

“A Flaunter Ne’er a Pray-er Be”

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Matthew 6:1-18 (Scholars’ Version)

Jesus said,

“Take care that you don’t flaunt your religion in public to be noticed by others. Otherwise, you will have no recognition from your Father in the heavens. For example, when you give to charity, don’t bother to toot your own horn as some phony pietists do in houses of worship and on the street. They are seeking human recognition. I swear to you, their grandstanding is its own reward. Instead, when you give to charity, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so your acts of charity may remain hidden. And your Father, who has an eye for the hidden, will applaud you.

And when you pray, don’t act like phonies. They love to stand up and pray in houses of worship and on street corners, so they can show off in public. I swear to you, their prayers have been answered! When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door behind you. Then pray to your Father, the hidden one. And your Father, with his eye for the hidden, will applaud you. And when you pray, you should not babble on as the pagans do. They imagine that the length of their prayers will command attention. So don’t imitate them. After all, your Father knows what you need before you ask. Instead, you should pray like this:

*Our Father in the heavens,
Your name be revered.
Impose your imperial rule,
Enact your will on earth as you have in heaven.
Provide us with the bread we need for the day.
Forgive our debts
to the extent that we have forgiven those in debt to us.
And please don’t subject us to test after test,
but rescue us from the evil one.*

For if you forgive others their failures and offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive yours. And if you don't forgive the failures and mistakes of others, your Father won't forgive yours.

When you fast, don't make a spectacle of your remorse as the pretenders do. As you know, they make their faces unrecognizable so they may be publicly recognized. I swear to you, they have been paid in full. When you fast, comb your hair and wash your face, so your fasting may go unrecognized in public. But it will be recognized by your Father, the hidden one, and your Father, who has an eye for the hidden, will applaud you.

I really, really love Jesus.
I pray to him everyday.

Now, can I have your vote?

It is election time and our aspiring elected officials are telling us that they love Jesus. You would think that they were running for my job. They are more religious than the preacher.

I am not here to pick on politicians. But they do provide a humorous illustration of exactly the kind of thing Jesus was speaking against. Jesus, according to Matthew, said:
"Don't flaunt your religion in public to be noticed by others."

In this section, he says three times, regarding three circumstances, when we give to charity, when we pray, and when we fast, to do these things unnoticed.

Three times Jesus repeats this refrain:
"...your Father, who has an eye for the hidden, will applaud you."

Jesus did not say that flaunting our religion would not garner results.

It works, truth be told.
We very well may be rewarded for showing our piety in public, or for wearing our faith on our sleeves, or our t-shirts, or our bumper stickers.

Flaunting our religion is profitable for business.

Just put that little fish symbol on the barber pole. Everyone knows that a barber who is a secular humanist will give you a nasty haircut. You need a Christian barber. The moral is that if we show our Christian colors we will increase our profit.

Boasting about how religious we are may get us elected and it will help us shape public policy. It is the Christian way to vote.

If we are really ambitious and flaunt our religion with passion, we may even be able to raise up an army of righteous martyrs to fight and die for our cause.

Flaunting our religion does have its rewards.

Jesus does not deny that. He simply says that if we do so that is all the reward we are going to get.

Now I used to think of that in a literal sense. I used to think that God was keeping score of the times I prayed in public and prayed in secret and would reward me or take rewards away after I died and went to heaven.

I still tell people in jest that their unrewarded good deeds will earn them jewels in their crowns. But that is in jest.

I don't think Jesus (or Matthew) meant for his symbolism to be taken literally. I do think he meant it to be taken seriously.

“The Father, who is hidden” is I believe, a shorthand for the Sacred. It is another way of talking about the Pearl that you don't want to cast before swine. It is the kingdom, or the queendom. It is the Boundless, the Divine Realm, the Sacred Universe, the Invisible Presence, the Fullness of Being itself.

It is that which is most important, the Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price, the Tree of Life, insert your symbol here _____.

It is our true selves when we allow the veils of illusion, desire, ambition, and fear to fall away.

“The Father who is hidden” is the sacred realm. It is the good stuff. The real stuff.

We certainly can use our religious symbols and our religious practices and our religious identity to garner earthly rewards. We can satisfy our ego desires through sacred means. But, in the end, all we have done is satisfy our ego desires. We are still bound to the wheel, or as the Apostle Paul would put it, we are still children of the flesh.

If we cheapen our faith by throwing our pearls to swine, we miss the true value of our sacred traditions, of prayer, meditation, and spiritual wisdom. We do nothing for our souls.

