



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 6:1-6 & 16-18

Topic

Jesus describes a person who wants to appear spiritual in order to receive the approval of other men as an actor playing a role behind a mask

Title

"Who was that Masked Manpleaser?"

Introduction

I have no idea if Jesus ever attended the theater but it's clear He had some understanding of stage acting. In this set of verses He uses the word "hypocrites" three times. It is from the Greek word that described actors. It means something like *playing a role behind a mask*.

You know the kinds of masks I'm talking about. Tragic masks carried mournful or pained expressions, while comic masks were smiling or leering.

His repetition of the word "hypocrites" is not the only clue Jesus had the theater in mind. Look at verse one:

Mat 6:1 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, **to be seen by them**. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

The phrase, "to be seen by them" (or your Bible may say "to be noticed"), comes from the Greek stem that is used of spectators in an audience.

The people that the Jews thought were the most spiritual, the most righteous, were more like actors wearing masks performing for an audience of other men to get their applause and approval. They were, in a word, phony.

Men are not the proper audience to review and reward your righteousness; God is. Staying with the illustration, we could say that you have an audience of One - your Father in Heaven.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Take Heed You Always Prefer The Audience of One, and #2 Do All Your Deeds To Please The Audience Of One.

#1 Take Heed You Always Prefer
The Audience Of One

(v1)

Let's take a look at verse one again:

Mat 6:1 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Most of the competent Bible commentators point out that verse one is an intro to the entire section. They say that the best translation of "charitable deeds," from the best manuscripts, is the word "righteousness." Thus the verse reads something like this: "take heed that you do not do your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else you have no reward with your Father which is in Heaven."

The word "righteousness," then, is a general term that describes behaviors that are inspired by your right relationship with God. Three of those behaviors are then described in these verses, in this order: giving, praying, and fasting.

When Jesus makes His points about praying, He goes into greater detail by giving us what is commonly called The Lord's Prayer.

We're going to talk about giving, praying, and fasting, but skip The Lord's Prayer and take it by itself next time.

Jesus warned about doing our deeds before men. Os Guinness wrote,

Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience or other. The question is not whether we have an audience but which audience we have. A life lived listening to the decisive call of God is a life lived before one audience that trumps all others – **the Audience of One.**

Paul the apostle, in Ephesians 6:6, encouraged you to serve God, "not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ..." It's the same idea put a different way.

Guinness went on to say,

We have moved from the “inner directed” world... in which [our] calling [as Christians] act[s] as an inner compass, to the “other directed” world of modern society, in which our contemporaries are our real guides. We see this in teenagers listening to their peers, women following the beguiling images of womanhood in magazines and designer fashions, politicians aping polls and slavishly following focus group findings, and pastors anxiously following the latest profiles of “seekers.”

Instead of playing to a human audience, we ought to seek the reward of our Father in Heaven.

Why should we care about rewards? One reason why is that Jesus cares a great deal about bestowing them.

- He mentioned them prominently in these verses.
- In Matthew 5:12 He said of those who bear persecution that their reward will be great in Heaven.
- In Matthew 10:42 He said that whoever gives a cup of cold water in His name will not lose his or her reward.
- In Matthew 25:14-30 at least part of the teaching of the parable of the talents is that the faithful servant will receive his or her reward.
- In Matthew 25:31-46 there is either punishment or reward with regard to meeting the needs of the saints.

We could go on, but here is the point. If rewards matter to our Father, they must matter to us.

A heightened sense of my future rewards will help me look past men to my real audience and to perform only for Him.

#2 Do All Your Deeds To Please The Audience Of One

(v2-6 & 16-18)

Jesus gets specific. He presents three behaviors:

- In verse two Jesus said, “when you do a charitable deed...”
- In verse five Jesus said, “when you pray...”
- In verse sixteen Jesus said “when you fast...”

Note that He said "when," not "if." Nevertheless these may be the three least practiced behaviors among believers.

- Regarding “giving,” the statistics are pretty drastic. **The average is that a Christian gives around 2% of his or her income to the work of the Lord.** When you figure in those who do actually tithe, who give 10%, it means that most Christians give nothing or almost nothing to the work of the Lord.
- It’s hard to give a statistical analysis of prayer, especially private prayer. Still, almost any believer will readily admit they don’t pray as much as they ought to or would like to.
- Fasting has fallen on hard times. A number of contemporary Christian teachers even go so far as to say that fasting is no longer a behavior Christians ought to practice.

