

Foundations: OUR MOTIVATIONS
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18 (AFBC 3/12/17)

Matthew 6

Giving

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.

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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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.

Fasting

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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

Why do we do what we do? What motivates us to live the way we live, to speak and act as we do? I raise this question today because in the passage before us, it seems to me that this is the question Jesus is raising. My questions don't really matter much, but His do!

Jesus knows us well—as in *completely*. He knows all there is to know! He knows that most of us are motivated, at least occasionally, by a desire to impress somebody else, or maybe to keep up with someone else.

So in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to take an honest look deep inside and ask ourselves, “Are we being true to ourselves—our faith, our values—OR, are we too concerned about what someone else thinks about us?” Motivations!

It's popular on morning news shows to have experts come in and talk about various financial issues. They encourage us to do things that most of us already know we should be doing.

All I can figure is there're a lot of folks who aren't doing what they know they should, and so they're finding themselves in a bit of a financial mess.

So they give advice to those who are rich in things and poor in brain cells! For instance, I heard this advice recently.

The financial guru suggested that if you have friends who are better off than you are financially, but you cannot resist the urge to try to keep up with them in terms of all the stuff they have—houses, cars, club memberships, big-screen TVs, nice clothes, expensive trips, etc.—THEN—wait for it—she advised getting a different set of friends!

Can't you just hear it? “Will you be my friend? You seem poor enough! What size TV do you have, and where did you go on vacation last year? Well, nothing impressive about that—you'll do just fine!”

Motivations are tricky. There's this tendency in most of us to want to impress somebody. I suppose there are some who have given up on this—maybe for all the wrong reasons, though. Hopefully, others have stopped for the right reasons.

But it's not easy. This urge to impress begins early in life. "Look, Mommy. Watch me, Daddy."

And from our parents' reactions, we think we must have done something *really impressive*—and if it's grandma that's watching us—it may seem as though it was most impressive thing ever done in the history of the world!

So it comes as a rude awakening... when we get a little older. Let's say, a teenage boy, for instance—we all know who they're trying to impress, whether or not they'll admit it! I suppose the same is true for teenage girls—I've just never been one of those—so I can't say for sure from personal experience.

At any rate, who is it in your life? Your teacher, your boss, your spouse, your friends, your golf or tennis partners, your Christians brothers and sisters? Who is it that you try real hard to impress?

I wonder how many auto accidents happen because somebody behind the wheel is trying to impress someone who isn't? More often than not, our attempts to impress others don't turn out so well--but we keep on trying!

In the teachings of Jesus that we have before us today, He tells us that there is only one Person that you and I should seek to impress: GOD—especially when it comes to worship, God is the Only One that should matter to us. If this isn't the case, if our motivation is not to please God and Him only, then we have a problem!

Listen to how Jesus begins this section of His sermon:
"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." (Matthew 6:1)

In the religion of Jesus' day, there were three great "acts of righteousness." There was giving, praying, and fasting. These were the big three that demonstrated a person's allegiance to God, so Jesus addresses each one. Look at how He does this:

1) GIVING (v. 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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

2) PRAYING (v. 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."**

3) FASTING (v. 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."**

Giving, praying, fasting—Jesus says that these good acts of piety and worship have been contaminated with bad motivations. Acts of righteousness have withered into acts of self-righteousness. The motive is no longer to honor and obey God, but to impress one's fellowman—which leaves God very... unimpressed!

Wherever we put our faith into action, whether, as Jesus observed, we do this in the synagogue or on the street corners, it's essential that we remember WHO this is for.

When I was a boy, my mother baked so many cakes and pies to take to others--mainly the sick and the bereaved--whenever I smelled those wonderful aromas coming from the oven or saw those delicious treats cooling on the counter, I would ask her, "Is that for us...or somebody else?"

When it comes to our worship, our giving, praying, our acts of love and devotion in whatever form they may take, our Heavenly Father wants to know, "Is this really for ME, or is it for someone else?"

Could it actually be more for you than ME? Might you be motivated by a desire to make yourself look better in someone else's eyes?"

Maybe this is not as big a problem now as it used to be, though. There was a time not so long ago when church was the place where you wanted to be seen. It was good for your standing in the community, your business, political campaign, or just your reputation in general.

Mixed motives were much more troublesome then, don't you think? That's not to imply the problem is solved; I just don't believe it's present to the same degree as it was years ago.

In Jesus' day, there were people who had transformed religious acts into an art form—as in the “dramatic arts.” This becomes clearer when we consider the New Testament Greek.

The phrase that Jesus uses here: “to be seen by men,” is the Greek word “theathenai.” It's the word from which we get our word “theatrical.”

It's fine to enjoy the theatre, but nothing that we do for the Lord should ever qualify as a theatrical performance! We don't do the Lord's work in order “to be seen by men.”

