

WHO IS WATCHING MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-27

Anyone who watches much television these days knows that there are more and more of those “reality shows” on the TV. I don’t know if they really have much to do with reality but they all follow more or less the same format. A bunch of strangers are put together in close quarters, given some tasks to accomplish and instructed to try to get along. Meanwhile, cameras and microphones record everything that happens. Naturally, that formula leads to plenty of stress and conflict as the participants attempt to cope with difficult situations while knowing that the television viewing public is watching every move.

My guess is that we would not want everyone watching all the things that we do everyday. That is certainly true in my case. For instance, one thing I hope not many folks witnessed happened several times in parking lots soon after we purchased a new car. I would come out of a store into the parking lot and spend several minutes looking up and down the rows trying to find my old truck. Then I would remember that I had NOT driven the truck. I was in the car. (I would usually hit myself in the head at this point.) Then I would be looking for a silver/gray 4 door sedan. Of course there were three or four of these in every row. Now, after several months I can recognize our car but at that point they all looked pretty much alike. More than once, I walked along holding the key and pushing the button waiting for one of the cars to light up. I hope not too many people saw me on those occasions.

I imagine we all do things that we hope nobody witnesses, but sometimes we DO hope that we are being watched. We hope someone notices how wonderful we are, all the time we volunteer around the church, the donations we make to charity, our close relationship with the Lord or our spiritual maturity.

These are the attitudes that Jesus warns against here in Matthew chapter 6, saying, “Do not do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen by men.” In others words, don’t worry about who is watching. And then Jesus gives three examples of what he is talking about.

First of all, do not make a big production out of it when you give to the needy. Don’t broadcast it to others and expect praise and recognition. Years ago, when I worked at a drug rehabilitation center, we would have a big Labor Day picnic for all the clients and their families. We would always ask local businesses for donations and would get a good response. I remember one businessman, however, who would not participate until he knew when and where a “thank-you” would be published. He did not care as much about helping as he cared about being recognized. Perhaps society would consider this smart business practice, but it is the attitude that Jesus is telling us to avoid.

Do not give to the needy so that you will be praised by others. And do not pray in order to be seen or heard by others. In those days, devout Jews prayed at certain times of the day: in the morning, at noon and in the evening. You can imagine that some folks just happened to find themselves at a very public place when it came time to pray so they could show everyone how devout they were as they prayed. Once again, Jesus says, “Do not be like that.” Don’t pray in order to impress others. Just talk with your father in heaven.

And then in verse 16, Jesus says, “Don’t put on a big show when you fast.” Fasting was much more common at that time than it is today. The fact that the person did not eat was not really the main thing. The important aspect of fasting was to grow closer to God and to seek His guidance. Some people made it a point to look all disheveled and pitiful so that others would notice that they were fasting. Once again, Jesus said, “Don’t do that.” Don’t draw attention to your spiritual practices, whether it is fasting or personal devotions or quiet meditation. Those disciplines are meant to bring you closer to God, not to impress others.

Now understand, Jesus does not say we should not practice the spiritual disciplines. We certainly should be praying and fasting, practicing charitable giving and the other disciplines. And people are naturally going to notice when we live genuine Christian lives. (We are after all told to be the light of the world...to carry the light into the darkness). But Jesus is addressing our motives. Even when we are doing good things, if our goal is to impress others, then our hearts are not right with God.

Like the pompous, self-righteous elder who was teaching a class of boys and trying to impress on them the importance of living a Christian life. “Why do people say I am a good Christian?” he asked them. No one answered so he became a bit perturbed and asked again, “Why do people say I am a good Christian?” Finally a small boy in the back raised his hand and answered, “Because they don’t really know you.”

Remember that God DOES really know you. And He is watching. While we are not to perform for others, we are also not to pretend that nobody sees us. Jesus says again and again that God is watching us, and like those cameras in the reality TV shows, he sees what is done in secret. In fact, His gaze pierces beyond our actions to reveal the motives behind those actions. And it turns out that those motives are what is truly important.

