

# Performing For The Audience

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[ 0 : 00 ] Have you noticed, as we've been making our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, that in each succeeding text, Jesus digs deeper and deeper and deeper?

He began with the whole matter of character in His eight Beatitudes, giving us a sort of personality profile of those upon whom the kingdom of God has come, of those in whom the Holy Spirit has come to dwell.

And then He moved on to the whole matter of behavior. In His six, you have heard it said, but I say unto you, He began to describe the new ways of relating of those upon whom the kingdom has come, of those in whom the Holy Spirit has come to live.

Now in the rest of His sermon, Jesus takes us deeper, behind character and beyond behavior, down into the subterranean movements of the heart.

What the writer of the book of Hebrews has to say about the whole of Scripture is especially true of this text today. The Word of God is living and active, he says, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

[ 1 : 14 ] It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. In the text before us today, we meet Jesus, the soul doctor. Through this text, the lover of our souls takes scaffold in hand and brings us through radical heart surgery.

If you are able, I invite you to stand for the reading of the Word. Matthew chapter 6, verses 1 through 18. Jesus is speaking to us. Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be noticed by them.

Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. When, therefore, you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your alms may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

When you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into the inner room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

[ 2 : 42 ] And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Pray then in this way. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. And when you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by others.

Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, so that you may not be seen fasting by others, but by your Father who is in secret.

[ 3 : 49 ] Spirit of the living God, we believe that you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write these words down on paper long ago.

And now we pray in your mercy and grace that you would take them off the paper, cause them to come alive in our lives as never before. Lord Jesus, do your work on us through this text, for we pray it in your name.

Amen. You may be seated. Like all of Jesus' hard sayings, he only says what he says to set us free. He only says these hard things to make us whole. The Savior knows us. He knows that every single one of us longs for authenticity, that we long for the real thing.

And so in this text, he shows us how to get it. Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be noticed by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

[ 5 : 05 ] Beware. Beware is a far too mild rendering of the actual word used in this text. Be on your guard is better. Better yet is stay on your guard.

Jesus is telling us that in the kingdom of God, motivation is the key. Jesus is telling us that in this new life brought into being by the coming of the Holy Spirit, motivation is key.

Stay on guard, he says. Stay on guard, lest you be motivated to exercise spiritual disciplines in such a way that actually render them unrewarding.

Jesus' concern in this text is authentic spirituality, and so he calls us to a vigilant, constant vigilance. Now, in this text, he deals with three spiritual disciplines which are common to most world religions. Almsgiving or charity, prayer, and fasting. In some way, these three disciplines are part of the dynamic of life in the kingdom. They're part of the dynamics of life in the Spirit of God.

[ 6 : 18 ] Notice, therefore, that Jesus does not say, if you give alms, or if you pray, or if you fast, but when you give, when you pray, when you fast, he assumes that those who follow him, those upon whom the kingdom of God is dawning, will want to be generous, will want to pray, and will want to fast.

When you give, when you pray, when you fast, be on guard, stay on guard, not to do it before others in order to be seen by them, for if you do, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

Now, this exhortation in Matthew 6 seems to contradict an exhortation we read earlier in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

In Matthew 5, 14, Jesus calls his disciples the light of the world. Remember that text? And remember how he goes on to elaborate on it? He says, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel. Instead, they put it on a stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds.

[ 7 : 33 ] And so praise your Father who is in heaven. Doesn't that seem to conflict with the major thrust of the text we just read? In Matthew 5, Jesus seems to be calling us to visible discipleship.

Whereas in Matthew 6, he seems to be calling us to invisible discipleship. Can this apparent contradiction be solved? Yes, it can. And it all turns on motivation.

In Matthew 5, the motive for visibility is to bring glory to God. In Matthew 6, the problematic motive for visibility is to bring glory to ourselves.

In Matthew 5, the motive is to display how good God is. In Matthew 6, the motive is to display how good we are. The 19th century scholar A.B. Bruce put it best.

