selfies." A few usies, no selfies.

But I've got a more serious reason for this title. I think the selfie, as a cultural trend, points to the fact that social media and technology have made it much too easy to put an image of ourselves out there that is seen, and maybe even liked or commented, but that's it. We get seen, and that feels rewarding, but to the degree that we do even good things just to get seen, they're meaningless. Jesus begins by stating the principle. Matthew 6:1 *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."*

In chapter 5 Jesus says "let your light shine before men that they may see your good works." Here he says don't do your righteousness to be seen by others. This is not a contradiction because those few words "in order to be seen by them" are the new element in this warning. Behaviors done in order to receive the praise of others are not praise-worthy. They are not true acts of righteousness. But behaviors done out of reverence for God and true concern for others are the deeper righteousness he desires, sees, and rewards.

All the contrasts in chapter 5 were about caring for others. Here the contrasts are about the practice of your faith: how you give; how you pray; how you fast. Jesus does not dismiss these things, but he says the way you do them, the audience you do them for, determines if have value or are only . . . “selfies.” No more selfies, he says. When you do good to be seen, that’s all you get.

The three examples Jesus uses, giving, praying and fasting, were the three chief expressions of Jewish piety. All Jews were expected to practice them. Jesus expected his disciples to do the same. He doesn’t begin each paragraph, “If you give, pray, fast . . .” but “when” you do so. Assuming his follower will engage in these things but, assuming they will, Jesus teaches them why and how to do so. The three paragraphs follow an identical pattern. In vivid and deliberately humorous imagery Jesus gives (1) a warning not to do the act to be praised by men, (2) a guarantee that those who ignore this warning get what they want but no more, (3) instruction on how to perform the act secretly, and (4) the assurance that the Father who sees in secret will reward openly.

The first example Jesus takes up is giving. Matthew 6:2-4 *“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

The Greek word ‘giving’ in verse 2 is not giving to the temple, but a deed of mercy or pity. The Old Testament teaches compassion for the poor. To give one clear example, Deuteronomy 15:11 says “for there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’” Generosity is not enough, however. Jesus is concerned with the heart. What is going on in our hearts as we give? Either we seek the praise of men, or we preserve our anonymity but congratulate ourselves, or we desire approval from our heavenly Father alone.

A ravenous hunger for praise was the characteristic sin of the Pharisees. “How can you believe,” Jesus asked them, “when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” Jesus ridicules the way they made giving a performance. He pictures a pompous Pharisee going to put money in the box at the temple or synagogue. In front of him march the trumpeters, blowing a fanfare, attracting a crowd. Did the Pharisees literally do this or was Jesus painting an amusing caricature? Carson says that there is trumpet-giving in Jewish history, associated with fasting, but even if this wasn’t that exactly, Jesus’ vivid imagery makes his point.

Hypocrisy is the word Jesus uses. In Greek the *hupokritēs* was an orator or an actor. The trouble with the religious hypocrite is that he's acting. He hides his true identity behind an act. Yet he is quite unlike an actor in that he takes some practice valuable in itself and makes it what it was never meant to be, a piece of make-believe, a theatrical display before an audience, done for applause.

Our modern versions of this may be more subtle, but no less deadly. I've never known anybody who used trumpets, but I've known people who felt their generosity bought influence. Before we started Trinity Gail and I were considered for the pastoral role at a church in Pennsylvania. We liked it; our visit was great; but the biggest giver, who had become the church boss, didn't feel we were mature enough. When he threatened to leave if we were called, they voted us down. In the larger world of charities, universities, etc., getting your name mentioned, getting the building named after you, getting wined, dined and feted, those things are still tremendously attractive to some people. Most of us, though, are more subtle. We know better than to blow trumpets. Instead we congratulate ourselves, compare ourselves, and give ourselves our own praise. Or we subtly let on to others that we're being generous while using our anonymity to give little and not often. I'm focused on me feeling good rather than on meeting real need and responding to God's real desires.

Of such people, who seek the praise of men, Jesus says with emphasis: they have their reward. The verb translated 'have received' was a technical term in commercial transactions; it meant to 'receive a sum in full and give a receipt for it.' So the hypocrites who seek applause will get it, but then 'they have had all the reward they are going to get.' God doesn't owe them a thing. If we do things to be seen, even if we're only seeing ourselves, that's all we get.

Instead, Jesus says, we should give humbly and secretly. "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret." Not only are we not to tell other people about our giving; there is a sense in which we are not even to tell ourselves. We are not to be self-conscious in our giving, for our self-consciousness will easily become self-righteousness. We are to turn from a spirit of self-congratulation.

Of course we can't quite, literally, keep our giving secret even from ourselves. At the moment of planning and the moment of giving, we are bound to know how much we give. Nevertheless, as soon as the giving of a gift is decided and done, we should do our best to we forget it. We are not to keep recalling it in order to gloat over it, or to preen ourselves on how generous, disciplined or conscientious our giving may have been. Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation.

