

THE GREAT TEMPTATION
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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Luther argued, “Our righteousness is more dangerous than our sin.”

If I were to ask you what’s your greatest temptation, you might pause a minute before you gave an honest response. But I want to pose another possibility for our greatest temptation.

The greatest temptation is to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

I. Giving that glorifies God vs. flashy charity (6:1-4)

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be notice by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

At the end of chapter 5, Jesus says to His followers that they are to be perfect, as the heavenly Father is perfect. Then He gives three examples – giving, praying, and fasting – that indicate how spiritual maturity or perfection is achieved in these areas.

In Matthew 6:1, he says to beware of practicing your righteous deeds before men to be noticed by them.

Oddly enough, back in chapter 5, He has said that we are the light of the world. Look at Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (see verse 16)

Now, it’s one thing to be seen. It’s another thing to be noticed. We have a tendency of going from the first stage of being seen as God’s people to wanting to be noticed as God’s people. And in doing so, we substitute being the light of the world – by which we are bringing attention to the righteousness of God – to being noticed and bringing attention to our own righteousness. It is a great, liberating day when we are free from the burden of pointing to our own goodness so that we can allow, quietly, our deeds to be a window that allows people to see the perfection of God.

Jesus couldn’t be more clear. If we practice our righteousness before others in order to be noticed, we will receive no reward from our Father in heaven. There are no double redemptions here. You hold up your good deeds so you can get applause here on earth – then you’ve already received your reward and there will be none in heaven for that good deed or act of kindness. It is when our

good deeds point away from ourselves to their divine author – God – that we receive a heavenly reward.

So, He gives us an example.

Verse 2.

“When you give alms, do not sound the trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”

We have a picture of someone walking up with the blast of the trumpet before they put their gift in the offering plate.

It wasn't uncommon for there to be trumpet-blowing, even on the streets. Water is scarce in Palestine, and one of the good deeds that religious leaders would sometimes perform would be to have water skins brought into the marketplace, have a trumpet sounded in the streets, and then stand beside the water as the benefactor who dispensed it to all who were thirsty.

In Isaiah 55:1, we read, “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

You see the difference? In Isaiah, God reaches out His arms to the thirsty world, inviting us to all drink freely, while in the Matthew passage, the hypocrite stands with folded arms, offering a drink to the people of Jerusalem in order to be noticed by them.

Verse 3.

Our acts of charity should be so secretive that our left hand doesn't even know what our right hand is doing. Our acts of kindness, our giving of alms, shouldn't be calculated. God gives himself freely. The hypocrites give in order to be noticed. And Jesus asks His followers to imitate God, instead of them, by giving without calculation. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 120)

Not only no external trumpets, but no internal music singing, “After all, I am a pretty good fellow.”

There is not a lot of anonymous giving these days. **In fact, I found a report from the Philanthropy News Digest that says that only about 1 percent of gifts of \$1 million or more were given anonymously. One out of one hundred gifts of \$1 million or more are given anonymously. Really, professional fundraisers today discourage anonymous gifts because they tell the donors, “If you will let us post your name up, it will persuade others to participate and to give.” (“Anonymous Giving Is Choice of Many Americans”, posted 11/14/05, www.foundationcenter.org)**

Now, let me be clear. I am going to preach the text just like I believe it's written. There is a place or two on this earth where you'll see my name on a plaque. So while I'm hurling the stones at you, you need to know they are coming back and hitting me in the head as well.

In fact, Richard Riordan, who has long run in philanthropic circles, says even when people make an anonymous donation, the people they want to know end up knowing about the gift. In an article entitled “Sometimes Anonymous Donations Aren’t Really Secret” by Kate Berry in the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, it’s discovered that not really many people write big checks to UCLA Medical Center, the L.A. County Museum of Art or the Walt Disney Concert Hall looking for anonymity. What they are looking for is to get a building named after themselves at a large institution, which is just another part of the competitive landscaping of being a key player these days.

Understand the stones hit my head as I speak.

To quote Pablo Eisenberg, “Almost no one gives anonymously anymore, and, worse than that, donations now have this aspect of eternal remembrance to them.” There was a study of gifts to the California Community Foundation, a collection of mostly smaller funds. They found that of the 1,300 donor-advised funds reported by the foundation in fiscal 2004-2005, only 28 (out of 1,300) were anonymous.

As Cheryl Zoller Simon, president of Foundation Management in Beverly Hills, which advises wealthy individuals on charitable contributions, says, “You give a gift to make a difference and you want to get something out of it.” (Kate Berry, “Sometimes Anonymous Donations Aren’t Really Secret”). Quote, unquote.

