

“Can You Keep a Secret?”

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 17, 2013

Well it's getting to be that time of year again. The air has warmed up, the trees are beginning to leaf out and the grass is beginning to grow again. That can only mean one thing – your taxes are due soon. One day the IRS received a letter that read, “Last year I intentionally misrepresented my income and I have not been able to sleep since. I have enclosed \$150 for the back taxes. If I find I still can't sleep I will send the rest.”

Your character has been defined as what you do when no one is looking. Another way of putting that is what you would do if you knew you would never get caught. That's exactly what Jesus is talking about throughout the Sermon on the Mount. As we learned in chapter 5, God is not merely interested in our outward actions – whether we have murdered someone or not – but he's concerned with our thoughts and desires.

One of the most common reasons that non-believers give as to why they don't go to church is that the church is filled with hypocrites, Christians who say they believe one thing but their actions seem to say the opposite. The word hypocrite is actually a Greek word for actors in a play. So a hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he's not. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we will admit that there's some truth in the accusation that there are hypocrites in the church. Each of us is, in some way, a hypocrite. The reality is that none of us lives up to the standard that the Bible lays out for us. But that doesn't mean that Christianity isn't true. The truth of Christianity doesn't depend on how well its followers live up to God's standards of holiness. The truth of the Christian faith depends solely on Jesus Christ, who is the

only person who has ever upheld it perfectly.

When people would tell Dr. D. James Kennedy that they couldn't join a church because of all the hypocrites, he would reply, “we always have room for one more.” In today's passage Jesus says, “don't be like the hypocrites.” The point he's making is not that the church is to be filled with perfect people, that's impossible. Instead, the church is filled with forgiven people. One of the things that makes the Church so attractive to non-believers is when we are transparent and honest about our failings and about the forgiveness that comes in Jesus.

There's an interesting paradox in this passage. In chapter 5 Jesus said, “don't keep your religion a secret. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Now in chapter 6 he seems to be saying, “keep your religion a secret. Beware of practicing your righteousness in front of other people.” So which is it? Are we to make our faith public or keep it private? The answer is “both.” There are some aspects of our faith that we are to make public so that God is glorified and there are other aspects that we are to keep private so that God is glorified.

It's human nature for us to want to be recognized and affirmed for the good things we do. We all want to hear that we have done a good job or that we've made a difference in someone's life. And there's nothing wrong with that. But it's also our nature to seek out more and more of that kind of affirmation. That can lead us to do things that are basically good, but to do them for the purpose of receiving praise from other people.

If my goal is for people to notice the things I do, then I will have to do them in a way that people notice. For example, if I want to be thanked for taking out the garbage, I need to make sure that I only take out the garbage when my wife is watching. If I take it out while she's not around, she may never realize it and I wouldn't get the praise I think I deserve. In that case, I'm not taking out the garbage because it's the right thing to do, I'm taking it out so I can be praised for it.

Jesus warns us that we can fall into the same trap with our faith. If we start practicing our faith because we want other people to see us as intelligent or spiritual or generous, we are actually offending God. Jesus says, "then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

In ancient Israel, there were three things that a good Jew was required to do. He was required to pray, to fast, and to give alms to the poor. Jesus addresses each of these, saying, "It's not enough to do those three things, you need to have the proper attitude about them."

The first one he mentions is charitable giving, probably because this is the one we are most likely to be tempted to seek recognition. The seminary I attended, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was originally founded in 1794, making it one of the oldest protestant seminaries in the United States. As you can imagine, there were lots of brass plaques recognizing donations made by individuals to the seminary. One day I was walking down one of the halls looking at these plaques and I ran across one that said, "This room shall forever be dedicated to the majesty and glory of God and in memory of..." and it had the name of the person who gave the money and the name of the person whose memory it was given in. The way it was worded impressed me so I decided to open the door and see this room. Sure enough,

the door was unlocked and I discovered that room so eloquently dedicated was the closet with the mop sink and mops.

You see, over the years the seminary had moved locations several times and then had torn down buildings and built new ones. But they saved the brass plaques. They needed a place to put them so every door had a plaque. Even the mop closet.

Jesus says, "when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do, that they may be praised by others." This doesn't mean that people actually sounded trumpets when they gave to the needy. We mean something similar when we say that someone is tooting his own horn. Jesus is saying, "when you give, don't call attention to yourself so that you can be praised by other people." That's the key to understanding what he's saying. Jesus is not saying it's wrong to be recognized on the brass plaque for donating money to a worthy cause. He's saying it's wrong to donate the money *in order* to get your name on the brass plaque. The question you have to ask yourself is whether you would be just as satisfied if nobody knew you gave the money.

Notice also that Jesus isn't saying that you shouldn't give. In fact he assumes that you will give to support his work. He says, "*when* you give to the needy." Jesus goes on to say, "Don't even let one hand know what the other is doing." The idea is that your giving should be natural. You should not have to think about it. It should be like playing an instrument. A skilled musician doesn't have to think about where to place his fingers for each note; it becomes natural. In the same way it should be natural for us to give.

The second discipline that Jesus addresses is prayer. We will talk more about prayer next time but notice again that Jesus is concerned about *why* you pray. The point of prayer is to speak personally to the living

God. You are addressing an audience of one. Jesus isn't saying it's wrong to pray publicly. We find lots of instances in the Bible of his followers praying publicly. But he's saying it's wrong to pray publicly in order to be seen by others. When you pray in public, the purpose should be to lead other people in prayer, not to get recognition for yourself.

The final spiritual discipline that Jesus addresses in this section is fasting. We don't hear much about fasting these days but here also Jesus assumes that we will fast as part of our spiritual life. He says, "*when* you fast," not "if you fast." The point of fasting is to take away the distraction of food in order to concentrate on praying and listening to God. That won't happen if you are trying to get others to notice you fasting. Instead, Jesus says "get dressed, wash your face, look normal."

In each of these Jesus warns us that if we do them in order to get recognition and praise from other people, then that's all the reward we can expect, and it's a fleeting reward. If we give only to get our name on a brass plaque, we may find that one day that plaque is mounted on the mop closet. Praying publicly so that other people will *think* we are more holy won't make us more holy. In fact, God won't hear those prayers.

So what, then, is the reward that God will give us for praying, giving and fasting with a proper attitude? The reward is Himself. God will hear us and will be close to us. We will experience his presence. It's really a simple formula. Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Which is way better than your name on a mop closet.

Amen