

Are We Playing The Hypocrite?

Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

Introduction: 1) Why do people not go to church? That is an important and interesting question that will receive a number of different answers. Among some of the more common you might hear are:

- 1) Church is boring.
- 2) The services last too long.
- 3) I got hurt in the church.
- 4) They only want my money.
- 5) I don't like organized religion.
- 6) The church has become too political.
- 7) My needs are not being met.

However, the one that I have heard the most throughout my life is one you will easily help me in finishing the sentence. "The reason I don't go to church is because the church is filled with ...hypocrites." Now, how should we respond to this rather pointed accusation? I think that we can say a couple of things. First, we plead guilty as charged. The church is full of sinners who sin in all sorts of ways including hypocrisy. Second, we recognize hypocrisy is a sin we are particularly susceptible to, so much so that the Lord Jesus addresses it head on in the Sermon

on the Mount in Matthew 6. Interestingly, the word hypocrite occurs more than a dozen times in the first gospel. It is an issue that obviously concerned our Lord and therefore it should also concern us.

2) Here in Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus addresses three important pillars of Judaism in the first century: giving (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). The heart of His concern will become crystal clear as we walk through these verses. It is the issue of motive. Why do we do what we do? What moves us to act and behave as we do, especially in matters of faith, religion and spiritual activity? The desire for the praise of men is an ever present danger. Dallas Willard provides a wise and helpful warning at this point, “Desire for religious respect or reputation will *immediately* drag us into the rightness of scribes and Pharisees because that desire always focuses entirely upon the visible action, not on the source of action in the heart” (*The Divine Conspiracy*, 188). Once again we are reminded of a vital spiritual truth: “the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.” Our text will easily divide into three sections for our expositional study of this important issue.

I. Watch your motives when you give

6:1-4

- Jesus tells us, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Now He addresses three of those good works: giving, prayer and fasting. However,

when it comes to these good works, our Lord introduces an important and surprising twist concerning the proper way to exercise them. We are to do them with no fanfare or show. In fact, they are usually best done in secret and privacy. This would have been shocking to the ears of 1st century Hebrews.

- The Bible has a lot to say about what I like to call “the grace of giving.” The apostle Paul dedicates two chapters to the subject in 2 Corinthians 8-9. There we are told to give sacrificially, joyfully, liberally and thankfully. Jesus adds two additional principles in verses 1-4 as we exercise this grace.

1) Don't give seeking the praise of others 6:1-3

- In Matthew 5:20 Jesus says, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.” Now in 6:1 He provides something of a companion statement when He tells His disciples, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.” Those last five words are critically important because they help us see how this verse does not contradict the “let your light shine” verse. The issue is one of motive: “to be seen by them.” “Be careful” is a present imperative, a word of command calling for constant vigilance and watchfulness. Jesus is teaching us that an important question

should continually present itself when we do good works: why am I doing them? Is my motivation for doing good works like giving, praying and fasting a desire to honor and glorify my God or is it a desire to gain glory and praise for oneself through the applause of men? If it is the latter you can be certain of one thing, “you have no reward with your Father in heaven.” An earthly goal will get an earthly reward and nothing more. Men may praise you but not your heavenly Father.

- In verse 2-4 Jesus illustrates his point with the example of giving. “Whenever you give to the poor,” and the assumption is we will give, don’t make a show of it. “Don’t sound a trumpet,” perhaps a figure of speech, “as the hypocrites do [both] in the synagogues and on the streets, to be approved by people.” Why? Because “Truly I tell you, they have their reward.” Jesus says, in essence, when you give don’t shout out, “look at me!” Don’t announce your righteousness on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snap-chat! Don’t call a press conference. In fact he adds in verse 3, “But when you give to the poor, don’t even look at yourself! Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Don’t pridefully celebrate your “own personal acts of righteousness.” Quarles puts it well, “the disciple

must not give so that he can pat himself on the back or applaud his own goodness. If a disciple should refuse to seek to be self-complimentary, how much more should he avoid seeking to be a spiritual celebrity in the eyes of others” (*SM*, 177).

- Now, before we move on we need to say a word about the word “hypocrite.” Quarles is again very helpful in his observations: “The word *hypocritēs* originally referred to a play-actor who performed on the stage of the Greek or Roman theater. The verbal form of the word was frequently used in Jewish writings in the time between the writing of the OT and NT to speak of the act of “pretending.” Many ancient play-actors aspired to be celebrities adored by the masses. They lived for the thrill of standing ovations and the prizes and awards sometimes presented for excellent dramatic performances. The hypocrites to whom Jesus referred were spiritual play-actors who pretended to have a piety that they did not actually possess in order to inspire the applause of a human audience.

