

Did Jesus Really Say That?

5. An Audience of One

November 22, 2020

Text: Matthew 6:1-18

Welcome to week 5 of our series on the Sermon on the Mount called “Did Jesus REALLY say that” If you have your Bible or app, please turn to Matthew 6.

Those who have joined Crossroads in the last few years might now know that I had a mustache for a long time – for over 25 years. I had a mustache when Linda and I got married. I had it when we started the church. Then over 10 years ago, I thought, “It’s time to lose the mustache.” My first thought was, “What will Linda think?” It was time to find out.

When the two of us were on vacation, without telling her, I went into the bathroom one morning and shaved it off. Then I walked out into the living room; and she looked up at me and her jaw dropped. She kept staring at me. She had to get used to it, but it turns out she was good with it. Then I wondered what my kids would think since they had never in their lives seen me without a mustache. They were fine with it, too. When I went to see my Mom the first time after shaving it off, I braced for her reaction and... she never said a word about it!

The opinion of others matters to each of us. We might not actually say the words, “What will people think?”, but the opinions of others influence us every day. If you don’t think so, try an experiment: get into a crowded elevator sometime and when some people step off and the elevator gets empty, don’t move away from the person you were next to; remain standing right next to them. Don’t look at the elevator door; look at the other person right in the eyes. For most of us, that scenario is uncomfortable even to think about. Why? It’s not illegal. It’s not hurting anyone. It’s just highly uncomfortable because we know the other person would be thinking bad thoughts about us!

We want other people to think well of us. That’s why we choose the clothes we do and why we speak to our boss the way we do. It’s why we post certain things and not others on Social Media. Every day, in all sorts of subtle ways, our lives are shaped by the opinions of others. Even if we pride ourselves on our independence, there are a few people (maybe certain family members or friends) whose opinion of us matters to us.

One reason we care is that we’ve learned that our lives go smoother when people think well of us than if they think badly about us. I heard the saying, “All things being equal, people will do business with people they like; and all things *not* being equal; people will *still* do business with people they like.” So we learn to pay attention to what others think of us.

The same was true in Jesus’ day; maybe even more so. Back then, most people lived in small villages their whole lives. That meant that they saw the same people day

after day and if they didn't like each other they couldn't easily avoid one another. Everyone knew life went better when people thought well of them, and in those days, people thought well of you if you were religious.

Jesus lived in a culture which rewarded people for being religious. It used to be that way in our country for a long time. Years ago, belonging to a church could be a business advantage. Business people knew that church was a place they could make connections and network. It helped their image. If you attended worship, most people assumed you were a responsible member of the community.

It is still that way in some regions. I heard someone who moved from the Northeast to the deep South say they were surprised that when getting to know new people, they were often asked, "Where do you go to church?" Not "If" you go, that is assumed you went.

In Jesus' day, it was an advantage to be known as religious, so some people did religious things publicly so that others would see them. Jesus warned his followers against that: **Matthew 6:1** *"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."* He said that doing religious things just so people notice us is spiritually useless.

Jesus picked three random ways people "practiced their righteousness." Notice that he drives home the same point about each one: if you do it to impress others, all you get is their opinion. If you do it to know God, no one needs to see because he will reward you.

The first example Jesus gives is **Giving money**. 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."*

"Hypocrites" was an ancient drama term. It means to pretend to be something you are not (which is what an actor does). Jesus is saying that some people give so that they appear to be generous, but they really aren't. They are acting the part for other people to see. *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.* If we are truly generous, we can joyfully give in private because we don't need other people to congratulate us for giving. Others might not know we gave, but our Father sees and he will reward you.

Jesus said the same thing about **Prayer**. 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."* If we pray because we are seeking other people's admiration, that's all we get.

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. God is unseen, and we can meet him when we're unseen by others. If we pray seeking God, we will encounter him. Why trade a reward from God for the opinion of others?

A third practice Jesus mentions is **Fasting**: *¹⁶ "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.* These guys would deliberately make themselves look different when they were fasting so everyone would know they were doing something religious. Their neighbors would ask, "What's up Joe – you look like you've had a rough night." Joe would answer dramatically, "Oh don't mind me, I'm just *fasting*. You know, being faithful to God, it's not easy." "Wow, what a holy guy!" they'd think.

That might impress others, but not God. *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.* Jesus says, "Don't fast for show, fast for impact. Take a shower and wash your hair!" Maybe others won't know you're fasting but God will, and he will reward you.

There's nothing wrong with giving, prayer, and fasting. These are important spiritual disciplines for anyone who wants to follow Jesus. In fact, Jesus practiced them all. The problem is not the spiritual act, the problem was in the motivation. In v. 2 the hypocrites give "to be honored by others." In v. 5 they pray in the streets "to be seen by others." And, in v. 16 they fast "to show others. ***A disciple of Jesus doesn't live for the approval others; we live to make God smile.***

Let's ask ourselves: **Am I living for God's smile or for something less?** Do I live to impress other people or to please God? We can live for an audience of one: the Lord himself. And when we do, he will reward us. Let's take a moment to think about **how does God reward us?**

The rewards God gives come to us both now and in eternity. **God rewards our Giving.** Giving to God always requires a choice, but it is always rewarding. It is rewarding here and now. Crossroaders are generous! We've never had to put up plaques or anything to let people know who gave to make it happen, and no one has ever requested that. Crossroaders have given joyfully in secret. Even during the pandemic, so many of you have been faithful in giving to God, and Jesus' mission has been advancing because of it.

It is rewarding to know that we are making a difference when we give. Each time we see someone baptized or see a leader developed, we can know our giving helped

make that happen. Each time a new group begins or a staff person equips and sends others, that is our giving at work, and that is rewarding.

God who sees in secret will reward us. Malachi 3 says he pours out blessings when we tithe. The Lord sustains us and provides for us every day. That is rewarding. Jesus said in **Luke 6:38** *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”* That’s a greater reward than the opinions of others.

God rewards our Fasting. Jesus fasted, and he expected us to, as well. In **Matthew 6** he said, *“WHEN you fast...”* I hate to fast, but I do. Why? The reward. Fasting purifies my desires. When I fast, I am saying to God, “I want you more than I want food right now.” I don’t always feel close to God while I’m fasting. Mostly I feel hungry! But the aftereffects are rewarding: temptations seem to be weaker and I’m free to live more fully for God. I’ve noticed that my prayer is more effective when I fast, too. Fasting is also good for us physically, though that is not the primary reason to fast.

God rewards our Prayer. Jesus gives us a sample prayer we call “the Lord’s prayer”. It’s a pattern that we can follow to Praise God, Pray for the Kingdom to show up around us, Pray for our needs and forgiveness and Pray to stay close to God. God rewards prayer in many, many ways.

I asked Flo Demas to talk with us about how she has experienced the rewards of prayer. Flo has a calling and gifting in prayer that I appreciate so much. I’m pleased that she has started training and leading others in intercessory prayer at Crossroads.

We all care about what others think, but in the end, the most rewarding life is to live for an audience of One: to live for the smile of Jesus. We can know the rewards of God today and every day. And at the end of my life, I want to hear the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” There is no other award, possession, or experience in life that can match that. And I want so much for each of you to hear that same thing. We can and that reward can start right now.