

Series: From Israel to Everyone: Disciples who Demonstrate God's Presence (a study of Matthew).

Sermon Text: 6:1-6 Avoiding Self-promotion (See App for lesson, slides, and to ask questions)

Last week, Gary's excellent sermon about non-retaliation and loving our enemies included the story of the Good Samaritan, a person despised by Jews who served a needy person as Jewish leaders made excuses and passed by. Today's internet has a whole genre of [Good Samaritan Videos](#) where influencers film themselves handing out cash or hot meals to vulnerable people. On the surface, it looks generous and pulls our heartstrings. And while the gift may be real, the recipient is often turned into a prop by someone looking for views, likes, and brand deals. Of course, this isn't new! These videos capture the same "*street corner*" dynamics Jesus addressed over 2000 years ago in His Sermon on the Mount. Instead of TikTok or Instagram, the platform was Israel's dusty roads. Technology has changed, but the desire to barter holy acts for public applause hasn't. Jesus confronts such motives with today's...

BIG IDEA: Grace frees us from turning worship into self-promotion.

Now, before nitpicking influencers for filming their charity, we must confess our churchy version of performative religion. We embrace grace that forgives our past but shrink back from its secret demands. Whenever we err around here, we recite this beautiful and necessary truth: there's grace for that! We're quick to agree because a forgiving God is easy to love. The tougher sell is how God expects grace to change how we live. It draws accusations of legalism from those who feel forgiveness is more like an insurance policy than an invitation to become disciples of the King. While grace certainly covers our stumbles, it was never meant to coddle our carelessness! You can't read the Sermon on the Mount and conclude: "*Forgiveness means all I need to do is sit back and coast on God's blessings.*" Just think back to Christ's seemingly outrageous claim in **5:20**: our righteousness must exceed that of those infamous rule-keepers, the scribes and Pharisees. This, as we have learned, is not about outproducing their empty deeds. Christ's sermon

illustrates how rather than lowering the bar of God's commands, grace offers us the freedom, security and power to finally obey from the heart.

Look at **Matthew 6:1** where Jesus assumed grace will produce a **righteous** life: ***Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*** Notice He did not say, "*IF you happen to practice righteousness*" but "*WHEN you do...don't be a showoff!*" That's the problem! Jesus exposed the hidden trap of turning holy acts into public theater and the way we tend to perform instead of joyfully and whole-heartedly serving with God. But He certainly loves when **righteousness** becomes the fruit of grace in our lives. **Righteousness** has been called the fabric that holds society, creation and families together. It enhances wellbeing, and thus, essential and desirable. At its core, **righteousness** is the fulfillment of just relational expectations--with God, neighbors, and the world. A **righteous** person doesn't just manage their own integrity, though, they actively seek the flourishing and standing of all. **Verse 1** sort of sounds as if **righteousness** should be **practiced** privately, but that's nonsensical because it's inherently relational, like an orchestra playing together. Jesus was addressing our extremes! These words about **practicing in private** call for faith that's not vain or performative. They balance out His call back in **5:16** that we have faith that's not cowardly or fearful: "*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, while it's true that **righteousness** is designed for display, it shouldn't become a show. We must monitor our motives in everyday spiritual practices like **giving and prayer**. Look at **verse 2** where Jesus warned that **righteousness** mustn't be turned into self-promotion: ***"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*** Receiving God's generosity naturally leads us to share funds and possessions with people in **need**. His issue is how we tend to boast about good deeds and turn them into self-promotion. In biblical times, they used trumpets to get people's attention and announce news. There aren't records of anyone throwing **trumpet** parades after

they gave, but Israel's Temple did have brass, **trumpet**-shaped collection boxes that rang loudly as their coins were deposited. It seems Jesus used a familiar cultural metaphor, like how we might say: "*Don't toot your own horn.*" Our modern **trumpets** look a little different, but we still know how to blow them:

- The Social Media Post: "*Humbled and blessed to sacrificially support my favorite charity today.*"
- The Humble Brag: "*Money sure has been tight since we helped our friend cover rent.*"
- The Plaque on a Building Wall: "The Jones Family Heart Center"

In a transactional world, people give to buy social capital and legacy. I've also met folks who insist their **giving** be anonymous but privately **praise** themselves before close friends. Observing a similar 1st century system, Jesus said: "*If that's why you did it, then enjoy that plaque because it'll be all the reward you get!*" Giving quietly, without bringing it up in conversation and social media throwbacks, reflects a belief that God's glance carries more weight than human praise. Of course, it's one thing to stop blowing **trumpets** for the crowd but quite another to quit patting ourselves on the back. Look at **verses 3-4** where Jesus moved from public displays to internal motives: ***But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*** Like His trumpet illustration, this is another obvious exaggeration. Hiding **right-handed** activities from **your left hand** is physically impossible! Jesus just meant, "*I want your giving so far removed from public promotion that you don't even throw a private parade about it in your head.*" Some folks think this is about hiding good deeds from others, but Jesus doesn't demand financial secrecy from my spouse, my children who need to learn from me, my neighbor whom I bless, or my accountant who helps reduce my taxes. Having grace-driven integrity isn't about hiding goodness but being so secure in God's grace that generosity becomes second-nature.

