

Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18; *Authentic Spirituality or a Cheap Imitation?*

From the moment we are born, we begin to seek attention. A baby learns very quickly that a loud cry will turn heads. A child's first smile, first step, and first word draws attention from others. Before long, the first word turns into many words. And here are two of the most powerful words ever uttered by the tongue: *watch me*. How many hundreds of times did we say these words as children? *Watch me!*

"Daddy, *watch me* jump into the pool." "Auntie, Uncle, *watch me* ride my bike." The student athlete, musician or dancer scans the audience to see if their friends and loved ones have come to watch them perform. The class clown acts out, seeking attention and applause--*watch me, notice me, pay attention to me*--it's not pathetic, it's human; we all do it in our own way.

illus: I was born in the 70's but grew up in the 80's. Where I grew up, in Surrey, in the 80's, the hair was long and the jeans were tight--today they call them "skinny jeans" but in the 80's we called them "tight", and where possible, we liked them acid-washed.

My elementary school boasted a significant group of grade 7 students, all decked out in their tight, acid-washed jeans, the long hair, and 3/4 length Metallica T's; they were what we called "head bangers." And when this group wasn't sneaking off school grounds to smoke at lunch time, they were engaging in their other favourite past-time: drawing the attention of the crowd. Here's what they would do: they used to run toward the baseball backstop and then leap as high as they could, smashing their foreheads into the metal wire. I know what you're thinking--*why?* And I think you know the answer: we all have our ways of getting noticed.

Watch me. This isn't something we grow out of when we get older; it doesn't go away, but it often goes underground. We become more subtle and sophisticated but we haven't really changed; we're looking around to see who will notice us.

illus: I bought myself a pair of sunglasses this Summer--Ray Bans--they retail for over \$200. Some might find that impressive, but would they be less impressed if I went on to say that I bought these sunglasses in Thailand? From a street vendor? For under \$5? If you're thinking to yourself, "they can't be *real* Ray Bans," you would be right, they're not.

They are a fake, a copy, a cheap imitation--Naomi and I, and our two kids bought matching pairs for a few pictures on the beach. They are easily the worst sunglasses I've ever owned; they were constantly fogging up in the heat and humidity. But they looked good, and sometimes, isn't that all we're really hoping for?

Both our desire to be noticed and our tendency to prioritize the "appearance" of things makes for a dangerous combination when it comes spirituality. We may find ourselves bypassing genuine, authentic, spirituality, because cheap imitations can be found all around us. In Jesus' *Sermon*, He warns against settling for a form of spirituality that has no substance, no depth, and no life.

William Shakespeare once said, "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players". He was quite right of course. But the question is, *in your life with Jesus, will you be content to play a part, to perform for the crowd, or will you come to Him (and others) as you are?* Authentic Spirituality, or, a cheap imitation? The choice is yours.

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Let's open our Bibles and listen to what Jesus says. This morning's text can be found in Matthew 6:1-6, and 16-18; page 1504 in the Blue Bible in front of you.

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Before we get into what Jesus said, I want to invite you to notice how He has structured things--He's brilliant as a teacher. **First**, in vs. 1, Jesus offers His thesis statement: *"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."*

With this thesis, Jesus sets the table for what's coming. He's going to talk about "practicing righteousness," that is right-living, living in right relationship with God. Let me put Jesus thesis into my own words: *live God's way--in other words "rightly," remembering that God Himself is the real audience; if you play-act for the crowd, you'll miss the whole point.*

Following His thesis, Jesus draws attention to three spiritual practices--**giving, praying, and fasting**--each of these spiritual practices hold the possibility of drawing near to God, or, playing to the crowd. And in each of these examples, Jesus' teaching follows a specific pattern (show table on powerpoint).¹

	Giving	Praying	Fasting
The Observance	6:2a	6:5a	6:16a
Prohibition ("do not")	6:2b	6:5b	6:16b
Motivation	6:2c	6:5c	6:16c
Substitute Reward	6:2d	6:5d	6:16d
Alternative Observance	6:3-4a	6:6a	6:17-18a

¹ Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Sermon On The Mount*, 152.

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	Giving	Praying	Fasting
Father's Reward	6:4b	6:6b	6:18b

Mt. 6:2-4

- observance: *so when you give to the needy*
- prohibition: *do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the street*
- motivation: *to be honoured by others*
- substitute reward: *Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full* (they've got the only reward they'll get)
- alternate observance: *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.*
- Father's reward: *Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Jesus uses this same pattern when He speaks about praying and fasting. We'll get to these two subject later, but for now, let's turn our attention to Jesus' words about financial giving.

(a) Giving: in His prohibition in vs. 2, Jesus makes mention of the "hypocrite". In the ancient Greek world, the word "hypocrite" was not a derogatory term; it was a job description. *Hypocrites* were actors, who played a role to entertain the crowd. Jesus picks up on our play-acting tendencies, He exposes our desire for honour at the expense of our integrity. When our behaviour is out of sync with our words--or our motives--we are walking in the way of the hypocrite.

