

**LIVE OUT A REAL FAITH****MATTHEW 6:1-18**

I'm sure the baseball fans in our midst remember Sammy Sosa from a few years ago. You might also recall that he got kicked out of a baseball game for using a corked bat. He'd hit a ball, the bat broke, and there was embarrassing evidence that the bat he was using was illegal. Some of you might be wondering, "What is a corked bat?" It's a bat that has had some of its inner core of hardwood drilled out and filled with cork instead. The result is a bat that is lighter and easier to swing while retaining its hitting power. Now, Sammy apologized to the fans after the game and explained that he simply picked up the wrong bat on that occasion. Major League Baseball did examine all 70 of his other bats and found them to be legitimate. Sammy explained that he only used a corked bat in homerun contests and batting practice because baseball fans loved to see him hit the long ball out of the park. Well, maybe.... But here's the analogy. A corked bat looks real and genuine on the outside, but the inside isn't solid wood. A corked bat lacks authenticity. There are also what you might call corked people. They may look genuine enough when you observe their outward behavior – impressive even - but they lack authenticity on the inside. That's a theme that comes up repeatedly in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. God values authenticity. And if there's "cork" in your soul, it will show up sooner or later.

Jesus cares as much about how you express your faith as He does about your morals and ethics. The last couple of Sundays we've considered how Jesus' disciples deal with every day issues like feeling contempt for others, self-centered anger, adultery, lust, divorce, keeping your word, whether or not you have "rights" as Jesus' follower, and treating even your enemies with love. But as we move into Matthew 6, you're going to see that Jesus is just as interested in your piety as He is in your morality, in other words, the way that you worship God just as much as how you conduct yourself in everyday life and living. Jesus is very interested in why you go to church, why you pray, why you put your offering in the plate, and why you do the religious stuff that you do. As I reflect on this passage, at least two, big principles emerge that I invite you to think with me about today. Here's the first one...

**YOUR RELIGION NEEDS REAL HUMILITY.**

I'm using the word "religion" to refer to the outward practices of your faith. I fully realize that word "religion" has a kind of old fashioned flavor and a sort of negative association to it. You might have heard someone say, "Didya hear about Henry? He got 'religion' the other night." Henry probably committed his life to Jesus, but the other person is likely making fun of Henry as if to say, "Our buddy Henry is not going to be a fun guy to hang out with anymore. Now that he's become religious or 'gotten religion', he'll act holier-than-thou all the time." Maybe you've heard the observation, "Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship." I agree with that statement up to a point. On the one hand, the Christian faith is certainly more than believing a list of doctrines or participating in certain religious acts like going to church, reading the Bible, and praying. It really is about a personal relationship with Jesus, first and foremost. On the other hand,

following Jesus does mean expressing your faith in literal, outward, and observable practices. Is it possible to be a Christian and it not find some outward expression?

Jesus was addressing a problem in his day and time that's sort of the opposite of what we deal with today. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were largely made up of two groups – the teachers of the law (similar to pastors and Bible college or seminary professors today) and the Pharisees (a group of very zealous Jewish laymen who never met a religious law or rule they rejected – the more the merrier!) Both groups were consumed with getting their outward behavior just right. They paid scant attention to what was going on in inside of you – your heart, your attitudes, or your inner motivation. As you can imagine, this showed up in how they practiced their Jewish faith or religion. All that mattered was the external, the outward, and the observable. Now, again, I say that's in some way the opposite kind of problem from what we face today. The word "spiritual" has replaced the word "religious." Many people desire to be "spiritual" but they don't associate spirituality with any kind of practice or act. They want to feel close to God, but they don't want to go to church. They want to feel forgiveness or peace, but they don't want to confess their sins to God or pray regularly. They want to help others in need, but they consider the practice of tithing as hopelessly legalistic.

What does Jesus talk about here? He mentions three very important Jewish religious practices – giving money to the poor, prayer, and fasting. Now, He didn't have any problem with any of these religious acts in and of themselves. In fact, contrary to people today who want to just keep everything "spiritual", Jesus assumes His followers will give money to the poor, will pray, and will fast regularly. There's nothing inherently wrong with religious acts or doing religious looking stuff. In fact, there's everything good and appropriate about them. But Jesus put His finger on the problem. The religious acts of the Jewish leaders had become a way to impress people rather than a way to honor God and commune with Him.

