

What's Our Motive?  
Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18  
West Valley Presbyterian Church  
September 3, 2023

Remember back to February and March? We went through Matthew 5, the first of three chapters of Jesus' teaching that we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. Then came Lent and Easter, and we went through Scripture passages that told us what Jesus' death means, and what his resurrection means. Then came Pentecost, and we went through the passages of Acts which tell us what the Holy Spirit did to form the church and to cause it to spread and grow. We spent three months looking at how the Holy Spirit works in and through the church, because it's the closest thing we have to a manual on how to support a church plant.

And now it's September 3<sup>rd</sup>. Labor Day is tomorrow. Of course that no longer means that school starts back up on Tuesday; these days, schools usually start in mid-August, depending on the district. But I still have a sense of "it's September, time to study." How about you? So for the next three months, we are going back to the remaining two chapters of the Sermon on the Mount – chapters 6 and 7. We're going to focus on how Jesus wants us to live our lives, individually and as a church.

Today's passage is Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18. Hear now the word of God.

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. (Thanks be to God.)

How many of us use social media, at least sometimes? Such as Facebook? Or The Site Formerly Known as Twitter? Or Tiktok? I use Facebook, partly because my daughter works for Meta, and partly because it does help me stay in touch with what my friends are doing. And if I post something, and I get positive comments in response, I have to admit that I like that. It feels good. I want my friends and family to see what I'm doing, and approve of it. Would Jesus approve of it, though? We all want to be seen. We all have a little bit of "look at me!" inside. We all want approval for what we do. Is that so bad? Well, let's look at what Jesus says, and see if we can figure that out.

First, let's note that Jesus assumes that we will be giving to the needy, and that we will be fasting. He doesn't say, "if" you give to the needy, or "if" you fast. He says "when" you give to the needy, or "when" you fast. He does expect that we will be generous and give to those in need. He does expect that we will fast for religious reasons, from time to time, which is not the same thing as dieting for health reasons. And yes, he does expect us to pray, which we will talk about next week. Notice that Jesus does not say "if". He says, "how". Here's how you should do it.

And, let's also notice that if we don't get the "how" just right, God doesn't condemn us for that. God may not reward us; but he doesn't condemn us for trying and not getting it right. Would God condemn a child for saying, "Mommy, Daddy, look at me, watch me?" No. So if we still have some of that child inside our adult selves, that doesn't mean we are awful. It just means we are immature. And God doesn't condemn us for being immature. God wants us to become mature, and that means that we need to grow, and that means that we need to choose him first of all. That is why Jesus says that if we are rewarded by our peers, then we don't get a reward from God. A reward from our peers is not a bad thing. It's just not the best thing. And because Jesus wants the best for us, he encourages us to leave behind the not-so-good thing and instead choose the best thing: God's reward.

OK. Now that we know what the passage doesn't say, let's look at what the passage DOES say. What does this passage tell us about ourselves? It tells us that we never completely outgrow what all children want: attention from other people. We want to be seen, as Jesus puts it in verse 1. I sure do remember my children saying, "Look at me!" or "Watch me!" And now I hear my grandchildren saying the same thing. Which makes sense. Children need a lot of care; so they need the adults around them to see them and hear them and pay attention to them. That's how they get the care they need to grow up. And once we are adults, that need doesn't completely go away.

In Jesus' day, a generous gift would be announced in the synagogue, maybe even with trumpets if it was an especially large gift. Sort of like getting your name on a museum or a hospital if you're an especially generous donor. From a management point of view, that makes sense; if you want to encourage generosity, you make a big deal about it and then more people will be generous. Why? Because we humans want other people to pay attention to us and approve of us. And even if we don't have a million dollars to give away, we still want to be honored and remembered for what we have done. We still want people to "like" our media posts. We still want people to say things like, "Wow, that was really generous of you," or, "I'm amazed at how well you fixed up that classic car," or, "What a beautiful sweater, did you knit that yourself? I've never seen anything like it." None of us are completely grown up! And that's why we all need Jesus to say to us, "Look, here's a more fulfilling way to live. You don't need to depend on the approval of people. It's much better to depend on the approval of God."

What does this passage tell us about God? It tells us that God is personal; that God responds to us; and that God rewards us. And Jesus should know, since he is the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. God is personal – yes, throughout this passage Jesus refers to God as "your Father." A father, and a mother, are very, very personal. Parents are the reason we are here. Parents

will do anything for their children. They will lay down their lives for their children. They want the well-being of their children more than anything. Jesus means all of that, and more besides, when he says, “your Father in heaven.”

God responds to us – yes. God clearly is aware of when we are giving money to those in need, and when we are fasting. He knows what we are doing, and what our motives are. And he responds accordingly. “You’ve got your name on that building? Okay. You’ve gotten your reward.” Or, “Not only did you make an anonymous donation, you didn’t pat yourself on the back for it. You didn’t even think to yourself, “What a good person I am for doing this.” Your reward is to grow more like Jesus, and to be filled with his love and his joy.” And if we are fasting, God is also aware of our motives and responds accordingly. “You’re looking miserable, and you’re saying things like, “Oh, I wish I could eat that donut, but I can’t, because I am fasting””? Okay. You’ve gotten your reward.” Or, “You’re fasting but you look cheerful and well-groomed, and you don’t tell anyone about it? Your reward is to grow to be more like Jesus, who also fasted, and to be filled with his love and his joy.”

And what would God’s rewards be like? They probably don’t involve fame or donuts. They do involve closeness, intimacy, love, and joy that’s so strong that it feels like it might break your soul open, or melt it in love. In John 15:9 Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” What do you think it would be like to remain in the same love that the Father has for Jesus?

How then can we live for God’s approval, rather than for our peers’ approval? Jesus tells us that too. He tells us that in our financial decisions, in our devotional decisions, or for that matter in any of our decisions, we should let go of the “hey, look at me” that lives within us. We shouldn’t announce what we are doing to the world around us, because that just encourages the attention-seeking child within all of us. Instead, we should do our best to look to God who lives beyond us, as well as within us by the Holy Spirit. Because that helps us to be fully grown in Jesus.

In other words, Jesus advises us to do things because God wants us to do them, rather than because we want ‘likes’ from our friends. And how do we sort that out? Sometimes it’s obvious; but sometimes not. Sometimes we really need to allow God to sift through our motives and reveal them to us, so that we make the choices that would please God. And how do we do that? My experience is that it takes practice, our whole lives long. God can always sift through our motives; we may not be open to what we discover about ourselves. So I’d like to lead us in a discernment prayer, to help us see what our motives are, so that we can make decisions that would please God.

Here is what we’re going to do: We’ll start off with a prayer for guidance. Then we’ll take a few moments of silent prayer. In that prayerful silence, think about a decision you’re making. It can be something as simple as who you’d like to talk with on the patio. It can be as complicated as asking God what he’s doing in your life right now. Once you’ve identified a decision, pray silently or in a whisper, and ask God to help you do what pleases him. That will take a few minutes. Then I will close our time in prayer by beginning the Lord’s Prayer, and I invite you all to join in.

Let's pray. //