What we should seek when planning and giving is the guidance and approval of God. We need not and cannot keep our giving secret from God. Your Father who sees in secret, Jesus says, will reward you. Some people rebel against this part of the teaching. They find our Lord's promise of reward crude or self-serving. How can he forbid the desire for praise from others or from ourselves and then command us to seek it from God? Surely this merely exchanges one form of vanity for another? But doesn't it depend on the reward? Lewis addresses this in *The Weight of Glory*: "We must not be troubled when [people] say the promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There can be a reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for her money. But marriage is the proper reward for real love, and no one who is in love is mercenary for desiring it. Similarly, we might say a silver cup is not a very suitable reward for a schoolboy who works hard, whereas a scholarship at the university would be. The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation."

Stott says "What, then, is the 'reward' which the heavenly Father gives the secret giver? It is probably the only reward which genuine love wants when making a gift to the needy, namely to see the need relieved. When through his gifts the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick healed, the oppressed freed and the lost saved, the love which prompted the gift is satisfied. Such love brings with it its own secret joys, and desires no other reward."

Next Jesus addresses prayer. We'll look at verses 5-6 this week and the Lord's Prayer next week. "*When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'*"

What he describes sound fine at first: "They love to ... pray." Unfortunately, it is not prayer they love, nor the God they are supposed to be praying to. No, they love themselves and the opportunity public praying gives them to be seen and heard. Of course regular prayer is good; all devout Jews prayed three times a day like Daniel. There was also nothing wrong in standing to pray. This was typical for prayer among Jews. But Jesus was concerned with motive. They stood in synagogue or street with hands uplifted to be seen by others. What they really wanted was applause. They got it. "They have received their reward." You can come to church for the same sinful reason which took the Pharisee to the synagogue: not to worship God, but to be seen.

Again, you can boast of your private prayer life or the insight your prayers bring only to promote yourself. In an earlier generation when I was first a believer I think I encountered this often. The older men and women in some churches I attended seemed to be in competition for who could pray longest, who could pray the most flowery prayers, who could cram the most preaching into their prayers. All of us can be tempted to say not what is offered to God sincerely, but what we think another person needs to hear. And some of us still tend to utter many words, many many words. All this is ultimately self-serving.

How, then, should Christians pray? “Go into your room and shut the door,” Jesus said. We close out disturbance and distraction and the eyes of others. We pray to our Father who is in secret, or, as the Jerusalem Bible says, “who is in that secret place.” He’s there, waiting to welcome us. Nothing destroys prayer like side-glances at human observers. Nothing enriches it like a sense of the presence of God who sees not the outward appearance but the heart, not the one who is praying but the motive. Prayer is essentially seeking God. Psalm 27:8 “You have said, “Seek my face.” My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek.’” We seek him to bow down before him in worship, love and trust.

Then, Jesus went on, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Stott pointed out that the Greek word for the “closet” “was used for the store-room where treasures might be kept. What are these treasures? Paul says that when we cry, ‘Abba, Father,’ “the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are indeed God’s children. He lifts the light of his face upon us and gives us his peace. He refreshes our soul, satisfies our hunger, quenches our thirst. We know we are no longer orphans for the Father has adopted us; no longer prodigals for we have been forgiven; no longer alienated, for we have come home.”

This need for secrecy, however, should not be taken to extremes. To take it literally would be nonsense. If all our praying were to be kept secret, we would have to give up church-going, family prayers and prayer meetings. There is value in corporate prayer. In hearing the prayers of others we learn something of how to pray. That’s been my experience at our men’s prayer meeting. We learn from each other each week and give the ‘amen,’ the ‘so be it,’ to each other’s prayers. Next week when we study the Lord’s prayer we’ll find it is a community prayer “Our Father.” It’s not a prayer we pray in secret or alone.

Not that I’m against the prayer closet or the power of getting alone with the Father to pray. It’s incredibly vital to our relationship and, as Jesus says, incredibly rewarding. Or, as my favorite Puritan prayer quote puts it “The life of our life consists in our communion with God, which we maintain not only by the set performances of prayer, Morning and Evening, . . . But we maintain this

communion more especially by a daily, and hourly, and frequent, and constant lifting up of our hearts to God in these sighs and groans, and so follow him, as that we will not let him go from us, or be one moment out of our sights.” If we do it to get seen, we get seen. If we do it to get God, we get God.

As we finish this section, let me add something that would have been obvious to Jesus’ hearers but may not be to us: this would include what we call worship. In our current church cultures there is great opportunity for worship to become an exercise in being seen by others. Worship teams and worship leaders may face this temptation in a special way because while people are supposed to be worshipping God, we know that they are also focusing on the worship leaders. So, it’s tempting to have your actions and demeanor and style and music and vocalization look more engaged and filled with the Spirit than you really are. That’s not even to mention that we put such people on a stage with lights and fog and close-ups. It’s hard to resist doing it to be seen. And our worship, like our prayers, is both public and private. We might think Jesus is saying “let your worship be only in secret.” But the church, like the people of Israel, is called to worship, speaking to one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. So it can’t be only private, but when it is public, like our public prayers, he’s calling us to be focused on God and unselfconscious.