Consider the religious act of giving money. In Jesus' day, it had become a spectacle. I'm not sure whether a trumpet was actually blown to announce someone's large financial donation or whether Jesus was speaking metaphorically. But the point remains. People were giving money in order to be seen by others and gain their admiration. Big givers were given choice seats in the synagogue next to the rabbis. Consider next the religious act of prayer. It was a very important part of the Jewish faith in Jesus' day. A devout Jew prayed at least three times every day at set times – 9:00 am, Noon, and at 3:00 pm. No matter where he was, a Jewish man was expected to drop everything and say his prayers at those times. Well, some people began to wait in very public areas – like the corner of Karl Road and 161, for example – so they could break out in loud prayers to God at those set times. God wasn't the real object of these prayers. Instead, it was very clear that the person praying wanted to hear whispers of admiration from those who observed it all. Still others had concluded that the longer and more flowery the prayer, the more impressed people would be by this religiosity.

Consider the religious act of fasting. The trick here was to let everyone know you were fasting without actually having to tell anyone! So some folk were wearing sackcloth and

refusing to wash their faces or comb their hair as they staggered weakly throughout their day. They might even rub some ashes on their faces to make them look even more pale and desperate. They wanted someone to take notice and say, “My goodness, look at how sad and distressed that person looks! Oh, he must be fasting. Moses said we must fast once a year, but I’m told this guy fasts twice a week. What a man of God! Look how much he loves God!”

Jesus implies here that there needs to be something truly humble about how you practice your faith – how you do religious stuff. By humility, Jesus doesn’t mean privacy. After all, Jesus said earlier in this same sermon, “Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Mt 5:16 NLT) Jesus never suggested your religious acts have to be secret which, by the way, our culture wants you to do. It says, “It’s OK to believe in Jesus; just don’t tell anyone.” Jesus simply wanted to separate religious acts from being a kind of theatrical performance. After all, the word “hypocrite”, which Jesus uses here, comes from the word for an actor – someone who plays a part on a stage. There’s nothing wrong with being an actor unless how you practice your faith becomes a performance as it had for the religious leaders in Jesus’ day and time. They had turned the Jewish faith into a kind of stage and they played to an audience - other people not God.

If you’re a follower of Jesus – a disciple, a Christian – you do religious stuff for an audience, too. But here’s the essential difference. You have an audience of One – God alone. And He likes humility. What does that look like? Well, let’s consider Jesus three examples again. First, giving money. When Jesus is Lord of your money, you give to Him and to those in need with uncalculating generosity. Jesus isn’t saying you should have no idea what you’re giving financially to the Lord or to needy people. After all, Jesus supported the practice of tithing. In order to give the tithe, you have to figure out actually what’s 10% of what you earn. Nor does Jesus expect you to write out a check or punch in random numbers on your debit card with your eyes closed! That’s not what Jesus meant by your left hand not knowing what your right hand is doing. But Jesus does imply here that His disciples kind of forget how generous they truly are. You don’t stop to gloat over and admire your own generosity. You don’t pray, “Didya see that, Lord? I gave a tithe and then some!” Or, some followers of Jesus give until it hurts and they don’t mind dropping some broad hints to you and others as to how much it hurts! Of course, you need to give your money to the Lord’s work and to the needy, but do it with the right attitude. Do it with humility. Do it with uncalculated generosity.

Second, humility is needed in how you pray. Jesus implies here that prayer is just the best way to access your Heavenly Father’s presence and power. Don’t pray to be admired by others. Be careful here. Jesus isn’t condemning all public prayers. Instead, the issue is why you’re praying at all. Authentic prayer cares less about impressing other human beings. Years ago, a pastor offered up a verbally gorgeous prayer at a staid, old New England church. Someone commented afterward – tongue-in-cheek, no doubt – that it was the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience. In other words, the man wasn’t really praying to God. He had made an audience out of those folk in Boston. Jesus then provided a model prayer which has

come to be known as the Lord's Prayer. I've preached on just that prayer before and I'm sure I will again someday. But this morning, I simply want you to notice how brief, simple, sincere and straightforward this prayer happens to be. Do you think God hears a ten minute prayer better than a two minute prayer? Do you think God is impressed by certain spiritual sounding phrases or the reverent tone of your voice when you pray?

