

THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

MATTHEW 6:1-18

A prominent sect of Jews in Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They were Jewish right-wingers - legalists.

And they were revered by the common-folk.

They were thought to be more righteous than other Jews. And the Pharisees certainly fostered this impression! They went out of their way to *appear* holy.

Recently I came up with a list - *a Top Ten List*.

Here are "The Top 10 Ways The Bible Would Be Different If The Pharisees Had Been Southerners..."

10) Kosher would be anything cooked in bacon grease. 9) Rather than pray, standing on the street corner - the Pharisees would pray in the middle of the trailer park. 8) Stock car races would be forbidden on the Sabbath. 7) Rather than the tithe of "*mint and anise and cummin*" it would be the tithe of "*grits and black-eyed peas and collard greens*." 6) The Pharisees would refer to the High Priest as "*a good ole boy*."

5) Instead of "*whitewashed tombs*," the Pharisees would be compared to "*bondo-ed pick-up trucks*." 4) Ritual cleansings would be performed with Lava soap.

3) The Talmud would contain 59 regulations on how to spit tobacco juice. 2) The rival schools of *Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai* would be replaced with the schools of *Rabbi Bubba and Rabbi Junior*. And the 1) way the Bible would be different, The typical Jewish greeting would change from "*Shalom*" to "*Howdy Ya'll*."

Realize, even though the common-folk held the Pharisees in high esteem, Jesus was no friend. Some of His harshest words were reserved for these guys.

Much of the Sermon on the Mount is a contrast between Pharisaical practices and the Jesus' style.

In Matthew 5, Jesus contrasted **the righteousness of the Pharisees with true righteousness**. While in Chapter 6, He contrasts **the worship of the Pharisees with true worship...** When we offer gifts, and acts of worship to God, *it's always our motive that matters!*

As a bit of an intro... In Matthew 6 Jesus talks about three activities - our *giving, our praying, our fasting...*

And as He does, you'll notice He never says, "*If you give...*", or "*If you pray...*", or "*If you fast...*" Check verses 2, 5, and 16 - it's always "*when*" you do these...

I believe if you've been born anew by God's Spirit - if you've tasted God's grace - you'll want to give, and pray, and fast... It won't be a matter of *if...* but *when...*

Think about giving... when God gives to us as freely and as lavishly as He has, it's only natural for us to want to return the favor, and give something to God...

And what about prayer?... Now that Jesus has established a connection between us and God, it's only natural to go online, and surf His many blessings.

And even fasting... as we fatten our soul on the spiritual bread, there'll be times when we'll be so enthralled with God we'll forget to do lunch. We'll forego a meal or two to spend more time with Him.

A new life in Christ drives us *to give, to pray, to fast*. We'll look for ways to deepen our intimacy with Jesus.

Yet here's a problem... **Intimacy can be imitated.**

Rather than *give, pray, and fast* out of a desire for God, wrong motivations can creep in. And **the most sinister of motives is a desire to be seen by men.**

Jesus warns us in verse 1, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven." The phrase "*to be seen*" is an English translation of a Greek word which meant "*theater*."

Jesus is warning us not to turn our *worship* into *showmanship*! Never turn *passion* into *performance*.

When acts of worship are staged to impress people, they cease to impress God. As G Campbell Morgan once wrote, "**Motive is everything in the Kingdom.**"

Listen to this paraphrase of verse 1. It hammers home the point Jesus is making, "**Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding.**"

It's been said, "**we're all just actors on a stage.**" And in a sense that's true, but the question Jesus asks is, "**Who's our audience?**" *Is it God, or is it other people?*

Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 3 that each of our righteous deeds will one day be tested - to determine "**of what sort it is...**" In other words, what's the motive behind the act? *Self-glorifying acts* will prove to be as combustible as wood, hay, and stubble. Whereas, *God-glorifying acts* are as treasured as fine gold...

In that day, God will test and try each act of worship, or service, to determine “of what sort it is...” While today, is our opportunity to sort it out beforehand.

Every year the Ringling Brothers Circus comes to town and for several years in a row our family was a regular. *We loved the circus!* Bears on motorcycles, the trapeze artists, the lion tamer, the human cannonball...

When the ringmaster - all dressed up in top hat and tails - stepped into the center circle, and the microphone fell from the sky... my kids would scoot up on the edge of their seats... They were all ears, as the PA thunder, “*Welcome to the greatest show on earth.*”

And our Lord Jesus could’ve pointed His finger at the Pharisees, and announced the same... “*Welcome to the greatest show on earth.*” The Pharisees were *priestly performers, and spiritual showboats*. They had turned the worship of God into a virtual circus.

