

“An Audience of One”

MATTHEW 6:1-4

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I would imagine that all of us here this morning are involved in a number of rewards programs. For us, one of the earliest here in Madison came when we started shopping at the Pick-N-Save in our neighborhood on the southwest side of Madison. For us, it started out as a check-cashing card, but it quickly evolved. As most of you know, we scan that card every time we make a purchase, and now at least, we earn a certain discount on gas that we purchase at BP. Every few months, those rewards add up, and we sometimes get 60 or 70 cents off per gallon. We have those little cards for Staples, and Ace Hardware, and Victor Allen’s Coffee, and the movie theater, and the Laundromat, and Papa Murphy’s Pizza, and REI, and Pancheros, and Marriott Hotels, and Drury Hotels, and Country Inns and Suites, and Zimbrick, and Borders, and Jung’s Garden Center, and Savers (the thrift store), and certainly one of my favorites is for Goodwill – you add up those points, and every few months you can earn a free item. Of course, the problem is, your wallet can only be so big! We now have a pouch of these things that we keep in the car. Thankfully, some recent grads from the UW are working on an app that has the potential for eliminating all of these cards. I guess I’ll believe it when I finally see it, but it is obvious that a lot of people love being rewarded for their loyalty to a particular store or brand.

This morning, I would like for us to consider a brief reference to God’s reward program in the New Testament, and it comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. We are thinking about the concept of rewards, because as we read this morning’s passage, we are going to find that the word “**reward**” is repeated three times in only four verses. As we have discussed before, one way to find the important idea in any passage is simply to look for words that are repeated, and that is certainly the case this morning. We will get back to the idea of rewards toward the end of the lesson.

I should tell you, though, that this morning’s lesson is being delivered in response to a request from one of the children of this congregation. Once again, one of the awesome kids of this congregation has come up with an excellent question, and the question is this: *Do we really have to hide our left hand from what our right hand is doing?* That right there is a great question. And as you might know, the passage where that concept is found is in Matthew 6:1-4 (p. 1508). We take the questions from the kids here very seriously, and so as we try to answer their questions, we plan on going directly to the word of God. The passage, of course, is found in the Sermon on the Mount. A lot of people think of Jesus as being all positive, all encouraging – never saying a negative word, never offering any kind of warning. And yet as we are about to discover, that is not exactly true. Let us, then, please look together at Matthew 6:1-4,

¹ ***“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”*** ² ***“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.”*** ³ ***“But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,”*** ⁴ ***so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.***

Did you notice how often the Lord used the word **“reward”**? Three times in only four verses! And each time it is used with reference to our motivation for doing something very good. And yet we have a contrast: We can do things primarily to look good in front of others, or we can do things to please our Father in Heaven. And with that contrast in mind, I would like to divide this morning’s lesson into two parts. First of all, let us consider the danger here. And then secondly, let us consider the solution to the sin that Jesus addresses here.

I. First of all, though, let us go back and consider the DANGER – the warning from Jesus that good things can sometimes be done for the wrong reason.

Notice, the Lord starts out with a warning, ***“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.”*** ***“To be noticed”*** comes from a root word that is the basis of our English word “theater,” and it conveys the idea of being seen by others. When actors step on that stage, they do it for the purpose of being seen – that is the point of the theater! And that is fine for a play or a musical. But the warning from the Lord here is the danger of being religious for the purpose of being seen by others. Giving to the poor is certainly good – we need to do more of it, but the Lord tells us that it can be done for all the wrong reasons.

In verse 2, we have an interesting warning against not sounding a trumpet before us, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets. There are several ideas on this out there. We studied one theory last year when we studied the widow who gave those two small coins, and you might remember how we discovered at that time that the offering boxes had trumpet-like openings on them – almost like an old spittoon. And we learned that the rich would put their coins in there in a way that made a lot of noise – almost like those coin whirlpool things you have in the mall. They would make those large coins roll around and around in those metal containers until they finally fell down into the hole. That’s one theory. Another theory is that the religious leaders would actually sound a trumpet – signaling the poor that it was time to come get helped, signaling the rich that it was time to give, and signaling everyone else that it was time to come watch. That is another theory. And then again, it is certainly possible that the Lord was exaggerating to make a point here, that He was painting a mental picture of a rich guy figuratively “tooting his own horn” so that he would be noticed for all of the good that he was doing. I think of those press conferences where the wealthy today will sometimes call in all the media to announce some huge gift. But whatever the case, we have a warning that we are not to do good just for the purpose of being noticed.

If we’re honest, I think most of us would admit that we are at least conscious of what other people think about us. Most of us take a shower every once in a while. Most of us try to brush our teeth from time to time. Most of us try to be somewhat aware of what kind of clothing we wear. So, we care about what other people think. And yet at the same time, there is a warning here against doing good for the purpose of being thought of as more righteous than we really are.

As I was preparing for this morning’s lesson, I read about a certain bar in a college town, and before a big “parent weekend,” the bar owner took out an ad in the college newspaper. The ad said, “Bring your parents to

lunch on Saturday. We will pretend we don't know you." Well, a minister in that town saw the ad and took out an ad of his own, "Bring your parents to church on Sunday. We will pretend we know you!" Most of us, then, care about what other people think about us, but the Lord is warning about doing good things for the wrong reasons.

And I should point out here: The Lord is not saying that it is necessarily wrong for someone to ever see us do something good. The Lord is not saying that we need to go into hiding. And I say this because of what the Lord just finished saying in the previous chapter, in Mathew 5:16, where He said, ***"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."*** Notice: In that passage, the glory goes to God. We are encouraged to do good works so that God our Father is glorified. But in our passage for this morning, the warning is against doing good things so that WE are glorified. There is a big difference in doing something so that we are noticed and doing something so that God is noticed. It gets back to our motivation.

