

Matthew 6:1–18
Faith without Hypocrisy

Introduction

George Truett was arguably the most well-known Southern Baptist preacher of his time in America. Many even called him the 2nd Charles Spurgeon.

One time, he was invited to dinner in the home of a very wealthy Texan oil tycoon. After the meal, the host led him to a place where they could get a good view of the surrounding area.

Pointing to the oil wells in the distance, he boasted, “Twenty-five years ago I had nothing. Now, as far as you can see, it’s all mine.”

Looking in the opposite direction at his sprawling grain fields, he said, “That’s all mine too.”

Turning east towards the huge herds of cattle, he bragged, “They’re also all mine.”

Then pointing to the west at a beautiful forest, he exclaimed, “That is all mine as well.”

He paused, expecting George Truett to compliment him on his great success. Truett placed one hand on the man’s shoulder and pointing heavenward with the other, simply said, “How much do you have in that direction?”

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-christian-cheong-stories-findingfulfillment-16420?+ref=TextIllustrationSerps>)

The human nature tends to show off what we possess or what we do well to impress others. That’s why we have this saying, “If you have it, flaunt it! Show it off!”

Our text today tells us that the Christlike nature is to do all things well not for the earthly applauses of men, but for the heavenly approval of God the Father.

Some Jews in Jesus’ time (some Pharisees) had expressed this notion of “If you have it, flaunt it! Show it off!” even in the spiritual realm. They showed off before others in the way they would give, pray, and fast as their worship and devotion to God.

Now, you remember what Jesus said in Matt 5:16—“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

At first glance, what Jesus is teaching in Matt 6:1-18 about not showing off what you are doing before others seems to contradict what he teaches in Matt 5:16 about letting others see your good works.

Both passages speak of doing good works, and doing them before others. But Jesus earlier remark in Matt 5:16 makes this a command. But in Matt 6:1-18, He prohibits doing it before others. Is Jesus contradicting Himself?

In our passage today, Jesus is prohibiting religious devotion that's done publicly for self-glorification. In Matt 5:16, He commands good works be done so that God will be glorified. What Jesus is saying is that everything we do is to give God glory, not ourselves. It's to call attention to God and His kingdom, not to call attention to ourselves.

Jesus is dealing with the hidden desires of our hearts. Jesus is more concerned with the motivation behind the deed than with the deed itself. It's not about what the hands are doing. It's about what the heart desires while the hands are doing.

Scripture often depicts the Pharisees as people with a great appetite for public recognition (though not all Pharisees were like that). While it's easy to criticize the Pharisees, the reality is that they're often no different from many of us. The human tendency is to desire to be noticed, to have the limelight on us, and to feel important.

The Pharisees were turning their religious devotion towards God into a public performance. Jesus called them hypocrites. The Greek term “hypocrite” was used to describe an actor. In Greek plays the actor would wear a variety of masks to portray different characters. In essence they were hiding who they really were behind a mask, pretending to be someone they were not.

So by calling them hypocrites Jesus was saying that by their actions they were assuming false identities. They were making themselves into something they were not.

Next, Jesus charged the Pharisees for wanting to be seen by all those around them. These Pharisees were like actors giving a performance on a stage—they were doing deeds for men to applaud them, not for God to be pleased with them.

In Matt 6:1–18, Jesus exhorts three heart attitudes that will help us practice our faith without hypocrisy.

I. Giving without Fanfare (vv. 1–4).

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Matt 6:1-4

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Giving to the needy is an act of mercy. In Jesus' time, alms were given to people to alleviate their difficulties and to help meet their needs. If they needed food, food was given or money to buy it. If help was needed, help was given.

What the Pharisees were doing was perverting this act of mercy and making it into a show-off event.

Jesus tells us His way in v. 3, "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ..." This means that we're not supposed to be self conscious about our giving. If we dwell on our good deeds, we may fall into the trap of self-congratulations, which soon turns into a form of self-righteousness.

John Stott (well-known Anglican minister) once said, "Christian giving is to be marked by self sacrifice and self forgetfulness, not by self congratulation."

Jesus begins in 6:1 with a principle that applies to all of 6:1–18. Jesus says, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

The word "be careful" always warns of danger ahead. To refuse to obey such a sign is both foolish and dangerous. Here, Jesus warns us to be careful of seeking to impress people. He doesn't say that you can't be impressive. Some Christians are really impressive yet humble people—they are really the salt and light for Jesus in this world.

