

True religion seeks an audience of one

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Date: 15 August 2021

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[0 : 00] Today's reading, we're going to continue Jesus' Sermon on the Mount by reading Matthew 6, the first 18 verses. Beware of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

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, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.

[1 : 16] And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

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

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Well, hi, everyone. Good morning. Well, let me begin with a story.

[2 : 57] Emma and I once got to visit the Vatican City in Rome, obviously a few years ago now, and walking among the crowds of people through all the beautiful artworks, the beautiful priestly vestments, and then into the Sistine Chapel, which was just, it took your breath away.

It was awesome. And then you go into this showroom and you've got all the Popemobiles, which is just very luxurious. All these goodies. We learnt at Youth Group in Trivia the other night that the Pope used to own a Harley Davidson.

Now, it was an interesting experience, but I've got to be honest, I came away from that tour just filled with sadness, that all these crowds just got a tour of what they thought was the religious capital of Christianity.

And what did they see? They saw art and prestige, power and wealth. That's just the same thing the world lives for. Religious people were hypocrites.

Isn't that the attitude of our times? Religious people were hypocrites. And given the recent Royal Commission, there's a lot of trust in the church that's been lost in the community.

[4 : 17] But our society isn't the first to call religious people hypocrites. Three times in our passage today, Jesus himself calls his contemporaries hypocrites.

And before we just point the finger at Catholics and others, if you have grown up in the church like I have, or if you've been in the church for a number of years now, then we need to put ourselves in the firing line of what Jesus is about to say.

We can be hypocrites. We need to listen to Jesus' warning in verse 1. Beware, be careful of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

For then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So in this passage, Jesus looks at three key ways to express devotion to God.

Giving to the needy, prayer and fasting. Now the first two of these need no explanation. You'll know what they are. But if you're like me, fasting, I had to learn a bit about that, what that was about.

[5 : 31] We've heard a lot of it, like fasting is all the rage for physical benefits at the moment. But what are those meant to be the spiritual benefits of Christian fasting? Well, the basic idea has to go without our earthly goods, without our being full of the things of this world so that we can focus on what is divine, what is eternal.

So fasting was an occasional practice. It was often combined with repenting for sin and especially combined with prayer so that you can focus on God. So we see an example of this in the book of Acts when the church fasts and prays before sending out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary work.

Now in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were so devout that sometimes they would fast twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. So you'll find these three practices, giving, prayer and fasting among most religions of the world.

You find them in the five pillars of Islam and they were central to the Jewish faith as well. Now when it comes to these things, Jesus doesn't hold back any punches.

Hypocrite. The word hypocrite has the idea of an actor in a theatre putting on a mask to play a character for the applause of the crowd. These acts of devotion to God, they're good things, but they are meant to be for God.

[7 : 06] And Jesus puts up a mirror to show us religious people what God sees if we have a mask on. When giving to the needy, it's like we ring up Jimmy Miro and ask him to bring his trumpet to church so that he can play it on the way to the offering box at church.

You make sure that at least someone knows that A, you are giving and B, you are giving generously. What is God to see in religious prayers? In Jesus' day, some people might have timed their walk home so that they just happened to be in public for the afternoon prayer time.

Or like in Buddhism with prayer wheels. It doesn't really matter if you mean what you're saying. All that matters is you recite the right words and out the other end comes the blessing.

But is reciting the Lord's prayer mindlessly in an evangelical church service or before bedtime any better? I can heap up empty words when I pray.

I can just waffle on as if somehow the length shows how many godly things I've got to say. Or I keep adding things in just to make sure my theology is correct, as if God doesn't get the wrong idea of what theology I have.

[8 : 28] Or instead of saying um in my prayers, I just fill the gap with Lord and Father and saying Father 32 times somehow makes the prayer more acceptable to God.

And what about fasting? In God's eyes, when the Jews put on a sad face as they went about fasting, it was like they were putting ash on their face.

It was just so obvious. And I wonder if this principle of fasting can be applied and extended out to other things. Going without other things to focus on God.

