

### **When People are Big and God is Small** Matthew 6:1-18

I didn't realize how much what people thought mattered to me or how much I hated feeling embarrassed until I spent a summer at Newport Beach. I directed a summer project for Campus Crusade for Christ with college students who came from all over the country to share the gospel with people on the beach that summer. Crusade has been doing these projects for decades because students grow so much in just a couple of months in their faith and their ministry skills. For this reason, we turned the leadership of the project over to the students as soon as we could to develop their faith and their leadership skills – which was a good idea in theory. But one day the students decided that they wanted to do a slow-motion football game on the beach to gather a crowd and then preach the gospel. They were really excited about their idea. I thought it was just going to embarrass us but I didn't want to discourage them and so we went with the plan. The game was scheduled for 11 in the morning and the closer we got, the more nervous I became – and I wasn't even involved. All I could think about was how stupid we were going to look and how more people would be turned off to the gospel than attracted. By 10:30, I had worked myself up to a point of absolute terror; so I made sure that when the game happened, I was far, far away. The results were neither as great as the students expected nor as dire as I thought. The game was hilarious and a few students were able to share the gospel with some of the onlookers. But that day I realized how controlled I was by the fear of what people think which has been a battle for me for most of my life. The need to please people, to be well-thought of and to avoid rejection or embarrassment is debilitating. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about a much more serious consequence of living to please people; we can't live for people's approval and please God at the same time – which turns out to be the key to getting free of this fear. This morning I want to talk about *When People are Big and God is Small* which is the title of a wonderful book by Ed Welch and perfectly summarizes what Jesus says in Matthew 6:1-18. If you worry more about what people think than you do about what's right; if you let people walk over you because you fear they'll reject you if you don't; if you're afraid to assert yourself or be your own person; you will find what Jesus says here absolutely liberating.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to complacent, self-satisfied religious people who are sure they'll get into the kingdom of heaven because they are Jews and have the Law of God which they received from Moses; and Jesus wants to show them how far from God they actually are so they will repent and be saved. So in this sermon – as Jeff taught last Sunday - Jesus shows how the Law of Moses is concerned more with peoples' heart than with their external performance. Now in chapter 6 Jesus continues to focus on our heart and addresses our motives and why we do what we do. Two Sundays ago, we read, "*Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.*" Now in chapter 6 Jesus explains what a pure heart looks like and about God's two great rivals for our heart; the praise of people and possessions. Today we'll talk about how our need for people's approval can steal our heart from God and next week we'll look at the love of money. In vs. 1 Jesus gives us the lesson and then in vs. 2-18, He applies that lesson to three areas in His culture where people commonly did the right thing for the wrong reason.

Jesus begins with the lesson. Matthew 6:1. "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*" Jesus is talking to good, moral people who are committed to living a righteous life. However Jesus says, "Make sure you're doing the right thing for the right reasons. Otherwise you'll have no reward with God." We have two audiences; the human audience and the divine audience, the visible audience and the invisible audience. The problem is, we can't play to both. We must decide which audience you're performing for; and that decision will determine the true value of all that I do. Will I live to impress people or will I live to please God? Jesus warns that if I do the right thing to be noticed by people, I have no reward with my Father in heaven. That's why our motives are so important to God. They reveal what I really think about Him. When I take people more seriously than I take God – when people are big then God is small – when I care more about what people can do for me or to me than about what God can do for me, I'm not

believing in the God of the Bible – even though I’m doing the things He wants me to do – which is what happened to me at Newport Beach. A pure heart is a heart which takes God more seriously than people and that’s the lesson Jesus wants to get across in this passage.