We are to show when tempted to hide, but hide when tempted to show. Show when tempted to hide God's righteousness, but hide when tempted to show our righteousness.

[ 8 : 48 ] In Matthew 6, Jesus is protecting the spiritual disciplines. The disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting have the purpose of nurturing our souls.

They have the purpose of nurturing our relationship with the living God. Yes, people might notice the disciples of Jesus doing these disciplines. People might notice the disciples of Jesus giving, and praying, and fasting.

And people then might be touched by that and moved by those acts. If so, it's supposed to be a side effect. For the disciplines are done not with a people orientation, but with a God orientation.

I think you can see then that the issue in this text is not simply visible versus invisible, public versus private. Jesus is not saying, no one should ever know you're doing this.

He doesn't say that. The issue is not public worship, but worship for publicity. We know the distinction, don't we? The issue is not public worship, but worship for publicity.

[ 9 : 53 ] Publicity. The issue is motive. Why do you and I place our offerings in the collection plate as it goes by on Sunday morning?

Why do we give to charity? Why do we give to missions? For whose ears are our spoken prayers intended? For whose eyes do we do our acts of devotion?

For whose glory do I work so hard on a sermon? Motive. Beware, stay on your guard, says Jesus, so that you do not do your acts of righteousness before others in order to be seen by them.

For if you do, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. Well, let's dig a bit deeper in this text. As I dig in the text, I find what I'm going to call five great facts of life.

Five facts of life. Fact one, all of us are actors in a grand drama. All of us are actors, performers in a grand drama.

[11:02] The question is, are we acting with integrity? That is, are we being who we really are or are we play acting? Are we pretending to be someone we are not?

Two words in a secular world of drama. The verb in Matthew 6, 1, in order to be seen, is featheni, from which we get the English word theater.

This verb means performing for an audience. The noun hypocrite, which Jesus uses three times in the text, refers to an actor in a play who dons a mask and thereby takes on the personality and character traits of another.

We are all actors in a grand drama. The issue is, are we playing ourselves or somebody else? Fact two, we are always acting before an ever-present live audience.

We are always acting before an ever-present live audience. No matter where we go, we are being watched. Three times, Jesus speaks of your Father who sees in secret.

[12:20] This is a great fact of life. Hebrews 4, 13, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of the one to whom we must give an account.

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 139 and in that psalm, David expresses it this way. O Yahweh, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways. There are no secrets.

There are no secrets. The Father of the Lord Jesus Christ knows every move we make, every word we speak, every thought we think.

God knows the content of every top secret file. God knows the whereabouts of every undercover agent. God knows the movements of every drug dealer.

[13:30] God knows the location of every hostage. And God knows every tear that drops from every broken heart.

Knowing that we live our whole life, public and private, before the divine audience, alternately comforts and terrifies us. It all depends upon whether we want to be seen at any particular time.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones is certainly right when he argues that knowing that God sees all is a powerful motivator for holy living. He writes, when we wake up in the morning, we should immediately remind ourselves and recollect that we are in the presence of God.

It is not a bad thing to say to ourselves before going any further. Throughout the whole of this day, everything I do and say and attempt and think and imagine is going to be done under the eyes of God.

He is going to be with me. He sees everything. He knows everything. There is nothing I can do or attempt, but God is not fully aware of it. Lloyd-Jones then adds that those who are aware of this great fact are soon to be seen flying to Christ and His cross and pleading to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[14:47] How do you respond today to the fact that we are always seen in public and in private?

Such an awareness makes many people want to hide. Am I right when I say that all of us at one time or another try to hide from the living God?

Don't leave me out here again. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we sense the gentle stirrings of the Spirit and we scurry under the bushes. It's just that we have more sophisticated bushes than Adam and Eve did.

We hide under noise. We keep the radio or television going to drown out the gentle but haunting call of God.

We hide beneath busyness. We keep going. We keep doing something more, something more so that we do not have to hear the footsteps of the hound of heaven.

