

**MATTHEW 6:1–6, 16–21.** (EHV)

“Be careful that you do not do your righteous works in front of people, so that they will notice. If you do, you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. So whenever you perform acts of mercy, do not sound a trumpet for yourself, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be praised by people. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. Instead, when you perform acts of mercy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Then your acts of mercy will be in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by people. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your private room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what others cannot see, will reward you. ... Whenever you fast, do not make yourself look sad like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show everyone that they are fasting. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that it is not apparent to people that you are fasting, but only to your Father who sees what is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

One branch of scientific study is called anthropology, the study of humanity. This branch includes, among other things, the study of human behavior. Within the realm of human behavior, there is a term and category called *self-presentation*. The term describes how people in general, and people within specific societies and groups, present and frame themselves to others, which often varies depending on the audience.

Anthropologists especially like to study self-presentation in the context of social media. And those of you who are active on social media probably know why. If, for instance, you have a Facebook account, you can use that account to craft and present the image of yourself that you want other people to see, and that digital image may or may not accurately reflect the reality of who you are and the experience of your daily life. The things you “say” on social media to others may or may not be things you would actually say to those people in person. Anthropologists like to study the relationship between a person’s self-presentation to that person’s life as a whole, and the effects that self-presentation can have on others who pay attention to that presentation—effects like admiration, jealousy, depression, one-upmanship, etc.

Even though self-presentation on social media is relatively new, self-presentation itself is not. Jesus talks about it in our text for this evening. He teaches us about a Christian’s proper self-presentation.

**1. Proper Self-Presentation Does Not Have a View to People**

Jesus teaches us, first of all, that proper self-presentation does not have a view to people and their responses or opinions. “Be careful that you do not do your righteous works in front of

people, so that they will notice. If you do, you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus then gives us three examples of activities in his day where many people, including many religious leaders, had a view to people with their self-presentation—acts of mercy (or what we might call charity), prayer, and fasting. For acts of mercy or charitable giving, he says that many people liked to sound the trumpet before their acts of mercy, so to speak. In other words, they made sure that they were broadcasting the fact that they were about to perform some kindness for someone who needed it—whether they were doing it in the synagogue or in a street alley. You can imagine some person asking them for help, and in response the people who could help would raise the volume in their voices, so that anyone in the area could easily overhear the conversation. Or maybe they would notice someone in need before they were even asked for help, and would turn the conversation they were having to what they were about to do. “Hey, I hate to interrupt, but it looks like that man is in need of help. I’m feeling generous today. I’m going to go over and see what I can do.” And they became puffed up with pride if they got comments like, “Good for you,” or, “I saw what you did back there. That was nice of you.”

Others acted similarly when praying. Perhaps an early bird at the synagogue on Saturday morning would stand in a prominent place in the entryway or in his spot in the sanctuary, mumbling a prayer while facing the direction of Jerusalem, so that the next people who would come in would see him praying. Or they might do the same thing on a busy street corner during the week. Or perhaps while reclining on a dining couch at a restaurant, they would say their table blessing particularly loudly, so that the other diners would hear. And they became puffed up with pride if they heard first- or secondhand that someone noticed how pious and devout they were.

And then there was fasting. When some people were fasting, they would deliberately go around with a sad, gloomy, or somber look on their faces, and they would disfigure or otherwise change the appearance of their faces, so that people could tell they were fasting. They might not wash themselves that day, or they might go around with a more unkempt or disheveled appearance. And they loved it if they passed people who whispered to themselves after passing them, “Did you see him? He must be fasting,” especially since it was commonly held that a person could help to avert God’s wrath over his people by fasting on their behalf.

Certainly, even though we are many centuries removed from the original context in which Jesus spoke these words, we can relate to them. When we give to others in need, don’t we want to be noticed? Are we as likely to give to needy people who can’t or won’t repay us when no one else is around? Isn’t the same thing often true of our praying? Ask yourself this: How often do you pray by yourself compared to the times you pray with others around you? Are there times when you only remembered to say a prayer before your meal because your pastor was visiting? As for fasting, I’m sure that one of the reasons this text was selected for Ash Wednesday is because there are many people who fast during Lent. They might fast by actually abstaining from food, whether throughout all of Lent or on certain days of the week during Lent, or they might fast metaphorically by giving up something they love for Lent. If you were to give something up for Lent, would you be able to do that without having anyone find out about it or notice it?