Now in vs. 2-18, Jesus applies this lesson to the three great marks of spiritual maturity in His own culture; giving, praying and fasting. If you wanted to know who the most devout folks in Israel were, you looked for the people who were the most generous to the poor and who prayed and fasted the most. Yet Jesus warns that you can do these things for the wrong reasons and lose your reward with God. Let’s start with giving to the poor: *“So when you give to the poor, (not if you give to the poor but when) do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. (Maybe this is where we got the expression, “Tooting your own horn.”) Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” (Matt. 6:2)* For Jews of that time, giving alms and being righteous was the same thing. The rabbis taught that giving alms gained merit in the sight of God and atoned for past sins. They said that “Prayer and fasting are good but better is almsgiving” and “greater is he who gives alms than he who offers sacrifices.” So when Jesus addresses giving to the poor, He’s talking about more than giving the homeless guy on the corner a buck. He’s going to the heart of what the people of His culture considered true righteousness. Apparently a lot of people who gave to the poor wanted everybody to know how generous they were. So they would make a big deal when they gave and the poor played along. The louder you yelled, “Righteous is Joab son of Abraham when a wealthy Jew dropped something into your plate,” the more likely Joab would be generous the next time he saw you. Jesus says the hypocrites – those who pretend to be something they’re not - give is to be honored by people and that’s what they get. People are impressed; God is not because bad motives invalidate good behavior. *But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees {what is done in secret} will reward you.” (Matt. 6:2-4)* A pure heart begins with what we believe about God. Do I believe that God sees what I do and that God will reward me? If I do, I can show mercy to others without calling attention to myself. That’s one reason why we don’t pass the plate at Creekside. We only want people to give out of their faith in God and love for Jesus and not because of social pressure or so people will see their generosity. So we just have the offering slot that you can use or not as God leads. Here’s the real issue. Do I give to impress people or to please God? If you give to impress people, you’ll get cynical fast because people are notoriously ungrateful. I find often that those I give to the most appreciate it the least. But God sees and God rewards. If my heart is pure, my giving will be in secret.

Jesus’ second example of doing the right thing for the wrong reason is prayer. *“When you pray, (again when, not if) you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” (Matt. 6:5-6)* In Jesus’ day, there were set hours for public prayer daily - similar to many Muslim countries today - and wherever you happened to be, you stopped whatever you were doing and rattled off these long, memorized prayers. The people Jesus calls, “hypocrites” would either stand in the synagogue and pray or would “just happen” to be caught downtown when the hour of prayer struck, so they’d have to pray on the street corners where everybody could observe them. These people loved to pray. They looked forward to these times of prayer. When it came to prayer, they were more disciplined we are. They looked very spiritual. The problem was, they weren’t praying to God, they were praying to people. That’s why Jesus calls them hypocrites and says they have their reward in full. They want to impress people with their piety and they do. But God won’t hear those prayers. Now of course, we live in a completely different time and culture. Is praying to impress people really an issue today? Any time my prayer is for anybody but God, I’m guilty. Years ago, again at Cal, there was a rumor that the administration had forbidden Christians to pray on campus. One of the Christian groups immediately began organizing all the different campus ministries for a big pray-in at noon on Sproul Plaza. However we declined to participate, because it seemed to me that we weren’t praying to God, we were praying to make a political point. Some people like to brag about how much time they spend in prayer. “They have their reward in full.” Some people’s prayers sound more like sermons with a few zingers in there just so you’ll know they’re praying about you. “They have their reward in full.” If people are my audience when I pray, I shouldn’t expect God to answer. *“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”* A pure heart begins with the faith that God hears me when I pray, that He sees in secret and hears in secret and promises to reward me. So put yourself in a place where nobody can hear you but God.

There should be an intimacy between you and God nobody else shares in. And you put yourself in a place where if God doesn't hear prayers, you're just wasting your time because there's no other reason to be there. Is Jesus forbidding public prayer here? No, Jesus prayed in public, the early Christians prayed together, we're commanded to pray together. The issue here isn't where you pray but why you pray. Do I pray to please God or to impress people?

Now after Jesus warns us about praying to impress people, He goes on to warn us about praying to impress God. *"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.* The Gentiles thought God would answer their prayers because of how much they prayed or how long they prayed. Most Roman, Greek and Egyptian worship of that time involved chanting, repetitious prayers. "O God, help us," repeated over and over by the hour. People thought God would be impressed by their devotion or discipline or by the sheer amount of time they spent praying and would be persuaded to answer. But Jesus says, *"So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."* Again, a pure heart in prayer begins with a correct understanding of what God is like. In vs. 5-6, Jesus says God sees and knows all; and if I believe that, I'll pray to Him in secret. In vs. 7-8, Jesus says God doesn't need to be informed or persuaded to answer. That's not the purpose of prayer. He's a loving Father, attentive to His children. He knows what we need far better than we do. He doesn't answer our prayers because of what we say or because of how long it takes us to say it. He answers our prayers because He is our father.