I’m sure my family is not the only family that enjoys the circus. Lots of people love an extravagant performance. Actually, it’s a human fascination.

And it doesn’t go away when people come to church.

The average person is drawn to the *flash* and the *splash*. They love to be entertained - *even on Sundays*.

And if pastors were honest they’d admit, that as upfront people, there’s a tendency in us that likes to entertain. Our pride likes to hear the *oohs and aahs*.

Pastors enjoy the applause and the limelight. We like it when people think we’re more spiritual than we are.

As pastors, our flesh likes the view from atop the pedestal, and there are people who like to put us there.

When the leader hot dogs, and the people pour on the relish - it makes for a dangerous combination. If pastors aren't careful, the tendency in both them and in their people, will combine to turn *church* into a *circus*.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day, had made a *three ring circus* out of their worship of God... In ring 1, there was the *game of giving*... In ring 2, the *performance of praying*... And in ring 3, the *farce of fasting*...

In this passage, Jesus wants to keep His kids - both then and now - from running off to join the circus!

In ring 1 of the Pharisaical circus, was **the game of giving**. Jesus says in verse 2, "Therefore, when you do a charitable deed do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men..." The Pharisees had turned *giving* into *grandstanding*.

During Mack's last year of baseball at South Gwinnett I volunteered to be the press box announcer.

This is a big job with multiple responsibilities - not the least of which is to cue up the batter's "*stride to the plate music*." Every player on the team had a music clip I played when they walked to home plate and dug into the batter's box. It was personalized theme music.

And likewise, when the Pharisees dug into their pockets to pull out an offering they also had their own music that alerted the crowd as to who was up to bat.

When everyone heard the trumpet sound they knew which rabbi was stepping up to give an offering... *but as far as God was concerned, he'd already struck out.*

Of course, we laugh at the Pharisee's bombastic, grandiose display of attention grabbing. None of us would ever hire a jazz band to draw attention to ourselves as we dropped money in the offering box.

But have we *tooted our own horn* in other ways?

When you share a testimony with a friend is the emphasis on you - *what you've done for God, more so than what God has done for you? Your generosity... Your courage... Your sacrifice... Your compassion...*

When you brag... *I mean share... Certainly, none of us would ever brag...* Is it about me, or about the Lord?

Yet look what happens when we succumb to this temptation... Jesus says, **"Assuredly, I say to you, (you) have (your) reward."** That's it. That's all you'll get.

Hope you enjoyed that pat on the back from your grandma, you've just forfeited your heavenly reward.

You just got the only reward you're ever going to get.

Whereas, if you'd just shown restraint - practiced a little humility - recalled that the glory belonged to God alone, and kept your mouth shut - then the God of the universe, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, will one day bestow on you eternal riches and treasures.

Instead, you got a handshake from a guy you'll probably never see again... *how satisfying is that!*

Realize, there's a balance here... In Matthew 5:16, Jesus told us, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works..." You don't have to cover-up what God is doing in your life, or ministry.

Rejoice! Praise the Lord! Give a witness! Psalm 96 tells us, "Give to the LORD the glory due His name."

But the rest of verse 16 provides the balance... "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works *and* glorify your Father in heaven."

It's true, motive is what matters in ministry. *And our motive will shape our methods.* If we want God glorified we'll avoid the curtain calls. We'll keep a low-profile.

We'll conduct our ministry in a manner that deflects attention to God, rather than absorb it for ourselves.

Our ministry will be a reflector, not a sponge.

Here's a great rule that'll help you and I strike the proper balance... "When tempted to hide, we are to show. But when tempted to show, we are to hide."

This is what Jesus tells us in verses 3-4, "But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret;... Here's the principle again, *when tempted to show, make sure you hide!*

Jesus says, *even hide it from yourself!* Don't let one hand know what your other hand is up to. The worse mistake you can make in any kind of Christian ministry is to believe your own press clippings. Remember, "Flattery is like perfume... sniff it, but don't swallow it."

Jesus tells us, if you do a charitable deed in a way that truly glorifies God, *and not you* - then “**your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.**”

It reminds me of Lawrence Deprimo’s experience.

