

# Fast, Pray, Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] It may have been my marketing professor back in varsity who once said that we're all in the business of sales. Now you may not be selling cars or insurance policies, but in some way we are all selling ourselves.

You're wanting to convince those around you every day that you're valuable in some way, that you're fun, that you're reliable, that you're intelligent.

And fair enough, we all want people to think that about ourselves. And it might not be conscious, but even subconsciously we want people to think well of us. And so we show our good side to people by nature.

We promote our good points to those around us. And that's such an ingrained instinct that we often don't even realize we're doing it, that even the ways we practice our faith can become exercises in self-promotion, which is precisely what Jesus now points to and takes time in the Sermon on the Mount to warn us against and to show us just how pointless and yet how common it is to practice our faith to impress people.

Have a look at verse 1 of chapter 6, how he starts. He says, Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

[ 1 : 38 ] Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven. And so that's what Jesus wants to teach us in this section. How to be careful.

How to be careful not to take this instinct of self-promotion and let it seep over into how we are Christians. And so he teaches us that by looking at three important religious practices in the next section, giving, praying and fasting, and to consider what is really in our heart when we do those things.

And so let's look at what he says. Firstly, giving. Have a look at verse 2. So whenever you give to the poor, don't sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be applauded by people.

Truly, I tell you, they have their reward. Okay, so Jesus paints quite a kind of grotesque picture that we really rail against.

Someone who hires trumpeters to follow them around when they do good deeds and trumpet it. Do, do, do. Look at what he's doing, everyone. That's the picture Jesus is painting.

[ 2 : 56 ] To make sure everyone knows the good things that I'm doing. Now, of course, most of us would never consider doing that. You know, hiring someone to follow us around, saying, hey, look, everyone, he's giving money.

Or, hey, look what he's doing. We wouldn't do that. That's not culturally appropriate. And yet, aren't there subtle ways we still blow our trumpets to those around us when we do good things?

Maybe not as obvious as that, but do we maybe not make sure people notice? Or just bring it into conversation when we do good things?

Walking our dog. Oh, he's a lovely dog. Yes, he's a rescue. Yes. I have seven of them at home. How many do you have?

You know? Or, oh, sorry, I can't come to your party on Saturday. I volunteer at the shelter. And then when you're there, kind of, look at me.

[ 3 : 59 ] Hashtag love charity work, you know. We don't have trumpets, but we have social media, which is often the same thing, isn't it? And so we're just as prone to it, if we're honest.

We're just as prone to wanting people to notice our good works. And so Jesus says this. Have a look at verse 3. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

Secret. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Jesus is using, as he loves to do, a very extreme metaphor, to just say, make it as unnoticeable as possible, so much so that part of you doesn't even know that you're doing it, let alone anyone else.

Now, it seems extreme, this level of secrecy Jesus is calling for. And he's not saying, you know, never make known to other people when you're doing things.

Maybe it'll encourage them. He's not saying that. But I think what he's getting at is that the only sure way to know that you're doing good things for the right reason, that you're not doing good things for the wrong reason, is when you do them just as much when no one can see.

[ 5 : 27 ] When you're just as generous when no one knows. That's really the only surefire way of knowing that your motives are right. Because really the only right motive is to do these things for God and not for people.

Do you notice, especially in this section, in the Sermon on the Mount, how Jesus speaks in very relational language? He uses the word Father a lot. I mean, if you count it up, you go through, especially chapter 6, and count up the times that Jesus says, Father, it's an incredible amount. Look at just the end of verse 4 here. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. And that's the context that Jesus is calling us to think about the good things we do.

Is it in the context of our relationship with our Father, God? Because the truth is, it's only when we have that relationship, when we have this real relationship with God, that the good we do, that flows out of real relationship with Him, will be genuine.

And it's only in that kind of relationship with God, when we're doing things in the context of that real relationship, that we will be able to be generous without needing to be noticed by anyone.

[ 6 : 58 ] And those are the only kinds of good works that God recognizes and rewards, Jesus says here. The ones that flow out of real relationship with Him.

He talks about reward a lot. In this passage as well. Your Father who sees you in secret will reward you. Now a lot of people wonder, what does He mean by that?

What does He mean by the Father will reward us if we do these good works for the right reason?

Well it could mean the present benefits of giving for the right reasons, with the right motives, or serving with the right motives.

And there are benefits to those things that we immediately receive if we're doing them for the right reasons. So if you give for the right reasons out of relationship with God, for example, and you give your money or your time or your resources trusting that your Heavenly Father is really your provider and you are not your own provider, which is what the discipline of giving is partly about, then you receive, and any of us who do give to God realize this when we give out of relationship with Him, you receive a peace, you receive a freedom from financial worry, you receive this liberation from being a slave to having to hold your money tight to you, but you realize you can give it up and you don't need it as much as you thought, as much as the world tells you, because you have a Heavenly Father who can provide for you.

And so when you give out of real relationship with God, there's great benefits that you receive. I mean, freedom from worry of money is one of the best benefits we can have in this life, but it only comes through giving for the right reasons from this relationship we have.