We have a similar passage in 1 Peter 2:11-12. Peter had apparently been listening to the Lord because Peter says, ***"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation."*** And so again, it gets back to motive. We can do good things publicly so that God is glorified. The problem is when we do good things so that we are glorified.

And I would point out, it is possible to do a good thing in secret and still have a bad attitude. Chrysostom, a preacher from the First Century, said this, "You may do good deeds before men, and yet not seek human praise; you may do them in secret, and yet in your heart wish that they may become known to gain that praise." Very interesting!

I would also point out: There is also a danger in doing good deeds so that I can tell myself how good I am...and that is not good either! And I think that's why we have the comment about not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing. The Lord was not telling us to close our eyes and reach into our wallet and give whatever comes out. That is not what He meant when he said that our left hand shouldn't know what our right hand is doing. He was not saying that half of our body should be prevented from knowing what the other half is doing. But instead, the idea there is: Even in our private thoughts, we are not to dwell on how generous we are. After doing some good thing, I probably should not be sitting at home thinking, "Man, I am righteous! I am one of the most generous people I know!" That is not good either! We should not be spending a lot of time patting ourselves on the back over how good we are. That is definitely not a healthy attitude to have. We are not to dwell on or gloat over how much we have given.

I know we've been talking about the wealthy here, but let me pass along another warning, and that is: There is no reference to the amount that is given here. In other words, this can be a problem for the wealthy or the poor. Even a poor person can do something good for a bad reason. As one author pointed out, you could give a nickel with the wrong motive and still fall under the judgment of this passage.

And before we move on from the actual warning, I should probably point out another danger here, and that is: The passage does not teach that it is a sin for anyone to ever know the amount of our contribution. In fact, think about this: It is possible to be sinfully proud of giving secretly! I have known some through the years who take this verse to mean that it is a sin to give by check (because someone might see it) or that it is a sin to get a receipt for tax purposes (because human eyes might actually view the amount). But again, that is not the

point. The actual method of our giving is firmly in the realm of opinion. Some give by coin, some give with cash, and some give by using a check. Personally, I wish the church took debit cards – we use a debit card for almost everything these days. But the actual method of our giving does not matter. The point here is not that our giving must be absolutely secret. And I say this because of what the Lord goes on to say about prayer. In the next few verses, the Lord goes on and tells us that we are to pray in secret. But again, He is not banning all public prayer, is He? We've already had two public prayers here this morning (one in class and one at the beginning of the service) – so, the problem is not whether someone sees us give or pray, but the concern here comes in our motivation. Are we giving to please God, or are we giving to try to make ourselves look better than we really are? A person who gives properly won't even think about who might see what they're giving. For the person who gives properly, that thought is not even on the horizon. It is not even a concern. That just doesn't even matter, because they are performing for an audience of One.

Before we leave the warning about this particular danger, I would pose a thought question: In the parable of the Good Samaritan, would the priest and the Levite have passed by on the other side if they had known that someone was watching? How would an audience have changed that parable? In my opinion, if they had known that people were watching, they would have stopped to help the man. But as it was, only the Samaritan stopped to help, even though he was out there in the middle of nowhere, and even though nobody would ever praise him for what he knew he needed to do. So, in summary, it all goes back to motive. The Lord is warning us about the danger of doing things for the purpose of being noticed. If we do stuff to be praised by men, the Lord says that that praise will be the extent of our reward. If we do it for the applause, that's it. We have performed for the wrong audience.

- II. As we continue looking at this short passage, I would ask that we focus in on the SOLUTION. We know the problem, but what do we do about it? And I would suggest here that we focus on performing for an audience of one, and that One, and that audience, of course, is God himself.**

Over the coming week, then, I would challenge all of us to go looking for some need that needs to be met, and then we meet that need – someone we can encourage individually, someone we can serve quietly, some opportunity to be generous, some opening where we can work behind the scenes – knowing that acts of righteousness done primarily for an audience of One are rewarded by God Himself. Even if nobody on this earth ever notice what we've done, if we've done it for the right reasons, then God has seen it and God will not forget it.

As Christians, giving to the poor is something that we have done for nearly 2,000 years now. In roughly 125 AD, the Greek philosopher Aristedes (from Athens), presented a defense of Christians to the Roman Emperor Hadrian. This is what he said,

He who has gives to him who has not without grudging. When one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they will deliver him. If there is among them a man that is poor or needy and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.

That right there is an ancient account of how our brothers and sisters took care of each other nearly 2,000 years ago. Notice: They were not sneaking around taking care of things so that nobody would ever find out –

that was not the emphasis, but instead, they took care of needs without regard for who may nor may not have been watching. They were performing for an audience of one, and that is certainly our challenge this morning.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would go back to the idea of doing something for a reward. If we do things (even good things) so that we can be seen by others, then when they see us, when they praise us for what we have done, then that is pretty much the only reward that we'll get. On the other hand, if we do good things motivated by of our love for God, then we will receive a reward from our Father in Heaven. As I see it, that is a pretty simple rewards program – and I am very thankful that it does not require yet another card!

I am so thankful for the request from one of the awesome kids of this congregation!

As most of us know, the real reward was not free but was purchased with the blood of God's Son. Jesus lived a perfect life and then offered His life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from sin, by confessing our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. We would be honored to go to God in prayer on your behalf. If you have any questions about what you have heard this morning, we would invite you to pull us aside and ask. We would love to study the Bible with you sometime this afternoon or this evening. On the other hand, if you would like to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com