

Living for an Audience of One

Matthew 6:1-18

Psalms 62:1-8

Matt. 6:1-18. This is a relatively large passage I'm about to read, but there is a clear overarching theme to this section, and I want to look at the overarching (or undergirding) attitude that Jesus is calling us to have, in a series of teachings about personal piety—or better put, spiritual practices. We have a string of three teachings: one about giving, one about prayer, and one about fasting. A separate sermon could be done on each, especially Jesus' teaching about prayer (which could be a whole sermon *series*). But when we read them all at once, we see that they go together—there is a pattern, there are themes, and a lot of repetition.

So as I read this, listen for the words and phrases that are repeated the most. This won't be difficult; the repeated words/phrases are obvious.

Matthew 6:1-18

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever 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. ⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This is the word of the Lord.

Did you notice any patterns? Repetitions? Formula? Here is what I came up with: “when/whenever” =7x; “in secret” =6x; “reward” =6x; “your Father” =10x. “Hypocrites” =3x

There is an obvious contrast between the religious “hypocrites” who want to impress others with their personal piety, and humble spirituality and practice that honors *God*, and is done simply and quietly.

Here is how I summarize this passage: our heavenly Father is the only person whose attention matters, and whose reward we should seek. Or, as it is put in the sermon title, live your life for an audience of one (one God, triune God).

When I read this, I have to ask myself: Who do I live my life for? Who am I trying to please? Do I care more about what *people* think of me or what my *heavenly Father* thinks of me? Is my joy and happiness based on my Father’s delight in me as his child? Or do the voices and opinions of others carry more weight? Many people struggle with this, especially those who tend to be people pleasers and like to be liked. So we have to go into our secret place on a regular basis and remind ourselves, or let God remind us, whose opinion really matters when it comes to our life. And when we do that, David’s words in Psalm 62 become our words: for God *alone* my soul waits in silence... He *alone* is my rock and my salvation... On him *alone* rests my honor.” In other words, not on people.

With this as our overarching theme and emphasis (living for an audience of One; having our heavenly father as our only audience), let’s look at the 4 main

phrases that Jesus repeats in this teaching; they give us some guidance in the practice our spiritual lives.

1. Jesus says “when” or “whenever” for our acts of giving, prayer and fasting (7x). This is worthy of notice because he says “**when**” you do these things and not “**if**.” Jesus does not say “*if* you give alms” or “*if* you pray” and so on. He says **when** you do it...

Therefore, Jesus **assumes** that we *will* give and be generous. He **assumes** that we *will* pray—simply and earnestly. He **assumes** that we *will* fast---that is, deny ourselves of something for a period of time to show our dependence on God.

Brief note on fasting: historically, the practice of fasting has been fasting from food; it’s the most obvious and best form of fasting because of the symbolism of hunger. It drives us to hunger more for God, to hunger for righteousness (to quote the beatitude) and it grows our gratitude for daily bread. But fasting can take other forms as well (fasting from television, or technology, or shopping, etc). The point is, Jesus **assumes** that we will deny ourselves of something on some occasions so we can grow closer to our heavenly Father.

So, hidden in this teaching is an encouragement **to be** a faithful giver, **to be** an earnest pray-er, and **to** deny ourselves in some way on a regular basis, in order to deepen our trust and dependence upon God.

And although Jesus tells us to do these things in secret, we may need to ask others for help and guidance when practicing (or learning) to do these things, and in fact there is a biblical and historical basis for things like spiritual direction with a trained director, and support & accountability in a group with others, so we can grow in our practices (which are done in secret). Those are good things, and they're not the same as having an attitude of pride that Jesus warns about—of doing things for show and for ego in order to impress others. Sometimes we need others to help us, or to hold us accountable. So that we can go into our secret place and practice our spirituality.

That's the first main word/phrase: *when or whenever*.

2. "In secret." (6x) When you give, do it *in secret*. When you pray, do it *in secret*. When you fast, do it *in secret*. And your heavenly Father, who sees what is done *in secret*, will reward you.

Jesus becomes more specific in the middle of this passage (v.6) when teaching about prayer. He says, "go into your room and shut the door." This is not to be

taken literally; it's more of a metaphor for the heart; although having a real room where we can go is great, and helpful. The symbolism here is cool: the "room" that Jesus speaks of here is literally a "store room" or a "supply room" or some commentators call it a "treasure room." Remember that in the 1st century many houses were open—open windows and doors, or only with simple wooden shutters and doors. The thing about these houses was that they were easy to enter or break into.