Today, Scripture reminds us that God looks at the heart (motive) before the hand (action). If your motive is to hear people "ooh and wow" over your righteousness, you have your reward ... but it is only earthly reward, not heavenly.

Jesus is saying, "Anyone who does a good deed just to be seen and appreciated by others will lose his heavenly reward, no matter how good and beneficial the deed is." This is the overarching principle that Jesus lays down in v. 1.

He then goes on to focus on the topic of giving. He says in v. 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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”

Notice that Jesus says “when” you give. He assumes that His disciples will give. This means giving is not optional. The question that Jesus is addressing in v. 2 and in the entire passage is not “when” but “why”. Why do you do what you do?

It is important to note that Jesus does not forbid public giving, but He doesn’t want you to “announce it with trumpets”. In other words, do not give for the purpose of desiring to be honoured by people. If you do, that will be your reward. The word translated “in full” (*apecho*) is a term for commercial transactions and means to “pay for something and then get a receipt for it”. When you seek to impress people you are not giving but buying, and you get what you have paid for—you pay your money and then you take a receipt for the transaction. This is the same picture when I seek to impress people instead of God—I am paid in full by the praises of men with no reward from God for the deed.

But Jesus offers an alternative. In 6:3–4, He says: “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ...”

Don’t put your right hand into the offering bag and wave your left hand to get attention at the same time. Instead, just give without drawing attention to yourself. Give in a spirit of humility and simplicity. This then is an act of true worship. Why? Verse 4 says, “... so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Again, there’s nothing wrong with public giving that is an act of worship. But there’s plenty wrong with giving to impress people.

When I was teaching in the Singapore Bible College many years ago, each faculty member was given a small group of students to care for (Pastoral Care Group).

I remember one time an overseas student in my group sharing some problems in his supporting church back home. He then asked the group to pray that the leaders and people in his home church would have God’s wisdom to resolve the problems.

Though he did not mention it, I sensed that his financial support from home was slow in coming. After that sharing time, the Lord moved me to give this student a love gift (just a small sum) to help him manage his difficult period. I sealed the money in an envelope, wrote these

words “A little gift to share God’s blessings with you”, and dropped the envelope into his student’s mail box.

At our next meeting, this student shared how the Lord had used an “angel” to provide for him. He was filled with much joy, praises, thankfulness and gratefulness to the Lord as he shared this.

Everyone rejoiced with him, including me. While he and the others were praising and thanking the Lord enthusiastically for His angel, I was pinching myself and telling myself not to shout, “Hey, I am that angel!”

But I rejoiced because I saw how the Lord could use the little I gave to bless someone with so much joy, never mind if I were the unknown “A”—not for Anonymous, but for Angel. In a simple way, I learnt what it meant to give without fanfare and be blessed by it.

Does this mean that you should never tell anyone what you give and who you give to?

In Acts 4:36–37, Luke tells us that Barnabas sold a field and brought the money to the feet of the apostles. So the apostles knew what Barnabas did to get the money, and the amount that was given by him. If Barnabas was looking for status and prestige, his motive was wrong. But it’s certainly false to say that it was wrong for others to be made aware of his gift. Barnabas’ act of generosity was known among the believers. Some other examples:

- Numbers 7 lists the names of the leaders of Israel and tells exactly how much they gave to the tabernacle.
- It is the same later in I Chronicles 29 when it comes to giving to build the temple.

Jesus does not object to the fact that people may know what you give and who you give to as a matter of accountability and encouragement. But He does disapprove that you give in order to impress people rather than please God. Why do you give? Do you give to please God or to impress people?

Jesus exhorts us to give without fanfare. The second heart attitude is ...

II. Praying without Pride (vv. 5–8).

Matt 6:5–8

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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But 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. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans,

for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Standing and praying was an accepted practice. But the word Jesus used here literally means to position oneself conspicuously on a high platform so as to be seen. Praying became a show-off event. It was done to get attention and to show people how spiritual the person was.

When we pray, Jesus says we're to do so in private. Jesus isn't against corporate prayer. There are plenty of examples throughout the Bible of our need to gather together for prayer. But what is also important is our personal time when we withdraw from others to get time alone with God.