In the "Peanuts" comic strip, Linus is on his way to school one day with a bunch of spring flowers in his hand. Charlie Brown meets him along the way and immediately figures out what's going on. Linus is taking flowers to his teacher. Charlie says, "Flowers for the teacher, Linus? You know, you'll never get anywhere with Miss Othmar by trying to use bribery." Linus turns and confronts Charlie with a wounded expression, "Bribery? This isn't bribery. I prefer to think of it as priming the pump." Do you ever try to "prime the pump" when you go to God in prayer? You're not really interested in a relationship with Him; you just want Him to grant your request. Of course, you must pray – regularly and often. But when you pray, come humbly. Prayer is how you access your Heavenly Father's presence and power. Prayer assures you of His love. Prayer allows you to experience His peace. Prayer provides the opportunity to ask His forgiveness. Prayer is the place you can tell Him about your needs and the needs of others. Prayer is where you can release your fears and anxieties.

Third, fasting. Jesus implies that fasting is something best done just between you and God in order to receive greater grace or guidance. Many followers of Jesus have never fasted. It's simply abstaining from food for spiritual reasons. Those can vary. It might be to seek specific direction for a major life decision, to seek God's answer to a specific prayer need, or to ask for greater spiritual power for some task. In the book of Acts, we read how the first leaders of the Church fasted in order to discern more clearly God's will regarding how best to spread the message about Jesus. Of course, fasting is an absolutely appropriate spiritual discipline. By all means, do it. But do it with humility, says Jesus. When you do religious stuff – you come to a worship service, you read the Bible, you spend time in prayer, you serve the Lord in some way inside or outside the church, you do Bible Chat, you tithe or give an offering – is it marked by humility? Who is the audience? Is it other people or is it God alone? That leads to a second principle I see in this part of Jesus' sermon....

## **YOUR RELIGION NEEDS RIGHT MOTIVATION.**

Motivation is powerful. I like the story about a Corporal Jones who, after his tour of duty overseas, was sent to an induction center here in this country. There he advised new recruits about their government benefits, especially life insurance. Soon he had an almost 100% sales record. His supervising officer was amazed and intrigued by Jones' success. One day this officer stood in the back of the room and just listened to Jones' sale pitch. He heard Jones explain the basics of the military insurance to the new recruits and then he said, "Now, if you have this insurance, and you go into battle, and get killed the US government has to pay out \$35,000 to your beneficiaries. If you don't have this insurance, and you go into battle, and you get killed, the government has to pay out only a maximum of \$3,000." Then, he concluded with this question, "Now,

which bunch of soldiers do you think they're going to send into battle first?" That's motivation! I'm not sure it's good motivation, but it is motivation!

Motivation matters a great deal to God. Jesus said this about the religious leaders of his day, "Everything they do is for show...." (Mt 23:5 NLT) What an indictment! No wonder they hated Jesus! Jesus basically made the same point in this entire section of His sermon. That principle of motivation can be applied to anything you do that expresses your faith in Jesus in an outward, observable way. Why do you come to church? Is it to be seen and admired by others? Does it make you feel better than other people? Or is it simply because you want to honor God and commune with Him? Why read the Bible and pray? Why do Bible Chat? Is it to get other people to think you're a godly person? Is it to get God to feel like He owes you something? Or, is it just about the best way to get and stay connected with your Heavenly Father? Why do you tithe or give money to the needy? Is it to get God to bless you financially? Do you want people to admire you for being generous and compassionate? Or, is it simply an expression of gratitude and obedience to God? Why do you serve in the church in one of our ministries or on a Ministry Team? Do you want other people to admire your dedication? Or, do you just love to serve Jesus because you love Him? Why do you look for opportunities to share your faith with someone who isn't a follower of Jesus? Do you want other people to be impressed by you? Or, do you simply want lost people to discover what you've found – God's forgiveness, God's grace, and God's love?

Jesus goes on to say here that those who seek the admiration of other people – or maybe it's a kind of weird self-admiration - will likely get what they want. If that's your goal, you just might well get it. If that's the extent of your spiritual horizon – just to get human recognition or some sort of personal gain for looking religious, so be it. If you give to be seen, pray to be admired, fast to be thought spiritual, go to church to be considered holy, or tithe to feel good about your own spirituality, Jesus says, "Well, then, you'll get the reward you seek and nothing more." Since the audience was never meant to be God anyway, any reward, or blessing, or affirmation, or praise from God should be irrelevant to you. Do you see the warning in Jesus' words? Of course, we're supposed to do religious stuff. The point is not to stop engaging in outward, observable practices associated with the Christian faith and just seek some kind of airy, fairy "spirituality." The point is to do all of those acts with the right motivation. Then they become truly meaningful. Then they truly benefit you spiritually. But if you do religious stuff just to feed your own ego needs, you'll forfeit any reward from God in eternity.

