

Publicity and Posturing

^{NRS} **Matthew 6:1-8** "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever 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. ⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

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Sometimes sacred texts become so sacred that they stop evoking the very qualities that made them sacred. We can make idols of the words and worship the passage without letting the message transform our lives. For instance, we carp and complain that the Ten Commandments ought to be in the school room and in the courthouse, but we don't keep the Sabbath, hang images of Jesus all over the place, and we covet whatever our neighbor has that is newer, nicer, or bigger than ours. In a similar fashion, we speak highly of the Sermon on the Mount, but are really lax about letting the teachings change our daily lives or transform the very core of our being.

In chapter six of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." The word translated "piety" here was rendered as righteousness or justice in the previous passage. Jesus doesn't distinguish between devotion to God, expressed in acts of worship, and acts of justice and love for other people.

The practices of giving alms and praying were fundamental Jewish practices and Jesus assumed that they would continue. But he said that we are not to make a public display of them. In the previous chapter, Jesus said to let your light shine before others. How do we make sense of this apparent contradiction? It turns out that this is a translation problem. Greek can often be more specific than English. Here again, our southern accent can help. Jesus said, "Individually, you need to practice your piety in private. As a group, y'all need to let your light shine before others."¹ He went on to give some specific examples of personal piety.

Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets." Jesus is using hyperbole; he's making use of humorous exaggeration, to highlight a point. People didn't blow trumpets before they gave money to beggars or the temple coffers. Today, Jesus would say, "When you give, don't blow your own horn!" This ties in with the original meaning of the Greek word hypocrite. A hypocrite was neither good nor bad; the word meant actor. Actors used masks to indicate the character that they were playing. This might be the source of our expression that someone is two-faced. As an actor, one didn't act like their true self on the stage - they played a part and they played to the crowd. Jesus is saying, don't blow your own horn and play to the crowd.

This text isn't only about giving money. The word translated as "alms" also means mercy and benevolent goodwill. If we take this passage as literal in meaning, word for word, we can miss the point and do some pretty unusual things. I visited a church in Dallas one time where everyone went up to a table at the front to give their offering. As they placed the money in the plate with one hand, they held the other hand behind their back, so that their left hand wouldn't know what their right hand was doing.

For those listening to Jesus in those times, giving to the poor wasn't only a humanitarian action, it was a commandment, a religious obligation. (Deut. 15:11) The Jews were to contribute 10% of every third year's produce to the local food bank. (Deut 14:28-29) If each of us contributed 10% of what we spend for groceries and eating out, how much would that be? I'm certain it would be a lot more than what the Nickel for Hunger program raises!

Twice in today's passage, Jesus says, "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you." If you have a King James Version, you might notice that it reads, "Your Father who sees in secret, will reward you openly." One way to understand this verse in the King James is to say that if we give to the poor in secret, God will reward us openly, that is, shower economic wealth on us as a reward. This is one of the foundations for what is called the "prosperity gospel." The general outlook is, if you believe the right things and do the right things, God will bless you with health, wealth, and happiness. The reverse must also be true, that if you're poor, suffer from bad health, and have great misfortune in your life, then it's because you're a bad person, you've made God mad, and you're being punished. Over four hundred years ago, when the King James translation was undertaken, they only had a few manuscripts to work with. Over the centuries, we have found many more manuscripts, most of them much older than those used for the KJV. All of those older manuscripts do not say "reward openly." That is why all of the more recent translations only say that God will reward you, but not that God will reward you openly.

Another way of understanding this passage is that God will reward you with everlasting life in heaven. That's fine as far as it goes, but it overlooks the reward in the present of living more and more in the kingdom of God. The more we're motivated to give by the recognition and praise that we'll receive from other people, the less we're motivated by love for our neighbor and compassion for those who suffer. In our desire to be seen by others, heard by others, and praised by others, we lose touch with the core foundations of communion with God and praising God. But, "Every time we give more of ourselves away, every time we do not ask for a reward, we find that a piece of our own broken lives has been mended."² A real relationship with another person demands that we kind of forget about ourselves in our concern and care for them. "A love which displays its favors or its sacrifices is not love – it is a caricature of love."³

A few years ago I was with a group of people touring a synagogue in St. Louis. Our guide was Rabbi Susan Talve, one of the first female rabbis in the U.S. She asked us, what is it that you don't see? What wasn't present in that whole facility, were any brass plaques honoring any donors. That Jewish congregation had made a conscious decision that they would give generously to build that new synagogue, but that they would all give anonymously. They did that because they loved and respected each other and they didn't want anybody to feel shamed by how little they could give.