This hints at the dangerous reason why we take our good deeds public: When we're spiritually empty, we seek to be filled and validated by others. The path to giving without seeking human praise starts with letting the Father satisfy our souls in private. That's why Jesus transitioned from quiet giving habits to quiet prayer

habits in *verses 5-6: "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room* (the word for “a place where treasures are kept”) *and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in (the) secret* (place cf. *Psalm 91:1*). *And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* Since there are biblical examples of people **praying** together and Apostles mentioning their **prayers** for others, we’re certain Jesus wasn’t forbidding such activities. After all, it’s good to **pray** with your spouse and kids, as well as in certain public settings. **Prayer** walks and other set routines also seem fine. It may also be okay to post about them. But instead of seeking “likes” to prove our worth, let the Father’s approval become our refuge from the pressure to constantly curate an image. That’s a far better **reward**!

While **giving** and **praying** without ulterior motives is part of being made **righteous** by grace through faith in Christ, Jesus was NOT saying that it’s wrong to desire **rewards**, which He mentioned 7 times in this chapter alone! I’m always puzzled by Christians who act as if we must disregard ourselves when serving others--like when I compliment someone for serving and they awkwardly reply, “*Oh, don't thank me, it was 100% God and 0% me!*” Their heart may be in the right place by trying to avoid pride, but God is trying to redeem our agency, not erase it. He delights to work through us and invites us to experience His genuine joy when true righteousness is channeled through our bodies. Moreover, receiving **rewards** for grace-empowered work isn't legalism; it’s part of God's generous kingdom design. Our Father in Heaven is not a taskmaster but a loving parent who delights in **rewarding** His children, both in eternity and right here on earth! Let’s think about that...our ultimate reward is face-to-face fellowship with Jesus. But if our walk with Jesus begins on earth, then the joy of His reward starts here too. The late theologian John Stott framed this beautifully (p. 132) when he wrote: “*It is probably the only reward which genuine love wants when making a gift to the needy, namely, to see the need relieved.*” Of course, our reward is more than good, subjective feelings; it’s deeper intimacy with the Father and His enduring approval which is far better than the fragility of fleeting human applause.

Now, as time with the Father in prayer begins to uproot the motive of audience approval, another challenge begins to emerge: “When the stage is gone and it is just us and the Father, how do we actually speak to Him?” We’ll explore what Jesus said about that next time. For now, let’s remember that He doesn’t leave us to obey God’s high standards on our own. His Spirit has been placed inside us and in helpers all around us! If you're struggling to walk in truth or carry a heavy burden, please reach out so that we can seek His grace together. Let’s remember, that Jesus didn’t merely preach the Sermon on the Mount, He embodied it! And He wants to help us do that too, by grace through faith in Him. This starts by letting the Father’s glance matter more to us than the world’s applause.

Sunday to Monday Connection:

- **Question:** See questions above and below.
- **Next Step:** See questions above and below.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to explore what all this might mean for you, please speak with someone you know here or one of our church leaders.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Where in your religious or moral life are you most tempted to seek validation or applause from others?
2. What is the practical difference between letting your light shine publicly (Matthew 5:16) and performing righteousness to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1)?
3. How do you discern your own motives when doing good in community? In what ways does social media culture tempt us to turn private spiritual practices, charitable acts, or moral convictions into public performances?
4. Identify one act of generosity or intercession this week and complete it entirely in secret—telling no one, not even on social media.
5. Before praying out loud, serving, or giving this week, pause for 10 seconds to privately ask: "Am I doing this for the Father who sees in secret, or for the people standing in front of me?"
6. Practice a one-week fast from sharing any spiritual insights, charitable giving, or acts of service on social media or in casual conversations.

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.

3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- Bible Project - Gospel of the Kingdom [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Heaven and Earth [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Temple [Videos](#).
- Bible Project – Day of the Lord [Podcast episodes](#).

