

GOD WILL SEE

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 6:1-4
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Matthew 6:1-4

Paul Scofield won the Academy Award for best actor in 1966, but he wasn't present for the ceremony. Michael Caine, another actor, said he asked Scofield's wife later where he was when he heard the news. "On the roof of our barn, mending it," she said. Caine persisted, asking Scofield's wife what he said. "Oh—you know, 'Isn't that nice dear?'"

Caine, who himself has won two best actor Oscars, notes the contrast between Scofield's reaction and that of other Academy Award winners: "Whenever I see the tears and tantrums at today's ceremony, I always think of Paul and smile." Scofield, for whatever reason, needed neither awards nor applause. He was remarkably free simply to practice his craft.¹

Sounds good, doesn't it? Are you free like that? If not, would you like to be?

With Matthew 6, we move into a new section in the Sermon on the Mount. How does the deep goodness that Jesus wants for us work itself out in giving, prayer, and fasting? First up: giving.

To be seen

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."

When we hear the words "your righteousness," they take us back to earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said "your righteousness" must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). The righteousness that Jesus offers his followers is a deep goodness that is nurtured by relationship with God. "Your righteousness" is thus connected to "your Father," who is in heaven.

Practicing goodness—or doing good deeds in the service of God—is putting deep goodness into

practice. However, Jesus warns us not to practice our goodness in order to be seen by people. He doesn't have a problem with practicing goodness before other people—sometimes there's no other way to do it—but with doing so for the purpose of being seen by others.

After all, earlier in the sermon, Jesus said, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). In Matthew 5:16, the motivation is not to be seen by others but to honor God.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus observes a poor widow making an offering in the temple, but the widow didn't make the offering in order to be seen. In fact, it looks as if she had no idea that anyone, least of all Jesus, was watching (Mark 12:41-44).

If we practice our righteousness for the purpose of being seen, Jesus literally tells us "you are having no reward from your Father who is in heaven." The implication is that if we practice our righteousness the way Jesus wants us to practice it, we, beginning in the present, have a reward from our Father in heaven. If we practice our goodness in order to be seen by people on earth, we miss out on such a reward.

To be praised

Matthew 6:2:

"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."

Jesus now turns his attention to a particular expression of goodness: giving to the needy. The Mosaic Law commanded care for the needy, and Jesus' words assume that gifts to the needy should continue as a regular practice (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 15:11). The words "give to the needy" would be more literally translated "practice acts of mercy." Our Father in heaven has been merciful to us;

therefore, we should be merciful to others. In this case, we should care for the needy, and we should make caring for the needy a regular practice.

But we should not give to the needy the way some people give to the needy: we should not do so in order to be seen by other people for the sake of being praised by them. That's the way hypocrites do it. They give in a public way and call attention to themselves because they want to be known by others as benefactors.

Literally, hypocrites want "glory" from people. Instead of letting their light shine before others so that others will see their good works and give "glory" to their Father in heaven, they let their light shine, as it were so that others will see their good works and give glory to them. These people take the place of God, seeking the glory from others that should go to him. They steal from God the glory that he deserves.

These hypocrites practice deception. They want to be seen as doing something for one reason when, in fact, they are doing it for another reason. It is quite possible that they are even deceiving themselves, having convinced themselves that they are giving to the needy because they care for the needy and want to glorify God.

When other people praise these hypocrites, Jesus says, "they have received their reward"—literally, "they have their reward in full." In other words, they got what they wanted, praise from people, and there is nothing more to get, at least until the next time they call attention to themselves.

Paul Scofield, the Academy Award-winning actor, said, "I decided a long time ago I didn't want to be a star personality and live my life out in public. I don't think it's a good idea to wave personality about like a flag and become labeled."

What not to live for

There are multiple problems with living for the praise of others. Here are a few of them:

First, living for the praise of others makes you beholden to the opinion of others. It makes you more likely to do things or not do things based on what others think about you. Perhaps they're right. Perhaps they're wrong. It gets especially problematic when some praise you for doing something while others criticize you for doing the same thing. When you repeatedly do things

based on what others think of you, you're living in fear, not freedom. In this way, some people become addicted to applause.

Second, if you live for the praise of others, you're likely to derive your sense of yourself based on the opinion of others. But think about it: if you derive your sense of yourself based on the opinion of individuals, who are invariably flawed, your sense of yourself is going to be flawed.

Third, if you live for the praise of others, you'll be inclined to try to be who you think they want you to be, whether or not that's who you are. You'll be more or less performing for others. In a sense, you'll be deceiving them, as the hypocrites who trumpeted their benevolence were deceiving the onlookers. You can keep it up for a while, as actors can, but eventually, you may start to feel a certain dissonance.