I would call this philanthropy with strings. I am happy to say that compared to other charitable institutions that publish their givers or encourage you to give more to make the next level, that all gifts to First Baptist Church are anonymous.

One of the greatest things about giving to church is that not only are we fulfilling the command to tithe to the storehouse, the church is one of the few places where charity is done in a way that is pleasing to the commandment to not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. We leave your reward to another kingdom.

I did come across a \$100 million gift that is the mystery in Erie, Pennsylvania. Someone, the “Anonymous Friend,” gave \$100 million to the Erie Community Foundation, and many of the charities in the community would receive a share. Mike Batchelor, president of the Erie Community Foundation, has been sworn to secrecy. He said he had worked with the donor over the years to determine who would be the recipients. He won’t tell you whether the donor is dead or alive. Makes no comment. And, in fact, the recipients have said they are reluctant to try to speculate because they want to honor the donor’s wishes to remain anonymous. (AP, “Anonymous gift of \$100 million an Erie mystery, MSNBC.com, 11/13/07)

And you know, that anonymous donations inspire others just as much as one with a name on it.

Don’t let the right hand know what the left hand is doing.

The greatest temptation in the world is to do the right thing for the wrong reason. To give to be noticed. To have your name published. To make the list – maybe at the gold level. If not, at least at the bronze.

There is a new form of ostentation in charity. Now this one is really vogue with the younger crowd. For example, buying expensive accessories as a sign of your generosity. It works something like this:

Bono came up with “accessorizing-with-charity.” His concept is called Product Red. You want to buy brands with “the power of red.” It’s fashionable. Bono used his star power to convince trendy brands to produce trendy products, usually in red. When trendy consumers buy them, like a red Apple product, they can use them to demonstrate just how trendy and generous they really are. Funds are raised for AIDS drugs in another country.

American Express has gotten on board. Converse All-Stars. Starbucks. Buy the Apple Red and Apple donates \$10 to AIDS drugs in Africa.

You get the point. If my iPhone is red, you know I’m really trendy, I’m really a giver. “Why, look at me. I was socially responsible when I bought my unnecessary accessory.”

It’s really sneaky. It’s saying that Western consumers are so shallow and materialistic that the best way to raise money is to get them to spend more money. That’s easy to convince Americans to do. Show your generous heart by shopping at Red’s Amazon store. “Shop Red,” save lives, and then post it to show it. (Dominic Knight, “The Ostentation of Charity,” 10/16/06, http://blogs.smh.com.au/radar/archives/2006/10/the_ostentation.html)

Product Red is a modern method of blowing the trumpet.

How far have we fallen!

II. Prayers that are private vs. flashy praying (Matthew 6:5-7)

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. 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.

Pray in secret. Don’t pray to be seen. Make your prayers heartfelt. No meaningless repetition. No stringing phrase upon phrase, committed to memory.

Everybody knows Larry the Long-Prayer. He shows up at churches during prayer time. Groups are going to circle up and pray, as is the custom of some church congregations. Larry loves to shuffle into prayer meetings and position himself right at the front of the prayer line, so when it’s time to petition the throne of the Almighty in prayer he’ll be the first to have a

word. Larry is mentally and physically prepared, determined, and he will win with the longest prayer.

Prayer meeting begins, and Larry jumps off the mark. He begins his prayer by petitioning the heavens about a neighbor who lost her cat in the backyard a week ago, then he moves his prayer to South America and works his way around the globe, praying for world peace and everything else in between – never mind that this particular gathering’s focus was to intercede for the youth service which begins in 35 minutes.

Four minutes into Larry’s prayer, everyone in the room is fighting to control their wandering minds, trying to focus on the prayer and agree in faith. But it’s hard. The mind wanders as Larry drones on. You begin to think about food and soccer practice and the overpowering perfume of the person standing adjacent to you who obviously has never heard that “a little dab will do you.” Your sleepy eyes begin to itch. People bow their heads slightly more to position their hands on their forehead and rest. “Hmmm,” they think. “This looks holy. No one will ever know I’m sleeping.”

Larry is feeling good. He’s in the middle of praying for Australian children in the desert who were being hunted by man-eating pythons (something he read on the internet). About that time, the youth pastor enters the prayer meeting and announces, “Amen.” Delayed “Amens” slowly echo around the room over the next 20 seconds as people awake from their Larry-induced slumber.

Larry did his job. No one else had a chance to pray. And Larry walks away from that prayer meeting feeling quite proud of himself. He’s holy and everybody knows it. After all, who else can pray for 45 minutes straight?

