

Date: 17.8.08
Text: Matthew 6:1-18
Title: The Christian's
Place: Kingscliff, Tweed Heads AM/PM
File: Matthew 6a

Introduction

In a small university town a pub frequented by students ran the following ad in the campus paper during the days before Parents Weekend: "Bring Your Parents for Lunch Saturday. We'll Pretend We Don't Know You!" The ad was soon challenged by the university chaplain, who posted a revised version on the campus bulletin board. It read: "Bring Your Parents to Chapel Sunday. We'll Pretend We Do Know You!"

Now there's a lot of pretending going around today. A lot of concern about what we look like, about our image, about what sort of person we project ourselves to others. Whether it is the clothes we wear, giving the impression that we are cool. Whether it is the car we drive to show others we are rich. Whether it is what we speak about so that people know that we care for the environment, or world poverty or sick children.

But Jesus says we Christians are not to be in the pretending game. We are not to give out the impression that we are more generous than we are, or more spiritual than the next person, more pious with our prayers. We are to be real, not hypocrites. We are to be the same person inside than out.

But the problem with that is that if you are like me, my insides are not all good. If you were to hear my thoughts, check my motivations, evaluate my inner righteousness, you might not like what you see. So for me it easier to change my outward appearance, and impress you with my devotion, than to change my inward appearance and be consistent and real and righteous.

But in the sermon on the mount, Jesus has been saying to his disciples that their righteousness needs to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. He has been challenging us to look at the commandments of God as not just affecting our outward actions, but our inward desires. That we are to be perfect.

And one of the ways that we can do that, is to seek not to please the people around us, but the father above us. So Jesus says in chapter 6, verse 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.*"

The Question Jesus wants to ask you and me today is - whom am I trying to please when I do something religious, whom am I trying to please? For there are many whom we can please - we can please ourselves, we can pat ourselves on the back, or we can receive praise from our Church or the person who sits next to you in the pew when they tell you what a good job you have done, OR we can receive praise from God. So whom are we trying to please?

Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute! I thought Jesus said back in Matthew 5:16 to let your shine before men so that they may see your good deeds & glorify your Father in heaven. And now He's saying DON'T let your light shine? What's going on?"

It's good to let your light shine in order to put the spotlight on God. But it's not good to let your light shine in order to put the spotlight on yourself. That's what Jesus is warning about! He's saying "Make sure that you're not doing your acts of righteousness for the wrong reasons. Make sure that you're doing what you do for the glory of God rather than for the glory of yourself. Make sure that you're not coming down with a case of Attention Getting Disorder."

And to highlight how we put this into practise, Jesus gives us three pieces of advice to help us. We should strive to do things in secret not in public, we need to be motivated by humility not pride and we need to chase God's reward not man's reward. And because we are a bit slow and needs these things spelt out, he goes on to apply this advice to three different situations - to giving, praying and fasting. So lets firstly look at how we

1. Should Give

Now I think it is interesting that Jesus doesn't tell us we have to give to the needy, he just assumes that we will. For he knows that if we have received God's free offer of grace, if we have had our lives changed completely by the gift of God's son Jesus, then one of the characteristics of our lives, will be that we give and give generously.

The apostle Paul puts it this way," *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*"

So it is not a question of giving, or not giving, it is a question of how you give and where you give. Jesus says, don't do it front of people, because then you will have a problem with pride. In fact do it in such a way that your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing. Do it so you don't remember, let alone anyone else! Because if people don't see you, then they won't praise you and so you will know that you are only doing it for God.

The problem is that the Church and most charities have found in this, is that if you encourage secret giving, then people don't give as much. And the bigger the fanfare - the more plaques you put on the pews, the more certificates and letters of thanks you give, the more you flatter, the more people give.

I remember one day when I was still at school, I got a letter from the Red Cross addressed to Sir Stephen Taylor. Now that was flattering. But inside was a personal letter thanking me for how generously I had given in the past, of the good that I had already done and hoping that I would fix up my will to include this fine organisation.

Quite simply for a 16 year old I was overwhelmed. Calling me Sir, patting me on the back, why were they doing this? Then I remembered that about 2 weeks before, a friend of mine had been going door to door collecting for the Red Cross. I had given a donation of \$2 and for a joke, he had put on the receipt, Sir Stephen Taylor. This

organisation knew that flattery help to loosen the purse strings.

