

March 25, 2012
 First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Matthew 6:1-18

Title: “**Authentic Spirituality**: Attending to Sub-terrain Movements of the Heart”
 (Series: Following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount)

Since early January we have been following Jesus of Nazareth into His wonderfully and radically transforming Sermon on the Mount. Have you noticed that with each new section of the Sermon He is taking us deeper and deeper? Have you noticed that with each new section of the Sermon our world is getting bigger and bigger? That is how it is with Jesus: the deeper we go with Him, the more expansive our sense of the larger reality in which He calls us to live.

He is taking us deeper and deeper into the Kingdom of heaven which He is bringing upon the earth. He is taking us deeper and deeper into His understanding of, and relationship with, the One He calls Father. He is taking us deeper and deeper into a world shaped by the real presence of the Father. And He is taking us deeper and deeper into His understanding of what it means to be human in a world filled with the presence of the Father. “Beware,” He says in the section we just read. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (6:1).

Up to this point in His Sermon, Jesus has been speaking about “righteousness”. It is the major burden of the whole sermon.. I have been emphasizing that it is a relational term; “righteousness” is all about relationship, right-relationship, right-related-ness.

Up to this point Jesus has been spelling out what the “righteousness” of the kingdom of heaven looks like in the everyday, earthly situations in which He calls us to follow Him. He has promised us that one day we are going to live this righteousness wholly, completely, perfectly. “You are going to be perfect as your Father is perfect”.

And now, “beware.” “Beware of practicing your righteousness, your right-relationships, your right-related-ness in order to be seen by others; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” Jesus is taking us deeper into our own hearts, into the subterranean movements of our hearts. And, in the process, taking us deeper into His more expansive understanding of the world.

As we will see as we keep following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount, the section we read today, Matthew 6:1-18, is tightly connected to the next section, Matthew 6:19-34, where Jesus will speak to us about anxiety, one of the dominant marks of our time.

Dallas Willard draws the connection for us: [*The Divine Conspiracy*, 188]

“Having shown us [in the previous sections of the Sermon] true well-being and the goodness of the kingdom heart, Jesus now, in Matthew 6, alerts us to the two main things that will block or hinder a life constantly interactive with God and healthy growth in the kingdom. These are the desire to have the approval of others, especially for being devout, and the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth.”

If we are not careful, if we are not attentive, these two desires will, says Willard, “pull us out of the sway of the kingdom”. So, “Beware,” says Jesus. “Be on guard,” is another way to render His exhortation.” “Be on guard against the tendency to practice your righteousness before others to get their applause; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”

“Father.” There simply is no way to rightly understand Jesus of Nazareth apart from His constant reference to and focus on “Father.” In the text before us He uses the word nine times! One “Our Father,” in the prayer He teaches us to pray. And eight times “your Father”. Jesus’ whole life and ministry is driven by His relationship with “Father.” At the beginning, at the age of 12: “Did you not know that I had to be about My Father’s business?” In the middle, time and time again slipping away to be with “Father.” Saying, again and again, “I only say what I hear My Father say, I only do what I see My Father do.” And on the cross, “Father, forgive them.” “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” Jesus lives for, and with, and in, “Father.”

In this section of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wants us to realize we will finally understand the world in which we live and move when we, like He, recognize the presence of His Father, who, because of Jesus, has become our Father. To put it differently, the Preacher on the Mount wants us to live in His “sense of the universe.” He wants us to consciously live in a world where “Father” is, well, everywhere! Jesus tells us that “Father” **knows** ... everything. “Father” **sees** ... everything. “Father” **hears** ... everything. And “Father” **rewards**.

I am aware that for many people Jesus’ constant reference to, and focus on, “Father” is uncomfortable. For many women, it can feel too patriarchal. It can feel there is no room to be truly feminine. For many people there is simply too much pain around their own fathers: absenteeism, neglect, hyper-demand. For some: abuse, horrible abuse, physical and emotional. So, many find Jesus’ Father-orientation uncomfortable.

I think Jesus responds to understanding this discomfort by saying, “I understand”, by saying, “If you let me, I can heal the pain.” And by saying, “I know a different kind of Father, and if you will follow Me, I will show you just how good He is.” He does this especially in His parable of the Prodigal Sons (Luke 15); parables through which Jesus brings me much healing, and frees me to embrace His embrace of His Father. Jesus wants us to know this different kind of Father.

