

BE UNSEEN TO BE SEEN

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, RSV

I want my badness to be ignored and my goodness to be noticed. Is that so wrong? Isn't it natural to want to put our best foot forward, to wear dark suits with thin vertical stripes if we are overweight or toupees where there is only a cue ball smoothness?

I want to hear people tell me that my sermon was well done, that it was eloquent and moving. I certainly don't want them to tell me that it is obvious I preached off the top of my head and not from inside it.

I like being stroked when I work hard for this church. It feels good to be told by the members that I really shouldn't go to so many committee meetings during the week, that I should spend more time with my family. I am glad if you know that I am sacrificing for you. After all how can I be a good pastor if I don't sacrifice for my congregation?

I don't want it said of me after I am gone, as it was said of Julius Caesar: "The evil that men do lives after them, but the good is oft interred with their bones." I want the good to stand above my bones like a tombstone, a monument, with the dates of my life inscribed on it for all to see.

I would like to think that if a funeral were held in this church for me because of some accident, that many people would come out and many laudatory statements would be made about me, so the good I had accomplished would live after me.

I think that if you're honest, you'll admit you feel the same way.

I want the good I do to be remembered; do I do the good I do to be remembered? If I were asked the question, "Would you like to be like God?" I would have to answer "yes." But that is very close to this question: "Would you like to be God?"

Bertrand Russell has said: "Of the infinite desires of man the chief are the desires for power and glory. . . Every man would like to be God if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility." (Quoted in Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I, from *Power, a New Social Analysis*.)

It is so easy for a desire to be good to be perverted into a desire for glory. It is so easy for the desire to be spoken good of to be transferred into doing good to be spoken of.

As one writer puts it, "Evil doesn't bother to infiltrate that which is already evil. Where there is darkness there is no need to snuff out the light." (Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season*, p. 140.)

You can be in the greatest danger of being infiltrated by evil when you passionately want to be righteous, to be like God. The desire to be like God too easily becomes the desire to be God, and the evidence you are being corrupted becomes clear when you want your goodness to be noticed so much that you no longer can separate in your mind the desire to be noticed from the desire to be good.

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We all want our goodness to be appreciated, but the genuinely religious man, says Christ, would never stop giving to the poor or praying or fasting if no one else learned of it. In other words, is your public religion based on your private faith or is your public religion all you have? Is glory from God or glory to God the source of your devotion? To be seen by God, we must be willing to be unseen by men.

Listen carefully to Jesus' words: "Take care not to try to demonstrate how good you are in the presence of men, *in order to be seen by* them. If you do, you have no reward with your Father in heaven." (Emphasis supplied.) Matthew 6:1.

In the time of Jesus there were three great works in the life of a religious man: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Jesus never attacked the works themselves. What he criticized was the sinful tendency within us to do the finest things from the wrong motives, to do the most self-sacrificing things from the most selfish of desires.

To do what is right and good without ostentation, without the perverse desire to be recognized, is Jesus' concern. Worship, giving, and praying, are to be done because of a vivid sense of God's love, for God sake and for his kingdom, and not for one's own recognition.

Giving of alms—special offerings for the poor in Israel—was a very good thing. The rabbis encouraged it, as did Jesus. Collections for the poor were frequently taken, for the law taught the Jew that God looked with great favor on those who cared for them. One almost got more merit this way.

But some people made it so obvious that they were giving. As Jesus humorously puts it, do not sound a trumpet before you give. (Or using a metaphor, "Blow your own horn." I don't know if this was ever a custom or not.)

Ask yourself: When you pray, do you hear "strains of a trumpet in the background?" If you do something in order to get attention, you have already earned your reward, and the Greek is even more emphatic—you have earned it in *full*.

There was a room in the synagogue called the Chamber of the Silent. People who wished to make atonement for some sin left money for the poor there and the poor came and took it for their needs. But people began to give in a way that everyone would see it. The rule for the Christian is: "Show when tempted to hide about this light; and *hide* it when you are tempted to show."

