

## How to be a Christian Without Getting Caught

Matthew 6: 1-8, 16-17; Isaiah 58: 3-9

Our theme for our Lenten Season is “Journey to Daybreak.” We will be walking with Jesus through passages in Matthew’s gospel—all the way to the cross and the Daybreak of Easter. The word “Lent” from the Latin means “lengthening”, or “lightening” as the days of Spring get longer and lighter. As we walk to the Daybreak of Resurrection nature and scripture will walk hand in hand.

Today’s sermon is entitled “How to be a Christian Without Getting Caught!” That’s what Jesus is getting at today. His teaching from the Sermon on the Mount is about not showing off your piety so to be praised by others. The passage from Isaiah is about the kind of fast God really wants. These two texts are often used by the church around the world at the beginning of Lent.

### I

Jesus addresses three forms of religious devotion important to the spiritual life, but warns about using them for the acclaim of others: *giving alms to the poor, prayers and fasting*. About all three acts he says, “It’s not about you!”

“When you give alms”, he says, “don’t blow a trumpet to announce your act of mercy as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and streets that they may be praised by others.”

Jesus is using hyperbole. People didn’t hire the trumpet section of the local Philharmonic to showcase the alms they were giving. But you get the point. Don’t blow your own horn when you are helping others.

Jesus used the word “hypocrites” to describe the folk who do such things. The word means literally, “play actors”, actors on stage. Novelist Reynolds Price describes them as the “self-pleased pious.” “Truly, Jesus said, “they have received their reward.” Or as Clarence Jordan translates it, “The truth is, such praise will be all they get out of it!”

Is this a contradiction to what he said earlier in the Sermon: “Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works and glorify your Abba in heaven?” It’s about the motive. *Why* we give, pray, fast. Are our motives ever completely unmixed? Perhaps not, but what’s the primary motive? Is our ego at the top of the list?

So, Jesus says, when you give alms don’t let your left hand know what the right hand is doing! Again hyperbole, to make the point. Make it almost a secret to yourself. Don’t sprain your arm patting yourself on the back.

## II

Then Jesus turns to prayer, another good thing that can be messed up by pride.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, the play actors, who just LOVE to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners to be seen by others. That praise is all they will get out of it!

The words are not against all public prayer. If so, I and we are in a lot of trouble! It's about *show-off* prayers, prayers for public consumption. Most of us don't stand in line waiting to be called on for public prayer. There was a morning breakfast meeting of businessmen. The man last to arrive, a little late, tried to slip in without being noticed. The leader of the breakfast seeing him, said, "Joe, why don't you lead us in the prayer before the meal?" Joe prayed, "Lord, you are probably as surprised by this as I am!"

Think about this contrast. The high school football coach recently who told all his ball players to circle with him at the 50 yard line just as the game ended to pray and thank God for the victory before all the fans. He became a national hero as the courts took up the case. Now this: the NFL game recently where the player was hit so hard his heart stopped beating for nine minutes. Players from both teams surrounded him and prayed, begged, pleaded with God to preserve his life.

It was in front more than 40 thousand in the stadium and millions watching on TV, but it was earnest prayer, not for show, on behalf of their friend whose life hung in the balance. Their prayer was a cry of the heart. Real prayer.

Instead of show-off prayers, Jesus said, when you pray make it as secret as possible. Go to a private place and pray there. Alone is where our deepest prayers happen.

The Native American novelist Scott Momaday tells of going to his beloved grandmother's house and stepping into her bedroom, where she was on her knees, praying, one by one, for all the tribes of her people. So fervent were her prayers, so reverent the air, he quietly backed out of the room, saying to himself: "I don't belong here."

Even the words of our prayers themselves become almost a secret to ourselves. Martin Buber tells this ancient rabbinic teaching:

I shall teach you the best way to say Torah. You must cease to be aware of yourself.... The moment you start hearing what you are saying you must stop.

This is true for preaching and also praying. Poet and spiritual writer Kathleen Norris says that sometimes her truest prayers are those she doesn't understand. She prays: "Lord, I *mean* these words even if I don't know what I *mean*!"

Mary Oliver in her poem on prayer, “Praying”, writes:

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just pay attention, then patch  
  
a few words together, and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but a doorway  
  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak. <sup>1</sup>

The second instruction about prayer is about long-winded prayers:

When you pray, don't jabber on like the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words...for your *Abba* knows what you need before you even ask.

Do we think we have to pray on and on to get God on our side? Prayer is not a magic incantation that will manipulate God into doing what we ask. No, simple

prayers, prayers from the heart. We are not trying to tell God something God doesn't already know. We don't need to pray on and on to get God's attention. God's ear is already inclined to us.

Then lastly, Jesus turns to the spiritual discipline of fasting. It is not part of our regular repertoire of spiritual disciplines. It was as important in ancient Hebrew life as well as in other Christian traditions today, but the truth of fasting is the same as with good deeds and prayer.

“When you fast, don't get all dismal looking with a martyr's long face! The spiritual play actors do this to be seen by others.” They want the watchers to say, “O, how spiritual they are, how godly!” Instead Jesus says, “Anoint your head, wash your face and look like you are on the way to a party!” No holy martyrs pose, please. Fasting is about the inner life, not, again, for public consumption.

### III

Now let's turn to the kind of fast God wants. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Lenten season is comprised of 40 days of one kind of fasting or another. Often people talk about what they are “giving up for Lent”, like chocolate or martinis or meat. At their best, such fasts remind us, as we feel some emptiness or craving for what we have given up, of our daily need of God.

In the Old Testament fasting was often associated with a time of repentance. But this spiritual act can be distorted as well. Isaiah 58 is a prime example of false fasting and true fasting—and about the kind of fasting God really wants.

The people of God here have gone through their normal time of ritualistic fasting and are pouting and whining because God has not shown up in the ways they expected. They'd done their part, but God seems nowhere to be found. They fasted, but God has vamoosed.

“Why have we fasted, and you see us not?” they whined. It's like the kind of praying Jesus was warning us about in the Sermon on the Mount: praying as a way of getting what we want from God.

Then God speaks with breath-taking honesty:

In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress your workers;  
you fast only to quarrel and fight.

“Is this not the kind of fast that I want?” God says to them in a series of questions:

To undo the fetters of wickedness  
To loose the cords of lawlessness

To let the oppressed go free

To break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your home,  
when you see the naked to clothe them  
and not to hide yourself from the needs of your kin?

Then, God said, if we fast like this,

Then, your light will break forth like the dawn (of daybreak)  
then, your healing as a people will spring up speedily...  
then when you call, the Lord will answer, (the Lord you thought had gone  
away)

And God will say

“Here I am!”

God is saying to our nation today:

-Away with performative Christianity.

-Away with 20 million dollars spent on Super Bowl ads about Jesus while  
people are hungry.

-Away with Christian prayers made mandatory by law.



-Away with talk about America as a Christian nation when the words of Jesus are ignored:

Feed the hungry

give drink to the thirsty,

welcome the stranger, the immigrant in your land

clothe the ragged

take care of the sick

visit the prisoners.

Note the verbs: *feed, give drink, welcome, clothe, care, visit!* Spirituality as a verb! “When you do”, Jesus said, “I will be there in your midst.”

And all this, not for show, but for love. No neon signs, but a towel and a bowl of water—when no one is looking.

This is what the “journey to Daybreak” looks like.

Amen