Quotes related to this passage:

- **A slight context shift:** “In chapter 5, this focuses more on the law, and on what it means to keep (or not to break) that law in one’s inner life and motivation. Now, in chapter 6, the focus is, to begin with, on the three things that Jews saw, and still see, as standard obligations: giving money, praying and fasting. In each case (we shall come to fasting presently) Jesus’ point is the same. What matters is the motive. If these religious duties are done with an eye on the audience, they become rotten at the core. Jesus doesn’t say that these outward things don’t matter. Giving money to those in need, praying to God day by day, and fasting when it’s appropriate—he assumes that people will continue to do all of these. What matters is learning to do them simply to and for God himself. All the Sermon on the Mount, in fact, is centred on God himself, who easily gets squeezed out of religion if we’re not careful.” (Wright, 54-55)
- **Context:** “Although Jesus may have taken his three examples from a list in Tobit 12:8 (in which ‘righteousness’ appears as a fourth; cf. Sir 7:10; 2 Clem. 16), such lists were never more than random examples; Judaism viewed each of these examples as extremely important but did not usually list the three as standard examples together (Wimmer 1982: 54–56; though cf. later Qoh. Rab. 5:6, §1). Another early teacher lists the three basic deeds as Torah observance, temple service, and charity (m. ’Abot 1:2; cf. ARN 31, §67B); still another, judgment, truth, and peace (m. ’Abot 1:18); later teachers would list prayer, charity, and repentance (p. Ta’an. 2:1, §9; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 28:2; Qoh. Rab. 7:14, §1), but even these later teachers did not explicitly define repentance only as fasting. Lists of three (m. ’Abot 2:1; 3:1; ARN 4, §17; 31, §68B; cf. Goulder 1974: 26) and sets of three admonitions (e.g., m. ’Abot 1:1, 4–8, 10, 15–17; 2:10) were common for other issues as well. For instance, some teachers considered works such as visiting the sick, hospitality, and comforting the bereaved more meritorious than charity because they required personal involvement (Van Unnik 1954: 96–97). Matthew thus intended his audience to apply Jesus’ principle (6:1) not only to the specific cases by which he illustrates it (6:2–18) but to all acts of righteousness. (Keener, 207)
- **Righteousness.** “Conformity to a certain set of expectations, which vary from role to role. Righteousness is fulfillment of the expectations in any

relationship, whether with God or other people. It is applicable at all levels of society and is relevant in every area of life. Therefore, righteousness denotes the fulfilled expectations in relationships between man and wife, parents and children, fellow citizens, employer and employee, merchant and customers, ruler and citizens, and God and man. Depending on the fulfillment of one's expectations, an individual could be called righteous and his or her acts and speech could be designated as righteous. The opposite of righteous is 'evil, wicked, or wrong' (cf. Ps 1:6; Zep 3:5). Righteousness is the fiber which holds society, religion, and family together. Righteousness enhances the welfare of the community. A godly (not "pious" in the modern sense) person was called "righteous" (ṣaddîq). The ṣaddîq was a person of wisdom, whose 'righteousness' brought joy to his family (Prv 23:22–25), to his city (Prv 11:10), and to the people of God (Prv 29:2)." Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Righteousness," in Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1860.

- **The expectation of giving:** "There is much teaching in the Old Testament on compassion for the poor. The Greek word for almsgiving in verse 2 (eleēmosunē) means a deed of mercy or pity. Since our God is a merciful God, as Jesus has just emphasized, 'kind to the ungrateful and the selfish', his people must be kind and merciful too. Jesus obviously expected his disciples to be generous givers. His words condemn 'the selfish stinginess of many', as Ryle put it. Generosity is not enough, however. Our Lord is concerned throughout this Sermon with motivation, with the hidden thoughts of the heart... (But) If we keep accounts and plan our giving, as conscientious Christians should, we are bound to know how much we give away. We cannot very well close our eyes while writing out our cheques! Nevertheless, as soon as the giving of a gift is decided and done, it will be in keeping with this teaching of Jesus that we forget it. We are not to keep recalling it in order to gloat over it, or to preen ourselves on how generous, disciplined or conscientious our giving may have been. Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation. What we should seek when giving to the needy is neither the praise of men, nor a ground for self-commendation, but rather the approval of God." (Stott, 128, 130-131)
- **The point about prayer:** "Jewish people did not normally pray in the street, but Jesus again reduces the questionable behavior to the absurd by graphically depicting a worst-case scenario: a person who craves notice so much that he arranges to find himself in the street during the regular daily prayer times (cf. Jeremias 1971: 187; France 1985: 132). Yet some Jewish laborers might actually have no choice at times, and Jesus' demand for privacy would make prayer difficult (Tannehill 1975: 82). This illustration, like Jesus' preceding one (6:2–3), involves a humorous hyperbole; none of our reports of Jesus' private prayer takes place in a storeroom (14:23; 26:36–44). This text precludes not public prayer (18:19–20; 21:13; cf. 1 Tim 2:8) but prayer to be seen and glorified by others... Some interpreters imply that Jesus opposes the formalism of Jewish ritual prayers. It is possible that Jesus implies preference for prayer in the vernacular language (Aramaic) rather than in the synagogue's