So maybe it's going without sleep because of how early we get up. Or maybe it's going without breakfast to read our Bible. Or going camping, giving up our bed.

Or giving up our phone and our devices to focus on God. Every one of those things I just mentioned, I've heard a Christian tell me that they did. And as I look back, frankly, I didn't need to know that they gave up those things.

[9 : 36] Now we might think all this showiness is obvious. But I think we religious people are often blind to it. It's not so much obvious to those watching on, but like an actor, the audience is fooled by it.

We're taken in. Other people are genuinely fooled, thinking that's a godly person. It's not the public nature of doing these things that's the problem.

Jesus isn't telling us, don't pray in front of others. The problem is the audience we're aiming at. As if somehow the approval of others, thinking that I'm a godly person, can then make me a godly person.

Their approval reassures me that I am a godly person. And we shouldn't even be doing these things for our own eyes. Jesus says, don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

We shouldn't even seek our own approval, dwelling on it. That after we perform, suddenly that performance tells us, I'm a godly person. We need to hear Jesus warning to us.

[10:52] Jesus repeats it. If you need others to see you, then you have your reward in full already. One of the words is the idea of a receipt, paid in full.

All you have, all we have if we are wearing a mask in our religious practices is the fooled opinion of others. But God won't be fooled.

You will miss out on the true reward for giving and for praying and for fasting. And when the secrets of men's hearts are revealed on the final day of judgment, the mask will be taken off.

And we will never recover for all eternity from the shame we will experience as being exposed as mere actors. So is the solution to get rid of religion then?

Get rid of these religious practices. Many have said that's the solution. Karl Marx, Richard Dawkins. Our own day and age. Our society values authenticity above everything else.

[12:05] You be you. The desires you see inside you, be that person. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. But doing that doesn't get rid of the mask.

We just have a different type of mask. It may not look religious, but we're still wearing a mask. And I'm going to borrow heavily from Tim Keller to point this out. Here's what Keller helpfully says.

To have an identity is to have something true of you that is sustained in every setting. Otherwise, there would be no you.

There'd only be masks for every occasion, but no actual face behind them. What about you does not change from place to place to place?

We all need a sense of self. We all need a sense of worth. And to have an identity, you need a stable, core sense of who you are day in and day out.

[13:04] But if your identity is your desires within, they will be changing all the time. If in every situation you seek your own self-interest, responding in ways to get the approval and control you want in the moment, then identity essentially disappears.

Ironically, the emphasis on being yourself results in there being no sustained you left. So that's Keller's words.

Getting rid of religion doesn't actually get rid of the mask. We can all be wearing this mask, whether it's the expectations of others or our own desires that change in every situation.

We need a deeper identity, something stable, something core about who we are that does not change from one moment to the next. So what's the deepest sense of self that will transform both our religious practice and also our approach to material possessions?

We're going to hear more from Jesus next week in the rest of Chapter 6 about the secular way of life that chases after money and possessions. Where do we get a deeper sense of self that will transform our religion and our approach to money and things?

[14:38] Jesus offers us a core sense of self, a deep approval that is given and not earned. Jesus offers us a core sense of self, a deep approval that is given and not earned.

Jesus offers us a core sense of self, a deep approval that is given and not earned. Can you see it? Your heavenly Father. Ten times the Father is mentioned so we don't miss it.

You won't find God being called Father ten times in any Old Testament book. In fact, you won't find God being called Father ten times in all of the Old Testament combined.

Israel should have treated God as their father. But they didn't. The king of Israel could be called a son but not an individual.

Calling God Father, we can take it for granted as Christians but it is new. It comes only with Jesus. In an article I read a little while ago, a woman from Iran starts her story of coming to Jesus with these words.

[16:11] In Islam, there are 99 names for Allah. Not one of them is Father. Everyone in this world, whether religious or secular, without God as Father, they don't know how much they are loved.

They don't know his provision in every circumstance, his direction, his nurturing discipline, his promises, his family, the church to belong to.

Don't have a home to look forward to after death. The world is full of orphans, some religious, some not religious. But with God the Son turning up, everything changes.

