

“The Right Kind of Notice”

The Way of Jesus

Downtown & Lexington

October 18, 2020

All right, we’re just gonna jump right in today.

Matthew 6:1

Beware of practicing 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.

Verse 1 basically sets up this next whole section of Jesus’ sermon. If you grasp what Jesus is talking about in verse 1, you understand what he’s doing in the next chunk of verses.

He gives this warning to “beware”—to look out for, or be on guard against—practicing your “righteousness” in front of other people, in order to be seen by them. **Biblically speaking, righteousness is about right relationships.** Right relationships with God, with yourself, and with fellow human beings or the world around us.

It’s not simply about keeping a set of rules or having good behavior, but it’s all the ways we contribute to the flourishing of the world according to God’s good design - both in ourselves and those around us.

This is actually embodied in the 3 examples Jesus will go on to give: Giving, praying, and fasting...

- v. 2: “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.
- v. 5: 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.
- v. 16: And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

These were considered to be the 3 big practices of a holistic righteous life in the Hebrew tradition.

- **Giving** is indicative of right living or love towards others. The way it reads might make you think of charitable donations and tithing. But it was a bit more than that. It’s important to keep in mind that in the 1st century world there was no such thing as state-run welfare. If the poor and oppressed in a community were going to be cared for, it was gonna happen by the generosity of the community. So, in some respects, you could consider this a lot like some of our justice efforts towards the poor and marginalized today. It includes our financial giving, but it also includes our advocacy and Serve the City efforts and the like.
- **Prayer**, obviously, was a display of relating rightly with God or loving God
- And **fasting** similarly dealt with righteousness within ourselves. We talked about this several months ago in our Lent series, but fasting was a spiritual discipline to train one’s dependency on God by abstaining from earthly things. With fasting, we’re talking about personal spiritual disciplines that are meant to grow our love of God and others.

So, with those 3, Jesus is hitting all the ways we might pursue what God calls righteousness. While maybe we'd express those things differently today - the point is, Jesus is talking holistically about who we are and what we do. How we love others and how we love God. If it has to do with restoring people or the world to how it is supposed to be - whatever the action may be - it is at least a version of "righteousness."

Now, it's worth noting here, that out the gate Jesus assumes that we will indeed do righteousness.

Jesus says "*when* you give to the needy, *when* you pray, *when* you fast"—not *if* but *when*. The expectation is that citizens of the Kingdom - followers of Jesus' way - will in fact live righteous lives - lives contribute to the flourishing of the world as God designed.

I bring that up because I've talked to people who try to take Jesus' teaching here and say, "look, Jesus doesn't want me to be fake. So, since my heart isn't in it. I'm not gonna do anything." This is a complete side note, but if that's you, let me just say this quickly... I love you, but you're wrong.

But, Jesus issues a warning: Be on guard against doing these things just to look good in front of other people.

And I love this about Jesus, because he's coming after something that we all know lies at the heart much of the human condition - the reality that there is always this temptation - no matter what your beliefs are - to do the right thing for the wrong reasons.

And to the people that do that, Jesus assigns a label that actually becomes something of a "Jesus-ism", he calls them "hypocrites." As best we can tell, Jesus was the first one to use this word in this way. Prior to Jesus, the word in Greek that we translate "hypocrite" - "hypokrites" - wasn't pejorative, it just referred to an actor or performer in a play.

Jesus is saying, those who do what they do just to be seen doing it by others - those folks are just actors. They're just performers. They're not the real thing.

Their righteousness is what we might call "theatrical righteousness" - a performance for the applause of others.

Now, obviously, Jesus is speaking to a religious culture to people who show off their piety. That's honestly probably the first image that pops into most of our minds when we hear the word "hypocrite" - some stodgy, religious man - who walks around like he's "holier than thou".

But, since our culture isn't really one where people by-and-large parade around their prayer life and sound off bullhorns when we give to a cause, this can be a little difficult for us to translate into our context.

But, if we were to dig a little bit, I believe we'd find that even if it's not overtly religious-looking, a little bit of this lives in each of us too. Here's what I mean, most everyone wants for people to think we're better than we actually are.

So, for example: Do you ever feel pressure to maintain an image? To keep up an appearance in front of others?

I don't know about you, but I know I certainly do. There is this thing in me that wants to be seen a certain way. For people to think I'm smart, and wise and know what I'm doing. There's this thing in me that seeks to carry myself in a certain way that gives people the impression that "Oh, he's a good father or a good husband."