We can take this one step further. The word “hypocrite,” which Jesus uses in all three sections that we're considering today, comes from the name given to the Greek actors who would fill several different roles in the same play.

They did this by wearing masks. Those watching the play didn't see the actor's face, just his mask. So...what people saw was not who the actor really was—which eventually evolved into our word, “hypocrite.”

Jesus strongly condemned what He was seeing among the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. He witnessed far too much “theatrics,” too much “hypocrisy” in their relationships with God and each other.

A. His first example is GIVING. The devout in that day were to give their tithes at the synagogue and then give their alms to the poor who were out on the streets. Jesus commended both.

But here's the problem: both forms of giving were done where others could see what was taking place. Jesus even called attention to this on one occasion by pointing out the generosity of a poor widow—remember the widow's mite?

But some had resorted to such theatrics that Jesus likened them to “blaring trumpets.” When they made their gifts, they wanted “to be seen,” so they... “tooted their own horns.”

They got what they wanted, Jesus said. They impressed those whom they were so concerned about impressing. But they didn't impress the One whom they most needed to impress.

B. It was the same way with PRAYER. The good people were to pray three times a day, preferably at their synagogue... or the Temple, if they were in Jerusalem.

But if they couldn't get to church to pray, they were to first turn and face in the direction of the Temple--and then pray. Again, some were doing their praying with grand theatrics. Look at me! Notice how holy I am. They wanted to make sure they were seen!

C. FASTING had also been corrupted. I realize that as Baptists we don't know much about fasting. One fellow told me he knew all about fasting. He said whenever he was hungry, he tried to get to some food as fast as possible.

Fasting is supposed to help us discipline our lives, to exercise control over our basic hungers in order to better focus on our devotion to God.

We're in the season of the church year called Lent. As I mentioned recently, many Christians refrain from eating meats or desserts or whatever during Lent. Whenever the urge strikes to eat something they've given up for the season, that hunger or desire is a reminder to pray instead.

The Jewish community of which Jesus was part was supposed to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. The super-pious crowd had decided that was not enough. THEY had begun fasting twice a week.

Then, to make sure that everyone understood how religious they were, they would intentionally look like they were suffering from this food deprivation. More theatrics... and hypocrisy!

Well, I got to thinking about this. I've only known a few people who faithfully practice fasting—and I only know about them because they told me they were fasting! How else would I know.

I think I understand now why I didn't feel entirely comfortable with them sharing this spiritual secret with me. At the time, I

thought I was just feeling a little guilty because I wasn't fasting too. But maybe, instead, it was because I sensed that THEIR fasting was really none of MY business.

Done right, only they and the Lord would know about it—right?!? That's what Jesus said.

And the same is true for the person who brags that HE only gives in SECRET—follow that? Or conversely, the person who never gives unless it results in his name appearing on some plaque or other form of recognition.

Then there's the person who shares with you that He had a special PRAYER CLOSET built in his new house! Kinda' makes you want to reach above their heads and adjust their halos!

Jesus said, 'Be careful. Don't do your 'acts of righteousness' before others. If your motivation for doing good stuff is so that you will be seen by others--well, once they've seen you—you've gotten your reward--and it's the only reward you'll be getting!'

I don't know if I'll ever reach a place in my life where I have absolutely no desire to impress anyone but God, but I do know that I will be a better person and a more devout follower of Christ if and when I do. And the same is true for you.

I like this story—any Father would—but I think it really applies here. In 2002, American tennis player Serena Williams won her first Wimbledon Championship. She was clearly not the favorite player, though, for many of the British fans; so after her impressive victory, a reporter asked her if this had bothered her.

She said, "No." She went on to say that she knew that some people had rooted against her her whole life. But she still wanted to win.

Then she added, "Besides, my Dad was sitting in those stands. I knew he was rooting for me, and I wanted to please him."

Maybe the reason we try so hard to impress others, friends, is we have never truly taken to heart the Gospel message that:

>we have a Father God who is "rooting" for us,

- >loving us with unconditional love,
- >forgiving us when we fail,
- >picking us up when we fall,
- >literally dying for us to love Him in return,
- >and know in our heart of hearts that we're HIS CHILD,
- >and that He's proud to call us His own!

Listen: until this Good News takes hold of our hearts, we'll knock ourselves out trying to impress others.

We'll spare no expense, take unnecessary risks, do things that are silly and dumb and embarrassing--all in a desperate effort to impress someone who in all likelihood WON'T BE!

Once we finally get it, though, that we are the deeply loved and completely accepted children of our Heavenly Father, we won't be so desperate to impress others any longer. Our heart's desire will be to impress Him, and Him alone.

Live like that—to impress your Heavenly Father, to bring glory to Him—live like that, love like that, serve, give, pray, and fast like that, be as faithful and genuine and consistent as that—and I promise you, without even trying, you will live a most impressive life!