So what is Jesus saying? Should we ban our public offering every Sunday? Maybe blindfold the ushers or gouge out the eyes of those

who count the offering? That would make it fairly challenging to recruit new members to the counting team. No, the problem isn't in other people seeing us give, the problem lies in our motivation. If we give, hoping that people will notice, hoping that we will be thought well of, our "giving" is transformed into "performance"--we've made it about us, not about God, and certainly not about others. By making a show of what we give, we may fool the crowd, we may fool ourselves, but we deserve the label of "fool" if we think that God can't see through the smokescreen.

Of this kind of giving, Jesus said, "*Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full,*" in other words: whatever applause they receive is the only reward they'll get. Jesus teaching plunges beneath the surface of our behaviour to expose our internal motivation. He begs the question: *who and what are you living for?*

There is another way to give of course: "*do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" Give in secret, or at the very least, give whatever God asks, to whomever God directs, with as little attention and fanfare as possible. This is authentic spiritual practice, the kind of right living (*righteousness*) that the Father will reward. Let me offer a word about reward before I continue.

Jesus speaks about reward frequently, but many well-meaning Christians want to steer clear of the subject altogether. *Why?* Because this talk of "reward" seems to contradict our understanding of grace. Here's how I hold these two in tension. I believe that we receive God's gift of salvation by grace, through faith, not by working to earn it.

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illus: When an employee receives their paycheck, they are getting what is owed to them; it's not a reward. A year end bonus is something different altogether--it's a reward, a gift, an invitation to share in the abundance of the owner. And so it is with our Father in heaven. Everything we receive from Him can be classified as gift, not paycheck. But there is reward, or put differently, there is greater gift when we centre our life upon and around Jesus Christ. He Himself is the reward since He is what we seek. His love, His joy, His strength, His wisdom, these and many more things are multiplied within us as we live God's way, and for God's eyes.

(b) Praying: let's move on to talk about praying (Mt. 6:5-6)

- observance: *And when you pray*
- prohibition: *do not be like the hypocrites*
- motivation: *for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.*
- substitute reward: *Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*
- alternate observance: *But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.*
- Father's reward: *Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Let me paint a picture of the context Jesus was speaking into, one very different from our own. In Jesus' day, there were prescribed, daily, rhythms of prayer in the worship of God. Faithful Jews prayed three times a day: before bed (this was start of the new day in the Jewish conception of time), when they woke from sleep, and at the

time of the afternoon sacrifice (3:00 p.m.).² When the hour of prayer came, people prayed wherever they happened to be--in public or in private.

Again the problem wasn't public praying per se, but praying in public so that others would take notice. It appears from Jesus' teaching that less-than authentic pray-ers would "just so happen" to find themselves near a crowded street corner, or, near an important synagogue when the hour of prayer came. Being conspicuous in prayer misses the whole point--the attention is focused in the wrong direction.

I've come to believe that certain prayers travel further than others; when we pray to impress, the words come out of our mouth and fall straight to the floor. The crowd may applaud the performance, but God won't be among our admirers. He doesn't take these kinds of prayers seriously because clearly, we're not taking them seriously either. Our motivation matters.

Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*" This is a sobering thought. If we are satisfied with building a spiritual "reputation," we might gain what we seek and miss out on genuine encounter with God. Applause in the ear is a poor substitute for satisfaction in the soul, but God will honour our choices, even the bad ones.

"Instead" says Jesus, "when you pray, find the most private place you can, where prying eyes and listening ears won't distract you from the real audience--your Father in heaven. There, in that secret place, your unseen Father will hear your "unseen" prayer.

² McKnight, 163.

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Now let's turn our attention to fasting.

(c) Fasting: Mt. 6:16-18

- observance: *When you fast*
- prohibition: *do not look somber as the hypocrites do*
- motivation: *for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.*
- substitute reward: *Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*
- alternate observance: *But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen*
- Father's reward: *and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

There is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding when it comes to the purpose of fasting. Fasting isn't for the spiritually elite, nor is it for those eager to get what they want from God. What Jesus makes plain is that fasting can be turned into a spiritual performance just like every other spiritual practice.

Listen to God's indictment of His people, found in Zechariah 7:5-6, "*When you fasted...[liked I asked you to, during religious festivals,] was it really for me that you fasted? 6 And when you were eating and*

drinking [at these same religious festivals], were you not just feasting for yourselves?"

Scot McKnight writes, "the focus of the Bible on fasting is *not on what we can get* from fasting...but instead lands squarely *on responding to sacred moments in life.*"³ When Israel's army suffered defeat, people would fast and pray. When God's name was dishonoured because of sin, people would fast and mourn. When a someone was sick, injured, or killed, others would fast and pray. Those who were longing God's glory, His kingdom, His peace, would fast and seek God.⁴

Jesus encountered people who were fasting to gain a name for themselves; He saw right through them: *look at me, notice me, think highly of me.* This kind of fasting is like high heels on a sheet of ice--it's going nowhere fast. McKnight writes, "We live in a world of evaluations, assessments, and measurements, but Jesus turns his gaze deeper because he knows that what is measurable can be faked."⁵ Motive is what matters to Jesus.

