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Today we move from Matthew 5 to Matthew 6 in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has shared that we are well off or blessed not based on outward circumstances whether good or bad but on our relationship with God and our sharing in what God is seeking to accomplish on earth. We've heard that genuinely good people are those who from the deepest levels of their being are committed to the good of everyone they deal with including themselves, God, and even those who make them angry or are their enemies. Jesus' followers go beyond merely not doing anything wrong, to acting positively and proactively from a heart and mind saturated with the love and spirit of God.

As we seek to live a life in relationship with God on a daily basis we will have to overcome **two desires that get in the way. These are a desire for the approval of others and a desire for material goods.** To be free from these entangling desires requires great confidence in Christ. These desires are what Jesus talks about in Matthew 6.

The chapter begins by dealing with the first desire, **that of acting in order to receive the approval, affirmation, and applause of others.** Jesus says,

*"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' in front of others, **to be seen by them.** If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

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.

*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.***

*Then your Father, who sees what is done **in secret, will reward you.**" (TNIV)*

If you looked up the word "exhibitionism" in the dictionary you would find that it is *"the act of flaunting oneself in order to attract attention."* During the 1970's there was a time when streaking was the latest fad. I can remember being at Fenway Park on more than one occasion when streakers came running out onto the field. Someone even made a bunch of money writing a song called "The Streak." More recently streakers have struck at soccer matches, a Super Bowl, and one poor soul who attempted to do so at a hockey game a couple years ago who fell coming over the glass and knocked

himself unconscious when he hit the ice. Whatever the psychology, or blood alcohol content behind the action, there is no doubt that a major motivation of a streaker is to attract the attention of other people.

Perhaps you're wondering, "What in the world does this have to do with Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount?" Well I'd like to suggest that today's passage, as well as those for the next couple weeks are in a sense about Streaker Spirituality. We can say that **Streaker Spirituality is engaging in spiritual practices or habits in order to be seen and praised by others.** **Seeker Spirituality** is when we engage in these same practices – such as giving to the poor, praying, and fasting, **in order to grow closer to and to please God.** Later in Matthew 23:5-7, Jesus criticizes the exhibitionist spirituality of the scribes and Pharisees, saying they, "***do everything they do with the aim of being noticed by others.*** *They enlarge the religious symbols on their clothing. They like to have the most prominent seats at dinners and in the synagogues. They relish loudly respectful greetings in malls and public places, and being called 'Professor' or 'Doctor.'*"

When it comes to our spiritual life Jesus is warning us, and he wouldn't have to warn us if this wasn't a serious concern, to **be Seekers, not Streakers.** Jesus doesn't issue many warnings to his followers, there are about five in Matthew's gospel and all but one are about what opponents or adversaries may do *to* disciples. The warning Jesus gives to his followers about something they may do *to themselves* is, "***Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' in front of others, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from you Father in heaven.***"

The spiritual principle at work here is this – Why determines How. Why we engage in acts of righteousness or spiritual habits will determine How we do them. The question Jesus is asking us **is who are we performing for – for other people or for God?** The desire to have and hear and bask in the affirmation and applause of others is an intoxicating temptation.

In the Academy Award winning Best Picture *All About Eve*, Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) gives the impression of being an innocent theater fan, bedazzled by the stars of Broadway and her favorite actress, Margo Channing (Bette Davis). When Eve is introduced to Miss Channing, she befriends the actress and the actress's circle of famous friends.

But Eve holds a secret ambition. Her "innocent young fan" act is a manipulative charade. In the months to follow, Eve schemes, lies to, betrays, and blackmails her new

famous friends. She purposefully destroys Miss Channing's career, and takes center stage on Broadway for herself. She will do anything to anyone to get what her heart desires.

Why? In one scene, Eve reveals the motive behind her manipulation. After a director friend admires how many actors work so hard for so little, she responds:

“So *little*? So little did you say? Why, if there's nothing else, there's applause. I've listened backstage to people applaud. It's like ... like waves of love coming over the footlights and wrapping you up. Imagine, to know every night that different hundreds of people love you. They smile, their eyes shine; you've pleased them. They want you. You belong. Just that alone is worth anything.”