You see we can do a good thing like giving to the Church, helping the poor and needy, but we can do it with the wrong motivation - to receive praise. And Jesus says that if we do that we will get no praise from God, only the praise from the people around you. You will have received your reward in full. We will only be rewarded by God, if and only if, we are not seeking praise from any other source. If our motive is to help others, not draw attention to ourselves. Then and only then will God reward you. And so the best way to keep your motives pure is to do things in secret and to keep it just between you and God.

That is why I get so annoyed when the news reports that another sports star was doing the round of the children's hospital. You know that good news story that they often run. There are those footballers, passing ball to sick kids, signing autographs, giving them a free jersey or scarf or beanie. And following them every step of the way are the TV cameras to show us viewers that footballers are not just alcohol driven ego maniacs, they are caring, sensitive individuals.

Now don't get me wrong, it is a great thing that they are going to the children's hospital, those kids will get a real buzz out of it. But Jesus is saying, that if you do those acts in public, then that's all the reward you are going to get. You will miss out on your father in heaven, telling you well done good and faithful servant.

So if you are going to give to the Church, try to use the Churches envelopes, so that no-one can see what you put in, it is just between you and God. If you are helping someone, if you can do it, do it anonymously. And if you can't do it in secret, try not to make a fuss over it. For it seems that Jesus is saying that when we help others we have a choice, we can be rewarded by people, or rewarded by God. And we all know that people are ungrateful, we all know that praise is fickle, we all know that to start to feed our pride means that we will have to keep on feeding it.

But God is generous. We can't out give God. As Jesus says "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." So it is important that when we do our religious acts for others that we do them in secret. For Christianity is not an attention getting religion. It's an attention-GIVING religion. But Jesus goes on to say that the same principle applies when we do our religious acts to God. For he turns from giving to prayer for this to be done in private.

2. Prayer.

And he draws attention to the Pharisee who prays on the street corners so that everyone can see what he is doing. And he says that it is better to lock yourself away - to pray in a private place as there is no distractions and so then you can pray just to your father in heaven.

Now I think it is important that we look at what Jesus is and isn't saying here. He isn't saying that the only prayer we should do is in private. Because throughout Jesus own ministry he often prayed in public. But he is saying that when we pray we should have our eyes, so to speak, on God not our eyes on men.

It was said of Robert Murray McCheyne, a famous preacher of yesteryear in Scotland, that sometimes he would open his eyes after leading prayer in Church and be surprised to see where he was. For he had forgotten that anyone else was with him. He thought he was alone with God.

For our religious duty to God, is just between you and Him. For when it is just between God and you, then your motives will be purified. Then you don't have one eye on God and the other eye on someone else. Then you know you will not be congratulated on your performance. Now today there is not much congratulations for prayers, and there certainly isn't much praying on street corners. In fact today, most people in the Church are uncomfortable in praying aloud at all and so leave it up to their leaders. So it is the leaders of the church who have to watch this closely.

I have to admit that I find it hard to pray before you, because my prayers tell you where I am with God. And sometimes, I feel disappointed, other times I have strayed from God's presence and I'm sure you can see my spiritual state if you listen to my prayers. But I can't worry about what you think, I just need to pray. And those who pray in public shouldn't just babble on, Jesus says, for longer prayers don't make answers to prayer more forthcoming. Instead it is whether your prayers are real or not. Whether you are really talking to God, or whether you are just putting on a show.

But this passage isn't just addressed to people who lead prayer in Church. It is addressed to all people who are involved in prayer with others. Because not only can you pray in such a way as to have your eyes on others, but you can *not* pray in public because you are too scared of what people think. You see many of us never pray with others, never come to prayer groups, never pray within a Bible study because we think our prayers will not be good enough. We might stutter on some words, we might lose our train of thought, we might ask for the wrong thing - we might embarrass ourselves. And so if you are someone who never prays in public then this passage is also for you.

Because it doesn't matter what people think. It doesn't matter that you might say the wrong thing, because you are not talking to the people around you, you are talking to God. You see our pride may keep us quiet or make us a show off. In the end, the point that Jesus is making is best found by me asking us all a question or two. Do I pray more frequently alone with God or in public? Do I love to pray to God secretly? When I pray in public do I pray the same way that I do in private? If the answers to all these are yes, then we are doing what Jesus wants. If not, we are acting like a hypocrite.

