

Private Religion

More and more frequently we are hearing that religion is a private matter, that one's faith is personal and should not be a subject of public conversation. You shouldn't be trying to convert anyone to your point of view, at least a religious point of view, and you should refrain from bringing up the "J" word in polite company. The "G" word is acceptable, but only on rare occasions and without additional comment.

Today we're going to look at a passage which seems to suggest that it's a good idea to keep our private faith out of the public eye ... at least at first glance:

Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give a gift to someone in need, don't shout about it as the hypocrites do - blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. And now about prayer. When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I assure you, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you and pray to your Father secretly. Then your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered only by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, because your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him.

And now we skip down to verse 16 ...

And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. (Matt. 6:1-8;16-18)

There are three actions being described in these verses: giving a gift to someone in need, praying and fasting. These are all activities that are good and part of the Jewish heritage of religious faith and practice. These are not activities that anyone would expect Jesus to speak against in any way - but in one aspect only, He does speak against them, and that is when they are being done to impress people instead of to honour God.

As we work through these verses, I want you to see three things:

1. Jesus says that we're not to do good deeds so that we will be admired by other people.
2. Jesus says that when we do things with that motivation - just to get some kind of recognition for our spirituality or generosity - that there is nothing else that we will gain from it.

3. Jesus says that doing good from right motives brings a reward from God.

Now that I've told you what I'm going to say, I'm going to say it.

We don't live in an age where people admire us for either praying or fasting in a public way, or in order to be noticed. We have other ways of making a name for ourselves. But in that day and in that religious culture, it was very easy to let people know what you were about. The trumpets would sound from the temple, indicating that it was time for people to come with their offerings — anyone here play the trumpet; we could try that, too. Anyway, you can imagine that it would be hard not to want people to notice you as you scurried over to the temple with your bag of coins, or with two or three coins in your hand that made a bit of noise if you held them loosely enough.

In each of the three examples, Jesus instructed His listeners, "Don't be like the hypocrites". In giving a gift to someone in need, He said, "Don't shout about it as the hypocrites do." When talking about prayer, He said, "Don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them." And when talking about fasting, He said, "Don't make it obvious as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled", so people will notice what you're up to. In all of these examples, the people Jesus calls hypocrites are all striving for the same things: attention and approval.

We have a clear idea in our minds when we hear the word "hypocrite". We think of someone who says one thing and does another, whose life is filled with pretence and inconsistency. The Greek word that is used in the gospels is usually translated "actor". I think it's strange that we give such admiration to actors, people who make a living by pretending to be someone they're not. That's the sense of the word that Jesus uses in these examples. What are they pretending to be? They are acting the part of a person who is godly, both inside and out. They are pretending to be highly motivated to honour God and to serve Him with their giving or their fasting or their prayers, but it's just an act. On the inside they care little for what God thinks of them and a whole lot about what the people who might be watching think of them. And Jesus warns those who are listening to Him, "Be careful; don't be like that!"

I think this is pretty much a universal experience. We are so aware of what others might be thinking about us, so aware of what kind of reaction we might be getting if we do this thing or that thing, that we can't help but act the part, play to the crowd, or to the person, whose opinion of our action is staring us right in the face, whose opinion of us seems extremely important, even if we don't know the person and are not likely to see them again. Think about the people walking to the temple with their coins clinking. What will they ever know about the thoughts of others who are in the streets of Jerusalem that day? Very likely they'll never know a thing. Do you find yourself rushing up to people on a crowded street to tell them that you think they are looking great, that they seem mature and self-confident, that they are good people with a great outlook on life? Me neither. And yet, there is this internal obsession that plagues us: what do people think about me? Are they impressed with my looks, my actions,

my words, my composure or my attitude? And Jesus is speaking to this little voice inside that asks those kinds of questions and He's saying, "Don't let that voice control your motivations. And here's how you can shut it down: do your good works in secret where no one can see and no one else needs to know."

What a message! It tells us something that we know in our heads, but which our emotions lie to us about all the time: it really doesn't matter what most people think about us, or if they're thinking about us at all (now there's a concept). But, it really does matter what God thinks.

Unfortunately, I can still remember being 19. I was so unsure of myself that I came across as being a know-it-all. I had an opinion about everything that anyone ever asked me about and I always felt that I had to prove myself by knowing a lot. I remember once when I was dating a girl who wasn't as impressed as I was with my knowledge or my opinions and she had asked me about something - I don't remember what the subject was - and I was doing my usual thing of thinking and talking and trying to work my way around to an answer and she interrupted me with a simple question: "Why don't you just say you don't know?" That was radical territory for me - I'd never thought of saying, "I don't know" before, but I've used her advice lots since.

We're all very aware that we make an impression and we're all trying to make a good one, a favourable one, but, in the end, it is God's opinion that will determine our eternal destiny, the rewards or lack of rewards we receive in the life beyond the grave, and even the blessings that come to us in this life.

Jesus then makes the startling claim that our desire to be seen and approved of by people eliminates the possibility of any further reward. If we are focused on making that good impression on people without regard to God, then that's all we'll get — and it may very well be nothing at all!

Let's look at the texts, starting with the one about giving gifts to the needy. Jesus says that the ones who do things to call attention to their acts of charity - like blowing trumpets in the synagogue to announce their generosity - have got the attention they wanted, and that's all they'll get. "I assure you," He says, "they have received all the reward they will ever get." When Jesus discusses those who pray on street corners and in the synagogues in order to be seen praying, He says, "I assure you, that is all the reward they will ever get." And when he talks about those who let it be known that they are fasting, He says again, "I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get."