On a cold November night in 2012, Officer Deprimo was on duty in Times Square. The NY Policeman saw an older, barefoot, homeless man. A few bystanders were laughing at the guy. Deprimo said it was so cold, he wore two pair of socks and his feet were still frozen.

When the Officer asked the homeless man if he had anything to use to cover his feet, he replied, “**It’s okay, Sir, I’ve never had a pair of shoes. But God bless you.**”

Deprimo asked the man his shoe size, then walked into a nearby Sketchers. He bought the man a new pair of boots - the warmest shoes they had. He paid \$100.

And here’s the deal, Larry Deprimo’s deed would’ve never been noticed, had it not been for a Arizona tourist. Jennifer Foster said later, “**The officer wanted nothing in return and didn’t know I was watching.**”

Jennifer grabbed her phone and snapped a photo.

The next day, she posted it on the NYPD’s FB page.

Overnight, the photo went viral. Since Jennifer’s posting, it’s had over 614,000 likes, and prompted 48,000 comments. It’s turned Officer Lawrence *Deprimo* into a *hero*. One man wrote of the police officer’s simple act, “**It restored my faith in humanity.**”

Obviously, if Deprimo had tooted his own horn, and made sure everyone saw what he was doing, his charity would’ve died on the spot - lost all its velocity.

It's selflessness and humility infused it with power. This is true of all our charitable deeds and gifts to God.

Do your good deed humbly, inconspicuously and one day the King of the universe will call you out before the heavenly host, and every person who's ever lived, and say to you, **"Well done good and faithful servant."**

But do the same deed so you'll be noticed, and I hope you enjoy the pats on the back you get from folks you'll forget about by the time you get home, since you won't be recognized by God. **You have your reward.**

If you want to live for Jesus, don't get caught up in Ring 1 of the Pharisaical circus, **the game of giving...**

Or Ring 2, **the performance of prayer.**

Jesus says in verse 5, **"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites."** Every circus has it's clowns. I suppose that's a good description of the Pharisees.

They made themselves up to be something they were not. They hid their real motivations behind the mask of appearance. The Greeks didn't use the term **"clown"**, they called them, **"hupocrites"** - from which we get our word **"hypocrite"** - but I'll let you in on a secret... *a clown by any other name is still a clown.*

And the Pharisees were the clowns of Judaism...

They wore *the face paint of humility - the rubber nose of charity - the big floppy shoes of sacrifice...* yet under the surface was a sinister self-righteousness.

And let me define the evil of self-righteousness... it's the belief in **clearance based on appearance...**

That looking good makes us good - or looking holy makes us holy. It's all in how we look. Our *appearance* gains for us a *clearance* with God. It's the hope that in God's eyes a *good show* makes up for *no substance*.

I've heard that when repairs were made on the aging ship, the [Queen Mary](#), and its smokestacks were dismantled - it was discovered that the metal stacks had rotted out. All that was left in their place were the countless coats of paint that had once covered them.

When I pull into Heaven's harbor and God inspects me, I want Him to find *substance*, not just *whitewash*.

A Christian can get so proficient at the performance, that the performance replaces the passion that once prompted it. It's no longer ministry... *it's just clowning*...

Jesus continues to describe the pompous practices of the Pharisees - in verse 6, "For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly..."

Prayer needs to be personal. When the Pharisees prayed they *addressed God*, but *spoke to the crowd*.

It reminds me of the little boy who was praying at the top of his lungs. He was shouting to God his desire for a new bike. Finally his mom popped her head in, and

said, “*Son, you don’t have to be so loud. Do you think God is hard of hearing?*” Little Johnny answered, “*No Mom, but Grandma is, and she’s in the other room.*”

The Roman philosopher, Cicero, once said, “*Of all villiany there is none more base than that of the hypocrite, who, at the moment he is most false, takes care to appear most virtuous.*” No activity is more sacred than prayer. It’s our lifeline to God. Thus, to use it for self-promotion... *can you imagine a worse evil?*

In 1960 a Navy aircraft engineer named *Kelly Johnson* coined a term that became famous.

He spoke of “*The KISS Principle.*” It was an acronym that meant, “*Keep It Simple Stupid.*” Johnson believed the simpler the system, the better it would work. He challenged his designers to build aircraft that could be repaired by a typical repairman using simple tools.

And when it comes to prayer I believe Jesus would also advocate “*The KISS Principle.*” Simplicity is best.

For the Pharisees did just the opposite. They vastly complicated prayer. They made it long and boring.

