

Before Men? In Secret?

Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before men? In secret? Jesus tells us in our text that we are not to do things in order to be seen by men, but we are to do them in secret. We are not to practice our righteousness before other people, or we will have no reward from the Father. You know, if we were to stop there, this text almost seems a contradiction of what we preach as Christians.

The life of a Christian is to be a living example of the faith to the rest of the world. You know the song, *This Little Gospel Light of Mine*, what are we to do with it? Let it shine. Why? Because Jesus, when He began the message which our text is taken from, said, *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* (Matthew 5:14-16 ESV)

Are we to be seen by others in the world as different? Or aren't we? Are we to be the light of the world? Or aren't we?

At first glance, this seems a bit confusing. But Jesus is simply talking about the motivation behind what you and I do as Christians. Listen to that first phrase of our text again. *"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."*

The motivation mentioned in this portion of our text directly opposes the motivation Jesus mentions when He begins what I read earlier from the beginning of Christ's the sermon on the mount. At the beginning of that sermon, the motivation was for people to see your good works in order to bring glory to the Father in heaven. In portion of that sermon which serves as our text for today, Jesus warns people not to do their righteous deeds in order to be seen by men, that is, to be praised by them.

Dear friends in Christ, it is so easy to do, isn't it. As I've stated before, one of the criticisms I hear when I and visit with people who have not, or do not, attend church, is that they claim the church is full of hypocrites, "Pastor, if you only saw how they acted outside of church. I don't want to be part of that." Such people have a wrong understanding of why believers gather in God's house. If our attendance at services in God's house is braggadocio, then I would agree with them. But, we gather because we know we are sinners, and here is where forgiveness and life is dispensed to us.

So, why do you act the way you act? Why do you do what you do? What do you hope to accomplish with every one of your actions? Are you doing what you are doing to look good to men, so that they may praise you, and say all sorts of nice things about you? Is it because you want people to know what a good Christian you are?

The godly woman who would never miss a Sunday service, and swears off all alcoholic beverages, is the same woman who will sneeringly gossips to anybody who will listen about the local drunks and how embarrassing to themselves they are.

And the man who speaks out very loudly about how sexual sins need to be curtailed, who speaks out in favor of abstinence for younger people, and rightly states that living together without marriage is a sin. Yet, he never fails to be working in his yard in the summer when the neighbor's college daughter is home cutting the grass on the riding mower – in her swimsuit.

Yeah, we all look good on the outside, but on the inside, because of our sinful flesh, we're full of dead men's bones. We all try to be seen by people doing good things, because we know what sins seethe deep in our hearts.

There are those who give generously – as long as it is listed prominently in the Sunday bulletin so everyone can know how much they gave. Some want to be seen studying their Bible and praying and coming to church so others know that they do, but the whole time they are at church, their minds are wandering with their eyes, checking out who else is there and what they are doing, just so they have fingers to point later on.

Of course, there are not many who fast anymore, but some who do, love to let everybody know how they are suffering. Their suffering becomes a badge of honor they through around Facebook.

Today, to help themselves look good before others, many will ‘give up something for Lent’. Sometimes they give up something for Lent to help their own image, maybe even in the hopes of losing a few pounds.

Imagine the scene... Jesus, battered, beaten, His back bloody, struggling to carry his cross on the road to Golgotha, when from the crowd behind Him, someone asks, “Jesus, what are you going to give up for Lent?”

You are the dearly beloved of God, and Christ’s carrying that cross was not done to show off His righteousness. Nor was it to brag about how generous He was to the needy. Nor to show how pious He was in prayer. And the fast imposed upon Him by the chief priests and elders was not His doing so that others would give Him praise.

Christ’s actions garnered mocking insults and abuse from all the important and respected people. It also gave all glory to the Father. Christ’s perfect righteousness was given to death on the cross for you. All the riches of heaven He denied, so that He might sacrifice them and give them to you. In His prayers, you were always on His mind – and still are. He suffered starvation, thirst, pain, and death so that you might never suffer privation for eternity.

Is it acceptable to give up something for Lent? Sure it is! And when you crave what you have denied yourself, remember the passion of Christ, come to the cross and see there, your salvation and righteousness. Rejoice in God’s gift to you. Glory in the fact that God loved you so very much that He gave Himself unto death for you.

We are to live our lives every day in the knowledge of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Everything we do should reflect not back upon ourselves, but upon God, giving glory to the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord. In Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, it is explained this way. *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 5:20-6:2 ESV)*

Before men? Not if we are trying to build ourselves up in their eyes. In secret? If we are trying to hide our faith, that also contradicts Christ’s command. You are to be in the world, but not of the world – a witness to the world, yet not a showboat seeking the praise of men, saying what a good Christian you are. Seek instead the praise of your Father in heaven, living your faith in humility – knowing all your righteousness is God’s gift to you in Christ Jesus – and treasure that.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Today we begin our Lenten journey. We begin to lay up treasures in heaven, treasures which cannot be taken away. Today, is the favorable time that God listened to you, hearing you confess that you have not always been focused upon Him instead of receiving the world’s accolades. Today is the day of salvation when God helps you, to remove all your sins against Him.

It is a favorable time, for God's grace comes to you, for today is the day of salvation. Yes, we're going to journey through Lent and come before the cross. We're going to listen closely to every word that Jesus spoke on that day He carried our sin, we are going to meditate upon them together.

But today is the day of salvation. Before men you confessed your sin - and Jesus confessed you before His Father, and they spoke to you by the Spirit telling you all is forgiven. Together, as the body of Christ, His Church, you receive from His gracious hand the righteousness He purchased when He was made sin for you – in a word, in a morsel of bread, in a sip of wine, Christ Himself comes to you and gives you His righteousness. There is your treasure. There is your heart. There is your salvation, before all men to see. Let us not keep that a secret. Amen.