Finally, the same thing is true of fasting, down in verses 16 to 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. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that 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.”*

The Pharisees fasted ‘twice a week’, on Mondays and Thursdays. John the Baptist and his disciples also fasted regularly, even ‘often’, but the disciples of Jesus did not. So how is it that in these verses Jesus not only expected his followers to fast, but gave them instructions how to do so? Most Christians expect to pursue daily prayer and sacrificial giving, but how many of us expect to fast? When I became a Christian it was never presented as a discipline, not even by those I learned the most from. Why? Is it just an Old Testament exercise? Is it entirely external and ritual, so that that Jesus’ righteousness of the heart utterly rejects it? No, I don’t think so. When people came to Jesus and asked “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus answered “When the bridegroom is taken away, ... then my disciples will fast.” He himself fasted forty days and nights in the wilderness. In the Acts and the New Testament letters there are several references to the apostles fasting. We cannot dismiss fasting.

Why fast? Today people might fast for dietary and health reasons, but in Scripture fasting is always for spiritual purposes. The word “fast” is often explained with the idea of humbling ourselves before God. Ezra, for example, calls a fast before leading the people to return from Babylon. “Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God.” Sometimes the fast was part of penitence for sin. When Nehemiah assembled the people “with fasting and in sackcloth,” they “stood and confessed their sins.” Daniel sought God “with fasting, sackcloth and ashes.” He prayed to the Lord his God and made confession of the sins of his people.

We also fast in dependence on God for future mercy. If ‘penitence and fasting’ go together in Scripture, ‘prayer and fasting’ are even more often coupled. When we need to seek God’s help in a particular need, whether for rescue or for guidance, we turn aside from food and other distractions and let the perceived lack drive us to a heightened awareness of God. Thus Jehoshaphat, seeing the armies of Moab and Ammon advancing towards him, ‘set himself to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.’ Queen Esther, before she took her life in her hands by approaching the king, urged Mordecai to gather the Jews and ‘hold a fast’ on her behalf. Jesus himself fasted for forty days. The church at fasted and prayed before selecting Paul and Barnabas for the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas fasted before appointing elders in churches. Special circumstances call forth special prayers, and special prayers are often focused by fasting. Finally, we fast for personal righteousness. If I struggle with a characteristic sin, or selfishness, or a lack of compassion and love for others, fasting can pull me back from myself and closer to God.

For me, in the last ten or fifteen years, this has been my practice of fasting: When one of my children or someone at church is in a particularly painful crisis or need, I will fast, part of a day or a day or at times five meals, in order to have more focus on prayer. The sense of hunger becomes a reminder not to eat but to pray. Now I’ll admit that I often also have a health reason to fast. Intermittent fasting is, for me, good for weight control and overall health. But I rarely do it without some spiritual purpose, some prayer focus, because if I’m going to be hungry anyway, it might as well drive me to prayer.

Whatever our reasons or our approach, Jesus took it for granted that fasting would happen. His concern was that, as with giving and praying, we should not fast like the hypocrites, drawing attention to ourselves. Their practice was to look dismal and disfigure their faces. They may have neglected personal hygiene, or covered their heads with sackcloth, trying to look pale, wan, melancholy and so outstandingly holy, so that their fasting might be seen and known by everybody. The admiration of the onlookers would be all the reward they got.

“But as for you,” Jesus went on, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that is, ‘brush your hair and wash your face’, so nobody knows you’re fasting. 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 humility before God and concern for others.

Looking back over these verses, it’s clear that throughout Jesus has been contrasting two alternative kinds of practiced righteousness. The first is ostentatious, motivated by vanity and rewarded by men. The other is secret, motivated by humility and rewarded by God. The difference is who sees, that is, who is our audience. The hypocrite performs his rituals ‘in order to be seen by men’. The Greek verb is *theathēnai*, in a theatre giving a performance. Righteousness is a public spectacle. If you do these things to be seen, that’s all you get.

The remedy? We have to become so conscious of God that we cease to be self-conscious. For even if no human being is near, God is watching us. Not as a kind of cosmic cop ‘snooping’ in order to catch us out, but as our loving heavenly Father, looking for opportunities to bless and better us. Which spectator matters to us the more, earthly or heavenly, men or God?

We’ve seen how this truth applied to giving, to prayer and worship, and to fasting. I’d like to close, very briefly, by applying it to social media. How might Jesus have addressed our world of screens in the style of these three examples. It might go something like this “And when you comment or post or share posts, do not comment to be seen by people, like the hypocrites. For they post to show their beauty or their fortune, their superior righteousness or their superior outrage. They have received their reward. But when you post, go to your own journal and write and comment not to be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And the Spirit will give you the insights he wants you to learn, and thus your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Also – no more selfies.