So the room Jesus refers to here was the room that was typically in the interior of a house without windows—so it was protected from thieves who could climb into windows or walk through an open door. And it was the only room in the house, typically, that was locked—or *could* be locked—so that's where the family treasures may have been kept, or other valuable items or legal documents. So, in some aspects, it was a secret place. Only the family had access to it, or knew where it was located.

The symbolism here is cool: Jesus says, go into a place (a) where no one can see you, and (b) where the treasures are. Mostly, in here (heart)—a protected and sacred space.

Again, God is our audience; and when we meet God in the secret place there are riches, spiritually, for us. He has treasures for us in store when we go to our secret place to pray. How wonderful is that?!

So, we don't *have to* show off. We don't *have to* impress others. It isn't necessary because God is giving us the affirmation we need and want.

Now, I don't know if there are many of us who actually like to show off or brag about our giving, or our praying, or our fasting so we can receive praise from others. Many, if not most of us probably feel *inadequate* about our spiritual lives, to be perfectly honest. I suppose there are times when we play the martyr and we get in the subtle comment about how we've been suffering for Jesus because of how much we're doing for him. But many of us probably wish we were more confident and consistent with our prayer life, and wish we trusted God more with our treasure, and maybe our fasting (although I don't know very many people who say, "I wish I fasted more"—that one eludes a lot of people; mostly because we just have not practiced it in the protestant church.

But every human being does want to be noticed, and we want to be appreciated for the things that we do, and for our accomplishments. And Jesus knows that. He recognizes that, and even affirms it in this teaching. So, instead

of teaching people to demolish *any* desire for recognition, Jesus simply wants us to **redirect** that desire. Let *your heavenly Father* notice you, and let *him* reward you. His rewards are way better than that of people anyway.

And I believe that God cheers for us, even when we're struggling to find the right words in prayer, or when we'd rather be doing something else. God cheers for us we choose to pray instead of watch the news, or distract ourselves with entertainment, or something like that. God cheers for us in those times when we do give more than we think we can afford, or when we deny ourselves when it's uncomfortable. He cheers. God doesn't say, "That's not good enough..." He cheers, and then keeps inviting us into more. "Keep coming to me; see how Good I am. Keep going to that secret place, having your loving Father as your audience.

3. Third, in these teachings Jesus uses the intimate and familial word "Father" and not the generic and impersonal word "God" when he speaks about the one who is our audience. He uses it so often in this passage it's almost ridiculous. Ten times, at least. And he doesn't just call God "father", he says "*your father*" and "*your heavenly father.*" He's making a point. The point is, you don't have to impress "God" (out there) and you don't have to be afraid. God is *your father*. It's personal, relational.

This is what's so unusual about the Lord's Prayer. Jesus has just brought God very close. Every rabbi was supposed to teach his disciples to pray. But a good rabbi always taught his apprentices to address God very seriously, very reverently, and very formally. Jesus has now turned everything on its head again.

Remember, this is the upside-down Kingdom we're talking about, and Jesus teaches us to address God in terms that *children* used when talking to their parents.

And btw, I think it's okay, if "father" is not a helpful image, to call God Mother. God doesn't have a gender. Remember in Genesis, in the creation account, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image; so, male and female God made them." Men and women reflect the image of God fully, so therefore God is both, or neither, or all of the above. Jesus used the language and familial image of the day (father) so as not to cause so much heartburn that he lost his audience altogether. However, using this familial term for God was a giant step in a new and better direction.

The point is: Jesus is saying, God is not some cosmic grouch—the heavenly Grinch who would just as soon take things away from all the little who-girls and who-boys. This was the view the Pharisees had of God. Jesus teaches that God is

the loving Father who knows who you are and what you need. You don't have to use fancy words; you don't have to stand on ceremony. You don't have to try harder.

Just be sincere, and willing to consent to God's will, and desire his Kingdom to come. He loves you—so just come and acknowledge who you are to your Father, and enjoy a relationship with him as his child. It's very simple. But do go to him! Give! Pray! Fast! Do these things, and learn how loving your father is. In other places in the New Testament we are encouraged to call him "Abba," which was often the first word a very small child learned when addressing their earthly father. It's so easy to say and it just rolls off the tongue—'ah' is the easiest vowel sound to make. It's simple! And that's how accessible Jesus says God our father is—as simple as making a vowel sound.

