

“Practicing Your Piety”

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-4

“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them for then you will have no reward from your father who is in heaven.”

When we read the Bible today we nearly always miss the inflammatory and controversial impact of what Jesus said. What Jesus taught made men and women angry. You don't crucify a man for healing people and going around saying things that make everybody feel warm and comfortable and happy. No, Jesus said and did things that made men and women hate him. They came to him so much that they went so far as to crucify him. And who were the men who were most responsible for his cruel death? They weren't the prostitutes and thieves or the lower classes. The religious people were most responsible for crucifying Jesus.

History seems to bear out the fact that of all people religious people are capable of the most cruel kind of hatred. Many religious people tend to be very touchy. They are easily offended and demand to be placated often. If they are forgotten or passed over or not recognized in some way they can become very hateful.

Religious people are the ones who are most likely to initiate morality campaigns. They enjoy getting up petitions to stamp out such things as pornography. But pornography is a safe thing to be against. No one really thinks it's a good thing. Most store owners really wish it weren't so much in demand and so profitable. Even the people who buy and read it often suffer guilt feelings and unhappiness and would be glad to have it banned just so it wouldn't be such a temptation. So it's a safe thing to attack pornography.

The same thing is true about homosexual behavior. Many people are against this kind of thing and think is wrong and bad. But I think that most people are against it, not because the Bible calls it a sin, but because it's still considered a perversion by many. I wouldn't be surprised at all if within 20 or 30 years or sooner the general consensus of opinion has changed so that most people will longer feel this is a perversion. When that happens how many church members will continue to believe it's a sin merely because the Bible say so. After all didn't you know that the Bible also calls usury a sin and more often than homosexual behavior. But our whole economy

is based on this. Public opinion favors it. So most church members feel it is a good thing despite what the Bible says.

So you see it's safe for religious people to campaign against sin when public opinion is behind you. You get people together and draw up a petition. You send it to the paper and it's published. You get your name in the paper as someone who has taken stand for righteousness. Most people will congratulate you for your strong stand. A few people will get angry and call you names and make threatening phone calls but these kinds of people are in the minority. And besides, their opposition just increases your popularity. They make you look like a martyr. You can even become a national celebrity. You are rewarded with this reputation for being a fine upstanding, righteous person. But it's really a safe thing to be against a sin when you have public opinion behind you.

Now if Jesus had been that kind of person he would have died of old age and his life would have been crowned with honor and glory. But he did nothing of the sort. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus exposes sin, but not the safe sins which everyone is against. The scribes and the Pharisees attacked the sin of murder. Not that's a safe thing to attack. Nobody is in favor of murder. But Jesus exposed the religious people for their self-righteous anger which eventually led to the murder of the one good man who ever lived. The scribes and Pharisees attacked adultery. Now everybody is against adultery, even most of the people who commit it. This is a safe sin to attack. But Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their dirty minds that literally made them snoop around and ferret out people like the woman taken in adultery.

Now in the sixth chapter of Matthew Jesus begins to expose the piety of religious people for what it really is. He shows what it really amounts to. And what he said would make a religious person angry, because here he condemns the religious person for the very thing he takes so much pride in and the very thing which gives him his reputation for being such a good person. Most people praised the scribes and Pharisees for their generosity. They were the people most able to afford to give to charity because they had the most money. They made the biggest contributions. They kept the charities in the black. Throughout Jerusalem many poor and sick people were

helped by their generous contributions. Now I'm sure that they were sincere in wanting to help others but Jesus exposes the motivation behind their charity.

We get a better idea of just how provocative the words of Jesus were if we paraphrase our Scripture Lesson this way: "When you make your large donations to the United Fund, refuse to have your picture taken for the paper showing you handing the check to the chairman, as the hypocrites do in the Sentinel Newspaper, that they may be praised by men." That's the kind of thing that angers some people.

What's behind this? It's true, the United Fund and other charities want to give public recognition to people or corporations that gave large amounts of money. And I'm sure that most people who get their picture in the paper for this thing aren't doing it for their own glory. They're merely representing a company. But behind it all its good public relations and free advertising. There are college courses on public relations. Every large corporation has well paid P.R. men. Charity is good P.R.

Now when Jesus said this he hit at something that strikes at the very heart of religious people. It's a very subtle thing. Listen to the things we sometimes say about others. "That person contributes next to nothing to the church. What kind of commitment do most of these people have when they pledge so little?" And all the time we are saying to ourselves and to others "my commitment is so much greater than theirs." In a very subtle way we are patting ourselves on our generosity and commitment. And what is this but sound our own trumpet before others?

None of us likes someone who goes around advertising himself or herself. Very few people go around telling others how much they give. We all know that would be in bad taste. There's no reward in that. But there are subtle ways we can indirectly let people know how charitable we are and it amounts to the same thing. We might not blow our own trumpets. That would be in bad taste. It's more effective if we hand our trumpet to someone else.

And of all religious people ministers are probably the worst offenders. Have you ever heard a preacher say, "Praise the Lord. God is really blessing my ministry. He has caused us to grow.