In the next few verses Jesus seeks to simplify prayer for His followers... Verse 7, “*And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them.*” What concerned the Pharisees was the *wording, articulation, volume, and length of the prayer* – *it was far more art than heart!*

Jewish prayers were rote and repetitious.

Each day, as early as possible - or as the rabbis liked to say “before it was light enough to differentiate between the colors white and blue” - they prayed the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one!”

Then they prayed the Shemoneh, or “*the 18*” - a collection of 18 prayers - all memorized. The Pharisees had scripted, canned prayers for mealtimes, weddings, funerals, entering or exiting a city... even for breaking in new furniture! My wife has such a prayer, “Lord, thank you, that my tightwad husband finally gave in!”

In addition, Jewish prayers were long prayers. Like the Energizer Bunny... *they went on and on and on.*

Jesus said of the Pharisees, “*They think they will be heard for their many words.*” But not so. The implication is that a prayer’s length is not what counts.

It’s a prayer’s strength, not its length, that matters.

I hold to the ole maxim, “A short prayer will reach God if the person praying it doesn’t live too far away!”

Pharisaical prayers were also wordy and verbose.

The phrase Jesus used, translated “*vain repetition,*” is a Greek word, “*battalogo*” or “*idle, thoughtless talk.*” It’s words without meaning - phrases without purpose.

It’s like baseball chatter. Just empty noise and cliques made by the players to keep themselves alert.

You see this today with Orthodox Jews. They bob up and down, and chant canned prayers. I’ve seen them do this while walking around, waving to their friends. Their prayer is obviously not coming from their heart.

When I study the biblical prayers they all cut to the chase - get right to the point. Their brevity is powerful.

The purpose of the prayer *isn't to inform God of your situation - or rehash with Him, His different options - or make your own suggestions and tell Him what to do...*

Jesus reminds us in verse 8, “**For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.**”

Our job is to simply ask...

It's true, if you want to *pray more* and *pray better*, the best approach is to simplify. Because I'm a pastor I pray so often I tend to get mechanical in the formation of my prayers. I can lose the spontaneity God desires.

I have to work hard at keeping my prayers from devolving into the rote and routine. Here's a definition for prayer that guides me, “**Prayer is when God warms His hands at the fire of man's heart.**” True prayer might come out of the mouth, but it originates in the heart.

It's *sincere*, and *fresh*, and *genuine*, and *passionate*.

One night, when the kids were just tots, we were in the car headed down the freeway. I suggested we pray.

First, Kathy prayed, then Zach, then Natalie... finally it was my turn. But I'll never forget how Natalie concluded her prayer. She said, “**In Jesus' name, Amen... And now God, here's Dad.**” It was as if she had God on the phone, and then she handed it to me.

Ever since that day I've tried to pray with my daughter's example in mind. I want to talk to God as naturally as I would if I had a friend on the phone.

But Jesus not only teaches us **how not to pray**. He instructs us **how to pray**, by giving us a model prayer.

Jesus knew some things are better *caught* than *taught* - like prayer. The best way to learn is by doing.

So in verse 9, **"In this manner, therefore, pray..."**

The phrase **"In this manner"** can be translated, **"Along these lines"** or **"After this pattern."** Jesus is giving His disciples a model - a prototype for prayer.

We often call it, **"The Lord's Prayer,"** but it's not. Jesus would've never prayed, **"Forgive us our debts."** He had no need for forgiveness. He never sinned.

Verses 9-13 are better titled, **"The Disciple's Prayer."**

And this prayer teaches us the flow, or rhythm of prayer... It begins and ends with **praise**. The middle is **petition**. Throughout it's laced with **intercession**.

Notice the plural pronouns that appear in the prayer, **"our Father," "give us," "lead us."** Implied is that we should pray this for each other, not just for ourselves.

Jesus begins, **"Our Father in heaven..."** The word translated **"Father"** is the Aramaic word **"Abba"** or **"Daddy."** Jesus puts us on intimate terms with God.

He's our Dad. We can run to Him with our needs.

"Hallowed be Your name..." Once a little boy told his Mom he knew God's name... **"It's Howard."** She asked, **"Where did you get such an idea?"** He replied, **"In Sunday School we prayed, "Howard by Your name."**

Of course, the word "hallowed" is a derivative of "holy." It means "to set apart." To hallow God's name is to acknowledge His preeminence - His supremacy.