We read from the prophet Joel this evening as he brought the word of the Lord to the Hebrew people, saying “Return to the Lord with fasting, weeping and mourning,” “Rend your hearts and not your garments.” It was the custom of a person in mourning to “rend their garment.” To tear their clothes. God is saying, now that is OK to show folks you are experiencing grief but instead of just a broken garment, let your heart be broken when you come back to me. Broken in such a way that leads to repentance and an authentic walk with the Lord.

Like a double stuff Oreo cookie, it is the inside that really counts. That is where God looks, and by focusing on the inside we build up treasure in heaven that will not be stolen or destroyed. William Barclay warned his readers not to be “short-sighted creatures who grab the rewards of time and let the rewards of eternity go.”¹ Do not sacrifice what you cannot lose in order to gain what you cannot keep.

In verses 2, 5 and 16 of Matthew chapter 6, Jesus issues a warning against being a hypocrite. Hypocrite is a term that came from the Greek theaters. It means an actor playing a role. Perhaps you have seen images of the masks that symbolize dramatic theaters. Actors would come out on stage holding a mask in front of their face and would recite their lines. Of course the audience realized, as we do today when we attend a play or movie, that the words were not really the actor’s. He was simply a character, playing a role. Jesus is saying, “Don’t do that with God. Don’t just play a superficial role.”

The famous actor Robert Redford was walking one day through a hotel lobby. A woman saw him and followed him to the elevator. "Are you the real Robert Redford?"

she asked him with great excitement. As the doors of the elevator closed, he replied, "Only when I am alone!" We play many roles throughout our lives but God is concerned with who we really are.

The one who does good deeds or spiritual acts in order to be seen and praised by others has all the reward he will ever see, but God's gaze is piercing into our hearts, looking for those who truly want to know him, to honor him and to serve him. Who understand that He took our sin on his back in order that we might be granted His righteousness.

And that brings us to tonight. We have gathered here to observe Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season which culminates with our celebration of Easter. It is a season of awe, wonder and even sadness as we consider Christ's amazing sacrifice for us and the terrible suffering he endured on our behalf. It is ultimately a season of joy as Christ emerges from the grave, the victor over death and evil. Our savior who takes away the sin of the world. Our guide and example who told us to build up treasure in heaven instead of on earth. Do not do the church things because you think others are watching but remember that your heavenly Father IS watching.

And of course we know that nobody is perfect. Even the New England Patriots discovered that. We may sit here and think to ourselves, "What the Bible is asking is just too difficult. I don't think I can meet that standard. My motives will never be totally pure." What do we do? I think God honors our desire to be obedient. If we truly want our motives to be pure and humbly ask God for help, He will take care of the rest.

Tonight we will receive the ashes, a sign of our mortality and penitence to help us remember that it is only through God's gracious gift that we are given everlasting life. A symbol of our relationship with Him. But Stuart Briscoe writes that the externals of Christian faith are symbols of the internal realities of a true faith in Christ. Signs that signify nothing and symbols that symbolize nothing are only fiction.² The result is hypocrisy.

Like the well known politician who made free use of Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and the Christian confessions which would become the pillars of the new government. He assumed the earnestness of a man weighed down by historic responsibility. He handed out pious stories to the press, especially to the church papers. He showed his tattered Bible and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from it as scores of pious people welcomed him as a man sent from God. Indeed, Adolf Hitler was a master of outward religiosity--with no inward reality!³

Do not be a hypocrite tonight! May we listen to the words of our Lord and allow the ashes to go on our hearts as well as our skin. Worship with our inner beings, not simply our outer appearance. The inner being is what God sees. And He is the one who is watching!

AMEN.

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1. William Barclay's Commentary on Matthew, Vol. 1, pg. 186.

2. Stuart Briscoe, *One Year Devotions For Men*. 2000. Tyndale House: Wheaton, IL. Pg. 36.

3. From *Today in the Word*, June 3, 1989.