The Israelites usually stood while they prayed and there were set times to recite the *Shema*, three short passages of Scripture. They also prayed a list of 18 or 19 prayers which were an essential part of the synagogue service. They were to begin their prayers as early as possible and wherever one was at those hours, he prayed. It was easy for people to make certain they were in the marketplace or on the steps of the synagogue at those times.

They prayed before and after meals--there was a prayer for every occasion. It was a good idea because it brought the presence of God into everything, acknowledging his presence. However it also lent itself to formalism. The prayers could slip off the tongue with little thought. Many remained devout and fervent but many lost the meaning of the prayers.

You can understand Jesus' warning, can't you? Isn't he saying that we should beware when we offer perfunctory prayers before our meals and before we go to bed? "Thank you for this food and bless the missionaries across the sea?" Or telling people in a talk you give that you spend two to three hours a day in secret prayer? (It's no secret now; do you hear the sound of trumpets?) Or offering an eloquent prayer full of ornate phrases. As one man put it, "the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience."

One who engages in public prayer must be as free from self-consciousness as if he were praying in the privacy of his own closet! He should avoid the stained-glass voice and the liturgical formulas. If one prays, even if it is a prescribed prayer for public worship such as the Lord's Prayer, it is an offering to God and not to one's reputation in the community. I would advise that we think and focus on God as we pray.

Obviously more is involved than just prayer, offerings, fasting; **all** good works are involved. We tend to love ourselves so inordinately, so excessively, that we use our practices of devotion to God in order to have devotion lavished upon us by others. To do that, we must deceive them. To get them to agree with us that we are remarkable, we must first deceive ourselves before we can deceive them.

That is why the righteous man, the giving man, the praying man, is the **last** to see his own hypocrisy. The Bible is filled with references to the importance of deception in sin all sin is based upon it. The devil is the "father of lies." (John 8:44)

People first want to do their works for evil; then they conveniently deceive themselves about what they are doing in order to live with the lie their life has become. There is a "willing ignorance," not necessarily a conscious act of dishonesty every time. But this ignorance is never so complete that there are not times one glimpses the truth about his religious life. There are times one clearly hears the trumpet!

I do not minimize how difficult it is to center one's religious life on God, one's acts of devotion and worship. It is easier by far to see the reality of other people, to sense them. To do all of these things—sharing, loving—for one who is invisible is not the simplest thing in the world.

To do good deeds for Him is the only way to be certain we are not doing them for ourselves. Being conscious that our gifts are not simply for the poor but for the God who has compassion upon the poor keeps us from being hypocrites. It's a never-ending struggle in our lives.

Even a good woman like Mother Teresa must beware. For years, with little or no fanfare and recognition, she worked among the poor of Calcutta. It would be difficult to believe she spent those years of labor and self-sacrifice in order to win the Nobel prize.

Now that she has won it, however, one element in her continuing to labor can easily become the dominant one; namely that since great recognition has come one must keep on going if one wants to continue to receive the recognition. It is now chic, fashionable, powerful, to work for the poor of Calcutta. The work has been brought to notice. It is no longer a quiet and unobtrusive ministry. Mother Teresa is no longer unobtrusive; she has become a television and media star, a symbol, legend. Even for the best of humankind, this kind of experience is dangerous.

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In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot imaginatively portrays the temptations that come to Thomas Becket while he is in the throes of making a decision that may lead to his death. He is now the Archbishop of Canterbury, formerly an adviser to the king.

The last tempter suggests to him that his willingness to be a martyr is because of the grandeur his name will have in heaven and on earth in succeeding generations. Thomas could hear the trumpet and it frightened him.

Tempter:

Yes, Thomas, yes; you have thought of that too.
What can compare with glory of Saints
Dwelling forever in presence of God?
What earthly glory, of king or emperor,
What earthly pride, that is not poverty
Compared with richness of heavenly grandeur?
Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
On earth, to be high in heaven.
And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed,
Your persecutors, in timeless torment,
Parched passion, beyond expiation.

Thomas:

No!
Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain: Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest reason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.