In Matthew 15:7-9 Jesus appealed to Isa. 29:13 to describe hypocrisy: “Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. They worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of

men.” This suggests that hypocrisy involves pretended devotion to God, empty worship, and the substitution of human authority for divine authority.” (Quarles, 176).

Sinclair Ferguson helpfully adds, “In ancient drama actors did not wear make-up. They wore masks, representing the part they played. What a vivid picture that gives us of the hypocrite. He pretends to be one thing, but all the time he is really something altogether different” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 113). Don’t wear a mask when it comes to your faith. Be the real deal.

2) Do give seeking the pleasure of your heavenly Father 6:1, 4

- Both verse 1 and 4 refer to our heavenly Father. They bracket our Savior’s instructions on giving, and they place the focus on where our attention needs to be when we give. We seek His approval and no other. We seek His pleasure and His alone. The reward we desire is with our “Father in heaven” (v. 1). Like a child longs for the approval of their mother or father, we long only for the approval of our Father in heaven. So, when we give, we do it quietly, almost always “in secret.” God sees what we give and that is enough. If others do hear or see of my giving, it only is to encourage them in faithful stewardship, not to exalt me. I will give in those instances like a

Barnabas (Acts 4:32-37), not like an Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 1:1-11)!

- As a result, “[my] Father who sees in secret will reward [me].” Of course, the greatest and most wonderful reward is the fact I get God Himself! I may get a gift but even better, I get the gift Giver! I get Him for all of eternity as my perfect heavenly Father. That, we will discover, is more than enough!

II. Watch your motives when you pray

6:5-8

- Jesus moves the conversation from giving to a second spiritual discipline; the discipline of prayer (6:5-14). Prayer in its simplest and most basic sense is a conversation with God. Prayer is a child of God talking to His heavenly Father and listening to His Father by His Word illumined by the Spirit.
- My friend Don Whitney helps us grasp the magnitude of this blessing called prayer when he writes, “God not only has spoken clearly and powerfully to us through Christ and the Scriptures, He also has a Very Large Ear continuously open to us. He will hear every prayer of His children, even when our prayers are weaker than a snowflake. That’s why, of all the Spiritual Disciplines, prayer is second only to the intake of God’s Word in importance. Despite the penultimate importance of prayer, however, statistical surveys and experience seem to agree that a large percentage of

professing Christians spend little time in sustained prayer. While they may offer a sentence of prayer here and there throughout their day, they rarely spend more than a very few minutes – if that – alone in conversation with God. It's very easy to make people feel guilty about failure in prayer...But we must come to grips with the fact that to be like Jesus we must pray.”

(Spiritual Disciples For the Christian Life, 80).

So, to become more like Jesus when we pray, what are some basic guidelines or principles that our Master give us?

1) Pray sincerely to your heavenly Father

6:5

- Jesus clearly expects prayer to be a regular habit for the life of His disciples. Verse 5 begins, “Whenever you pray.” The *ESV* says, “And when you pray.” The idea is you and I will pray. Immediately he follows the statement with a now familiar warning, “You must not be like the hypocrites (v. 2). Don’t pretend to be what you are not. Don’t put on a show, a sham! Hypocrites love to flaunt their false spirituality “because they love to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people.” They pine for the praise of people. This is the reward they seek and Jesus says this is the reward they receive, “Truly I tell you (Gr. *amen*), they have their reward.”

- Hypocrites are not sincere when they pray. They pray for show. So, let me raise a couple of simple questions for us to consider at this point. First, do you pray longer in public than you do in private? Verse seven will also speak to this. Second, do you pray differently in public before others than you do in private when only your heavenly Father can hear you? I believe these two questions can help us evaluate our sincerity when we pray.

2) Pray secretly to your heavenly Father 6:6

- Neither the Bible nor Jesus condemn public prayer. It is practiced throughout the Bible and commanded as a vital component of corporate worship. Doing it as a mere formality or ritual is what is soundly condemned. Further, public and corporate prayer is no substitute for private and individual prayer. So, what is the pattern commended to us by our Lord? First, when you pray find a private place “Go into your private room” and “shut your door.” Second, seek out the Father who is in heaven. No need to make a show in your prayer closet! “Pray to your [heavenly] Father who is in secret.” This is a private affair between us and our Father in heaven. Notice the repetition of the word “secret” in verses 4, 6 (twice), and 18 (twice). I think what our Savior is trying to help us understand is who

we are in private is who we truly are. Who are you when only God is watching? What are you like when only God is watching? These are searching questions for the soul.

- Jesus concludes verse 7 as He did verse 4 on giving: “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” The hypocrite prays for the approval of a human audience. The true disciple prays for the approval of a heavenly audience. The approval and pleasure of His Father is all he needs, it is all that he wants.

