

We had an incredible time at Fall Family Fun Night on Sunday. Our church family filled up the parking lot full of games, food, and fun. I'm so thankful to Kristi McElheney and her team and all the people and Life Groups who volunteered. But not everything went perfectly. After having manned the cotton candy for years and perfecting my craft, the pandemic has left me rusty. Additionally, my costume was so effective that most people didn't recognize me until I talked with them for a bit. I get it. It's hard to tell who I am when you can't see my glorious hair. But other than that, it was a great time. It was also interesting timing of that event, given the passage we are going to look at this morning.

Every time you and I practice our faith, we make a decision to do it authentically for the glory of God, or to put on a façade, a costume, and do it for the benefit of ourselves. I have trusted in Christ and am now in a right relationship with God. The practices of my righteousness includes preaching God's Word. But the decision I have to make each week is if my sermons are going to be authentically about him, or if I'm going to play the part but really make them about me. If they are about him, they will be of value. If they are about me, they will be worthless and costly. Our worship team has the same decision to make. And so do you; not just on Sundays, but every time you practice your righteousness. Will it be about you or will it be about God? That's what Jesus wants to talk with us about this morning.

In Jesus' time, the religious rulers of the day, called Pharisees, practiced their religion in public view and did so for the sake of looking good in the eyes of others. They practiced the right things, but they did so in the wrong way. They wore the costume of the devout, but their motives and methods were more about making a name for themselves than they were about making a name for God. It was a decision that came at a great cost, and it's a mistake Jesus does not want us to make ourselves. In fact, in describing it, he's going to use the word "beware". If we choose to live like them, our spiritual actions may look good, but they will be a costume, rejected by God, and costly to us. Let's see what Jesus has to say.

[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18] "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ²"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you... ¹⁶"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus points to three pillars of the practice of the Jewish faith to show us what our practice is not to look like. He uses the same pattern to explain how the Pharisees go through the proper motions, but their motives were to call attention to themselves and receive the reward of the approval of man. For that, Jesus calls them hypocrites. The original Greek meaning of that word is “actor”, and by it, Jesus is saying they are merely playing a part for the applause of the crowd. That applause, though, is the only reward they will get, because practicing righteousness that way doesn’t count in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Giving to the needy: We worship a generous God who calls us to live a life of bold generosity. But when the Pharisees gave, they made a spectacle of it. They made a big deal because they desired the praise of man. *Doxa*, translated “praise”, is most often translated “glory”. We don’t know if Jesus was being figurative or literal, but the idea of the Pharisees blowing a trumpet when they gave is where we get our saying “toot our own horn”. It would be like, in the time where we passed the basket at church, you blowing an air horn or yelling out “Cha-ching!” when you put in your money. It is intended to say, “Look how generous I am!” And if we act this way, we turn our act of giving into an act of receiving. What is meant to meet the need of another becomes an act that meets our own need of approval. Jesus says our giving should be so private that our hands don’t even know what the other is doing.

Praying: Praying is good! To commune with God for the sake of praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition is one of the great joys and privileges of the Christian life. And corporate prayer is good. It’s an opportunity to lift a collective voice and edify and encourage one another. But the hypocrites prayed ostentatiously; lots of words, repeated phrases, all intended to draw the attention of man to themselves.

Now, some of you all are already thinking about someone in your life that prays like this. They go on and on. They go so long that, even though your eyes stay closed, your eyebrows go up. They just love to hear themselves talk. Take a vote in your Life Group this week! But what’s the purpose of prayer?

[Psalm 27:8] ⁸ You have said, “Seek my face.” My heart says to you, “Your face, LORD, do I seek.”

Prayer is the foundational practice of our relationship with God. Prayer seeks the face of God to know him and be known by him. But if we pray like the hypocrites, what is intended to seek God’s face becomes an effort to show ours. It shouts “Look how spiritual I am.” You may not drone on and on, but you might pray hypocritically in other ways. How? “I’ll pray for you.” How often do we say it, mean it, and do it? We want the credit without the investment. And we live in an age where we can text it. We don’t even have to look at the person. And now we even have the prayer hands emoji, so we don’t even have to type the words! Jesus says prayer is seeking the face of God for a conversation between you and God.

Fasting: This isn’t something we all do regularly, though we’ll talk about it more in 2022. It’s a practice intended to go without food (or something) to discipline and control the appetites of our body as we rely on God to fulfill us in its place. We can also use it to sharpen our focus as we rely on God and seek his counsel in a decision. Our elders fast six times a year on the days of our

monthly meetings for this very purpose. But for the Pharisees, what was intended to master the flesh actually enflamed it. They'd fast twice/week, put on sackcloth (a sign of mourning), maybe put ash on their face, and walk around looking miserable.