Jesus is saying that prayer (and I will talk more about prayer in a minute) connects us to the Sacred but only when we treat it with respect, tenderness, and discretion. This not only counts for prayer but other practices, any thing that is good and holy. It is only good and holy, sacred and beautiful when it isn't broadcast all over.

Activities such as prayer, meditation, selfless action, those things that are done for our souls are only valuable when they belong to us alone. If I were to sum up this section on the Sermon on the Mount, I would use this statement: “Virtue is its own reward.”

Now we all want to be recognized. We want to be assured that we are good. We want to know that we measure up. We want to know that we are loved and lovable. We like to hear it when people tell us they like us. We need and want positive affirmation. Those of you who are counselors know that the most important thing you can give to those who come to you is positive affirmation. Healing happens when people feel safe and loved.

We need that. We receive so many negative messages from so many places. Sometimes we have heard and internalized so many negative messages about ourselves that we cannot believe the positive ones when we do hear them. Sometimes it is never enough. We may never receive enough positive strokes to feel good about ourselves. Sometimes that hurt is so deep that we cannot accomplish enough to feel we are accepted and valued. Or we place our acceptance and value on our accomplishments and on the recognition that others offer us or withhold from us.

I read this section on the Sermon on the Mount in that light. It is not so much instruction on how to pray or how not to pray. It is really about finding our value and worth. “The Father, who has an eye for the hidden, applauds you.” That is who you are. You are worthy of Sacred Applause.

Jesus began the sermon telling his disciples, “Congratulations! Blessed are you! Sacred are you!...You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!” I am sure that his disciples had as hard of a time believing that as you do. And as I do. Nevertheless, I think it is true. You are created in the Divine Image. The Divine One applauds you.

Because we forget that, we need to remind ourselves. Bill Kirkwood at the last Wednesday meditation told us that our sacred practice, whatever it is we do, is an act of memory. We remember who we are. We need to do that everyday, to remember to go back to the source. As the Israelites in the wilderness forgot Yahweh and needed to be reminded, so we are to remember who we are. Our sacred practices are acts of memory.

So how are supposed to pray? I don’t know if there is a right way to pray. We already talked about wrong ways to pray. If we wear our religion on our sleeve for recognition, that will be less than helpful in remembering who we are.

How to connect with the Sacred? Let me count the ways!

There are so many ways from journaling to painting to walking to praying with rosary beads, to reading sacred texts, to meditating on your breath, to digging in the dirt, to sitting quietly—find your own way. There are many resources.

The idea is to care for your soul. To care for yourself. To remember who you are. To allow the Sacred to applaud you. Experiment, find one, stick with it, and keep it for yourself.

No outside recognition can really do what is needed for your soul. In the end, we care for ourselves. This is not a lonely act. The Universe itself, the Father and Mother who is hidden, is caring for you as you do it. Remember each day, to do whatever you do, to be at peace, to give yourself that moment of Sacred applause.

Now while I do not think we can live on outside recognition alone, it is important to recognize others. The world is a harsh place. We are a community of the fragile. As strong as someone may appear on the outside, s/he may or may not be on the inside. It is important to be kind. It is important to accept and to forgive.

Jesus reminds us in the Sermon that forgiveness is reciprocal. We experience the Sacred peace as we offer it to others. As we begin to let go of our own hurt and bitterness, as we expand that circle of love to include those with whom our relationships may be stormy, we experience the peace and relief.

We are a community of the fragile. The value of the community is to help each other. We have different needs and different personalities but we all need to be reminded of who we are.

I think our most important role as individuals in this community is to be an agent of the Sacred to help others remember and discover who they really are. I can't think of a more Sacred act than to be present for someone—to care for another's soul—as we help them begin the journey of caring for their own soul.

This can be as simple as a kind word, a warm greeting, and a listening ear.

We are agents of compassion. We don't do it to be seen or recognized. We do it so the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. We are present for one another so they and we may hear that Sacred applause.

The way in which we worship as a community reflects that. Gandhi said that one of the seven deadly social sins is worship without sacrifice. I think in part what he means is that worship is not just about us. It is a communal act that requires sacrifice on behalf of all of its participants.

We may not necessarily like part of the service, a hymn or a prayer, or something said in the sermon. But it may be the thing that our neighbor needs. We sacrifice our own particular need because we want to be in community with our neighbor. We say to ourselves, "This person is more important than my preference."

That is sacred community.

It is a way to live life. It helps us to be less critical and more flexible. Less rigid and more open. Less anxious and more peaceful. Less worried and more joyful.

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit,

You know what we need before we ask. You know who we are more than we do. You know what the world needs more than we do. May your sacred realm be known throughout all of creation. It is for this reason that we come together. May all of creation participate in your divine applause. Amen.