This identity he gives us is his identity as the Son of God. And it can't be by our performance. We've just heard in chapter five, Jesus has hammered us.

He's removed any self-righteous leg we thought we had to stand on before God. Knowing God as Father can only be by his incredible forgiveness.

[17:23] That somehow we come to share in the relationship Jesus has with the Father. A Christian is someone who already has the approval of God as their Father because of what Jesus has done, not because of their performance.

And so a Christian doesn't need to perform. We don't need to act. I remember a time when I was in youth group with my brothers and I said a joke that made those who heard it laugh. I made quite a decent crowd laugh and I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. I was pretty chuffed until I caught the eyes of my brother.

The unapproving eyes of my brother, it cut through me. My brother's opinion outweighed the crowd combined and I regret that joke ever since.

How much more than siblings do we value the approval of our parents? When we know our identity as a child of God, his opinion, his delight in us outweighs everyone else combined.

[18:39] Now, I've got to admit, I don't crave this opinion as much as I should. Partly, I think that's because of the actor that still lives in me.

And I think partly it's because I can't see his smiling face. I can't hear his approving words. He is in heaven. He is in secret. But he won't always be in secret.

We know that heaven is coming to earth soon. So we should live every moment anticipating our father's words. Well done. Well done.

But he's not just future. The emphasis here is that God sees what is in secret. He sees what's behind closed doors. In our thought life, in our hearts, attitude.

Your father who sees in secret will reward you. This gives meaning and weight to everything we do, every thought we have when we're doing it for an audience of one.

[19:45] I reckon we're going to be surprised to learn just who God was working through in this world to bring the kingdom of God more fully when Jesus returns.

It's going to be the old man praying at home faithfully. It's going to be the family barely getting by who give generously with a cheerful heart.

It's going to be the uni student who turns his phone off to seek the Lord's face. We can't see those things now. But the point is, the kind of the point is, we don't need anyone else to see it.

We know the father sees it. And he's pleased with that. And where other people can be taken in by a show, our father is not fooled.

So already having his approval in belonging to him through what Jesus has done, seeking his pleasure, that gives us a profound integrity as a child of God.

[20:47] A child genuinely interacts with their father for his sake. Which raises the question for me, what is the reward Jesus doesn't want us to miss out on?

I'm going to suggest a few things that this reward might be. To live always as an actor with a mask means you never know the peace and joy of being a child.

A child doesn't fear the final judgment because we know Jesus has died for us. But a child waits for that final, hearing those final words, well done.

I think that's going to be a wonderful reward, isn't it? The reward of knowing that God is present with us, like Catherine was saying in the kids talk, no matter where we go, our father is present to help us, to forgive us every single moment.

We get the natural reward of these religious activities as well. We don't get some gold medal like in the Olympics. That's not the reward for these things. So in giving to the needy, I get the satisfaction of being like my father in satisfying the needs of others.

[22:05] In praying, I get the reward, not of others seeing me, but knowing that my father hears me, that he's present, and that he's ready to provide for me.

As verse 8 says, he's ready to give. In fasting, in going without, I get the reward of having my heart and my mind refreshed by focusing on what ultimately matters.

And I get the reward in doing these things by, as a child, becoming more and more and more like my father.

There's a lot of rewards. If my core identity is as a child because of what Jesus has done, there will be a deep integrity through all of life as a result, doing things for my father's sake.

And I think this integrity is why Jesus pauses in verse 9 to 15 and gives us a model of how to pray. Because this prayer, this kind of praying shows the deep childlike faith of a Christian.

[23:15] And this prayer also gives us a framework to help us become the child that we are. So instead of the actor wanting the focus to be on himself, the child wants the father to be the focus.

He wants God to be the focus, that the father's name will be made holy, that God would have the highest place in every person's mind and heart all over the world in every society. That's not acting. It's just a God obsession. Instead of performing to the whims of society's standards or my own personal desires, a child wants the father's will to be done, trusting that that is best.

And this God obsession, trusting that God's will is best, that defines my daily needs as a human being. I trust my father to be ready to provide for my every need as a limited creature. And unlike the self-righteousness of the actor, to live in the presence of the perfect father, I don't just need his forgiveness every so often.