In the time remaining, I'd like to offer a few suggestions by way of application. The first has to do with the giving and the second has to do with praying.

1. A few words on Giving

³ McKnight, 194.

⁴ C.f. Lev 16:29-31; 23:26-32 (Day of Atonement, mourning over sin); Psalm 35:11-16 (praying for the sick); Mark 2:18-22 (longing for the kingdom).

⁵ McKnight, 198.

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I first learned about the importance of financial giving when I was a small boy. I saw what biblical, financial, giving looked like, lived out through my mom and dad. Their pursuit of God took precedence over the pursuit of money. The dreams they dreamed for us didn't have "net worth" attached to it. My parents talked with us about who we were becoming, and we knew that financial giving would profoundly shape our character. What they said "stuck." It resonated.

My parents gave financially to the local church, to missionaries, and to people in need. *They gave regularly*--every month--not when it suited them, or they had money left over. *They gave thoughtfully*, asking Jesus to direct their giving, and to bless those who would receive it. *They gave generously*--sometime far above what they thought they could "afford".

Billy Graham once said, "God has given us two hands -- one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for giving."

I learned from observing my parents that giving isn't an act of nobility, it's an act of humility and faith. When we give, we recognize that everything we have has been given to us by a gracious God; we give humbly in response to the Giver of all things. Our giving is an act of faith: we place our lives, our needs, and our bank accounts in God's hands.

The reward in giving isn't in being recognized, or, in God paying us back for what we gave. The reward is in knowing that our obedience in giving brings Him honour and pleasure. The reward is in knowing that as we give, we are being joined to Him, and becoming like Him.

If you have personally experienced this sense of blessing through giving financially, I would like to hear your story--please send me an email in the coming weeks.

In two weeks time, Jesus' *Sermon* is going to bring us back to the subject of money. But unlike Capital One, Jesus isn't going to ask "what's in your wallet?" The more important question is, "what's in your heart? What do you treasure?" I wonder, who has the greater hold on your heart, money or God? Stay tuned for more.

2. And now a few words on praying.

From my own experience, inauthentic prayer can happen in a crowd, but it can happen just as easily in a secret closet. In our text this morning, Jesus warned against public prayer performance, and many of us have seen it firsthand.

Father, I want to thank you for Jesus, thank you for atonement, for His propitiating work on the cross. Father, I realize that most of the people around this circle don't even know what propitiation means but I know, and I know that You know that I know, and praying about it now Father, it makes me feel so important...God thank you for me, for how much I know, for how my praying brings you glory.

I'm laying it on a little thick, I know, but we've all heard prayers that aimed to impress everyone but God. It's usually more subtle than that, but it's there, just under the surface, in all of. This performance spirit isn't innocent, it's insidious. It will destroy any chance of "real" conversation and connection with God.

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Jesus' warning is particularly applicable to ministry leaders--pastors, elders, small group leaders, prayer ministry leaders--because we regularly stand with and/or before others to pray. We need to ask ourselves, *do we pray different in front of people than when we are alone? Are we prayerful and eloquent before people, and prayerless on our own time?* As a pastor I need to regularly face this question. Do I pray only on "church time"? Do I take a vacation from God when I'm not on duty?

Whenever there is a disconnect between our public and private praying, there's a possibility that we are playing to the crowd and settling for a cheap imitation of conversation with God. We are neurotic about what others think of us; it's a clear sign that we don't think much of ourselves (we're deeply insecure), and, that we aren't regularly hearing what the Father thinks of us. *Remember who you are praying to--the Father who loves you. Remember that He sees you completely--there is nothing to hide and no need to perform.*

Public prayer performance is one danger, but private prayer performance is equally dangerous. Many of us become prayerless in private, not because we are busy, but because we won't let ourselves be real. When is the last time you have prayed any of the following:

- *Father, I am lost, confused--I'm ready to quit on you and on life*
- *Father, I am caught in sin and I can't stop--I'm not sure I want to stop.* Augustine, of church history's greatest theologians, once prayed, "Lord, give me sexual purity...but not yet."
- *Father, I am angry at you for not giving me what I want.*

This is "real" prayer--bringing our real feelings, thoughts, and issues into conversation with God. We perform in private prayer whenever we leave out what's "real."

People who are angry or disappointed with God often become prayerless and it's not because they don't have anything to say.

They say to themselves, "*I can't be angry with God, He's done so much for me, expressing anger would be ungrateful and selfish.*" And so they ignore their anger, pushing it off to the side, so that they can pray nice prayers, thankful prayers, and ultimately, inauthentic prayers. After awhile, they stop praying altogether because they've eliminated the possibility of saying anything "real."⁶

Again, *remember who you are praying to--the Father who loves you. Remember that He sees you completely--there is nothing to hide and no need to perform.*

God is good, utterly, thoroughly good, and He has life in store for you. Come to Him with your dark shadows. Come with your wounds. Come with your longings and desires. Come and receive life. His life.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

⁶ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 73.