I used to speak at football team chapels before Cal games and I was always surprised by how many players get religion on game day. Guys who have no interest in God the rest of the week showed up at chapel because they were looking for any edge they could find. If they gave God some time and prayed, maybe it would change the final score. That's the essence of superstition. Superstition is the belief that there are things you can do to control spiritual forces; that if you use the right charm or the right ritual or say the right prayer or make the right sacrifice, heaven will smile on you. Superstition is rubbing the lamp to summon the genie to do your bidding; and so much of religion is based in superstition; what you need to do to impress God or to persuade God. And superstition demeans both God and us - as if we could manipulate the Creator of the Universe! Yet Christians often see prayer the same way. We put our faith in prayer rather than in God. If I spend this much time in prayer, then God must answer. I'd read about pastors spending between 2 and 4 hours praying daily and how their churches would explode with growth, and so I started spending two hours a day praying. Exactly two hours. Yet nothing happened. Why? I was doing exactly what Jesus told me not to. I thought God would answer me because of my many words rather than because of Who He is. Well, if God already knows what I need before I ask Him and if God wants to give it to me, why do I need to pray? Simply to be with God: prayer isn't about ritual or duty, it's about relationship. God promises that if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. I pray to get closer to God, to experience God's presence and joy and strength and wisdom. I'm not smart enough to know how to spend my days. I need His guidance. I'm not strong enough to do what He wants me to do. I need His strength. I'm not courageous, or wise, or loving enough to be your pastor. That's why I pray. I believe that spending much time in prayer is the biblical pattern but if the reason I spend those hours in prayer is to impress God with my devotion or to persuade God to answer my requests or to remind God of what I need, I'm wasting my time. Those motives are an affront to the character of God. I spend time in prayer to get my own heart into an attitude of faith and dependence, not to get God into an attitude of giving. I spend time with God because I enjoy God and because I need God, not so I can sell Him on whatever I need Him to do for me. I spend time with God - not to remind God of my needs but to remind myself of my need for Him.

After telling us how not to pray, Jesus tells us how in vs. 9-15 with the Lord's Prayer. He says, "Pray then in this way..." However, since we're talking about pleasing God rather than pleasing people, we're going to skip down to vs. 16 and the third area where bad motives can ruin good behavior; fasting. *"Whenever you fast do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."* Fasting means giving up something you really enjoy. Usually food, but you could go on a media fast, sports fast or anything you think has too great a grip on your heart. Fasting from food is what Jesus is talking about here and fasting means not eating when you would regularly eat; skipping a meal or more or not eating for a day or even longer. In the Bible, people fasted when they were mourning over some tragedy or in repentance for their sins. Other times, people fasted when they devoted

themselves to prayer like Moses who fasted for 40 days before he received the Law from God on Mount Sinai or Jesus who fasted for 40 days before He began His public ministry. The Bible never says that fasting makes our prayers more powerful; but when people are devoting themselves to prayer, they don't want to be distracted by eating. The only fast the Old Testament commanded was on the Day of Atonement when the sacrifice for the sins of the nation was made and people were to mourn over their sins. However the Jews loved religious traditions and by the end of the OT, there were four national holidays where people fasted and the Pharisees – the strictest sect of the orthodox Jews who always tried to take things up a notch – fasted twice each week. In Jesus' day, fasting was something religious people did and Jesus warns that like in giving and prayer, fasting for the wrong reason can invalidate an otherwise good action. People wanted everyone to know they were fasting so they would look sad or famished or wipe ashes across their forehead. "Are you fasting?" "Yes, this is my second day." "Wow, you are so spiritual!" And Jesus says, "That's your reward. You wanted to impress people and you did. Congratulations. But don't expect any reward from God." *"But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men but by your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."* (Matt. 6:17-18) This is the only place in the Bible that talks about God rewarding fasting and I'm not sure if God is rewarding the actual fast or the faith to fast in secret so that only God sees. It's the same lesson; you can perform for people or you can perform for God. You can't perform for both.

Giving, praying and fasting were the places in Jesus' culture where people were tempted to try to impress people more than God. How do we make people big and God small today?