As he exits the room, Larry fails to see the red eyes, yawns, and hand prints on every forehead. And he’s pretty proud of his prayer, which he thinks has pleased God and all of the brethren. (www.lucasperry.com/1-larry-the-long-prayer)

The hypocrites wanted to be seen when they prayed. They would position themselves in some conspicuous place when it was time to pray – on a busy street corner or in the square. They would lift their hands to God in display of their devotion to all who were passing by.

But Jesus says, “No. Find a private place. Find a storeroom. Close the door and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place. And He will provide the appropriate reward.”

He gives a third and final example of secret piety.

III. Fasting with a happy face vs. flashing fasting (Matthew 5:16-18)

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

Those who fast and want everybody to know it put on a gloomy and sad face. They position their clothing in radical disarray. They have frowns on their faces.

“Not so,” says Jesus. “When you fast, anoint your heads and wash your faces so your secret acts will not be noticed. But you will be able to receive a divine reward.”

It might, in contemporary circumstances, go something like this.

It's Thanksgiving Day. It's a day to celebrate – a day to eat and a day to be at the table of festivities with family. Cousin Ted doesn't care for anything. He doesn't put anything on his plate. Everybody begs Ted, inquiring why he will not eat. And he talks about how his spiritual dedication has made him feel like he needs to fast and pray on Thanksgiving Day.

Well, if you're picking Thanksgiving Day as a day of fasting, then you're wanting to be seen. You're trying to do it at a family gathering so everybody will know that you are holier than they.

Fasting was a regular part of religious activity in Jesus' own day. The scripture never says, however, that fasting is not to be done. In fact, it's expected that God's people will fast – “When you fast....” Individuals who fast know that there is a moment of emptiness, a moment of despair. And then, beyond these stages, there is a new sense of spiritual intimacy, spiritual transformation. Every time the hunger pangs come, you're reminded of the person or the reason for whom or for which you are fasting.

Carl Vaught wrote a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. He said that his great-grandmother, whom he never knew, was an invalid. But he learned that she fasted once a week. She studied the passage before us carefully, and every Wednesday she anointed her head, washed her face, and fasted all day in her room. She would allow people to visit her and would converse with them during the day. The point of her activity was not to be noticed but to be committed to a single, overriding spiritual objective. In her case, that overriding objective was this: though she was unable to leave her room, and though in a certain sense she was imprisoned behind closed doors, she sought to reach the center of her being where God was to be found, and from there to reach out beyond herself to make living contact with the larger world.

When, as a little boy, Vaught's father would visit her on Wednesday, he became aware of her powerful presence and by being there was given access to the secret place where God reveals his richness. He told Carl Vaught that one day, in the midst of their conversation, his grandmother said to him, “Son, there are more prayers stored up for you in heaven from this room than you will ever be able to use.” Later, as a mature man, Vaught's father began to realize that for her fasting was not an experiment, not simply a reaction to an overwhelming experience of joy or grief, not an external that was performed in order to be noticed, but an attempt to offer prayers for her grandson and for the larger world – the center of her being. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 139)

A modern version of “to be noticed” fasting might be this gentlemen I came across. This man, 45 years of age, began carrying a cross all the way across the country – a ten foot cross. He had been doing so and spreading the gospel since the year 2000. His original 86-pound oak cross was replaced by a 12-pound version with two wheels at the bottom, so he can roll it along. He accepts rides when offered. In fact, he’s even had the cross tied to every kind of vehicle known to humankind. He’s even been on the back of a Harley-Davidson. (“Man carries 10-foot cross across U.S.” ReligionAndSpirituality.com, 6/12/07)

Seems to be, though God will be the judge, that those flamboyant acts of piety which draw attention are not the kind that pleases God. When Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow Me,” he’s talking about a silent, secret cross – not a cross to display across the country.

I’m going to give you a hard assignment this week. I want you to do something good – an act of charity for somebody – and I don’t want you to tell anybody. It is so hard to do something good and keep it a secret. Yet, when we share it, Jesus says we have already have our reward. What you find is the overwhelming temptation to, somehow, share what you are doing. “Well, I wouldn’t tell anybody else, but I want you to know – just so you can pray – I did this for so-and-so....”

The devil tempts you to work into the conversation all the good things you’ve done. It is so hard not to self-promote our good deeds. I mean, if you’re going to do them and nobody knows about them, what good is it, you think to yourself.

Well, that’s the only way it is good, says Jesus. Be careful. Give anonymously. Pray in private. And fast with a happy face.

Do what is right, but do it the right way.