Let's start from scratch. You're a Christian and have immediate access to God the Father because of Jesus Christ. You are in His presence. He is your Audience of One. But you are not an actor to His audience; you are a re-actor to His awesomeness - reacting to His love and grace and mercy and forgiveness and acceptance.

Re-acting that is not acting will reveal itself in your giving and in your praying and in your fasting.

G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary on Matthew, suggested something interesting and, I think, insightful. He suggested that your giving is the result of your praying; and that your fasting enhances your praying. In other words, they are progressive in reverse order.

Let's take these behaviors in reverse order and start with fasting in verses sixteen, seventeen and eighteen.

Mat 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Jesus made it clear fasting would continue when He said, "when you fast." We know, too, from the Gospel accounts that Jesus practiced fasting.

The Lord and His first followers fasted and assumed we would, too. Jesus was once asked by the disciples of John, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" He answered, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15). Jesus was referring to Himself as the "bridegroom." Now that He has returned to Heaven, His disciples "will fast."

His followers in the first century fasted. The apostle Paul is a good example. He once said of himself, in fact, that he was “in fastings often” (Second Corinthians 11:27).

At the same time I have to point out the fasting is nowhere in the New Testament prescribed as a duty. It's of grace. It's not that I *have* to fast, but rather that I *get* to if I so choose.

The “hypocrites” fasted on Monday's and Thursday's. They said it was because those were the days Moses ascended Mount Sinai on the two occasions he met with God there.

What a coincidence, however, that Monday's and Thursday's were also market days and the crowds would be the largest. **They chose those days to be seen by more men - in order to have the greatest audience of men for their performance.**

Mat 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

Mat 6:18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

The single issue addressed by Jesus is the outward demeanor *when* you choose to fast. Be inconspicuous. Give no indication you are fasting. Don't be an actor.

No audience on earth, therefore, knows - only your Audience of One. Jesus' words restored fasting to an activity between you and your Father.

That's a good way of approaching fasting - as an activity you and your heavenly Father participate in together.

When we talk fasting, we're talking abstaining from food. But the bigger picture is that we are foregoing something in our life in order to spend time with The Lord. It might be food, but it can be something else.

I want to suggest that fasting is, well, *romantic*. It's like when I first dated Pam and gave up sleep in order to drive from San Bernardino to Santa Ana and back *every night*.

I know this doesn't sound spiritual, but think of fasting like you think of dating. You give up other activities to be with the one you love.

Don't, however, think you are fasting because you were too busy at work to eat lunch. If I skip lunch, but spend none of that time with The Lord, I'm missing the point. It isn't what I give up; it's what I gain in the sacrifice, and what I gain is time alone with God.

Fasting always seems connected with prayer in the Bible. There are times of prayer without fasting but not times of fasting without prayer.

Regarding prayer and fasting working together W.H. Griffith Thomas remarked, "Prayer may be said to be that by which we attach ourselves to God, and fasting that by which we detach ourselves from the world."

Working back up the verses, meet me at verse five.

Mat 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

There were set times for daily prayers in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

- In the Old Testament you see Daniel praying at those prescribed times.
- In the New Testament Book of Acts Peter and John were “going to the Temple at the hour of prayer” when they paused to heal the blind beggar.

There was nothing wrong with having set times for prayer, or for having prayer meetings. There was nothing wrong with offering prayers in public.

What *was* and *is* wrong has to do with the motive to be seen by others. These whom Jesus called hypocrites would leave their homes late, I think at least sometimes on purpose. They couldn't get to the synagogue on time so, at the appointed times, they would simply (but loudly) stop on the streets and offer their prayers for all to see. Passersby would see how spiritual they were.

If they did get to the synagogue they prayed in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Let's make a short list of ways we might draw attention to ourselves.

- We can pray but our words are really a message intended for our fellow believers to hear rather than a conversation with God.
- We can totally change our manner of speaking when praying.
- We might suddenly get loud and start repeating some phrase.
- We might adopt a formality we would never use in ordinary conversation.

We can subtly draw attention to our prayer-life when we are not praying, too.

- We might make sure others know we are going to pray.
- We might let slip how early or how often or for how long we pray.

I think we get the point. We should not pray to be seen of men. We might sometimes be seen of men, but that should never be our motive or our desire.

Mat 6:6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

“Go into your room” is sometimes translated “enter in to your closet.” It has given rise to the concept of a special place or room where we can do our ‘best’ praying. There are even plans you can discover for ‘building’ a prayer closet.