3) Pray specifically to your heavenly Father 6:7-8

- Jesus continues his teaching on prayer with strong words of condemnation for senseless, mindless, rote incantation and recitations that are more akin to paganism. Quarles summarizes well our Lord’s approach to prayer and says, “Although Jesus was devoted to prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 11:1), His prayers were not memorized recitations given at the whim of the clock. His prayers were intensely personal, often spontaneous, and an expression of His deep communion with His Father” (*SM*, 179).
- Therefore, Jesus says, “When you pray don’t babble (*ESV*, “heap up empty phrases,” *NKJV*, “use vain repetitions”) like the Gentiles.” Don’t pray like a pagan and speak nonsense over and over. Many

words does not equal either sincere prayer or a guarantee you will be heard. God cannot be manipulated by hounding him with your silly and empty repetitions.

- “Don’t be like them” because your heavenly Father is not like these pagan idols who are no gods at all. He is an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient Father who “knows the things you need before you ask him.” He is aware of your needs and He is attentive to them. Isaiah 65:24 beautifully complements our Lord’s promise in verse 8, “Even before they call, I [the LORD] will answer them, while they are still speaking, I will hear.” Talk to God then like a child would talk to a loving parent. Talk to Him like a perfect heavenly Father who loves you with a perfect, heavenly love and concern. He is there. He is ready. He is willing. And, He is able!

III. Watch your motives when you fast

6:16-18

- Fasting is a spiritual discipline we seldom talk about and very few practice. I must confess to falling into this camp. However, the Bible addresses the subject in numerous places. It might be good then to start with a biblical description. Fasting consist of abstaining from eating, drinking, or even sexual activity for the purposes of prayer, spiritual devotion, mourning, grief and repentance. Fasting can be corporate or individual (cf. Jonah 3). The

Old Testament specifically required “self-denial” or fasting for the nation of Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27, 29, 32) [Quarles, *SM*, 224].

- The Old Testament prophets strongly condemned hypocrisy in fasting (Isa 58:1-12; Jere. 36:9; Joel 2:12-17). Quarles is precisely correct, “Jesus’ teaching regarding fasting is thus in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets” (226). Jesus will address fasting in a very similar way to how He addresses giving and prayer. There is a clear literary parallel: “So whenever you give” (v. 2); “whenever you pray” (v. 5); and “whenever you fast” (v. 16). His instructions are also quite similar as we will now see.

1) Don’t draw attention to yourself when you fast 6:16

Jesus begins with the premise that we will fast. When we do, once more he warns us, “don’t be gloomy like the hypocrites.” The word “gloomy” could be translated “sad-faced” (*GNB*). Jesus actually tells us what these sad-faced actors actually do. “They make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people.” They fast to make a show for men. Their interest is in the approval of men, not the approval of God. Jesus once again reminds us that they succeed in what they are after: “Truly (*Gr.* amen) I tell you, they have their reward.” The deceptive and dishonest nature of the hypocrite’s fast may not be perceived by men, but it is clearly seen by God. He sees beyond the action to the heart. He

knows very well why they are doing what they do. The temporary and fleeting praise of men is theirs! The eternal and enduring pleasure of the heavenly Father is not. What a fool the hypocrite actually plays.

2) Just act normal when you fast

6:17-18

Once again the Lord Jesus reminds us that our ultimate audience in the practice of spiritual disciplines is God not man. He is the one who should be the focus of our attention and affections. So, when we fast, “Put oil on your head and wash your face.” This is a first century way of saying “just act normal.” The Middle East climate is hot and extremely dry, so lubricant and sooth your scalp and skin like you would normally do. The same is true with your face: wash it! Why? Verse 18 provides the answer: “so that your fasting isn’t obvious to others but to your Father who is in secret.” God is invisible, He is Spirit (John 4:24). You may not see Him but He certainly sees you. In fact we should never forget, He sees everything! And, it is His opinion that matters most. And, here is the Lord’s promise to us all, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” The Father in heaven who sees the silent gift, the private prayer, and the unnoticed fast will bless you with eschatological and heavenly reward. His reward might come later, but it will be so much better!

We should kick to the sidelines silly talk about “your best life now.”

When you are in a relationship with Jesus as his faithful disciple, you have a great life now. When you join Him in heaven with your heavenly Father, it will be even better. He will reward you. You can count on it.

No doubt about it.

Conclusion: The practice of spiritual disciplines should not play to the audience of the many. They should play to the audience of the One, our heavenly Father. He sees every action and knows every motivation. He and He alone is the One we should concern ourselves with. He is the One we should seek to please. This was certainly the way of Jesus as he made His way to the cross for the salvation of hypocritical sinners like me and you. He clearly understood that all that matters in life is that we please God. And, He did! May our heavenly Father, in grace and mercy, help us to learn this valuable lesson too, to learn the way of Jesus. It is the difference between pleasing men and pleasing God!