And He wants us, like Him, to experience a “Father-full” universe. Therefore, “Beware”, not “beware of the Father”, but “beware that you not miss out on what the Father has for you.” “Beware of living out the new right-related-ness of the kingdom of heaven to be seen by others. Otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” Jesus’ concern is authentic spirituality, authentic interaction with the Living God.

So He calls us to attend to the deep movements of our hearts, to the subterranean movements of our hearts. He calls us to pay attention to how we practice the so-called “spiritual disciplines”, in particular, the three spiritual disciplines common to most religions: almsgiving (or charity), prayer, and fasting. Jesus brings us these three because

these disciplines especially enable us to stay attentive to “Father,” and us to participate in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Notice that Jesus, therefore, does not say, “If you give alms, if you pray, if you fast”, but “when you give alms, when you pray, when you fast”. He assumes that those who follow Him, who seek to live in the Kingdom of God, will want to be generous to others, will want to pray, and will want to fast. When you give, when you pray, when you fast, be on guard not to do these acts of righteousness before other people to be noticed by them. Otherwise you have no reward with your Father.

Now this exhortation seems to contradict Jesus’ words early in His Sermon. Matthew 5:16 - “Let your light shine before others ...” Remember? “You are the light of the world ... Let your light shine before others ...” Is this in conflict with what He is now saying to us in Matthew 6? In Matthew 5 Jesus seems to call us to visible discipleship. In Matthew 6 He seems to call us to invisible discipleship. But the two are not in conflict. In Matthew 5 the motive for visibility is bringing glory to God: “Let your light shine ... that others may glorify your Father who is in heaven.” In Matthew 6 the motive for visibility is bringing glory to ourselves. In Matthew 5 the motive is to display how good God is. In Matthew 6 the motive is to display how good we are. I like how the 19th century NT scholar A.B. Bruce put it: we are to “show when tempted to hide” and “hide when tempted to show.” Show when tempted to hide God’s righteousness. Hide when tempted to show our righteousness. In Matthew 6 Jesus is protecting the spiritual disciplines, and, therefore, our relationship with the Living God.

The acts of giving, praying, and fasting deepen our relationship with “Father.” Yes, people might notice disciples of Jesus giving, praying, or fasting. And they might be touched in some way. If so, it is a “side-effect.”

In Matthew 6 Jesus is not saying, “no one is ever to know.” Robert Guelich put it: “The issue is not public worship, but worship for publicity.” [*Sermon on the Mount*, 301]

The issue is motive. Why do we put money in the offering plate? For whose ears do we speak our prayers? For whose eyes do we do acts of devotions? For whose glory do I work so hard on my sermons? Charles Talbert makes the point most clearly: the aim of Matthew 6 “is not the privatization of piety but the purification of motive” in relating to God. [*Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 108]

“Stay on guard,” says the Master. “Do not do your acts of righteousness before others to be seen by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father.”

As Jesus takes us deeper and deeper, He causes our sense of the world to get bigger and bigger. In this section of His Sermon Jesus is helping understand the “real world” is which we live and move.

1. He is first of all helping us to realize we are all actors. We are all actors in a grand drama. To make this point, Jesus uses words from the world of acting. The verb in verse 1 of the text, “in order to be seen,” is *theothēnai*, from which we get the word “theatre”; it means, “performing for an audience.” The noun “hypocrite,” which Jesus uses three times in the text, is *hpokrites*, referring to an actor who puts on a mask and plays the part of someone else. We are all actors in a grand drama. The question is, are

we playing ourselves or someone else? C.S. Lewis pleads with God: “May it be the real I who prays, and may it be the real You to whom I pray.”

2. Jesus is further helping us to realize we are always acting before an ever-present live audience. We are always and everywhere being seen. Three times Jesus says: “Your Father who sees what is done in secret” (4,6,18). As the writer of Hebrews puts it: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of the One to Whom we must give an account” (4:13). “O Lord, You have searched me and known me,” prays the Psalmist (Psalm 139):

“You know when I sit and when I rise;
You perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern by going out and my lying down;
You are familiar with all my ways.”