It's weird, too for me, to be honest, because my job is pretty public. I find myself at times as this mixed bag of motivations - genuinely wanting to teach and lead you in the way of Jesus... and also wanting you to think I'm good at it. It's weird.

And truthfully, I find this has only been heightened in our current cultural moment to post stuff on the internet that shows the world what I'm about and how I'm one of the good guys. Hey look, "I spoke up about this thing that I know everyone thinks I need to speak up about.

That's what Jesus is talking about here.

- For some of us that look really religious. It looks like making sure that people think of you as a "good Christian person". A person who goes to church every Sunday. A person who reads their Bible and prays.
- And for some of us, it's not all that religious-looking. You aren't concerned with people thinking that you love God per se, but you're totally concerned with whether or not they think you're on the right side of history, or that you stand up for the righteous causes. Or at bare minimum are an authentic and genuine person.

You don't have to look any further than how we handle ourselves on social media to know what our culture is actually steeped in this. Call it virtual signaling or slacktivism or whatever, but social media has become this one-stop-shop for righteous theater. "Look at me, look at what I'm about! Look at what I stand for. Look at how good I am." And we treat likes and retweets as justification and validation for who we are and what we do.

And look, I'm not saying that's bad. It's not. We need to speak up about injustice. That's a very righteous thing to do. I'm just saying, we often do it with a theatrical motivation.

I ran across an old friend on social media recently who said, "Hey, Christians, if you aren't being vocal about _____ insert their cause _____ just know the world is watching." And it struck me, "Oh, so is that how we're doing this now? We measure our righteousness by what I tweet?"

Whether that be posting something inspirational about my morning Bible reading or my alliance with a social justice issue - And I'm not really on Instagram or Twitter, but I still even sense this desire in me to win the admiration of people. To do the right looking things to gain their approval.

Now, is it wrong for me to read my Bible in the morning? Of course not. That's actually wonderful and more of us need to do that.

Is it wrong for me to post a picture of how good my time with Jesus was? Of course not. That may spur others on in a way where most of our social media is filled with junk or things that inflame us.

But I have to ask, what is my motivation for wanting others to see my good deeds? Is it to spur them on, or to build some kind of image for myself?

And maybe you do it in other ways

- Maybe you're the person who fishes for compliments.
- Or the type of person that draws attention to yourself in conversation making sure to drop the good things you said or did into the dialogue. You know, just so they know that you think and do the right thing.
- Or maybe for you, it's not in what you do say, but what you don't say. Maybe you're never really honest about your failures or sin. Maybe you sorta dull the edges of the things you need to confess - so you don't look so bad.

The point isn't which group does it or in what ways do you do this, but that this temptation in some form or fashion lives in you. The point is that we are constantly tempted to live for the applause and approval of others - whether that's your Instagram followers or your family, your parents, your friends... maybe your ideological party... your church, or even your LifeGroup.

And to let that applause become the driving motivation behind what we do.

And Jesus warns his people to be on guard against this. But, I find the way he words his warning to be very interesting.

- verse 2: "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.***" Again, in the next example:
- verse 5: 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.*** And then one more time in the last example:
- verse 16: 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.***

Jesus' warning initially seems so... Not severe, right? He doesn't threaten theatrical righteousness with the fires of hell or lightning bolts from heaven or anything like that. He simply says - "those who do what they do to be seen by others have received their reward." Essentially, they've got all their gonna get.

And he just leaves it there. And if you don't pause and think about it, you might fail to realize how sobering that actually is.

He's saying that momentary rush of dopamine, that temporary boost in self-esteem, the momentary affirmation given to you by that person or group of people - at least until you do something that upsets them- those little heart icons accumulating in a fake online world... that is what you get, and that's it.

He's touching on the reality mentioned in **Proverbs 29:25**...

Proverbs 29:25

The fear of man -

which is living for the approval of others

- is a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.

It's a trap.

It looks and maybe feels for a moment really appealing, but doesn't actually give us what we're looking for. The point being that treating the applause of others as the ultimate reward in life is ultimately... a futile endeavor. **Because the approval of people is fleeting and insufficient.**

When I say it's fleeting, what I mean is it doesn't last. You have it for a moment... and then it's gone. And then you gotta do something else to get it back again.

I mean, consider for a moment, how many people in our culture alone who have fallen from grace, right? Like we have a whole word for it now "cancel culture". People who once were held in high regard and applauded by the masses, now condemned. It can turn on a dime. You can be praised one day and cursed the next... or more likely, just forgotten about.