[ 15 : 55 ] We hide beneath relationships or chemicals or cynicism. We can even hide beneath religion. Karl Barth, who is one of the greatest theologians of this century, Karl Barth said that religion is the most sophisticated hiding place of all because we do it in the name of God.

We create a God in our own image, a God with whom we can be comfortable, a God who expects very little of us and a God who lets us live our lives the way we want to.

Thank you. But none of these escape routes finally works. For one thing, God has made us for himself and he is not going to let us go.

As he did in the garden, he gets under the bush and calls out, Adam, where are you? And for another, it is simply impossible to escape. Apparently, the psalmist had tried to escape and learned it could not be done.

Again, Psalm 139, where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your face? If I go to heaven, behold, you are there.

[ 17 : 11 ] If I make my bed in shale, behold, you are there. If I take the wings of the dawn and travel to the farthest part of the sea, even there your right hand will lay hold of me. The psalmist seems to have even contemplated the ultimate hiding place.

If I say, surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness is not dark to you, for darkness is as light to you. Even there, God sees and is present.

We are always acting and performing before an ever-present live audience. Fact three, we all want to be seen.

We all want to be seen. not by the lustful, dehumanizing look, but by the look of love, which is why it is so tempting to give and pray and fast in order to be seen by others.

We crave attention. We crave admiration. Right? Again, please don't leave me out. Whenever I do this confession stuff, please join me with an amen or something.

[ 18 : 23 ] We crave attention and admiration. Right? Even the shy person is craving attention and admiration.

Right? Is this desire wrong? It does get twisted, but is it wrong? My friend Dale Bruner puts it so well.

He says, we are made to want notice. One of the most characteristic remarks of the child is watch me. Watch me, Daddy. Watch me.

Watch me. And they carry on a long time. Bruner continues, the child's verbal watch me becomes the adult's more unspoken but just as deep watch me.

This drive to be noticed is not only the result of sin, it is also part of being in the image of God. We were made to notice and to be noticed by God.

[ 19 : 23 ] In Jesus' heart saying, He does not condemn our desire to be seen. He does not diminish our passion to be noticed. Rather, He redirects it. He says, in effect, focus your deep desire to be noticed in the right direction toward the Father and your Father will notice.

Fact four, life is a series of choices. Before whom will I perform? For whose acclaim will I perform? Whose affirmation and admiration will I seek? The living gods? Yours? Or my own? You realize, don't you, that we can actually do the spiritual disciplines to be seen by ourselves?

It's ghastly. I'll get up early in the morning to spend some time with the Lord in reading and in praying and initially I'm aware that I am in the presence of a divine audience.

But before, before I even notice it, I have become my own audience. I'm the one now watching and I'm performing for me watching.

[ 20 : 38 ] Example, I'll be writing my prayers in my journal when all of a sudden I become aware that I'm not writing that prayer to the Father anymore. I'm writing that prayer and I'm saying to myself, that's one fine prayer.

Just think how my kids and my grandkids when they read my journal later on, they'll publish, they'll publish these prayers. They're so good. Don't leave me out here alone again.

You know what that's like. Dietrich Bonhoeffer hits the nail on the head. I can lay on quite a nice show for myself even in the privacy of my own room. The publicity which I'm looking for is then provided by the fact that I am the one who at the same time prays and looks on.

We take note that we have prayed suitably well and this substitutes for the satisfaction of answered prayer. Boo. Fact five.

We get the reward we seek. We get the reward we seek. It's a great fact of life. When we give or pray or fast in order to be seen by others as spiritual people we will get what we seek.

[ 21 : 59 ] Other people will call us spiritual and that'll be the end of it. Three times Jesus says they have received their reward.

The hypocrites he says announce the fact that they are giving in order to be seen by others. I tell you the truth they have received their reward. The hypocrites he says pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by others.

I tell you the truth they have received their reward. The hypocrites he says disfigure their faces when they fast in order to be seen by others. I tell you the truth they have received their reward. Three times Jesus uses a word which is the technical business and commerce word for payment in full. This is the word that uses this is the word that is stamped a receipted account stamped on the receipted accounts payment in full.

