***“Do Not Let Your Left Hand Know”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Ash Wednesday, 2020

**Matt 6:3** But 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.

In all ancient societies, religion was much more important than it is in our secularized, industrialized society of today. But that also meant that human vanity, pride, and social climbing were thoroughly entwined with public displays of religion. Social and political power were deeply entangled with organized religion (as they still are). People sometimes use the organized church to get acclaim and popularity for their good deeds. Jesus is trying to break that unholy alliance between religion and public prestige and power.

He is teaching people to leave that selfish stuff out. He says it’s a good idea to do your charity and other good deeds in secret. That is what is meant by not letting your left hand know what your right is doing. It means don’t let your selfish take advantage of your religious life. Don’t let self-promotion poison your good deeds. Don’t be a show-off, and don’t think that God is impressed by empty phrases.

Of course, some people, when they hear this, will find ways to be *seen* as humble. But Jesus’ advice is really calling for an inward change, not just a pantomimed outward one. To really follow Jesus, your *character* needs to be shaken up, humbled, and transformed. You can’t really follow even a simple commandment of Jesus outwardly; only an inner transformation will do. He asks you to re-evaluate everything in your life, to re-think all your values, and to *not* place self or ego first.

He never asks for the destruction of self or ego; only its demotion. Nor does he try to get people to believe that the personality is an illusion, as eastern religions do. He does not teach that all pleasure is evil, or he would not have been known to drink wine and enjoy himself at wedding parties. He did not believe that humanity is evil, or he would not have called himself the Son of Man, the Son of Humanity. He has a positive view of human possibilities. But he *does* want us to back off the braggadocio, to shelve the showing-off, to ratchet down the rage, to exit off the ego, to plug up the pride, to cease the self-serving, and to reject resentment.

Doing those things is hard enough, as they require a transformation of character. “Be transformed by a renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2).