Frederick Buechner describes what happens to us:

Starting with the rather too pretty young woman, say, and the charming but rather unstable young man who together know no more about being parents than they do about the far side of the moon, the world sets in to making us into what the world would like us to be, and because we have to survive after all, we try to make ourselves into something that we hope the world will like better than it apparently did the selves we originally were. This is the story of all our lives, needless to say, and in the process of living out that story, the original, shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us end up hardly living out of it at all. Instead, we live out all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather.²

Finally, if you live for the praise of others, what happens when you die? What good is the praise of others going to do you when you stand before God? Do you think he's going to take a poll? Is he going to count up the "likes"? You can trumpet your goodness all you want, but it will do you no good at the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:22). As General George C. Patton observed, "All glory is fleeting."

Brennan Manning writes:

After I delivered a forty-five-minute sermon titled "The Victorious Limp," the assembled community of 11,000 rose to its feet and erupted into thunderous applause. My shadow self that hungers for honor, recognition, power, glory and human respect experienced an instant

*of gratification. My false self that thrives on the illusion that my real identity lies in ministerial success, homiletic triumph, victories in the vineyard, stellar book reviews and the admiration of others basked in the chorus of adulation. In that fleeting moment of euphoria, God took pity on his poor, proud son. Immediately I was given a vision of myself lying in a coffin. The funeral home had closed, the place was deserted, my embalmed body was lying in the coffin completely alone. I had run out of time.*³

In the first century, Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them . . .” Today, I wonder if he might say, “Beware of posting on social media before your ‘friends’ in order that they might ‘like’ you.” I don’t imagine him having a problem with posting per se; I imagine him having a problem with posting for the purpose of being liked.

Later, Jesus identifies scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites (Matthew 23). The kind of “righteousness” practiced by scribes and Pharisees was hypocritical. The righteousness that we practice must be of a different sort. If we’re not to live for the praise of others, what are we to live for?

Give in secret

Matthew 6:3-4:

“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.”

Jesus is obviously speaking figuratively, for a hand can’t “know” anything. If we are not to give in order to be praised, and we still want to be praised, we might then praise ourselves. In one of Jesus’ parables, a Pharisee praises himself, praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11-12).

If we give with our right hand and no one sees us, we might make sure our left hand takes notice, so to speak. Then our left hand can say to our right hand, “You’re such a generous hand!” In the parable, the Pharisee is letting his left hand know what his right hand is doing.⁴

Instead of giving so that we might be seen by others, with the ultimate purpose of being praised by them, we

should give “in secret.” This kind of giving prevents us from giving in order to be praised by others. We still might harbor some desire to be praised by others, but if we give in secret, we will not be acting on that desire. If you don’t act on wrong desires but instead act in such a way to prevent you from acting on wrong desires, your desires will begin to change.

When we give in secret, we should not think that we are escaping notice, because our Father in heaven “sees” in secret. Those who seek and receive praise from people have the reward they are looking for, but if we give in secret, our Father in heaven will “reward” us.

What’s the nature of the reward in this passage? If the praise of others is the reward for those who trumpet their generosity, the praise of God is the reward for those who conceal their generosity. If we resist the temptation to seek the praise of others, and we resist the temptation to praise ourselves, we still want praise. We *rightly* want praise. We want praise because we were made for praise.

God created us to serve his purposes, and when we do, he is pleased. God created us not least to practice goodness, to practice acts of mercy, because he is good, because he is merciful. When the daughter or son thinks and acts like the Father, the Father is pleased.

When will the Father reward us by praising us? Of course, he will reward us in the new and eternal creation, when we hear the Son of Man say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

But if we are doing what Jesus asks us to do, if we’re fulfilling our Father’s purpose for us, and if we know that the Father will praise us in the future, can we not hear his praise in the present? Of course we can. The Holy Spirit has been given to us in the present as a “guarantee,” or down payment, of our future inheritance, so that we experience now in part what we will experience in full later (Ephesians 1:14). We hear his praise by feeling his pleasure as we resonate with his purposes for us.

Mailing cash

The straightforward application of Jesus’ words is to give to the needy without letting others know that you’re doing so and without letting them know how much you’re giving.

Years ago, when I was part of a fellowship, I heard that one of the sisters was hurting financially. I decided

I wanted to help, but I wanted to do so without her knowing about it. I put some cash in an envelope, without a return address, and mailed it to her. It felt really good to do it. It was fun. It felt as if God were rewarding me for doing it as if simply doing it were reward enough.

