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AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

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Ever since I was a little boy, I have had a love for film and drama. I remember watching the Saturday matinees in absolute wonder. In those big monster movies, we knew the difference between what was real and what was fake, yet very early on we realized that moviemakers could create perceptions by merging images and story and dialogue together. They could manipulate reality.

These days we live in a very image-driven society. Images are consistently manipulated to make certain impressions. Just think how that is going to play out in this election year. We are going to be bombarded every day, all day long, with images in the media, and those images are almost always going to be some sort of distortion of the truth. A kernel of truth is framed in a certain way. Pictures and words are glued together in a collage of impressions to portray a candidate as the good guy, in contrast to the opposing candidate, so people will vote for him (or her). Truth is not considered all that important. Image is what is important.

There has been a lot of controversy this summer over Michael Moore's movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Moore is hailed as a great prophet by detractors of President Bush. He is derided as a manipulator of truth and propagandist by supporters of President Bush. But wherever you stand on that--the politics aren't important--the truth is that he has given us a wonderful example of editing images and dialogue to create a perception. In our image-driven culture, the saying "Perception is reality" is certainly true.

But you and I are also very adept at creating images, particularly of ourselves. Nowhere is this more prevalent or more deadly than in our spiritual lives. We expend a lot of energy creating a persona to present to others so they will think, "What a great Christian," or, "What a good person!" This problem is as old as the history of mankind. Driven by a sinful desire for recognition and acceptance, humankind has always adjusted perceptions of reality to put a good face on itself.

Jesus encountered this problem in his day. In the passage that we are going to look at in this message, Jesus speaks directly to this issue and to what it costs us spiritually when this is our approach to our Christian life. We are in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, at the beginning of Matthew 6. Before we look at the text, allow me to review the context for the Sermon on the Mount and for this particular passage.

The Sermon on the Mount is a teaching about who the people of the kingdom of God are, how kingdom people should behave, and how we become kingdom people. Jesus delivered this sermon to an audience that almost was exclusively Jewish. Jewish teaching about the kingdom of God was highly refined. Most of the people hearing Jesus would have assumed that they were part of the kingdom of God. They were God's chosen people; therefore they were the kingdom of God. Now, they recognized that at this point they were residing in an insignificant province way out on the edge of the Roman empire, and that politically they had been dominated by other kingdoms for many centuries, but the longing in their heart was for the Messiah-King to come and restore them to their proper place in the world order, to overthrow their current Roman bondage and re-establish them as a great nation at the center of spiritual history.

Jesus gradually unveiled himself to those people as the Messiah-King they had been awaiting. But their

expectations for him had been all wrong because their understanding of the kingdom of God was all wrong. The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps one of Jesus' greatest teachings on the true nature of the kingdom of God.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with what we call the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11), a series of character qualities of true kingdom people. Jesus goes on to teach that God has called his kingdom people to stand out as the salt of the earth, as lights to this world of darkness and confusion and sin, to draw people to God, to help them understand God's forgiveness and grace and holiness. Kingdom people embody God's presence, truth, glory, grace, and love.

In the process of giving this teaching, Jesus did something very radical: he redefined what it meant to be a kingdom person. A kingdom person was not an ethnic Jew. Jesus explained that all of the Old Testament was pointing to him. He was the complete fulfillment of all of it. So in one stroke Jesus redefined a kingdom person not as an ethnic Jew but as a follower of Messiah. "Those who follow *me* are the true kingdom of God," he said.

Jesus then went on to teach in chapter 5 that kingdom people living with absolute loyalty to him as the Messiah-King would live out their lives in a certain way. Such men and women would not be committed to superficial conformity to rules, but would love God from the heart and would seek to serve him from the very core of their being.

Now we come to chapter 6, where Jesus gets very pointed. To be perfectly honest, I don't like chapter 6. It is very, very uncomfortable. It will hit us at the core of what is important to us. In the passage that we are going to look at in this message and the next one, Jesus is going to talk about our approach to spiritual life. Then, in the verses following, which we will look at in subsequent messages, he will begin to open up our hearts and ask us, "What is it you really value? What are you investing your life in? Who are you trusting in?" These questions are disturbing because they force us out of our self-centeredness and cause us to ask ourselves hard questions about what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

Let's read 6:1-18:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. 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. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way:

"Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

As we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[For Yours 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.

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face

so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

In these verses Jesus issues a warning about the way we practice our faith. He uses the three most prominent spiritual disciplines of the Jewish community of his day to illustrate how it plays out in real life. In this message we are going to examine this warning and what is at stake here, and then in the next message we will look at the spiritual disciplines themselves.

A warning about motives

Before we try to understand what Jesus’ warning is about, let’s say what it is not about. First, he is not laying out two different kinds of righteousness. The phrase translated “practicing your righteousness” has the simple meaning of doing righteousness. It is used in other places in Scripture for obedience to Christ, doing what God wants us to do. He is not saying that there are certain acts of righteousness that the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other Jewish leaders are doing, but that his followers are to do a different set.

