

SIMPLE FAITH

Beware! Religious Performance Now Showing

Matthew 6:1–8



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In many ways, our walks with God are something we shouldn't keep to ourselves. By sharing our faith, we not only spread the good news; we go on record as being Christians . . . and not ashamed of it.

On the other hand, it's possible to be so conscious of others watching us that we turn our spirituality into a public performance. When that occurs, we're "practicing . . . righteousness . . . to be noticed by them" rather than walking humbly with our God (Matthew 6:1).

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took on the hypocrites with both guns blazing! Drawing on common examples of showy righteousness, He instructed us on the importance of being people of quiet sincerity, seeking to glorify God rather than impress others.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Micah, the Prophet, Speaks

Micah, the sixth-century BC prophet, asked the people of his day what God required for worship. Rather than animals and other offerings for sacrifice, God desires that His people do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before Him. God is not looking for ostentatious public offerings but a quietly effective pursuit of God in every aspect of our lives.



Quotable

*Living faith
is a deep devotion
carried out in
secret only for the
glory of God.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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A CLOSER LOOK

Micah Speaks

One of the most significant roles in all of history is the prophet. While generally unpopular, prophets have been vital to the human race, for the prophet worked to rouse people from their daily slumber, awakening them to lives of godly vitality. Jesus often functioned as a prophet, sometimes speaking discomfiting and unsettling words from God. In doing so, Jesus stood in a long line of prophets who had been speaking to God's people for hundreds of years.

Some seven hundred years before the arrival of Jesus, God's people heard from the prophet Micah. He prophesied to Judah in a time of good kings and bad and in a time when its neighbor to the north, Israel, was falling to the fearsome Assyrian army. Micah stood apart from a people devoted to serving their own pursuits. While the people of Judah took advantage of the less fortunate, stole from others, and worshiped idols of their own making, Micah warned them of coming judgment.

God had a case against Judah; the people had transgressed His Law severely. And yet in truly divine fashion, the Lord pointed them toward a way of escape. That way of escape did not involve outwardly pious actions such as bringing sacrifices to the altar; the people had long brought sacrifices, but their hearts had been wrong. Instead, God, through Micah, called the people to correction—rather than participating in exploitation, thievery, and prideful idolatry, they were “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with” God (Micah 6:8). Practicing these actions and attitudes would constitute a complete turnaround for Judah.

2. Jesus, Our Lord, Instructs (Matthew 6:1–8)

We need to beware of practicing our religious devotion before others in an effort to draw positive attention to ourselves. In particular, that means giving quietly and praying privately, lest we become known as self-absorbed hypocrites.

Jesus began His counsel on these two issues in a truly prophetic spirit—with a warning. The focus of the Sermon on the Mount to this point has been on holy living that extends from thoughts to deeds. However, the pursuit of living righteously carries a danger as well. For this danger, Jesus spoke a warning to His hearers: beware of practicing righteousness before others in order to be noticed by them (Matthew 6:1).

Living well is difficult enough. Doing so in a way that does not seek the attentions of others raises the bar even higher. Jesus employed the same word, *noticed*, when speaking of hypocritical Pharisees who lengthened the tassels on their robes or took the seat of honor at banquets in order to draw attention to themselves as holy people (23:5–6).



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The last clause in Matthew 6:1 points out the limitations of doing deeds to receive notice from other people—though we might receive rewards from people, we will receive no reward from the Father. When we act to be noticed by others, rather than act in order to honor the Father in heaven, any rewards we receive will *have* to come from others, for the Father does not honor deeds practiced with such duplicitous motives.



LET'S LIVE IT

What should Jesus' teaching on giving and prayer look like in our lives? Three points of application should help us focus our efforts:

- *When devotion becomes a performance, we lapse into hypocrisy.* Devotion to God highlights our humility as we express our need of Him.
- *When our giving lacks secrecy, we lose our reward.* God brings to the giver a deep sense of satisfaction. As He provides for us, so too can we provide for those who have needs. No accolade or attention beats that reward.
- *When our prayers are public demonstrations, we lack God's power.* God has chosen to work through us when we pray to Him truly, rather than when we pray so others might hear.

In what areas of your life do you sense the threat of religious performance or a lack of genuine commitment?



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