There are no secrets. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ knows everything, everyone, every thought we think, every word we speak, every move we make. “Father” knows the content of every “top secret” file. “Father” knows the whereabouts and movements of every “undercover” agent. “Father” knows where every drug smuggler or terrorist think they are hiding. “Father” hears every cry of every broken heart. “Father” sees every tear that falls. How do you react today to what Jesus is revealing to us? The philosopher Frederick Neitiche was repulsed by it. Many find it too much to endure and find ways to ignore it. Am I right when I say that all of us at some time or other try to hide from the ever-present, all-knowing God? Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we sense the presence of the Wind, the Spirit, and scurry under the bushes. Some of us hide beneath noise: we keep the radio or TV on, or keep plugged into the cell-phone or iPad, to drown out the gentle, but haunting call of God. Some of us hide beneath busyness: we keep going from one thing to the next, ignoring the footsteps in dogged pursuit of us. Some of us hide beneath chemicals, or relationships, or rationality, or cynicism. Some of us even try to hide beneath religion: the most sophisticated of all hiding places for we do it in the name of God! We create a god in our own image: a god who expects little of us, who lets us alone to live the way we want to live.

But none of these “hiding places” work. For one thing, we were made by God, for God. And God will not give up. God seeks us out. As God did Adam and Eve, calling, “Where are you?” For another, it is simply impossible to hide. Apparently the Psalmist tried to, and learned it could not be done. Psalm 139 again: “Where ...? Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your Face? If I go up to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in the depths, look! You are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there Your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘surely the darkness will hide me and the light become as night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to You, for darkness is as light to You” (7-12). God even sees in the darkness!

We are always acting in a grand drama. We are always acting before a “live audience.”

3. And Jesus is helping us to realize we all want to be seen! Not, of course, by the lustful look, the dehumanizing look, but by the look of love. Which is why it is so tempting to

give, pray, and fact to be seen. We all long for attention. We all long to be admired, even the introverts, even the shy. We want to be noticed. Right?

Are we not all like Shreck? “Pick me, pick me, pick me!” Is this desire to be seen wrong? No. It gets twisted, but it is not wrong. I like what Dale Bruner says. “We are made to want notice. One of the most characteristic remarks of the child is ‘watch me’. The child’s verbal ‘watch me’ becomes the adult’s more unspoken (but just a deep) ‘watch me’. This drive to be noticed is not only the result of sin, it is part of the image of God. We were made to notice and by noticed by God, in imag(e)-ine and image his pleasure.” [*The Christbook*, 229]

In His Sermon, Jesus is redirecting our desire to be noticed, in effect, saying: “Focus your deep desire to be noticed in the right direction: toward your Father. And your Father will notice. He will see, He will hear, He will reward.” We are all actors in a grand drama, always acting before a real audience. We all want to be seen.

4. And Jesus is helping us realize we have to choose. Before whom will I act? For whose acclaim will I perform, whose admiration and affirmation will I seek? You realize, do you not, that we can do the spiritual disciplines to be seen by ourselves? I often shared this with my students when I taught at Regent College. We can do the disciplines to be noticed by ourselves. It is awful. I will get up early in the morning to spend time alone with God. At first I am aware of His presence, of the Divine audience. But before long, I become my own audience! I pray best at the end of a pen; I write out my prayers in a journal. Sometimes as I write ... to the Lord ... I realize I am no longer writing to communicate with Him, but for my own applause: “Wow, that is a really fine prayer. Notice how poetic it is. Notice the nice rhythm to it. One day this could be published.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this: “I can lay on a very nice show for myself even in the privacy of my own room. The publicity which I am looking for is then provided by the fact that I am the one who at the same time prays and looks on. We take note that we have prayed suitably well, and this substitutes for the satisfaction of answered prayer.”

[*Cost of Discipleship*, 182]

We are all acting in a grand drama before a real, live audience. We all want to be seen. We have to choose – for whom are we acting.