traditional Hebrew. But the text gives no indication that Jesus opposes Jewish ritual here. First, in this early period various Jewish teachers still debated among themselves whether fixed prayer could become too mechanical, and some advocated spontaneous prayers from the heart (m. 'Abot 2:13; Ber. 4:4). Second, it is pagan rather than Jewish wordiness that Jesus critiques when he addresses verbiage (6:7). And third, Jesus does not himself hesitate to offer his disciples a sample prayer (6:9–13). Jesus' point of contention with his Jewish contemporaries was not the form of their prayers (which his own prayer in 6:9–13 closely matches) but their motivation." (Keener, 211-212)

- **Rewards:** "Jesus also assumes that there is benefit to be had from doing these things. Many people imagine that he is asking us to do everything with no thought of reward, and are then rather shocked when he repeats, three times, his belief that our heavenly father will repay us (verses 4, 6, 18). Clearly, Jesus is not so bothered about the notion of disinterested behaviour, or 'altruism', as we sometimes are. In fact, what he says is far more realistic. If we struggle to clear our hearts of any desire to do something, so that we are acting from totally pure motives, we will always find a little corner of desire somewhere—even the desire to behave altruistically! Then, instead of looking away from ourselves and towards God, we find ourselves focusing back on ourselves again, wanting to please not God but our own ideal of lofty, disinterested action." (Wright, 55)
- **Types of rewards:** "When people say that the idea of rewards is distasteful to them, I always suspect that the picture in their mind is prize-giving at school, with silver trophies gleaming on the platform table and everybody clapping! The conjuring up of this kind of scene may be due to the AV words 'shall reward thee openly'. This adverb should be omitted, however. The contrast is not between a secret gift and a public reward, but between the men who neither see nor reward the gift and the God who does both. C. S. Lewis wisely wrote in an essay entitled 'The weight of glory': 'We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of rewards. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it.' Similarly, we might say that a silver cup is not a very suitable reward for a schoolboy who works hard, whereas a scholarship at the university would be. C. S. Lewis concludes his argument: 'The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given but are the activity itself in consummation.' What, then, is the 'reward' which the heavenly Father gives the secret giver? It is neither public nor necessarily future. It is probably the only reward which genuine love wants when making a gift to the needy, namely, to see the need relieved. When through his gifts the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick healed, the oppressed freed and the lost saved, the love which prompted the gift is satisfied. Such love (which is God's own love expressed through man) brings

with it its own secret joys and desires no other reward. To sum up, our Christian giving is to be neither before men (waiting for the clapping to begin), nor even before ourselves (our left hand applauding our right hand's generosity) but 'before God', who sees our secret heart and rewards us with the discovery that, as Jesus said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Stott, 131-132)

- **Examples of giving and prayer:** "Jesus, instead, wants us to be so eager to love and please God that we will do everything we should do for his eyes alone. Other eyes will be watching from time to time, and it's very easy, particularly for clergy and others who are involved professionally with leading worship, to 'perform' for them rather than for God alone. For that reason he gives quite specific instructions about how to be sure of integrity, of the outward appearance being matched by the inner reality. When you give money away, do your best simply to forget about it. You may have to record it in your tax return, but even that could suggest a calculating spirit, and the point here is to match the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself. The best way to be sure is for nobody else to know. The same applies to prayer. What you are in private is what you really are. Go into your inner room and talk to your father. You don't have to make a song and dance about it, and indeed the fewer people that know you're doing it the better. Nor do you have to go on mouthing pious phrases. You may find there are forms of words which help, as a framework or a starting-point; Jesus is about to give the disciples the framework he particularly recommends. But the point is to do business with God, one to one. Jesus doesn't say what kind of reward we should expect. That, too, is part of the point. Simply knowing God better is reward enough; but there may be other things as well. You never know till you try. What is clear is that he is inviting his followers to a life in which inside and outside match perfectly, because both are focused on the God who sees in secret." (Wright, 55-56)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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