For Eve Harrington, deception, manipulation, and betrayal are small prices to pay for applause, for approval, and for the acceptance of others.

What prices are we tempted to pay, to gain or keep the approval of others?

Jesus knows how easy it is to be caught in the performance trap, to desire to be noticed and applauded and loved and told how wonderful and spiritual and godly we truly are. Jesus knows spiritual deeds may be done for the tangible rewards offered by the esteem and respect of other people. And who doesn't like to be praised? Praise from people is tangible – we feel the pat on the back, we see the grateful face, we hear or read the words of appreciation, we are grateful for the gift. However, if the applause of others becomes our motivation, we have no reward beyond that. Jesus hopes we will live our life, do our charitable deeds and practice spiritual habits in order to know and be known by God rather than for people. Jesus says we have no reward from our Father in heaven if we've done spiritual things to win human praise. In John 5:44 Jesus says, *“How can you have faith when you seek glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the One who alone is God?”*

Jesus wants us to have an audience of One and to focus on our relationship with God. TEN times in 18 verses in Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus refers to God as *“Father”* because Jesus defines our spiritual life in Interpersonal Terms. Jesus' characteristic term for God, is Abba, daddy, because he wants us to understand that God is like a loving devoted parent. Often people have images of God that are mistaken. Some folks picture God a like a referee in a black and white striped shirt ready to blow a whistle or throw a flag because they've failed to give or pray or fast or read the Bible as they should. The mistake in this thinking is to believe that if I just gave, prayed, fasted, read, served, or studied enough that we would be holy and God would love us. A Christian

teacher (Dallas Willard) wrote, “Most people assume that spirituality is a certain set of practices, but that is legalism. **Spirituality is a life lived from God.** It is getting beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and entering into the depths of the heart. The disciplines are a means to arrest our attention and focus it on God.”

Jesus says **the spiritual habit of secrecy helps break the grip of our need for human approval and applause on our soul and our actions.** It is very beneficial to practice things like giving, praying, and fasting in such a way that no one else knows. That way our motivation and reward for doing these things cannot come from human beings.

Jesus hopes we will engage in spiritual practices like giving to the poor in order to know God and to be known by God who is like a loving parent. **Jesus is directing us toward living this way all the time.** We do what the Lord wants us to do in a manner that is as quiet and secret as possible. Again remember, Jesus is giving examples of spiritual practices, not laws, he doesn't mean, never ever let anyone see you do a good deed. That would be ridiculous. Jesus says don't give TO BE SEEN, not that you shouldn't do these things in public. It isn't that you're more righteous if you are unknown. There is nothing wrong with being known, we just don't do things *to be known*.

The key is in the area of our motivation so that others may give glory to God (5:16) and not to us. The truth is we can do the right thing for the wrong reason. There are no “double spiritual coupons” in the eyes of the Lord. If we do something to be praised by people, we've already received our reward. We should not look for credit from the Lord as well. It is better for the right thing to be done, even if not for the best of reasons, however, it is even better for the right thing to be done for the right motivation.

Jesus wants his followers to be the kind of people who can **be content without human approval and not destroyed by human disapproval.** Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ* that whether people say bad things or good things about us, it doesn't matter, we are still who we are. Secrecy helps us lose or at least tame our hunger for fame, justification, or the attention of others. Hypocrites is a neutral term in Greek, literally meaning stage actors. Jesus is the only one who uses the term in the New Testament and he used it 17 times. He applies it here to those who perform their religious acts with an eye on the people in the seats and who are practicing deceit because their heart didn't match their visible actions. They were giving for the wrong reasons to draw attention to themselves rather than alleviating someone else's pain.

The giving Jesus is talking about in these verses is giving to help the poor. The Bible teaches that the poor are to be cared for and not to be taken advantage of, they are to be defended and given opportunity. The fundamental Biblical command is to love, and the first act of love is the giving of attention. Therefore the poor are not to be avoided, forgotten, or allowed to become invisible. Proverbs 22:2 says, *“The rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is the Maker of them all.”* Those without the mind of Christ make distinctions between people the mature disciple would never make. When Jesus says give so the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing is a way of saying, we don’t see anything big about our interaction with or helping the poor, we are merely doing what the Lord himself did and would do through us.