God is Daddy, there's an *intimacy* - but God is also *transcendent*. He's *nigh* and *high*. God is holy - that means He's a cut above. He's in a class all by Himself.

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's Kingdom is *His rule*. And He doesn't just reign in heaven. We bring His reign to Earth when we humble ourselves and submit to Him.

Then Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice, He doesn't say "daily steak and lobster," or "daily chocolate mousse." It's "daily bread."

Bread is not a luxury, it's a dietary staple.

God never promises to give us all we'd like. But He does promise to provide us all that we truly need.

"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." CS Lewis was once asked, "*What is found in Christianity which is not found in any other religion?*"

He replied, "That's simple - the forgiveness of sin."

Be thankful we serve a God who is rich in mercy and forgives by grace... And if God is eager to forgive us, how can we withhold forgiveness from each other?

Then He says, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." We've prayed for **provision**, and **pardon** - and here for **protection**.

We should ask God to protect us from ourselves. In essence, “Steer us clear from the tempting situation.”

I can ask God to keep me from stupid mistakes - or from biting off more than I can chew - or from falling prey to the devil’s tricks, or from being bullied by evil.

Jesus’ model prayer closes as it began - *with praise*.

“For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” All prayer should be full of praise.

Then He adds a postscript, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Often, this verse is explained by cause and effect. If you *receive forgiveness*, then you’ll *show forgiveness*.

And that’s true, but that’s not what the verse says... Maybe, Jesus just intends to be taken literally.

The Father went to such extremes to forgive us. *He sacrificed His only Son*. Thus, if we withhold forgiveness from others, He takes it personally. He considers us ingrates, and pulls the plug on our forgiveness. I’m not sure how that interpretation fits my theology, but it’s what He says... *we need take heed*.

To be on the safe side, I’d just bury the hatchet.

Well, finally, to avoid joining the Pharisaical circus, you also want to avoid ring 3, **the farce of fasting.**

Verse 16, “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.” When a Pharisee fasted everyone knew it...

He'd mused his hair, ripped his clothes, put ashes on his head, dressed in sackcloth. Even paint his face with a white paste that made him look pale, weak, anemic.

The guy looked like an unmade bed. The Pharisees wanted every one to know what an extreme sacrifice they were making for God. It was a farce! And sadly, the pity they got from people was their only reward.

In light of this charade, Jesus tells His followers in verse 17, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” Put a little gel in your hair, splash on some cologne - don't tip it off that you're involved in a fast.

I heard a person say one time, “You can be a fundamentalist, but you don't have to look like one.”

If you can't enjoy your fasting... *then why fast?*

The point of saying “no” to food, is to say “yes” to God... and obedience to God always produces joy!

To me the most repulsive kind of spiritual showmanship is the woe-is-me, servant of God pity party. *The pouting pastor* - the guy who makes a show of how hard he's got it, and the sacrifices he's made...

With his first pat on the back, he's received the totality of his reward. Is it really a good trade-off - pity from another human being for God's priceless reward?

Let me close with one last story... Once, my kids and I were talking about heavenly rewards. Both Zach and Natalie were still tots. I don't even remember what brought up the subject, but they'd thought it through...

I'll never forget, my little theologian Zach, asked me, "Dad, since heaven is perfect, and since we'll already have everything we want, what's left for God to give us as a reward?" I wasn't quite sure how to respond...

I was still groping for an answer, when Natalie bailed me out. Her little voice chirped in, "I know what reward I want. I want hugs and kisses from Jesus."

And my daughter's answer has upped the ante on my whole life and ministry. If all I'm after are medal crowns, I might be tempted to forfeit a crown or two for some here-and-now glory... *but if we're talking hugs and kisses from Jesus, I'm holding out for the best!*

Nothing compares to the love of our Lord Jesus.

Well, this AM, let's check our motive... *Intimacy can be imitated!* You worship God - you give, and pray, and fast - but do you do it to be seen by men, or because you really love God and want to see Him praised?

There is a law still on the books in the state of Georgia that restricts a child from running off to join the circus. This must've happened to a congressman in the past, and he enacted the law to keep his kid at home.

But I hope this never happens to God's kids.

Don't you run off to join the three ring circus of hypocrisy - the game of giving... the performance of prayer... the farce of fasting... **Our motive matters.**

If your goal is to be "*seen by men,*" then "*you have your reward!*" God wants sincere worship... Here's a final thought, **If the rewards we've been promised are hugs and kisses from Jesus, then we'll want every one!**