Later, I overheard her telling others what had happened to her and that she was overwhelmed with gratitude. That made me feel even better about what I had done. Then she said she desperately wanted to know who had mailed her the money. She said she asked pretty much everyone she could think of and no one fessed up to it. Then I started to wonder, well, why didn't she ask me whether I had sent the money.

Frankly, that's why I feel I can tell you the story and feel that I'm not trumpeting my generosity (I won't tell you how much I gave, but it wasn't that much). If I had any inclination to feel proud about myself for being generous, I was immediately humbled when I learned that I was not someone my friend thought enough of to ask whether I was the one who mailed her the cash.

What to live for

If we're not to live for the praise of others, what are we to live for? We are to live not least for the praise of our Father who is in heaven. He created us and then redeemed us in Christ to be his sons and daughters, to be like him, to be his representatives on earth. In a general sense, from the perspective of the words of Jesus here, he created us to be merciful to the needy.

He's merciful. He's been merciful to us, the needy. He created us and then redeemed us not least so that we might be merciful to others, especially those in need. When we practice deep goodness and give to the needy, he is pleased, provided that we don't trumpet our generosity.

Observing that Jesus tells us that we must "become like children" to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3), C.S. Lewis writes that "nothing is so obvious in a child—not in a conceited child, but in a good child—as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised." Lewis continues:

I am not forgetting how horribly this most innocent desire is parodied in our human ambitions, or how very quickly, in my own experience, the lawful pleasure of praise from those whom it was my duty to please turns into the deadly poison of self-admiration. But I thought I could detect a moment—a very, very short moment—

before this happened, during which the satisfaction of having pleased those whom I rightly loved and rightly feared was pure. And that is enough to raise our thoughts to what may happen when the redeemed soul, beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, learns at last that she has pleased Him whom she was created to please.⁵

How do we learn to live for the praise of our Father in heaven instead of the praise of people on earth?

First, learn from experience that living for the praise of others is a dead end. Living for the praise of others makes us beholden to the opinion of others, it makes us live in fear, it creates addiction, it gives us a flawed sense of ourselves, it turns us into performers, it creates a certain dissonance within us, and it profits us nothing when we stand before God. And that's only a partial list.

Second, learn not only who you are in a general sense as a son or daughter of your heavenly Father but also learn who you are in a specific sense, who he made you to be, how he's gifted you. The Father wants to help you recover, through the redemptive work of his Son and the illuminating work of his Spirit, what Buechner calls your "shimmering self." What gives you joy? When does what gives you joy bless others? If you live with those two questions for a while, you'll begin to get a sense for who God made you to be and gifted you to be in a more specific sense.

Third, as you practice who you are, both in a general sense as a son and daughter and in specific sense in accordance with how the Father has made you and gifted you, feel his pleasure as your resonate with his purposes for you.

Feel his pleasure

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, based on the life of Eric Liddell, Liddell's sister is worried that his running is distracting him from a more noble purpose: serving God as a missionary in China. Liddell listens hard for what God is telling him.

Finally, Liddell informs his sister that he's going to China but not until after he competes in the Olympic Games: "I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt."

But it wasn't as if Liddell were living for the applause of people. He competed in the 1924 Olympics and won

the gold medal in the 400 meters. Afterward, the real Eric Liddell said this: “It has been a wonderful experience to compete in the Olympic Games and to bring home a gold medal. But since I have been a young lad, I have had my eyes on a different prize.”

The praise of others meant little to him. The praise of God meant much more.

For many of us, it’s a hard road to freedom. The other voices seem louder than the voice of God. The other voices masquerade as the voice of God. But on the road, we seek him—exactly what he wants us to do. As we seek him on the road to freedom, we feel his pleasure.

The Sistine Chapel

Michelangelo spent four excruciating years painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel while working from a hanging scaffold. When he was asked why he was working so hard on a dark corner of the chapel that no one would ever see, Michelangelo is said to have replied, “God will see.”

I’m no art historian, but I’ve spent some time reading about Michelangelo, and in my two trips to Florence and one trip to Rome, I think I’ve seen every work of art of his that’s on display in those two cities. Near as I can tell, he was being who God made him to be, creating works of art that blessed others.

And your Father who sees in secret will punish you.

No?

“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Ah!

Endnotes

- 1 Michael Caine, *The Elephant to Hollywood* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010), 70.
- 2 Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperSF, 1991), 45.
- 3 Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 188.
- 4 The meaning of Jesus’ figure of speech emerges with a more literal translation. Literally we are not to “do” our righteousness before others or “do” our acts of mercy in order to be praised by them. While we are literally “doing” acts of mercy, we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is “doing”: we should not do with our right hand in order to be seen by our left hand.
- 5 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 33.