Second, this is not a debate about public versus private acts of righteousness. It is true that Jesus talks about doing things openly versus doing things in secret, but the heart of what he is saying is not to preclude any public expression of our faith, or we would never have corporate prayer or giving to help the poor. He is not saying all public acts are bad and only private acts are valid.

Third, he is not indicting these acts themselves. There is nothing wrong with giving to the poor, praying, and fasting--quite the contrary! He assumes that his followers will practice these things. It is *when* they give to the poor, *when* they pray, *when* they fast, not *if* they do them. These things have great benefit for us if we understand them rightly. That is why we are going to spend some time in the next message examining them.

If that is what Jesus’ warning is not, then what is his warning about? It is plainly a challenge for us to examine our motives for the things we do in practicing our faith. It is a call to understand what really matters and why as we obey Christ, seek to draw near to him, and even avail ourselves of resources to draw near to him. He questions the *way* that these things were practiced because they were a reflection of the *reason* they were practiced.

As you and I think about the ways that we practice our faith, we must question our deepest motives. Why do we

do the things we do in living out our faith?

Jesus gives us this warning in summary form in verse 1: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them....” If what we do in living out our faith is primarily done because we want other people to watch us and think that we are on the right track, or that we are great spiritual people, or that we are worthy to be leaders or followers, that our lives are right with God, and so on, then we have missed the point. Jesus warns us sternly; what he says in the verses that follow is quite pointed. When we seek to live out our faith simply to be noticed by others, we are going to have no reward from our Father who is in heaven.

Jesus illustrates that warning with three specific public acts of righteousness, of spiritual discipline, if you will, that were being abused in his time. Each illustration follows the same pattern: he warns them not to do this for the praise of men; he guarantees that if they do go ahead and do it for the praise of men, they are going to get that reward, and that reward only; he then instructs them on the correct way to do it; and finally, he says if they do it with the right heart attitude, a different and better reward will be offered to them.

When giving to the poor, Jesus says, “Do not sound a trumpet.” There has been some disagreement among Bible historians about the background of this clause. There is no historical record of accompanying public giving to the poor with the blowing of a trumpet. Some have surmised that because trumpets were blown when public fasts were declared, and often at those times of contrition there were acts of giving to the poor, perhaps these two are bundled together. But regardless of the exact historical background, what was in play here was a deliberate, calculated effort to draw attention to the act of giving. It was a public, ostentatious expression of faith rather than simply giving out of a heart of love for God and love for people.

In prayer, Jesus says not to be like the hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners.” Again, the idea is of putting on a show. The word “hypocrite” is the old word meaning actor, and it simply means to display oneself falsely. Praying in such a way as to draw the attention of other people to yourself is missing the point of prayer.

In fasting, Jesus says not to make yourself look unkempt or gloomy. Once again, people would do these things so everyone would notice that they were fasting, so that others would say, “These people must really be suffering for God! They are really serious.” Sometimes people would even rub ashes on their forehead or cheeks to make their complexion look worse, so that others would think they were really denying themselves. All of this was calculated to achieve the same thing: to get other people to notice.

Now, Jesus doesn’t say such choices are worthless. He actually says the people who do these things will get what they want. If what you want from practicing your faith is other people to notice, that is what you will get--and it is all you will get. “They have their reward in full.” The spiritual principle is very clear here: you basically get what your heart desires. There is an incredibly important warning in these words, “They have their reward in full.”

In the religious culture of our church, we have expressions or practices of faith that are very important to us. This is true in every Christian culture. In the next message we will talk about the value of these. Perhaps coming to church on Sunday and being an active part of the body are examples. And in order to look appropriate in church, we dress in a certain way (although we are pretty casual out here in California). As informal as we are, we have our own liturgy: we sing songs, pray, read the Scriptures, hear the sermon, smile and greet each other on the way out, and so on.

In a church like ours, we put a great and wonderful value on studying the Scriptures, and that is important in getting people into the word of God and helping them grow. But it is so easy to shift over into studying the Bible so that other people will see it and give us credit for that. We can take things that are inherently good, designed to draw us near to God, and translate them into things that will bring the praise of other people, just as Jesus is warning about.

Jesus goes on to tell his hearers how to carry out each of these practices correctly. We will examine that a little more closely in the next message. He talks about doing things in secret so that the Father who sees in secret will reward you. Again, I don't think he is excluding all acts of public piety. He is just calling us to have motives that do not concern what other people say, but only what God sees. He is calling us to desire to honor God by our acts of giving, prayer, and fasting, by all the ways we draw near to him, even coming to church and singing the songs and studying the Scriptures.

For those who seek the Father as their only audience, Jesus says, there is another guarantee: the Father will reward them. (Some versions say he will reward them in public, but actually the phrase "in public" is a late addition, not part of the original text.) I want to call us to consider what is really at stake in this reward from the Father.