- Your post gets swallowed up in the ocean of online activity. Your good deed gets forgotten with the passage of time. In the case of my sermons, I've learned that's usually by Tuesday.

And this makes it so insufficient. Because it puts us in a spot to always need more. There's always someone else to impress. Always someone else who doesn't know us or hasn't seen what we've done.

It's like a hamster wheel. We never stop chasing it. There has never been a moment in your life, or in mine, where we went "you know, I think after people recognizing that thing that I did, I don't think I need any more human approval for the rest of my life. I'm good now."

We end up living with our emotional state hinging on what other people are or aren't saying about us or what they *might* think about us. We wind up constantly managing our image. Often living into stereotypes of whoever's approval we're chasing - we gotta think a certain way, dress a certain way, act a certain way, vote a certain way - often even conforming to their ideas of righteousness over and above those of God's.

We wind up living under the tyranny of the approval or disapproval of other people - which suffocates us and others - and, in a strange turn of events, instead of contributing to the flourishing of the world as we were meant to do - we wind up contributing to the destruction of it. Spreading insecurity and fear as far as the eye can see.

And I want you to hear me on that: whatever means you use to garner the praise and approval of other people, it will never be enough. You will never speak out about enough social issues, you will never help enough people, you will never quote the Bible enough or pray enough. You will never get enough praise.

There will never ever be a moment where you go “I’m good now. I’ve done enough things, I’m a good enough person. I’m approved of by enough people—I think I’m going to take some time off from all that.

The fear of man won’t let you do that. It’s a snare. It’s a trap. If you live by the approval of people, you will die still wondering if you have it.

And so towards this thing that so many of us think is the ultimate reward, Jesus drops “that’s all”. As if He knows there is something better.

A buddy of mine was telling me the other night he made brownies but his kids didn't know. And after they ate dinner, his kids asked if they could get a piece of candy out of the box where they keep all the Halloween candy they didn't eat yet. Obviously, by this time it’s a year old and gross.

He said he told them, “If that's all you want. If you want to settle for leftover Halloween candy from last year, knock yourself out.” Apparently, his littlest ones took off running for the pantry, but his oldest - whom he should be proud of, might I add - said, “wait, settle? What do mean, settle? Is there something better we could have?!” And he smiled and pulled out the brownies. And of course, everyone just exploded with excitement and came running back.

That's sort of what Jesus is doing here. He’s saying: "You want to settle for acceptance, approval and admiration of others as the defining goal of your life...ok. Knock yourself out." And for those of us who previously thought that was the greatest treasure on earth, he’s encouraging us to stop and say "wait...is there something better we could have?"

And Jesus is about to bring down those brownies...Look back at what he says next in each example.

- Verse 3: “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.***”
- Verse 6: “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. ***And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***”
- Verse 17: “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.***”

When Jesus says do these things in secret. He’s not saying that the point is to hide them. He’s not saying that outwardly you should look unrighteous, but surprise! behind the curtain there was good stuff all along.

We have to remember that this is one part of a larger sermon. Just one page ago, Jesus called his followers to be “salt” and “light” that their good deeds before others would bring God glory.

When he says “secret” here, he’s addressing motivation. And Jesus’ solution to our performance problem is to change the audience. What really ought to motivate the things you do, isn’t the notice of others, but rather the notice of God.

To be honest with you, it blows my mind that Jesus doesn’t say, “But do your righteousness before God’s eyes because that’s the right thing to do” but instead says, **“Do your righteousness where God sees because He will reward you.”**

I come from a tradition that avoided talking about God rewarding what we do. I understand where that comes from - the clear teaching of Scripture is that we don’t earn salvation. Salvation is an unmerited gift through Christ. So, talking about rewards feels like it tiptoes into heresy.

But to be clear, Jesus is not talking about salvation here. But something different. The fact that he puts into the context of a relationship between a father and his children out to remove any commercial element we might be tempted to think about what he’s saying.

Here’s the thing: We are born with a desire to be noticed. Parents of kids know this. Kids are always saying, “Mom, Dad, Watch me! “Watch me ride my bike! Watch me jump off the couch! Watch me climb this tree higher than you’re comfortable with!”... maybe that last one is just us. But, kids clamor for the eyes of their parents.

This is my experience every day when I come home. “Daddy, watch me beat this level in Mario.” “Daddy, listen to this joke!” “Daddy, look at how strong I am!” My usual response is something like “Dude, that is awesome! I love that! You’re funny!” I smile and delight in it. Because these are my kids and I love them and I love that they want to make me smile.