That’s OK, to an extent. Just remember this. Most of the people in Jesus’ audience had one-room homes without closets.

What kind of “room” was He talking about? According to scholar William Hendriksen,

[The] Greek [verb used was related to the nouns]... *treasurer, treasury room, storeroom*. Such rooms [were] where precious objects were kept...

The equivalent today might be a vault. My paraphrase of this might be, “Think about your prayers as if they were spoken in a vault that secures precious things.”

I submit to you that prayer is precious to God. There are indications in the Bible that God stores our prayers:

- Three times in the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ we are told that the prayers of the saints, which rise before God as incense, are collected in Heaven (5:8, 8:3, 8:4).
- In the Old Testament we read in Psalm 56:8 that God puts the tears of the saints into His “bottle” and in His “book.”

Our prayers are not stored because they are profound. They are stored because God is our Father.

You parents and grandparents, do you not have tons of memorabilia from your children? By itself it is junk, trash. But because it was handled by your child or grandchild, because it was drawn by them or molded by them, it is precious to you.

It puts a very different slant on prayer, does it not?

If you've spent all this quality time with God, fasting and praying, you can't help but respond by giving. Jump up to verse two.

Mat 6:2 Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

This is probably where we get the expression, “Don’t blow your own horn.”

Apparently it had become customary for the Jews to announce their “charitable deeds” by sounding a “trumpet” and gathering a crowd.

Those who give in such a way that they receive recognition from men are acting spiritual when, in fact, their motives are carnal. They are giving in order to receive rather than giving in order to bless others.

Mat 6:3 But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

Mat 6:4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

I've always been fascinated with the phrase, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Is one of your hands writing checks without you really knowing about it? Swiping your credit card? Putting your wallet in the offering?

Then I came across something that I think can help make some sense of the expression. There is something, a real, rare neurological condition, called Alien Hand Syndrome (AHS).

It is an unusual neurological disorder in which one of the sufferer's hands seem to take on a mind of its own. AHS is best documented in cases where a person has had the two hemispheres of their brain surgically separated, a procedure sometimes used to relieve the symptoms of extreme cases of epilepsy. An alien hand sufferer can feel normal sensation in the hand... but believes that the hand, while still being a part of their body, behaves in a manner that is totally distinct from the sufferer's normal behavior. They feel that they have no control over the movements of the 'alien' hand, but that, instead, the hand has the capability of acting autonomously.

We are to give as if the money in our hands was being controlled by another - in this case, controlled by The Lord.

How does The Lord get control of my giving? The Lord takes control of my giving "in secret." In other words, when I am alone with the Lord, perhaps fasting and praying, He and I determine in that secret, intimate time the scope of my giving. I emerge from my time with Him having given Him control.

It's hard to believe that anyone could emerge from a "secret" meeting with the Lord, having given Him control of my giving, **and then give almost nothing - or nothing - to Him from my finances.**

No, if I am meeting with Jesus, I will give more and more. In those meetings I see that He gave *everything* for me. He became impoverished so I might have every spiritual blessing in heavenly places.

Giving is one behavior that allows us to be brutally honest with ourselves. Giving is quantifiable. **I know exactly how much I give, or don't give.** It's right there, in my bank statement.

The verse ends, "and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." The word "openly" does not occur in the best manuscripts we have. The sentence simply reads, "and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you."

Don't you want to delight the heart of your Savior when you see Him face-to-face? Of course you do!

Fasting, praying, giving, are not so much religious activities as they are responses to God's love for you. As I said, you're not an actor; you're a re-actor.

God loved you so much that Jesus came and died for you. Are you not inspired to sacrifice more-and-more of your time to spend time talking with Him?

Are you not excited to then give from what He has given you so that this Good News will go out to others?

The Jews Jesus addressed were familiar with His illustration of the hypocrite. We might update it for ourselves by discussing role playing. There are lots of different ways we role play. I've done it at Chaplain training seminars where you rehearse a role in a simulation in order to apply the training you've been taught.

Perhaps the most popular role playing is in games, e.g., on-line, where you assume the role of a certain character.

Following The Lord is not just live-action role playing, called *larping* by nerds. It is loving Him with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Is my expression of Christianity a role play in which I say and do certain things that are characteristic of a believer... Or am I giving expression to the overflow of God's love I discover in my heart as I sacrifice in order to spend time with Him?