I've known many people who don't pray because they think they aren't doing it right, or saying the right words, or they believe God is mad at them because they're too sinful or unworthy, or that God is like the wizard of Oz, demanding something impossible from them before he will hear and maybe grant their request. So they don't pray, because God feels distant to them.

I believe that is just the kind of person Jesus is speaking to here. And he is saying to them (to you, if this is you): don't be intimidated by others who seem to be professional pray-ers, or seem to have it right, or seem to be on a higher plane of spirituality; and certainly don't be intimidated by "God." Just come to *your Father*, simply and honestly, with what's on your heart. He's waiting to hear from you.

During a confirmation course with high school students years ago, we were doing a Bible study of Luke's gospel. One student, while reading the gospel of Luke, and particularly after the parable of the prodigal son, made this observation: "Jesus was very popular with the ragamuffins." What a great observation. The light bulb was starting to go off for her. She was asked, "Why do you think that was? Why do you think the ragamuffins and outcasts liked to hang out with Jesus?" She said: "Because Jesus made God accessible to them." She got it! And that was a wonderful new insight for *me*. Jesus brought the Father close and made him accessible by showing people, especially the ragamuffins & outcasts, that God is their heavenly father/mother who loves them.

Who calls them, and us, into an upside-down and backwards Kingdom way of living, who knows us and knows our every need. More on that next week; stay tuned!

Finally...

4. We will be rewarded (6x)—when we keep our Father as our only audience.

Jesus says, people who want to be seen and heard have already received their reward. But we're told that our heavenly father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us.

The question that's often asked is, is that reward immediate, in small installments each time we do something in secret? Or is it one big reward at the end, in heaven? As in, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter the joy I've prepared for you." And the answer is: Jesus doesn't tell us. Because, maybe it's both. Reward now, and reward later. Some of each.

Maybe pleasing our father is reward in and of itself. Maybe the boost of inner strength and encouragement is the reward. Or the reward of being known by the creator of the universe. The point is, there is a reward. Go find it! Discover what

that is for you. I don't know about you, but I like rewards! So I'm in when it comes to what Jesus is saying.

Let me end with a story. This will ring true for you parents and grandparents.

When our kids were little (up to age 5 or so) they all did gymnastics—little gym. All around the floor, tumbling, jumping, rings, bars, etc. When it was my turn to take the kids, I often had a book to read while they had class. But I would look up from time to time and—this happened with each of our kids in their classes, and this surely happens with all parents and their little ones—I would look up to see them waiting for me to make eye contact with them. I'd get the wave, then mouth the words, “watch me,” and then they would do something impressive...

This happened all the time, with all of our kids, during all of their activities when they were little—“watch me.” At the playground after school, at the swimming pool, etc. And after a while I finally figured out that my job was simply to watch, and admire them. Applaud, or give the thumbs up. And I loved doing this; I loved watching and admiring them (and still do!).

It occurred to me one day that this is the kind of relationship that God our father/mother longs for with us. And the light bulb came on for me. Here were my observations:

- Our kids were not trying to impress anyone else; they didn't care about the other kids in the class.
- They weren't faking it; of course, they didn't do everything perfectly, but they were utterly sincere and trying their best and having fun;
- During and after class they got a reward—my undivided attention, smiles and cheering; hugs afterward, and usually a slurpee. Or, something out of the strategically placed vending machine by the exit at the gym.

All our kids and grandkids really want (and need) is our attention and approval.

Of course many will say this changes as children grow into adolescence and begin to care less about what their parents think, and they may in fact tell us they don't want us to watch them at all. They're perfectly happy to have us ignore them. But I don't believe it; I believe they still want, and need, our loving attention (not hovering; there is a difference between surveillance and

admiration). Even when they push back, they're just doing their job of asserting their independence. I believe they really need our attention and loving affirmation through adolescence; and even beyond that.

And when we've all grown to adulthood and feel very self-sufficient and independent... Jesus reminds us of all that he teaches here, when later in Matthew's gospel he says: "Unless you change and become like a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven."

Again, we're invited to go back to that place of trust, innocence, playfulness, and of wanting nothing more than to have the attention of our gracious and loving Father in heaven.