If I give to demonstrate how generous I am or to bask in the warmth of other people's gratitude I will get what I seek.

[ 23 : 06 ] That'll be the end of it though. Payment in full. If I pray to impress people with how spiritual and insightful I am I get what I seek but that'll be the end of it.

Payment in full. If I fast to show others or myself of how self-disciplined and sacrificial I can be I will get what I seek but that'll be the end of it.

Payment in full. Now here's the good news. If I give because I know this is what God wants me to do and this pleases God and if I pray because I want to know the mind and heart of God and because there is no other hope but God and if I fast because I want to deny myself and make myself all that I can be for God the one who is unseen sees and rewards.

Reward what is the reward? Many people are embarrassed to ask the question what is the reward? Many people want to think that authentic spirituality goes beyond the question of rewards.

Apparently Jesus doesn't see it that way. He's always talking about rewards. I like how William Barclay puts it. He says we ought to be careful that we do not try to be more spiritual than Jesus in our thinking about rewards.

[ 24 : 39 ] So what is the reward? The clue lies in the grammar of Matthew 6-1 the first line. Reward with your Father in heaven.

With your Father in heaven. Other translations say reward from your Father in heaven. Now from your Father and with your Father are two very different matters.

Which is it? Reward from the Father or reward with the Father? It is with. For those of you who know Greek it is para with the dative which means near, with, or by the side of.

The reward of exercising spiritual disciplines in order to relate to God is to be with the Father. The reward is to be drawn closer to the Father's heart.

What greater reward is there? What could we possibly get from God that's greater than being with God? Five facts of life.

[ 25 : 42 ] We are all actors in a grand drama. We are always performing before an ever-present live audience. We all want to be seen by some audience.

Life is therefore a constant choice before whom will we live. and we get the reward we seek. Therefore, says Jesus, beware.

Stay on guard. When you give, do not announce it to anyone, not even to yourself. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Just give. As many translators and commentators have said, this particular saying sounds the death knell of an old humanity.

It's a call to die to the old egocentric way of life. Just give, no notice. Don't even keep a record of the giving? What about my income taxes?

I don't know what to say about that. I do know this, though. If the day ever comes when contributions to the church are no longer tax deductible, the church will not suffer.

[ 26 : 56 ] The church will not suffer. For one thing, gifts which truly bless the ministry of Christ are those which are freely given. And secondly, unrecorded giving has this power of enriching the giver.

And the giver ends up being freer to give even more. Just give, says Jesus. Just give and forget about it. And your father, who sees it in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not stand in the sanctuary or in the marketplace and call attention to yourself. Go into your closet. Close the door. The value of the closet, see, is it shuts out all those watching eyes.

In fact, do not even call attention to yourself, that you're praying. Just pray. Just do it. Just speak to the one who is there unseen.

You do not need many words, he says. We don't need many words because the father knows what we are going to ask him anyway. And I think he says that we aren't to use many words because many words makes us far too self-conscious.

[ 28 : 12 ] God knows what we need before we ask. God does not need to be informed. God does not need to be persuaded with our many words that we're sincere this time. Just be a child and ask.

And Jesus says if you don't know how to ask, here's a way to do it. Our father who art in heaven, your name be hallowed on earth as it is in heaven.

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and cancel our debts as we cancel the debts of others around us.

And when you lead us to the test, don't let the test become a temptation, but deliver us from the evil one for yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Just ask, and the father who sees in secret will hear and answer.

And when you fast, do not look somber or gloomy. Don't let on what you're doing. Do as you normally do. Wash your face, brush your hair, go about your normal activities, just fast.

[ 29 : 18 ] Just follow your decision to deny yourself. Humble yourself before God in secret, and the father who sees in secret will meet you and fill the hunger with the bread of life and quench the thirst with the living water.

In the kingdom of God, in the life of the spirit, motivation is the key. Stay on guard, says the soul doctor. Stay on guard so that you can get the real thing.