

Matthew 6:1-6

1 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever 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 (NRSV).

Introduction

I love this Scripture for two reasons. One reason is that it addresses hypocrisy which is a favorite pet peeve of mine. One thing that Jesus strongly condemned is hypocrisy. The other thing is that it addresses the need for sincere prayer.

The Gospel of Matthew deals with a time when it is a peasant society. There was no middle class. There was a ruling class, the working poor, and what society in its day considered expendables. The ruling class was made up of a few powerful men and their families. The working poor were the local businessmen, artisans, farmers and fishermen. The expendables were the bandits, beggars, and prostitutes. It is not that they were expendable but that society considered them expendable. Within the dominion of that society the women ranked below the men and the children ranked below the women.

It is within this oppressive environment that Jesus was an advocate of the disadvantaged, the poor, alien, widow, child, and handicapped. This advocacy creates conflict with the ruling class. Today's Scripture takes place early in the ministry of Jesus. After he is baptized and faced temptation he begins his ministry in Galilee. News spread about him and large crowds followed him. Then, he gives the Sermon on the Mount and today's Scripture is part of that famous sermon.

It is early in the ministry of Jesus that he addresses a problem that is a deep rooted, ingrained problem of the society of the day where people that are positions of power want to protect their positions of power, wealth, and prestige. It is a common problem of human nature for people who are in positions of power to take advantage of their positions at the expense of others. Jesus comes into the world at a time when the priests have slipped away from the will of God into a realm of political power and abuse. The priests are to be the defenders of God's realm. It is early in Jesus' ministry that Jesus addresses the problem of feigned piety where the religious leaders were pretending to be devout and righteous. So, Jesus teaches that righteousness is not to be done to be seen by others. Right deeds come from right intentions. Righteousness is a matter of humility not pride.

As Christians it is important for us to pay attention to what Jesus teaches. The lesson that he teaches here is about a contrast. It is not a contrast between public worship and private worship. It is not a contrast between external and internal behavior. It is a contrast of motivation. Piety is to be practiced for the benefit of God, not for the approval of the crowd. Do not practice piety in a way that calls attention to yourself. If you do, then the attention that you receive, which is for the sake of pride and vanity, is your reward. Those who pretend to be pious only gain honor for self instead of for God. It is hypocrisy. Therefore, God rewards those that practice

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piety in secret. The religious leaders had public prayer that was long winded and designed for show. Their prayers were aimed at impressing a human audience. Prayer is to be sincere and God centered as worship is to be sincere and God centered.

Back when I was thinking about going into ministry, I studied the prayers of clergy. I listened intently to how polished they sounded with the pious, theological language. I was thinking about ways that I could improve my public prayer so that I could be like that. Then one day a young college student lead prayer for a youth group meeting and it went something like this "Oh God, you are so awesome, we just love you so much." I thought wow! That is the most sincere, heartfelt prayer I have ever heard. I said to myself that's how I want to do it, not with all the theological doctrine, not polished and grandstanding, but from the heart. Sincerity is very important to God and to God's ministry here on earth.

God wants us to help others not impress others. God wants sincerity not showmanship. God wants you to be humble not proud. Holiness is based on intent and purity of heart. Jesus follows up the lesson with the Lord's Prayer which is the theme for next week.

You can fool people but God is not fooled by appearances. We cannot fake devotion. God knows what goes on inside of you, the best and the worst. God knows if you carry thoughts of hatred. The Jews of the New Testament had three great pillars that marked a righteous life: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus did not dispute that. What Jesus did was address a problem of motive. If you bring glory to yourself, you miss the most important thing. If you publicly demonstrate generosity in order to be seen by others, you are missing what God wants all together. God approves of public prayer, it's an important part of worship but God also wants you to maintain a private prayer discipline that is done in secret.