For God's isn't interested so much in the religious *act*. What you do. He is more interested in what is inside. He wants to know *who you are when nobody's looking*. He wants to see that you are reaching out to Him in prayer, not trying to put on a show to others. That you really care for the person in need, not just interested in your good name. And lastly Jesus points out, when you fast you need to do it to draw nearer to God and not to enhance your reputation amongst the people around you.

3. Fasting

Now we are living in a society that ranks "eating" as the number one passion. We love

our cakes and our pizzas and our ice creams and our sandwiches and our pasta. It is true that we have been programmed to eat at set times, breakfast, lunch and dinner. There may be no hunger involved, for at times we eat out of habit” because it’s there”

Now as a general rule, you would have to say that we Australians eat too much and too fast. Many of us are over weight. Many of us are very dependent upon food. We use it to deal with anxiety, depression, boredom & many other emotional moods. Rather than eating to live....many live to eat.

And so it is not surprising that fasting has gone right out of fashion. A couple of years ago one of our bible studies groups were talking about fasting and out of all the people who were there, and between them there were hundreds of years worth of Church attendance, only one person had ever fasted. And she had done it for dietary reasons not to bring her closer to God.

It seems that Christians today have ignored the Bible's teaching on fasting. But once again, Jesus doesn't tell people to fast - he just assumes that they do fast. So he starts his teaching by saying "When you fast". So why did people in the Bible fast? Well there seems to be four good reasons why Christians are encouraged to fast.

Firstly, they fasted because they were sorry for what they had done. Their sins weighed heavily upon them, they were fully aware of how they had let God down. And so the act of fasting - of going without food or drink was a way of showing sorrow and a way of showing that you had turned from your old ways. If that is true, we should still be fasting because we still should be sorry for the things that we have done to let God down.

But fasting had also to do with looking forward. Often when there were big events coming up like Moses going up the Mountain to meet with God, or Ezra leading the exiles back from Babylon or there were big decisions to be made, like when the early Church sent Paul & Barnabas out on their first missionary journey, people prayed and fasted. Fasting helps us then to focus on what is coming up in the future.

But fasting also has value as a tool for self control. Because food is given such an exalted place in our society, we want to make sure that we control our physical appetites, it doesn't control us. In the same way that we have to take control of our lusts and desires so we have to control our desire to eat. And lastly people throughout the centuries have fasted to remind themselves of the poor - how they have such little food. This has often led to the giving away of the money saved to the poor on a regular basis.

But whether we are fasting because of our past, or because of future decisions, or for self control or for the poor, Jesus says make sure people don't know what you are doing. Don't tell everyone, don't look hungry, make sure you wash and shave and put on deodorant. For if you fast, don't draw attention to yourself, do it in secret.

Now it is probably impossible to do it entirely in secret - after all your family will know whether you are fasting or not, but don't make a show and dance out of it. For it is just between you and God. And if you are trying to humble yourself before God, the last thing you want to do is to have one eye on what other people think about you.

Our world teaches us that to make it we have to thrust ourselves forward, we have to put ourselves in the spotlight, we have to tell people how good we are, otherwise we will be trampled on. Yet Jesus is telling us today the exact opposite. He says do things in secret, be humble not proud, look for God's reward not mankind's. Which in the end is the key to how we are going to live our lives isn't it?

Do we want to please God or our neighbour? Do we want the pat on the back for doing something good now, or later. The choice is ours. We cannot serve two masters. "So seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and then all these things will be added unto you."

Let me end with a story. Serena Williams won the Wimbledon Tennis tournament for the first time in 2002. After her impressive victory, a reporter asked Serena if it bothered her that many of the English fans were loudly barracking against her. She politely said, "No," she understood – there had been people barracking against her all her life. But she still wanted to win for herself.

Then she added, "*Besides, my dad was sitting in those stands, and I knew he was rooting for me and I wanted to please him.*" That's the key isn't it? People may be patting us on the back or stabbing us in the back, but that really isn't the most important thing, is it? It's about what our Father thinks, our heavenly Father. He is the stands watching us. He notices when you give to others, he hears what you say in secret prayer, he knows whether you fast and why you put yourself out.

And nothing we do for Him, will not go unnoticed and unrewarded. So today whom do you want to please? When you come to Church, when you pray, when you help someone in need, who are you really trying to please? If it is your family or your friends, you will be rewarded, but the reward will be over in a flash. If it God, then he will always see what you do. And he is the only one we really want to please, isn't He?