5. And Jesus is helping us realize that we get the reward we seek. Three times in the text Jesus says, “they have their reward in full” (2,5,16). The “hypocrites,” says Jesus, announce their act of charity in order to be seen by others. “I tell you the truth, they have their reward in full” (6:2). The “hypocrites,” says Jesus, pray standing in the sanctuary and on the street corners in order to be seen by others. “I tell you the truth, they have their reward in full” (6:5). The “hypocrites,” says Jesus, disfigure their faces when they fast in order to be seen by others. “I tell you the truth, they have their reward in full” (6:16). The word Jesus uses – “reward in full” – is a technical term (*apechein*) from the business and banking world. It means receiving the full payment, “payment in full” (William Barclay, 186).

If I give to demonstrate how generous I am, or to show people by how much I care, I get what I seek. People applaud. But that is it: “payment in full”. If I pray to demonstrate my theological and spiritual depth and insight, people will take notice; “My, what a prayer.” But that is it: “payment in full” – people were impressed. If I fast to demonstrate how self-disciplined and sacrificial I can be, people will take notice. But that is it. “Payment in full” – people were impressed. But, says Jesus:

- if we give simply because we know this is what God wants us to do and because it pleases God,
- if we pray simply because we want to know God’s heart and mind and because there is no one else to turn to but God,
- if we fast because we want to deny ourselves or to be more available to God, the One Who is unseen sees. And rewards us. The Father rewards us?

Rewards us: many are embarrassed by this idea. Many think that authentic spirituality ought to move beyond the consideration of reward. But Jesus does not think so. He often speaks of reward. As William Barclay once remarked: “We ought to be careful that we do not try to be more spiritual than Jesus in our thinking about this matter” (180).

So what is the reward? Listen carefully. Matthew 6:1 – “reward **from** your Father.” Other translations have it – “reward **with** your Father.” Which is it – ‘from’ or ‘with’? Two very different things. It is with. (For you Greek students, it is *para* with the dative; which means, “near, with, by the side of.” Para-legal; para-plete.) The reward of exercising the spiritual disciplines in order to relate to the Father is to be WITH the Father! To be drawn to His side, to be in His company, to enjoy His presence. What greater reward is there? What could we possibly get **from** God that would surpass being **with** God? So Jesus warns us: “beware,” “stay on guard,” “be vigilant.” When you give, do not announce it to anyone, not even to yourself. “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (6:2). Just give. As many have said, this “sounds the death-knell of the old humanity.” [So Bonhoeffer, 178]

It crucifies the old ego-centricity. Just give. Do not keep a record? What about our tax forms? I doubt many of us are trying to impress the tax agency with our piety. As I said when I preached on Malachi 3, I know if the day comes when contributions to the church or charity are no longer tax-deductible, the church will not suffer. For one thing, gifts that truly bless ministry are freely given. For another, the Lord loves to multiply gifts freely given. And for another, unrecorded giving will enrich the giver, and we will be freed to give even more. Just give, says Jesus. And your Father who sees ... will notice ... and will reward you. And when you pray, says Jesus, do not stand in the sanctuary or in the marketplace, calling others attention.

Go into your closet, for the great value of the closet is that it shuts out watching eyes. Just pray. Focus on the Unseen One who is there. And you do not need many words, says Jesus. Many words make us too self-conscious. More to the point, many words do nothing for God. “Father” knows what we need before we ask. “Father” does not need to be informed. “Father” does not need to be convinced of the urgency of the need. Just ask, like a child. If you are uncertain about what is appropriate to ask, “here is a prayer for you,” says Jesus. Here is prayer that actually reveals your true needs.

“Our Father in heaven, on the throne of the universe.
Hallow Your name on earth as it is in heaven.
Bring Your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.
Cause Your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Cancel our debts as we cancel the debts of others.
And when You lead us to the test, do not let the test become a temptation,
but rescue us from the evil-one.
For Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever. Amen.”

Just ask. And the Father who knows, and sees, will hear. And when you fast, do not look somber or gloomy. Do as you normally do: wash your face, brush your hair, be your everyday self. Just fast, just follow your resolve to deny yourself for a season, making yourself more available to God. And the Father who sees secret things, will notice. And will meet you. And will fill you with the Bread of Life, and quench you with the Living Water. Jesus comes on so strong about these acts of righteousness; Jesus comes on so strong about the movements of our hearts because He wants us, like Him, to be alive in a “Father-full” universe.