1. Do you ever do things, not because you think you should do them but because of what others will think if you don't?
2. Do you have a hard time saying no or explaining to others what you really want?
3. Do you feel responsible for others' happiness?
4. Do you ever exaggerate your accomplishments or hide your failures for fear that if people knew the truth they might think less of you?
5. Do you second-guess yourself when others disagree with you?
6. Do you avoid risks for fear of looking foolish?
7. Are you ever nice to people more out of a desire to please them than to please God?
8. Are you afraid of intimacy and avoid going deep with people?
9. Are you easily embarrassed? Do you ever lose sleep because of something stupid you did or said?
10. Is it hard for you to live with feeling misunderstood or misjudged?

Most people are affected to one degree or another by the fear of what people think about them. When we're in our teens, we call it peer pressure. When we get older, it's called people-pleasing. In the recovery community, it's called codependency. But God calls it sin and it is a fear Jesus says God wants to free us from. And Jesus shows us the way to freedom. Jesus was the freest man who ever lived. He never did anything out of fear of what people thought but lived only to please His Father. So what did Jesus know that we don't? He understood the principle of glory. God designed us with a desire for glory: for honor, approval and admiration when He created us in His image. But we only receive that glory when we seek His glory. In John 7:16-18, Jesus says. *"My teaching is not Mine but His who sent Me. If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory: but he who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."* (John 7:16-18) Jesus only taught what God told Him to teach because His concern was not with what people thought about Him but what people thought about God. If people honored God, they would honor Him. If people didn't honor God, they would have a real problem with Jesus. That's why Jesus says that He seeks the glory of the One who sent Him. And because Jesus sought God's glory rather than His own, what people thought about Him was irrelevant. In John 5:41, He says, *"I do not receive glory from men."* Jesus never sought glory for Himself and when people tried to give it to Him, He wouldn't receive it. He didn't want and He didn't take it seriously. The only glory that mattered to Jesus was the glory which came from God. *"I do not seek My glory: there is One who seeks and judges."* (John 8:50) *"If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me."* (John 8:54) Jesus neither sought nor accepted glory from men but instead sought the true glory that comes from God. That's why Hebrews 12 tells us that as He went to the cross, He despised the shame and mocking and rejection the cross represented because He knew that God

would glorify Him and give Him the name which is above every name and to which every person will one day bow. Jesus trusted God for His reputation. He knew that if God honored Him, nobody else's opinion would matter. He knew that God is the one who glorifies and God is the one who humbles and so He lived to please God – even thought that meant enduring rejection, dishonor and shame in order to save us from eternal death. Jesus knew where permanent and real honor comes from; not from fickle people but from God and therefore lived to please God rather than people. The desire to please, to be approved of and to be honored isn't wrong. It's because God made us for Himself. But sin distorts that desire into something we try to get from people instead of God and instead of happiness, our desire for honor and attention brings us only unhappiness. So how does Jesus deal with our desire to please people? He gives us a new heart.

That's why the gospel is good news. Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Not only does He live the life we failed to live so that God can credit us with His perfect record as a gift in place of our own; not only does He die in our place and bear the punishment we deserve so that God can forgive us of all our sins; but when we put our faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord, He comes into our lives to free us from who we've been and to make us new with a new heart – which is exactly what the Old Testament promised that the Lord would do. *“This is the covenant that I will make with them, after those days,” says the Lord. “I will put My laws upon their heart and on their mind I will write them.” (Hebrews 10:16)* When Jesus comes into our life, He makes us new people with a new and pure heart; a heart that wants to obey His laws; that wants to please Him more than people or ourselves. If Christ is in your life, that's the real you and that's your true heart and why pleasing people will never feel right or satisfy. Jesus has released us from the control of the fear of what people think - we just need to act like it and trust God to give us what people cannot. As you say no to the desire to impress people and yes to the desire to please God, you will be amazed at the joy and freedom and intimacy with God you experience because this is the way you were created to live. If Christ is not in your life, He will come in right now if you will ask Him. If you believe that Jesus is God's Son and that He died for you on the cross and rose from the dead to give you eternal life, call on Him in prayer and ask Him to come into your life, free you from sin and to make you a new person.

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