Dallas Willard writes eloquently of our need for new eyes that see in the light of the cross, “Our problem is not primarily with how we see the poor, but with how we see ourselves. If we still think and convey by our behavior that in some way we are fundamentally different and better as persons from the man sleeping in the discarded boxes in the alley; we have not been brought with clear eyes to the foot of the cross, seeing our own neediness in the light of it. We have not looked closely at the lengths to which God had to go to reach us. We have not learned to live always and thankfully in the cross’s shadow. From that vantage point alone is our solidarity with the destitute to be realized.

How do we respond to that man sleeping in those discarded boxes? Does it take great and awkward effort even to acknowledge his presence, or to speak to him if need be, or to take his hand or help him with his few possessions? Are we frightened of him though the circumstances are perfectly safe? Do we shrink from being seen near him or dealing with him? Is his smell and dirtiness alone enough to repel us from him? Or how about others not in such extreme conditions? Does the fact that a person is without work or an apartment or an automobile make us treat him or her as if he or she were “different”? **If so, then we have not truly beheld our own ruined condition, and because of this we cannot heartily love that person.”**¹

Opportunities to serve the poor and the weak come to us almost every day or week. Living as followers of Jesus will make us much more sensitive to occasions to help and give than before we learned to see with the eyes of the cross. We may even be able to discover a need without some one having to tell us. Our deeds of giving will

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (San Francisco, Harper, 1988) 211.

be low key, unassuming, and sometimes even anonymous without anyone knowing the source, so that as Jesus says, “our giving may be in secret.”

Author Dan Clark tells the following story,

“Once, as a teenager, my father and I were standing in line to buy tickets for the circus. Finally, there was only one family between the ticket counter and us. There were eight children, all under the age of 12. I could tell they didn’t have a lot of money. Their clothes were frayed but clean, and the children were well behaved all of them standing in line, two-by-two in back of the parents. They were jabbering about the clowns, elephants and other acts they would see that night. I sensed they had never been to the circus before. This promised to be a highlight of their young lives.

The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing proud as could be. The ticket lady asked the father how many tickets he wanted. He proudly responded, *“Please let me buy eight children’s tickets and two adult tickets.”*

As the ticket lady quoted the price, the wife let go of her husband’s hand, her head dropped; the man’s lip began to quiver. The father leaned a little closer and asked, *“How much did you say?”* The ticket lady again quoted the price. The man didn’t have enough money. How was he supposed to turn and tell his children that he couldn’t afford to take them to the circus?

Seeing what was going on, my dad put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a \$20 bill and dropped it on the ground. We were not wealthy in any sense of the word. Then my dad reached down, picked up the bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said, *“Excuse me, sir, this fell out of your pocket.”*

The man knew what was going on. He wasn’t begging for a handout but he certainly appreciated the help in a desperate, heartbreaking, embarrassing situation. He looked straight into my dad’s eyes, took my dad’s hand in both of his and squeezed it tightly. With a tear streaming down his cheek, he replied *“Thank you, thank you, sir. This really means the world to me and my family.”*

My father and I went back to your car and drove home. We didn’t go to the circus that night, but we didn’t go with out.” (from Puppies for sale and other inspirational tales)

Jesus wants us to have the kind of heart that naturally extends grace to those around us in need without seeking to draw attention to our selves. Jesus’ followers perform for an audience of One and are unconcerned with trying to impress people or win their applause or praise. We desire the applause of our Father in heaven who sees in secret and who knows what is motivating our heart.

Dr. A. Nyland has done a terrific translation of the New Testament called *The Source New Testament* which I am enjoying and highly recommend, it translates Matthew 6:1-4 this way, *“Take care that you don’t do the right thing in front of people just so they will notice you! If you do, you sure won’t have a reward from your Father who is in the heavenly places! So when you do charitable deeds, don’t make a big song and dance about it like the overly critical, hair splitting, pedantic religious people do in the streets, so people will praise them. It’s a fact, their reward is paid in full. When you do a charitable deed, keep it to yourself and don’t tell anyone. Make sure it’s a secret. And your Father who is watching you in secret will reward you.”*