What you do to honour God brings honour to God and what you do to honour yourself, will bring some measure of honour to you. If you seek to enhance your own reputation by acts of piety or kindness, then God says, "I hope that human applause satisfies your soul, because that's the only reward you will get for your actions." What we do for our own sake — and we know what those things are — cannot also be done for God's sake. If we're looking for the approval of people, we're not looking at the same time for

the approval of God. If our motive is the reward of gaining the respect of our fellow human beings, then it is not about gaining the applause of heaven.

I find it so interesting that Jesus makes this point in each of these three cases of doing something that is so good, so spiritually necessary. It's important to be generous, it's important to pray and it's vital for us to deny our appetites on occasion in order to focus our minds and hearts on the Lord our God. But the point of each of those things is that they will bring us closer to God, help us to bring our thoughts in line with His, help us quiet ourselves to hear from Him. If we get twisted up here, and do these good things for the wrong reasons, we lose all of these benefits - and, apparently, we lose a reward of some kind.

My third point today is that Jesus clearly states that doing a good thing for the right reason, with the right motive, brings a reward from God. Again, let's look to the texts. When giving a gift Jesus tells us to make that gift in secret:

Give your gifts in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

When seeking the Father in prayer, Jesus tells us to pray in secret:

When you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you and pray to your Father secretly. Then your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

When fasting, Jesus tells us to not give it away, not to let people know that we're fasting:

Comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

Clearly, there are rewards for helping the poor, for praying and for fasting. Jesus says as much in very clear terms in these verses. What those rewards are, we're not told. But we are told that the rewards are given by God — so they'll be worth more than the fleeting opinions of other people who may think highly of you today, but not so much tomorrow.

There is a point to Jesus' teaching, isn't there? He's trying to get us to see something that stares us in the face every day of our lives. We are so blinded by the world that we can see, that we have little insight into the world that we can't see. Our vision is for the here and now, the things we can achieve, the people we care about. We spend precious little time thinking about the eternal realm, about what it will be like to walk with saints who have testified to the glory and wonder of God throughout the centuries, about what it will be like to hear the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Because we don't think about these things very much at all, it's easy to become consumed with this very visible world with which we are interacting every day. Jesus says to us today, "Don't be preoccupied with this visible world and miss out on the rewards of the invisible world to come."

The framework for what Jesus has to say about how we practice our spirituality is simply this: the Father knows all secrets. You may be able to convince the people around you that all is well and that your motives are pure, but He knows what your true

motives are. Within that framework - God your loving Father sees it all and knows it all - Jesus tells us that it is wise to grow close to God in prayer, in sacrifice, in spiritual disciplines, without having any concern that people in your life are aware of what you are doing to grow deeper in your walk with God.

So, what is the message for us; how can we apply this passage to our lives in a practical way? I think I have some ideas for all of us:

1. Be self-aware. God knows the motivations of our hearts, but do we? Ask yourself, once in awhile, "Am I doing this so that people around me will be impressed by me, or so that God will receive glory?" Ask the important heart questions, not so you can judge yourself and condemn yourself and feel terrible about yourself, but so you can grow. If you never see something as an area of potential growth, you'll never be motivated to change in that area. Laugh at yourself when you realize just how important the opinions of others are to you - and how easily they trump God's opinion of you. If you laugh at yourself, then you're not going to take yourself so seriously that you're threatened by the need to change, to grow.
2. Look for ways to bless people anonymously. Think of a person you know who is really needing a lift right now and then imagine ways in which you could help provide that lift without anyone knowing who it was that did it. I think there are enough creative people in this group that you will find great joy in the weeks and months ahead in blessing people without drawing attention to yourself. Trust me, you'll have fun with it!
3. I'm tempted to say that the obvious application is to comb your hair and wash your face, but I'm going to resist that temptation to talk about the thing that lies behind what Jesus was saying in this context. Draw close to God, but only for the sake of your relationship with Him. Don't do a spiritual discipline that you have to talk about with other people. Don't make your walk with God an issue of public display, but do make it something that's taking on a new priority in your life. Again, creative thinking needs to go into finding out how to make time for God in the busyness of daily life and how to make it a profoundly rich experience. There is great reward in this life in spending significant time in the Lord's presence; in prayer, in private worship, in reflection, in listening, in study in God's Word, in journalling, in contemplation. These disciplines help us to grow and they've been practiced by the church for nearly 2000 years.
4. The fourth application is to live in expectation that a loving Father who knows all secrets will see what you offer Him when no one else can see a thing, and He will reward you. Live in anticipation of the kinds of rewards that God offers, because they are so much more wonderful than the reward of human approval. They are to be sought after, eagerly, and to be cherished when given. Don't dismiss them as though this was Jesus' afterthought. When God promises to reward us for something, this is something that we should pursue with passion and it is something we should expect with confidence.
5. The fifth application is that I don't think that Jesus is in any way discouraging us from group prayer or from committing ourselves to a spiritual discipline with someone who can encourage us and hold us accountable. I personally find strength in group prayer and I find it often motivates me and helps build me up.

But, even then, I have to watch that I am not praying to the people in the group, that I don't use my prayers to teach them or to correct something that someone else has prayed. I need to grow in the area of being mindful of God, even while I'm in a group and mindful of the people in that group. That is another part of growing in this area of watching my motives, and of giving myself more fully to the One who judges all things.

Is that enough for us to work on for one week? I think that gives us a new lifetime project - be blessed in it!