[24 : 25] I need to swim in his forgiveness constantly unless I drown. Having been forgiven so much, I pass that forgiveness on to others.

And unlike the self-confident actor who thinks they can remain true to God in their own discipline, a child knows that there is a spiritual battle going on and the battleground is my heart.

And I need the father's protection and power to fight for my love for God. Can you just sense just the integrity of a childlike prayer life?

True religion is just God obsessed, God focused, it's sincere, it's to the point, it's utterly dependent in all aspects of life and it's soaked in forgiveness.

This kind of inner secret integrity is the only thing that will stop us from putting on a mask. And it will make our public life a light in a world full of orphans.

[25 : 35] So if, like me, you want to grow in your private prayer life and prayer attitude, then I think the Lord has given us this prayer to help us.

It's a model of how to pray. We are a child, but using this prayer can help us become more of the child that God wants us to be and all the rewards that come with that.

So let me just finish with two helpful pieces of advice that I've heard in how to pray like this child.

The first piece of advice is from a faithfully praying man all his life who helped found the mission agency CMS.

So his name is Charles Simeon. He found prayer to flow freely when he dwelt on his abundance of forgiveness.

And I think this captures why Jesus says, verse 14 and 15, that the Christian life is essentially marked by forgiveness. So here's what Charles Simeon says.

[26 : 51] By constantly meditating on the goodness of God and on our great deliverance from the punishment which our sins deserve. So constantly meditating on these things.

We are brought to feel our own vileness and our utter unworthiness. And while we continue in this spirit of self-degradation, everything else will go on easily.

We shall find ourselves advancing in our course. We shall feel the presence of God. We shall experience his love. We shall live in the enjoyment of his favour and in the hope of his glory, of being like him.

You often feel that your prayers scarcely reach the ceiling. But, oh, get into this humble spirit by considering how good the Lord is and how evil you are.

And then prayer will mount on wings of faith to heaven. The sigh, the groan of a broken heart will soon go through the ceiling up to heaven into the very bosom of God.

[27 : 59] So there's one piece of advice. I think we try and avoid a sense of unworthiness. But we need to swim in it. Focusing on the goodness of God.

And when we do that, we'll see how unworthy we are. And then we just remember how much we are forgiven. And that will energise our prayers. The second piece of advice is a bit of a practical thing from Martin Luther.

Martin Luther used to take each line of the Lord's Prayer and use each line as a launching point into further prayers, like Catherine did in the kids' tour.

So as we go about our day, I think we can pray in the morning or evening, whenever you do. Times of prayer are good. But I think we should be praying without ceasing.

This is just the oxygen we breathe. So as we go about our day and we grate against frustrations, we pray your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[29 : 05] As we are tempted to be unfaithful to the Lord, we can beg for his deliverance, that we don't have the power in ourselves to fight, and then we can trust that he provides a way out.

As we are angry, we can rejoice in our own forgiveness and our indebtedness, and then ask for help to pass that forgiveness on. As we fret about our finances or the stresses of the responsibilities for the day ahead, we can rest knowing that God is ready to provide all we need as limited creatures.

So there's two pieces of advice to help us be and pray like children. Let me finish with this question. What difference would it make to the integrity of our witness as Christians and as a church family if instead of all the acting that we do for one another, we've constantly remembered and reminded each other of our core identity as a child of heaven, already secure in the Father's approval, empowered by his presence, set free by his forgiveness, and learning to make dependence on him in prayer just the oxygen we breathe throughout the day.

That inner integrity as a child, I think it will transform us. Will you pray with me?

[30 : 48] We need God's help to be the children we are. So let's finish by praying. Our Father, please give us, teach us this core identity as your child.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, who was the perfect son, who was constantly faithful to you. Thank you that we can have a share in his relationship with you.

Lord, thank you for your abundant forgiveness. Help us to swim in your forgiveness. Help us to extend and pass that forgiveness on. Lord, please change each one of us to have that prayerful attitude day in and day out.

Lord, please make us the children that you have called us to be, that we already are. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.