

8. Arrogance, Self-Righteousness, and Being Seen of Men

The poor in spirit, the meek, and the merciful find themselves described in the beatitudes. Now Christ describes those who manifest the opposite ethical and moral standards of conduct: the arrogant, the self-righteous, and those who do what they do to be seen of men. The antithesis of this level of self-righteousness is in the description given by Paul in Phil 2:3-4: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." In the 21st century, people often act in their self-interest at the expense of others. Their attitude becomes assuming, self-interested, and self-serving. These attitudes and their concomitant actions are the opposite of what Jesus taught. They are the attitudes and actions of sanctimonious religious people and exploitive business people. They are that part of worldly ethical behavior described in 1 John 2:16 as "the boasting of what he has and does."

The Ethical Standard

Matt 6:1: *1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

The principle is clear: If one does acts of righteousness to be seen of men, there is no reward from God. A rich man builds a wing on the local hospital—a righteous act, indeed. He expects to get public notice in the newspaper and his name on the building. He has his reward. A less well-off person gives \$50 to a passing stranger in need. He tells all his friends and neighbors what he has done. He, too, has his reward. When the Lord says, "Be careful," he signals just how tempting it is to take earthly credit and boast about what one has done. The deceit of Satan is to lead us down the road of pride, followed by public declaration where our acts are good and often even great, but the devil steals our everlasting benefit by appealing to our self-righteous ethics, tempting us to take the credit from among men. We think we are so important that we lose everything to vainglory in this life.

The Ethical Standard Applied to Giving Gifts to the Needy

Matt 6:2-4 *"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 men. I tell you the truth, 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.*

The Lord states what is not a command, but a principle eternal: Hypocrites announce their gifts with trumpets; they do this in the synagogues and on the streets; and they have received their reward in full. The command that tells the proper ethical action follows: Do not announce your gift with trumpets. Do not let your left hand know what the right hand is doing. Do your giving in secret. The heavenly father will reward you.

In the church of the Lord, giving is individual and personal, and of one's own free will. Paul teaches that each of us must purpose in our own hearts in 2 Cor 9:7: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." The church must take care that the public vaunting of the gifts of those better off does not embarrass members of modest means. Rich or poor, the church is one in Christ Jesus. If we do our gifts in secret, the Father who sees what is done in secret will reward us.

The Ethical Standard Applied to Praying

Matt 6:5-7: *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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 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.*

Praying, as in giving, is an area where some publicly vaunt and boast in themselves. The Lord calls the people hypocrites who pray on the street corners and in the synagogues to be seen of men. Today, there are practices of prayer that call attention to those praying in public places, showing off their prayers to others. However, this same act of vainglorious prayer can occur in the assembly where the prayer excludes those around or is worded to show off the skill of the one praying to the congregation making it a mere audience. The Lord gives specific commands about praying: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen." Personal prayer to God the father is always appropriate, but it must be private. Paul regulates public prayers in the congregation in 1 Cor 14:15-17, "I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind."

These public prayers must not be babbling and wordy.

Matt 6:7-8: *7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

The *babbling like pagans* describes prayers that are showing off the speaker's use of words and his ability to use many words. Christians are to remember that our prayers are to God. God knows what we need even before we ask.

The Ethical Standard Applied to Fasting

Matt 6:16-18: *16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men 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.*

The common practice of fasting was an occasion for men to show off their piety with somber looks and disfigured faces. Their vainglory is before men, and they have received their reward. The Lord calls these acts the acts of hypocrites. When Christians perform their religious acts, they are to dress and look normal. It must not be obvious what they are doing. The Father who sees what is done in secret will reward the Christian with this proper attitude.

Conclusion

In the middle of this text, the Lord taught the disciples how to pray. Christians should see this prayer in its simplicity and earnestness as the guide for our prayers--not babbling, not verbose, and not to be heard by men. In the closet of our hearts, we should pray in secret to a heavenly Father who will reward us. To choose verbose prayers to be heard of men is its own reward. Prayers said to be heard by men please only our lust for vainglory in this life.

Matt 6:9-15: *9 "This, then, is how you should pray:*

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,*

10 *your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.*
11 *Give us today our daily bread.*
12 *Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*
13 *And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'*

14 *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Perhaps, the most unethical of standards is to choose to be seen and heard by men for our own vainglory. The ethos of private, unheralded acts of good works or worship empowers us to true greatness.

Study Questions from the Scriptures

1. Phil 2:3-4: What is the opposite attitude to self-righteousness? To whose interest ought Christians to look?
2. 1 John 2:16: The boasting of what one has and does is of what domain—heaven or the world?
3. Matt 6:1: When we do acts to be seen of men, what do we lose?
4. Matt 6:2-4 How secret is our giving to the needy to be? If we give in secret, who will reward us?
5. 1 Cor 9:7: How is it decided what to give? Giving must be free from what constraints? What does God Love?
6. Matt 6:5-7: Where and how are we not to pray? Where and how are we to pray?
7. 1 Cor 14:15-17: What two parts of a person ought to be present in prayer?
8. Matt 6:16-18: How do hypocrites fast? How are Christians to fast? Who will reward them?
9. Matt 6:9-15: How are we to address God in prayer? How are we to address our temporal needs? In order to ask forgiveness, who are we to forgive? How do we regard temptation and the evil one in our prayers? If we fail to forgive those who sin against us, what can we expect from our heavenly Father?