

## Learning to Live Without Vainglory

September 11, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

**6:1** *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

<sup>2</sup> *"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

<sup>5</sup> *"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

<sup>7</sup> *"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

<sup>16</sup> *"And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Learning to live without vainglory; that is, glorying in yourself, is probably one of the hardest tasks I know. Just when I think I have a pretty good control over it, someone lifts up about how great a preacher somebody else is, and then it starts my downward spiral all over again. If that other person is so great, then what's wrong with me? I believe it comes from the desire to have people like you and think well of you. It's like what one preacher heard said: "a person's heart is truly in the kingdom of God when, after

speaking, his or her desire is not for people to say, 'What a great preacher,' but rather, 'What a great God the preacher knows.'"<sup>1</sup> Yes, yes, I know that, but still...

We tend to place a value on ourselves, that begins when we are little. If you do well, you receive affirmation. If you fail, then your value decreases.

Over time we begin to hunger for others' affirmation because it seems to establish our value. Positive appraisal can become more important than actually being good or doing well. We all want to be loved. We all long to feel that we are valuable, worthwhile and wonderful. In a sense we are. Regardless of our physical appearance, talents or abilities, we are amazing beings created in the image of God. But the world will not tell us this. Too seldom do we hear it from our parents or our loved ones. Even our churches contribute to this problem. We praise success and lionize certain people for their piety. Though there is nothing wrong with acknowledging a ministry success or a godly person, the narrative that value is determined by success may continue to work its way in peoples' minds. The world measures our worth on the basis of our appearance, production and performance—which seem to be the only things that count. This narrative says our value is determined by others' assessment. If they say we are good, then we are. Image is everything in our world. We feel the need to be appreciated, respected, applauded and affirmed for what we do. Then we feel good about ourselves. The need for love is temporarily assuaged by admiration; it is the only substitute we can find. Unfortunately, admiration based on our looks or performance is fickle and fleeting. We are only as good as our next performance...

Outside of the kingdom of God, we have no way to determine our value other than what others say about us. If we do something well and no one notices, it drives us crazy because we have lost the thing we want the most—affirmation and praise. It's easy to see how we transfer this narrative into our religious lives. Most people praise religious activities. Thus spiritually mature people, those who pray and read their Bibles and fast, often receive accolades, which tempts them to vainglory.<sup>2</sup>

In my lifetime I have had a number of celebrity preachers that I have admired for a period of time, and then vainglory took over in their lives. They were so popular that they thought they could do anything – and then they made heretical statements, or abused their relationships with their congregants, or behaved unethically.<sup>3</sup> Vainglory can be difficult for anyone but seems to especially be the bane of religious people.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (The Apprentice Series Book 2) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition

<sup>2</sup>.Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Bill Hybels, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Ravi Zacharias, Marc Driscoll are a few who come to mind.

Here are a number of ways that vainglory could exist in your life:

- You always have to make yourself look good. Whether it's on FaceBook, Instagram, or even a Christmas newsletter, where you let everyone know how great you and your family are yet never share the difficult times and the failures
- You let everyone know when you get recognition for something, but hide the things others are critical of
- If you love dropping names, trying to impress other well-known and/or well-loved people whom you know
- If you want everyone to know about the good deeds that you do
- If you can relate to the old Mac Davis song that goes: "Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way."
- When you are more interested in how well your child or grandchild performs in front of others than if they are actually enjoying the game or activity

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives three examples of people doing good deeds with the intention of being praised by others, using a pious behavior as a cloak to conceal it: giving to the poor, praying, and fasting.

First, Jesus describes a common practice when giving alms (money given to the poor). The synagogue in the first century had a system in place to care for the poor, much like a welfare state. People gave a portion of their money to the synagogue, which was then given to the needy. When someone gave a significant gift, it was common for that to be acknowledged in the synagogue (Sirach 31:11). There is nothing wrong with giving money to people in need; in fact, it is a good and godly thing to do. And there is nothing wrong with having others acknowledge the gift. Jesus is not criticizing the act of public acknowledgment. He is asking whether we gave that gift in order to be praised by others. If so, then we already have what we asked for.

Second, Jesus describes another scene common in his day: prayer in the synagogues and on the street corners. Devout Jews prayed three times a day, often in public. At the ninth hour people often went to their synagogue to pray, and they commonly prayed aloud while standing. So it was obvious when a person was praying. Again, there is nothing wrong with going to a religious place for prayer. But Jesus asks what we are seeking. Do we want people to see us praying so that they will think we are pious and godly? If so, we have what we seek.

Third, Jesus describes the common practice of fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (see Luke 18:12), usually on Mondays and Thursdays. Some people wore sackcloth or mourning clothes. They often put dust and ashes on their faces, a symbol of penance and mourning. This practice, a sign of mourning, was intended to

help a person grow closer to God.

Giving money to the poor. Praying. Fasting. All three activities are some of the most spiritual activities a person can do. So what about Jesus' harsh words? Actually, he is not speaking against these practices. He is attacking the way in which they are being practiced. He is not concerned about the method but the motive. As we have seen, Jesus starts with the world's standard of rightness (not murdering, not lying under oath) and then peels off the veneer to see if the heart is good. The same is true here. He takes three righteous and holy actions and shows how the condition of a person's heart determines whether the discipline is a blessing or a hindrance.

Jesus is a genius when it comes to how our hearts work. He exposes people who practice these disciplines in order to impress. They do what they do "to be seen," to gain the respect and the praise of others.

If they wanted to impress others, then Jesus says, "truly they have received their reward." The Greek word for "reward" is in the singular, indicating that it is a one-time reward. They got what they wanted. But God has nothing to do with any of this because he is not in the mind of the person caught up in vainglory. He or she wanted the praise of other people, not intimacy with God.<sup>4</sup>

The kingdom narratives oppose the world's narratives: You are valuable to God. God loves you no matter what. Your worth is not dependent on your performance or on what others think of you. Your worth is found in the loving eyes of God. If you win, God loves you. If you lose, God loves you. If you fast and pray and give your money to the poor, God loves you. If you are sinful and selfish, God loves you. He is a covenant God, and his love never changes. You are valuable, precious and worth dying for—just as you are."

Paul says it beautifully: "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). We do not need others to affirm us. Our worth comes not from the opinions of others but from God's opinion: we are precious and priceless.<sup>5</sup>

When the kingdom narratives replace the false narratives, we are able to play without needing to win, love without needing to receive, pray without feeling pious and serve without needing to be thanked. Our value is set; our worth is stable and unchanging. We are loved and valuable, no matter what people tell us.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.