Ever had someone in your life that made it very clear when they weren't doing well, and did it so you asked them about it? The Pharisees want everyone to see them so they can declare "Look how devoted/sacrificial I am." When I read this passage, I think about my middle son Luke who has been in a constant state of hunger since the moment he was born. When he could barely walk, he'd stand next to Martha as she was cooking dinner, pull on her pants, and cry. And when he started to talk, we regularly heard wailing accompanied by the exclamation "I'm so hungry I'm going to die!" That's what the Pharisees wanted to communicate for the attention and approval of others. Jesus says clean yourself up and look normal. No one needs to know you're going without food.

When is the last time you "gave something up" for the Lord? For God to do something in that deprivation? Lent, something during or coming out of the pandemic? Screens, social media, food, drink? Now how many people knew about it, and how often did they hear about it? If our fasting is coupled with "Woe is me", we've missed the point. We're to keep it between us and God.

So Jesus calls out this hypocrisy. They are the right things done in the wrong way, and it all comes with a great cost. They are rewarded with the approval of man, but they miss out on the reward from God. Not just eternal, but the reward of intimacy, spiritual growth, and to be a blessing to others. And if we practice in the same way, we'll miss out too. So why would we ever do that?

[John 12:43] ⁴³ For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

First, it satisfies our pride and insecurity. This is the old idolatry of the praise of man. We want to look good in the eyes of our peers and use the practices of our righteousness to accomplish that. Just think about the biblical narrative. Our sin so often comes down to wanting to be made much of. Adam and Eve were tempted by being like God. The builders of the Tower of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves. James and John wanted to sit at the places of honor next to Jesus. Even Jesus himself was tempted to throw himself off the temple, be caught by angels, and impress the people. **We make much of being made much of.**

We live in a culture of public approval and shame. Our value can come from likes and views, we can all fall in the habit of virtue signaling, which is a public declaration of support that requires nothing of us. It checks a box, though. And we are all subject to the whims of cancel culture. What others think of us has become the currency of our time, and we can fall into that trap. So we do these practices in a manipulative way to win approval and feel better about ourselves.

We can also struggle with this temptation because we struggle with disbelief or dissatisfaction in the Gospel. **Why else would we trade in the unconditional and eternal approval of God for the conditional and fickle approval of man?** Do you really believe that, if you have trusted in Christ for salvation, that God accepts, loves, and approves you just as you are? That you don't have to do anything to earn it? Do you believe Jesus when he said "It is finished." That there's nothing left to do for us to be made right with God? Do you believe Paul when he says nothing

can separate us from the love of God, Peter when he says our eternal inheritance is secure and waiting for us, John when he calls us sons and daughters of God? Page after page, verse after verse of the New Testament tells us that if you follow Jesus, you and God are good. **If we really believe who we are in Christ, the approval of man would become meaningless to us.**

But we struggle, and we wind up pursuing a cultural salvation that requires us to constantly work for it instead of our true salvation that was already accomplished by the finished work of Christ. Jesus says that's not the way of the Kingdom. **Kingdom citizens DO out what has already been DONE.** Our practices of our righteousness are the fruit of our relationship with God, not the means to it. If you are struggling with that, what can be done?

Declare bankruptcy. Go back to the first thing Jesus said in his sermon: blessed are the poor in spirit. Remember that you and I are spiritually bankrupt without God. On our own, we have nothing good to offer, so what we offer on our own can only be for our own benefit. **Only that which is done through our relationship with God for the glory of God has value.** Before every sermon, I pray "Lord, help me make much of you." I kind of feel like telling you that goes against this passage! But, I tell you because without that prayer, my "righteous practices" will be in my own power and ultimately about me. That prayer says I have nothing to offer on my own and I'm asking God to show up and use me for his glory. God gives everything to the one who says, "I have nothing."

Get to the secret place and enter into the joy of your Father. There is a secret place only God and you know about, and it's your heart. Yes, giving discretely, praying by yourself, and keeping your fasting hidden are all good things. But we are a community and live out our faith together, so some of the stuff will be seen and known by others. But what none of us can know is what's going on in your heart, and that's where God wants to meet you. Many of us know "Well done good and faithful servant." What we often miss is what is said next. "Enter into the joy of your master." When we live out of our relationship with God, for the glory of God, we experience the pleasure of God. And there's nothing better.

So I want to close with a time for you and God to meet in the secret place. Noah is going to sing some songs about making it all about him. This is a time for you to perhaps devote yourself to his glory, pray, give. We'll put the giving slide up if you want to do that to end the service. No one is looking! You can even fast, but you only have about five minutes left! Let God check your heart and show you what motivates you. He wants you to know you are enough, and he wants to set you free from whatever would get in the way of living your life fully for him.