And to get back to Jesus’s more general statement, how and why do you do your righteous works? Another pastor once shared a story that one of his members shared with him. If I am recalling correctly, he had gone through the self-checkout line and the machine had

accidentally given him too much change. There was a slot for change in the machine he could have simply put his extra change into. But he couldn't bring himself to do that. He went and stood in one of the lines with a cashier. "Pastor," he confessed to his pastor later, after he realized what was going on in his heart, "I needed someone to know that I was returning the extra change."

This kind of self-presentation is on display and is encouraged all around us, and we are by no means immune to it. You can't just vote; you have to get a sticker that trumpets to everyone that you voted. You can't just shovel your neighbor's sidewalk for him; you need to ring the doorbell and tell him, or it needs to be your next Facebook status update.

But Jesus says about all these people that they have already received their full reward. That is, the direct or overheard compliments they get, the Likes and comments they get on their status updates, are *all* they are going to get. They don't have anything coming from God except punishment, if that is their only self-presentation.

## **2. Proper Self-Presentation Has a View Toward God Alone**

But what is the alternative? Is there another form of self-presentation?

Absolutely. Jesus tells us that proper self-presentation has a view toward God alone. About acts of mercy, Jesus says, "Instead, when you perform acts of mercy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." That is, it should be merely second nature, like an instinct, like when you start scratching your arm or your head without even realizing it. "Then your acts of mercy will be in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Jesus is not saying that we cannot give if others are around, but whether or not they are around should be merely incidental to our giving.

About prayer, Jesus says, "But whenever you pray, go into your private room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what others cannot see, will reward you." Jesus is not saying that we cannot pray around or with others, but whether or not people are watching us and paying attention to us should be incidental. To the extent that our praying out loud in church benefits and encourages others, because it reinforces their faith in God's promises about prayer and it reinforces for them that they are not alone in their faith, wonderful. But we should not care whether or not they are thinking anything about us when we are praying. We should only care that we are speaking to God and he is listening.

About fasting Jesus says, "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that it is not apparent to people that you are fasting, but only to your Father who sees what is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Jesus is not saying that no one had better find out that you're giving up anything for Lent, but whether or not anyone does should have nothing to do with it.

A good employee is the one who works just as hard even when no one is looking and they're not being recorded by any camera. In the same way, proper self-presentation is presenting ourselves only to God in all we say and do, and it does not care about who is watching or listening.

But how do we make proper self-presentation second nature, an instinct that comes naturally? Jesus tells us, "Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven,

where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” When we present ourselves with a view to people, we are betraying the heart of our sinful nature, which only treasures things that are below, things that are temporary and fleeting. So direct your new person once again to the One who performed the greatest act of mercy, paying for our self-centeredness and all our sin and saving us eternally, not with a view to our praise as such. After all, he doesn’t even receive any praise from many of the people to whom he has shown this great mercy. He did it simply because it was the right thing to do and it was best for us. He did it for his heavenly Father. Direct your new person once again to the One who got up while it was still dark in order to go off by himself and pray for us. Direct your new person once again to the One who fasted from eternal glory and power not just for forty days, but for his entire life leading up to his resurrection, in order to glorify his Father and so that we might have heavenly treasures that can never perish, spoil, or fade. Direct your new person once again to the One who can see even what is done in secret and who graciously promises to reward that which we owe him anyway.

If the treasures Jesus has stored up for you in heaven are your true treasures, then your heart will be with those treasures also. And when your heart is with those treasures, what you do and say will flow from that heart, and the responses and opinions of humans to what you are doing and saying will not matter.

Maybe tonight or tomorrow morning would be an opportunity to go back over your Facebook and other social media profiles and to ask yourself, “How much of this do I have on here with a view to people? How much of this do I have on here with a view toward God and his glory?” Maybe it’d be a good opportunity to go back over a lot of things—your wardrobe, your routine, your obituary, if you’ve already started to work on that. Yes, this gives us an opportunity to think about and reflect on every minute of our lives and to pray, not just here, but also at home, in our room, by ourselves, “Lord Jesus, forgive me all my improper, self-centered, earthly-minded self-presentation. Help me to present myself in my thoughts, words, and actions always and only to you, my loving Savior. Amen.”