He has given us financial security. He's blessing our Sunday School and worship service. And I just want to give all the glory to God for this." It's such a subtle thing. Our charitable acts and deeds can be very rewarding.

Jesus admitted this when he said of those people, "Truly, I say to you, they have their reward." No the whole question of rewards troubles a lot of people. Some people think that their good works, their prayers, their charitable giving, their church attendance, and all the sacrifices they make are going to earn a reward in heaven. I've known religious people to get angry at the idea that a gross sinner, say a murderer or an alcoholic or an adulterer, may repent on his death bed and still go to heaven. I've heard religious people say, "Well, if that's true, what's the sense of going to church and praying and giving all this money. I might as well go out and enjoy myself and do whatever I feel like doing. I might as well go out and really sin it up if God will let me into heaven on the basis of a death bed conversion.

But the reason these people get angry is because they have done all these religious things for the wrong reasons. They betray themselves with their very words. They have not enjoyed going to church and giving their money and doing their religious good works. IF they really enjoyed doing these things they would continue to do them even if it meant going to hell. If they really enjoyed doing these religious things the idea of going out and sinning would have no appeal for them.

Their problem is that they are keeping track of all their charitable deeds and gifts. So when they run into problems and experience tragedy they bring out their account books in which they have carefully listed all their good works. They look them over and complain to God saying, "Hey, I've gone to church for years, I've pledged a lot of money. I don't swear, I don't drink and I don't smoke. Why, Lord, do I have all these problems? Look at my next door neighbor who is real sinner and you seem to be blessing him so wonderfully." Haven't you heard people saying these things? Haven't you maybe overheard yourself thinking these things? "I'm such a good religious person and all this tragedy and sickness still comes to me. I could have been rewarded just as well if I had done what I really wanted to do."

But that's not the attitude a follower of Christ has. Jesus says, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret." That means don't even keep an account in your mind of all the charitable things you have done. Don't keep referring to your charitable deeds and comparing them with others. Your good deeds and your contributions should be so habitual, so natural, so enjoyable that you don't keep a record of them

I think a good illustration of this can be seen in young children. Say you give your little boy or girl a small serving of asparagus or something they hate. They count the spoonfuls they eat. And when you ask them later how much of their asparagus they ate they can tell you exactly how much. "Five lousy spoonfuls." But when it comes to chocolate chip cookies it's a different story. They never can remember how many they ate. Their left hand doesn't know what their right hand is doing. They lose count. We keep careful count of all the unpleasant things we have to do but forget to count when we are really enjoying ourselves.

Well that's the way we're supposed to be if we know Christ personally and if the Holy Spirit is living in our hearts. The man or woman who knows and loves Christ hates sin. He or she would hate sin even if there was no hope for heaven. Such a person doesn't avoid sin in order to avoid going to hell. He or she hates sin because it breaks off that fellowship with Christ. So the man or woman who really knows and loves Jesus naturally has a tendency to keep track of his or her sins. He keeps track of them because he hates them so. It isn't good to keep track of them but he's like the little boy who counts the number of spoonfuls of asparagus he hates to eat. The man or woman who knows and loves Christ naturally keeps count of his sins.

But if we love Jesus we don't keep a record of all the good things we do. Our left hand doesn't know what our right hand is doing because we are enjoying ourselves. So we make our donation and ask ourselves, "I wonder where all my money went. And we can't remember. We don't have anything to show for it. Where could it have gone? We don't do these charitable things for a reward. We do them because we enjoy doing them. It's like eating chocolate chip cookies. We don't stop to keep count.

We shouldn't keep count of the charitable things we do but God does. He knows what we really enjoy. He knows the things that really give us pleasure. We can fool others. We can even fool

ourselves. But we can't fool Good. He is the one who sees in secret. He sees everything we do and he even sees what we think and he knows what we enjoy doing. He knows if we do all these charitable things to be seen by others, for public relations, or if we do them simply because we love Christ and so enjoy doing them.

Finally, do you remember what Jesus said about the last judgment in Matthew 7? He said, "On that day (all these religious people will come to him and take out their little books in which they have kept a careful record of all the good things they have done and they will say to Jesus, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name...?" They could have gone on and on reading all the good things they had done, producing newspaper clippings for verification. But Jesus stops them. He interrupts them. He says, "I never knew you. Depart from me you evildoers."

And then do you remember the scene of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25? Do you remember what Jesus said to those who knew and loved him in this world? He says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." This time it's Jesus who has the list of all the things those who have loved him have done. This time it is they who interrupt him and say, "Hey, wait a second. Are you sure we are the right people? When did we do all this? I can't seem to remember." They are completely surprised by this revelation.

And Jesus will laugh loudly and clap his hands and say, "I know you can't remember. You were enjoying yourself so much in your almsgiving and all the good things you were doing that you didn't stop to make a record of them. You kept all these good things a secret from others. You even kept them a secret from yourself. But your Father who sees in secret knows all about you. Your Father who sees in secret now rewards you. Come into the feast. "Enter thou the joy of the Lord."

Amen.