"We float in an ocean of God's generosity. All that we have, all that we are comes by the mercy of God. So, when we are generous toward others, we are not writing checks on a limited account. We are drawing from an inexhaustible flow of divine grace; works of mercy never deplete the supply."⁴ "Give generously. Engage the stranger. Care for the needy. As country music singer George Strait reminds us, 'The hearse doesn't come with a luggage rack.'"⁵

Next, Jesus teaches about prayer. A quick reading would leave us pretty sure that prayer is to be private and brief. And that is part of the lesson, here. In those days, pagan prayers were often very public and very long. Seneca, a Roman writer and philosopher, referred to those who "tire out the gods."

The length of the prayer itself isn't the issue. Jesus prayed for long periods of time. (Matt 14:23-25) The issue isn't public prayer itself, because we know that the disciples continued to go to the temple for afternoon public prayers. The issues here are again a matter of motivation. The purpose of prayer isn't to try to impress God with length, formality, or piousness. Even more so, we need to be careful that we aren't slipping into trying to impress other people with our prayers. If five minutes of prayer is good, twenty minutes isn't four times as good.

It's so easy to slip into various habits that can become more ritual than communication. It isn't necessary to use old English when praying. I think most people who use Thee, Thou, and Thine when they pray do so because it seems more formal and respectful. What they probably don't know is that those old pronouns were the more informal and familiar terms used when you were talking with family and close friends. Some people will say God or Father frequently in their prayers. That's okay, if it doesn't just become an empty ritualistic phrase. It isn't necessary to keep repeating God's title in prayer - because you already have his attention. In fact, any phrase that gets repeated a lot in prayer tends to become more of a set formula and less of a sincere conversation with God. We don't need to impress God, or vie for attention, and we certainly don't want to be trying to manipulate God. ^{NRS} **Ecclesiastes 5:2** Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

Sometimes I think pastors have even more difficulty with prayer. There are certain styles of speaking that seem to be almost reserved for prayer. The word order can be shifted around, the vocabulary can become more formal and ponderous; the phrasing can become very stiff or repetitious. Sometimes a minister's prayers in worship services seem to be more of a mini-sermon directed to the congregation than a conversation directed toward God. The point really seems to be to impress or reform the congregation.

All true prayer is spoken only to the secret depths of God. Don't try to impress others with your prayers. Don't try to impress God. Jesus immediately follows today's passage by saying, "pray like this," and gives us the Lord's Prayer. It is short. It is simple. It is direct. It also "reminds us that the Christian life is about 'we' and 'us,' not 'me' and 'I.'"⁶ Jesus tried to teach us how to pray. All we need to do is pay attention!

In all of the Sermon on the Mount that we've studied so far, Jesus has urged us to be transformed, to become different from the culture around us. He's kept on teaching that our attention needs to be less on ourselves and more on God and our fellow creatures. As we make that transition, we actually find that we ourselves are more whole, more fulfilled, more content.

One temptation is to try to find some set of rules, some formula to follow, some set of dos and don'ts that will make everything right. With that legalistic approach we can do everything right, but never let it transform our hearts and minds. We can pray because we're supposed to, not because we have a relationship with God where we need and want to communicate. We can give because we're supposed to - without ever feeling compassion for others. We can attend worship without worshipping.

Our temptation "is to substitute religion for God. We mistake our road map for our destination."⁷ We can stop longing for God and become satisfied with being religious. The ironic thing is that when we become satisfied with being religious, we usually expect other people to notice how religious we are. We tend to become proud of how religious we are, but pride is especially pathetic and obnoxious when it is based on religiosity. And if we give and pray for the praise it will get us from others, our actions are basically irreligious.

Real faith pushes us toward modesty, not self-promotion. "The very purpose of almsgiving, prayer, and religious observance is to deliver us from the debilitating and exorbitant *self*-consciousness that dogs our lives."⁸ "When faith is true . . . we find ourselves . . . liberated *from* the burden of self, liberated *for* the other."⁹ In serving others, we are made whole. In simple prayer focused entirely on God, our relationship with God is most true and pure. Amen

There is an old joke that says that many people would be equally shocked to hear Christianity doubted -- or to see it practiced.

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 15:11** Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 14:28-29** Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; ²⁹ the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

¹ Matt 5:16 Let your light shine before others is second person plural, but in 6:1-4 it is second person singular.

² Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 22

³ Suzanne de Dietrich, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1961) p 40

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 67

⁵ Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 22

⁶ Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 22

⁷ Patrick J. Willson, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 23

⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 24

⁹ Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 24