Again, Jesus' concern is praying to impress others. He is not opposed to long prayers or public prayers except when you are seeking accolades from people. Jesus' point is this: When you pray to impress people, you are paid in full. Instead, pray in secret and the Lord will reward you in His time and way. Perhaps a few questions would help.

- Do I pray frequently or more fervently when I am alone with God than when I am in public?
- Is my public praying an overflow of my private prayer?
- Is it possible that the reason more of my prayers are not answered is because I am more concerned about saying my prayer before men than before God?

Jesus exhorts us to give without fanfare and pray without pride. We now move on to look at the third heart attitude in our passage today.

III. Fasting without Notice (vv. 16–18).

Matt 6:16-18

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others 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.

To disfigure means to become unrecognizable. Those who fast to impress people would wear sackcloth and smear ashes over their faces and into their hair so that they could show everyone how they were humbling themselves before God.

But Jesus said don't do that. Instead we are to anoint our heads, wash our faces. Today we'd say, "Take a shower, shave, and comb your hair." When we fast we want God's attention, not men.

And that's the whole point. We're all on a stage and God is the one we're playing to, not man. Though man can only look on the outside, God looks inside and sees our hearts, and therefore He sees our motivation. So let's do our devotions and works as unto God.

The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). But when they fasted, they looked miserable and tried to draw attention to themselves. They seemed to say, "Look at me; I'm fasting!" Jesus says to His people, "Don't you be like them!"

The Bible teaches that fasting is voluntary and not coerced. Fasting is more than just a crash diet or change of diet for the body; it is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Many fasting today is done for other reasons—health or cosmetic.

Note that Jesus gives us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast. Just like all the other Spiritual Disciplines, fasting is not to be a legalistic ritual.

Though the length of fasting may not be rigid, but the purposes for fasting must clearly be spiritual. There's more to a biblical fast than just abstaining from food. Without a spiritual purpose for your fast, it's no better than a weight-loss effort.

Here are some purposes for fasting:

- One, to strengthen prayer (Ezra 8:23; Acts 13:3). However, the Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying. We need not always pray and fast. But sometimes, it is good (or even needful) for us to pray and fast.
- Two, to seek God's guidance (Acts 14:23). There is biblical precedence for fasting for the purpose of discerning the will of God more clearly.
- Three, to express repentance and return to God (Joel 2:12). Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief for sin. But fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It also can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction. As with all Spiritual Disciplines, fasting can be little more than a "dead work" if we continue to harden our hearts to God's call to deal with a specific sin in our lives.
- Four, to humble oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27-29). Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God (like kneeling in prayer).
- Five, to express concern for the work of God (Neh 1:3-4). A Christian may fast and pray because he feels a burden for the work of God in a

broader scope. E.g. a Christian might feel led to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy or disaster.

- Six, to overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God (Matt 4:1-11). Jesus fasted “forty days and forty nights”. In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast He was prepared to overcome the temptations of Satan himself in the wilderness. It was also during that fast that He dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter. Note that in Matt 4:2, we are told that after Jesus had fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry (no mention that He was thirsty). I believe this implies that Jesus did drink water while observing His no-food fast. In fact, the body generally cannot survive without water for more than three days though it can go much longer without food. But it is important to stress that nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to fast for forty days and nights like what Jesus did. However, one principle we can learn from Jesus’ example is this: Fasting is a way of overcoming temptation and of dedicating ourselves to the Father.

One important word of caution about fasting: If you are on any medication, or sick, or under-nourished, or pregnant, or you have a medical condition (e.g. diabetes, GIT condition), it is imperative to first seek medical advice before attempting a fast.

Conclusion

Jesus cares about our motives. This is why He says, “Give without fanfare, pray without pride, and fast without notice.” Do the right thing in the right way—the Lord’s way. Oswald Chambers (well-known Scottish minister) once said, “My worth to God in public is what I am in private.” Who are you when no one is looking? That is the ultimate question. Authentic discipleship takes place when our outward doing is a true reflection of our inner devotion to God.

There are also other “spiritual” things we do besides giving, praying and fasting—e.g. doing missions and community work. The same motivation applies—we do and tell all these to others to testify of God’s grace and glory, and not to draw attention to ourselves.

Pray that the Lord will help us live our faith life without hypocrisy by being true to God, to others, and to ourselves in all that we do in His name.

Amen!