Let me sum up what I hear Jesus saying about how you and I are to practice our faith day in and day out – how we're to go about doing that outward, observable stuff that people associate with religion. First, whatever you do, do it to please God not to impress people. Second, because God knows everything, always remember that He knows the motivation of your heart better than you do. You can fool other people. You can fool yourself. You can never ever fool God. Third, remember that God rewards on the basis of right motivation more than spectacular results. You'll be rewarded in Heaven on the basis of right motivation instead of how impressive your religious acts might have looked to people here. On the one hand, even a cup of cold water given to

a thirsty person in Jesus' name with the right motivation won't miss a heavenly reward. On the other hand, you can cast out a demon in Jesus' name, but still hear Jesus say, "I never knew you. Get away from me" because your motivation is all wrong.

Let me conclude with a word or two about this matter of rewards. Jesus is the One who raises the whole issue of rewards. He clearly teaches here that seeking heavenly, eternal rewards is completely legitimate. Why, even Jesus sought rewards from His Father. The Bible says about Jesus, "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." (Heb 12:2 NLT) What kind of reward should you seek from the Lord? First, you can expect spiritual satisfaction. When you do the right thing with the right motivation, or when you obey the Lord Jesus because you love Him, or when you just choose to go His way in life, it always brings a wonderful satisfaction in the end. It may be very difficult at the time, but once you're through and on the other side of it, there's not greater joy than knowing that God is well pleased with you.

Second, you can expect even greater responsibility as a reward. A budding musician is rewarded with harder music to learn and master. A football bench warmer is rewarded with more playing time. A disciple of Jesus who serves Him with real humility and the right motivation will get more and greater opportunities to serve Him. For example, if you give money generously to the Lord's work, God will give you more and greater opportunities to fund Kingdom work. If you use your spiritual gifts to honor God and bless His people, God will give you more opportunities to use your time and energy for Him. If you prove to be a rightly motivated spiritual leader, God will likely give you a bigger leadership responsibility. Third, you can expect your ultimate reward in Heaven. It's as if Jesus says here, "I will reward you then openly in front of every creature in the entire universe. The books will be opened. All will be revealed. Everything you did for the glory of My Name will be proclaimed everywhere to everyone. And I will say to you, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.... Let's celebrate together!'" (Mt 25:23 NLT)

Joe was an executive who did a lot of business traveling. One day when Joe was on a flight, he got really impressed by the flight crew. They were unbelievable! They were the most attentive, responsive flight crew that he'd ever seen. Toward the end of the flight, he stopped one of the flight crew members and said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to bother you, but I fly a lot, and I have never seen a flight crew like this one. You are the most engaged, enthusiastic, service-oriented flight crew that I've ever seen." The female flight attendant got a little smile on her face as she bent down and whispered to Joe, "Thank you, sir, but for that you can thank the woman seated back there in 12B." She paused, nodded her head slightly towards seat 12B, and continued, "You see, sir, the woman in seat 12B is the head supervisor for all of the flight attendants for our airlines. And she's on our flight today!"

Now, was that flight crew's motivation to serve those passengers authentic and real? Probably not. It was about impressing the boss and keeping their jobs. But here's another way to look at it. When you really know that Jesus is in your midst, that He is "on your flight," so to speak, that every moment of every day He's watching and

observing your journey through life, it has a profound way of changing the way you live out and act out your faith in Jesus. And shouldn't it? Should it not profoundly affect how you perform your "religion" – in other words, why you come to church, why you tithe, why you support missionaries, why you help the poor, why you pray and read the Bible, why you serve in this church or out in the community, why you try and point spiritually lost people toward Jesus, why you try and live a godly life? If you're His follower, His disciple, don't you want to please Him? Don't you want to impress the Boss? Don't you want to hear Him say, "Well done"? Don't you want His approval – the One who suffered, died on the cross and rose again from the dead for you? Don't you?