And my kids will do the same things over and over again. They’ll tell me the same jokes for the 100th time because they love to have their Daddy’s smile. Part of what gives them joy is bringing me joy. They aren’t doing it because they think it makes me love them more or less, they do it because they love me and they love what makes me smile.

And the point that Jesus is making is that you are made for the same... but not merely for your earthly parents, but for your Father who is in Heaven. You have a Father in Heaven who loves you and you were made for His delight and applause.

Friends, I want you to know - you were made to be noticed. It’s a part of what it means to be made in the image of God. You were made to be seen. You made to be loved and adored and delighted in and approved of.

But not by the eyes of men... but by the eyes of God, your Father.

And that's the reward of the Father: His delight. God, your Father, sees you, he sees everything you do - regardless of what others see - and when you do the things that align with His will. When you love others, when you pursue him. When you choose to live for His eyes, He delights in you.

I have found that I love the way C.S. Lewis talks about this in his work entitled, *The Weight of Glory*: "The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses... shall find approval, shall please God. To please God... to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness... to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son — it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is."

Somewhere along the way, I fear that many of us started believing that God doesn't delight in the things we do. And I think I understand where it comes from, we want to be sure that we don't give the false impression that things we do earn us anything with God. But, to believe that God doesn't look at what you do and take pleasure in it is ridiculous - and not at all what the Scriptures teach.

2 Corinthians 5:9

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

Ephesians 5:8,10

Walk as children of light . . . and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

I Thessalonians 4:1

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

God takes pleasure in you and what you do. And I love how Lewis says it: that it seems impossible. That it seems like that's too much glory or honor for the Father to bestow to lowly creatures like us" But He does. And it's important that you know this.

As theologian Frederick Dale Bruner writes:

Frederick Dale Bruner

It is important that believers know that their heavenly Father notices what they do, and notices not merely in a deistic way, like a distant grandfather, but in a personal way, as a living Father. Disciples should know their sacrifices are worth it, that their bucking public opinion and visibility gets a response somewhere. Human beings are made (in the image of God) to be noticed and to want to be noticed by God. Jesus... does not give techniques for eliminating... this passion, to be noticed; he redirects it.

The only way to kill theatrical righteousness in your life is to starve it out. Is to stop worrying about other people's eyes, and trust that His are actually the only ones that matter - and to do what you do for an audience of one.

He delights in your pursuit. He delights in your secret place. He delights in you.

And if Jesus is to be believed here - every act of love towards your neighbor. Every pursuit you make to know Him. Every discipline you undertake to become like Him. Every step in following the way of Jesus is seen and celebrated by your Heavenly Father.

There is no gift you give. No out sacrifice you make. No prayer you pray. No encouragement you share. No word or deed that will ever go unnoticed or uncelebrated by your Father in Heaven.

Man, and how good is that to know.

But, the best part, isn't just that God takes notice, but that because of Jesus, **we can have the confidence that this will never fade or change.**

What makes God's delight better than the delight of others - is that it's not something that you can lose.

While the approval and acceptance and admiration of other people is fickle and changes with the wind. Because of Jesus, God's approval and acceptance of you is secured. The good news of the gospel is not that God doesn't care about what we do or why we do it, but that what we do and why we do it will never change how He feels towards us.

And while God takes special delight in our pursuit of Him and his righteousness - just like a parent takes special delight in their child's obedience over their disobedience -because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that forgives and cleanses us from all sin - and justifies our standing as children of God - there is nothing you can do to change any part of the love the Father has for you.

And that means that when it comes to what we do, we no longer have to perform *for Him*, but get to enjoy what brings Him delight *with Him*

We can be free from the hamster wheel of approval. We can be free from the tyranny of trying to be good enough. We can be set free from fear and self-doubt and insecurity. To receive the true life that Jesus gives us.

So, let me just leave you with a few questions for you consider:

- What audience do you live for? The audience of people? Or the audience of God?
- What groups do you tend to want to impress? Who are the people that you want to think well of you?
- Do you care about their approval more than God's?
- Is public you more righteous than private you? When you're around people are you a little more like Jesus than private you. Who prays more? Who sings more? Who serves more? Public you or private you?

Let's repent together. Let's put our methods of self-promotion down and receive the never-ending delight of our Father.

Proverbs 29:25

The fear of man is a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.