Wrong motives yield great losses

Jesus does not lay out in specific detail what this reward from the Father is, but I think he implies heavily that the reward is the Father himself. That is, what is at stake here is intimacy with God. The God of the universe has invited us individually and corporately to enter into his very presence and live in personal fellowship with him. All over the world people have been coming together in congregations in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and have been going through the motions, but God is not there, because they are doing it for the praise of men, or making sure they go through some list of things they are supposed to do. But when we seek God fully and seek to honor him in the practice of our faith, the reward is his very presence. How many times have we bartered away the intimacy with God that he offers us for the meager and far paler affirmation of other people? But vital connection with the living God is at the core of what Jesus is calling kingdom people to. That is his offer to us. That is what he died for. His kingdom is the place where God himself resides among his people, and we have the privilege as the body of Christ of showing forth God's very presence among us.

Flowing out of this great and most important consequence of not heeding Jesus' warning are some other consequences. When we give up intimacy with God because we are more concerned with what other people think than with what God thinks, we also forfeit power for life and ministry. The Beatitudes describe a kingdom person. When you read that list, you come away with the realization that it is something you aren't capable of being. But wonder of all wonders, kingdom people are vitally connected to God himself, and it is his power residing in them that sets them free to be transformed into the kind of people that he has called them to be. It is God's power and his presence in his people, individually and corporately, that allows them to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. So we can't afford to cut ourselves off from vital connection with God.

There is another consequence. When we cut ourselves off from the intimacy that God offers, we rip apart the very fabric of the community of faith itself. The kingdom of God is not a collection of individuals; it is a corporate identity--all of us together, united in Christ, with God present among us. We are a vitally connected family. As Americans we have been taught to apply almost everything to ourselves as individuals. But most of the Scriptures were intended to be applied primarily corporately. When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," that is in part true for just me wherever I am, but that message is given to the church, to the kingdom of God. *We* are the light of the world corporately. But when we as a group of people are living out our faith simply to impress others, we cut ourselves off from that vital, intimate connection with God--and then we cease to be a community of faith. How can we be the kind of people who sacrificially love and care for one another, who join together to present a new way of living to the world that is built not on selfishness but on sacrificial love and grace, if we are all living in our little self-made, masked worlds? It can't happen. As long as the practice of my faith is reduced to just going through the motions, there is no way that my heart can be connected to your heart, no way that we can break through the barriers to truly love each other and truly demonstrate God's presence and power among us.

Now, I wish that I could say that I have all this figured out. I don't. As I said before, I grew up loving movies, and I think somewhere along the line I learned that you can get the approval you crave by presenting yourself in a certain way. I developed a pattern of creating personas. I was in a lot of drama and theater, and I was really a

performer at that point. One of my personas was an athlete. One of them was involved in politics. All were ways I presented myself to other people. “I am the basketball player.” “I am the actor.” “I am the student leader.” And so on. I learned as a performance-oriented person that I had the skill of making a good first impression. But from the moment I made that impression, I lived in fear that if somebody really got to know me, they wouldn’t like me anymore. What if they saw through the persona that I had presented? That has been my struggle all through life. God’s grace is transforming and freeing me from that, but there are days when I still fall back on a persona: “I am the pastor.”

All of us are good at creating these little personas that we present to others, but it is such a hindrance to true community and to our true fellowship with God. There is so much at stake here that Jesus pulls the gloves off, looks into our faces, and says, “Beware! When you do that, you are giving up a lot! The things that really matter, you are going to lose.”

What does this mean for us as a church body? It means we have to ask ourselves hard questions individually and corporately. We have to be willing to say, “Lord, why are we here? Why do we do the things we do?” Of what value is it for us to gather together and share the word of God and pray and sing, if all of it is just a show? Now, honestly, I don’t think that is true of our church body. But every one of us knows how easy it is to slide into that. So my challenge to myself and to all of us is to say, “Lord, teach us how to draw near to you with a heart that is about you and you alone.”

I am a big baseball fan, so I love baseball stories. I don’t know whether this one is apocryphal or true. Babe Ruth once came up to bat. (He was the greatest athlete of his day, but he was an egomaniac and a crazy guy.) The pitcher threw the first pitch, and Babe didn’t swing at it. The umpire called it a strike. Ruth stepped out of the batter’s box and glared at that umpire as if to say, “How dare you?” He addressed him: “Ump, me and forty thousand people know that last pitch was a ball.” The umpire replied, “Yes, but mine is the only opinion that matters.”

At the end of the day, God’s opinion is the only one that matters. It doesn’t matter what I think of you or what you think of me. I hope we will get to the place where our fellowship is deep and intimate and personal in the light of God’s grace. But in the end, what matters is God’s point of view. His opinion of our worship, our Bible study, our preaching, our singing, our teaching, our praying is the only one that matters. So we have to ask ourselves when we come together to worship, “Who is our audience? Is it each other? Or is there indeed an audience of one, God alone, whose favor we desire?”

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Matthew 6:1-18

Ninth Message

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