[ 9 : 05 ] And so it could mean the rewards could just mean those things, those peace and contentment that comes from doing these things the right way.

But it could also mean when Jesus talks about our Heavenly Father rewarding us, He could be referring to the reward of life itself in the future, eternal life. In other words, what He could well be saying here is that those not doing these things for the right reasons won't just get less Heavenly treasure, they'll get nothing.

Their only reward will be in this life. Because they're not saved at all. Jesus actually calls them hypocrites. That's another word that appears frequently in this passage.

Hypocrites. We see that in verse 2. So whenever you give to the poor, don't sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do. Now that's a very interesting word. I wonder if you know where it comes from.

It's actually, the Greek is literally that word. It's directly from the Greek. The original word is hypokrites. and it literally means a stage actor.

[ 10 : 18 ] It's what they would describe their actors on stage in the ancient world. They didn't have obviously TVs but they still had actors just as we do. They still had entertainment and they would go to the amphitheater and they would watch actors with the masks on and they would pretend to be

someone else just like our modern Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts do.

Spoiler alert, they're not those people. They're different people. They're acting those roles if you didn't know. I think we get that and they knew that too. They had actors who acted different roles and they were called hypocrites.

People who played a role that wasn't real. Actors. That's who Jesus is talking about here. Often, you know, Jesus uses that word in the Bible more than anyone else.

He speaks a lot about hypocrites. actors. Actors. Because it's so common. Even today.

There are many actors in church today. People who are coming and playing a role which isn't true of them in reality.

[ 11 : 35 ] And so I guess I've got to ask you at this point, are you coming to church church just to play a role to the people around you? To your wife, perhaps, who wants you to come?

To your children, who you want to be a good example to? Maybe you're just coming to act for them. Are you coming to play a role that's not real? I think that's what Jesus is challenging us to think here.

Well, one way to answer that is by looking at your prayer life, which is the next topic that Jesus wants to talk about, prayer. Have a look at verse 5.

Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people.

Truly, I tell you, they have their reward. And so again, he's talking about people who were very showy in their religious practices.

[ 12 : 45 ] And they were here taking something as special and intimate as prayer with God and using it as an opportunity to impress people.

Now, imagine how God feels when people do that. How would you feel? How would you feel if after the service, right, we go and we have some cake and tea and I'm having a conversation with you but it soon becomes obvious to you that I'm speaking a bit louder than I should because I'm actually just interested in what the people around me overhear.

I'm actually not talking to you at all. I'm talking in such a way that they'll hear how clever I am in what I'm saying to you. I mean, how would you feel? That would be an insult.

And yet, how often do we do that when we pray? We can so easily do that. Pray, not directly to God but actually pray more thinking about how do the people around me hear?

how do I come across to them when I'm praying? We can, even in church, you know, we can use the gift of prayer to show off our theology or to show off how pious we are to the people around us.

[ 14 : 08 ] It's, you know, Jesus raises these particular things because he knows these are our tendencies. And so, he says, verse 6, but when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your father who is in secret.

And your father who sees in secret will reward you. Now, back then, they didn't actually have separate rooms in their homes like we do.

So, privacy was in very short supply in the ancient world. they would normally live in a sort of large roomed house. And the word Jesus uses for private room here is actually the word that was used for the home storeroom.

It would sometimes be kind of a cellar. And it was typically the only room with a locked door in an ancient household. house. And so, Jesus is saying, go to that one room that locks and lock yourself in when you pray.

Why is he saying that? To go to your private room to close the door and pray? Some people think, well, it's so that we don't get distracted when we pray, and that's a very good thing.

[ 15 : 33 ] Make sure that when you pray, you're in a place that isn't distracting. But that's not what Jesus is getting at here. He's saying, do it not to be seen. He's saying, don't be like the people who like to be seen, but go to the greatest lengths you can to do it in secret, to not be seen.

Now, why is that? Why is he saying that? Well, he's not saying that it's wrong to pray publicly. He teaches us to later on, and he himself prays publicly later on.

He teaches us to pray together out loud. There's nothing wrong with that. That's not what he's speaking against here. He's speaking against this showy type of prayer with wrong motives.

And he's saying that it's only when no one else is around that you can tell what your real relationship with God is actually like.

Because you can pray here, and that's great. You can look very very pious, very close to God. When you pray in front of your children, you can look very committed, committed father.

[16:45] When you pray in front of your wife, you can look like a very Christian husband. But it's when you pray by yourself that your real relationship with God will be seen.

That's what Jesus is saying here. Private prayer is the main indicator of the reality of your relationship with God. And so how are your private prayers?

How is your prayer life when no one else is around? Do you love the secret place of prayer? prayer? Because if not much is happening in private, then whatever you do here is a sham.

Now, it's easy to feel guilty when it comes to the topic of prayer. I know. It's not to say that we don't struggle to pray. Jesus actually recognizes we do.

And he knows it's not easy to pray. There's many forces in the world that are arrayed against us that will make it hard to pray. And that is why Jesus goes on in the next few verses to give us some amazing advice on how to pray better.

[18:06] The best advice you can find in the Bible on how to pray better. And it's so important these next few verses that he teaches about prayer that I'm going to leave it until next week.

We're going to devote a whole sermon just to the Lord's prayer and to look at what Jesus is teaching us on how to pray better here. So come back for that. But before we finish today we must look at the last example of the Christian practice that Jesus gives us.

That's from verse 16. Fasting. Let me read from verse 16. He says whenever you fast don't be gloomy like the hypocrites for they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people.

Truly I tell you they have their reward. But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting isn't obvious to others but to your father who is in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you.

Fasting is a voluntary ceasing of eating for a time a set time that you decide. There's no rules really about it but it is done as an act of worship to God that he is more important than food at this time.

[19:39] It's a way of showing him that he is the thing that we're hungry for more than anything else. It's an opportunity to exercise self control which is a spiritual discipline and it's a remembrance that we are not home yet.

We're not feasting yet. It's a healthy spiritual discipline which Jesus actually encourages his disciples to continue to do until his return. you may be unfamiliar with the practice.

Maybe you haven't come across many Christians who you know do it or who talk about it but that's probably because they're obeying what Jesus says here and doing it in secret without anyone knowing.

But he also warns us that even that can easily become another way to show off. look at what he says again in verse 16 so that their fasting will be obvious to people.

Before that they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting will be obvious to people. The original is interesting he says literally they hide so that everyone can see.

[20:55] As opposed to what he says you should do and be discreet. If you're fasting put oil on your head and wash your face so that it's not obvious what's happening. What you're doing.

But what the people are doing here hiding so that everyone can see is that they're going around and saying oh look how much I'm suffering for God. Look how devoted I am. It's so hard.

And that's just another example of false piety. But again aren't we prone to that?

Aren't we just as prone to wanting people to see how devoted we are? How much we suffer for the Lord? You know not once but more than once have people even in this church come to me because they're grumpy that no one thanks them for what they do.

And you know that's just a sign that they're not doing it for God but they're doing it for people. Or what about attending church events or coming to church on a Sunday or attending the men's convention on Saturday?

[22:12] Guys, when you go to things like that, when you go to conventions, church things, church events, why are you going? Think about it. Are you going because people expect you to be there?

Are you going so you can show, oh look, I'm here. Sometimes in my years of being a pastor, there have been people who very blatantly come to me on Sunday morning, hi pastor, just look, I'm here, I'm at church, just like you said I should be.

And it's quite obvious that they're doing that to show me that they're there. And I think there's that in all of us. We can go to these things that are on, we can go to church because we want to show people that we're there.

We want to show people that we're sacrificing our Saturday for God. But actually it's not for him, is it?

we're doing it for them. And if that's the reason, if it's for people, not for God, that we come to church, or go to men's conventions, or whatever it is, then you'll get what you come for, Jesus says.

[ 23 : 35 ] People will notice you're there, good for you, you'll get that. But that's all you'll get. and that's what he's saying about all of this.

And he repeats that phrase. They'll have their reward when you do these things to be seen, when you pray, when you give, when you fast, to be seen.

You'll get what you want, but that's all you'll get. And so in all of this, what Jesus wants us to consider when we do the things we do as Christians, is he wants us to consider what's in our heart when we do it.

And if you're just going through the motions here at church, to be seen, because it's expected of you, but it's not out of a real vibrant living relationship with your God that brings you here, well then you've already got your reward.

But don't think that this is earning you eternal life, because it's not. But you know that's what most religion in the world actually is.

[ 24 : 48 ] Jesus later on in Matthew says even the most committed Jewish religious people were hypocrites, and they were the religion that was closest to God of all of them, and yet even they, Jesus says, you're just acting.

You're just going through the motions. The reason is because they didn't have this real relationship with God as their father that Jesus talks about.

But that is exactly what he came to bring. See, that's why he came. That's why he died. And it's why he rose again. To give us a father.

That's what he did it for. To give us a father. So that your father who sees in secret will reward you. Jesus went through all of that and he sacrificed his life and he suffered because he wanted you to experience his relationship with his father that he has had from eternity past.

[ 26 : 01 ] He came to this earth and did all of that so that you can be brought into that relationship. the ultimate father that even the best fathers on earth if they did their job have only ever been pointing towards.

The greatest relationship you could ever know. The relationship you were made for. In which you realize you don't need to earn his love through religious devotion but you want to be devoted to him because he already loves you and he's shown that love in Christ.

And that is the only kind of devotion that counts. A devotion that flows from a real relationship with the father. That is true Christianity.

I hope that is your Christianity. Let's pray. Lord Father we come to you and we pray to you not to impress the people around us but because we know you hear us and you have made this way open to you for us to enter into the greatest relationship that we could ever know.

And Lord we pray that as we've learned today that our devotion our religious practices what we do as Christians would only ever flow out of that relationship that Jesus died so that we can have.

[ 27 : 59 ] Lord help us not to have wrong motives but to joyfully do the things you call us to because we have a true and real joy of knowing you as our Father.

And may you be glorified through that in Jesus name. Amen.