

BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THAT!

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Matthew 6.1-6 and 16-18
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I. Connecting With One Another

Christians have been labeled "hypocrites" by some within our contemporary culture. Do you think this label is fair? Why or why not?

Spend some time reflecting personally – then share with your group – in what ways your words or actions might be considered hypocritical.

Before continuing in this study, please pray:

- a. For the upcoming week of Vacation Bible School: That the Holy Spirit would draw many children from our community to learn about Jesus, as well as empower the staff and members of our church family who are serving these children.
- b. For those who will be taking vacations - that they be times of renewal and re-creation.
- c. For this weekend's gatherings: That we dive deeply into God's Word, heeding Jesus' instructions on how to be his disciple, that we might be salt and light to those around us, to the glory of God.

II. Introduction to this Study

Christians are called to non-conformity. Not conforming to the world is a familiar New Testament concept (see Romans 12.1-2 for example). As we turn to Matthew 6.1-6 and 16-18 we hear Jesus calling us not to conform to a religiosity that seeks the approval of other people and fails to seek God's approval. Jesus' call is to be truly distinct in life and practice from the worldliness of a culture that rejects God and from the worldliness of nominal religion.

In Matthew 5, Jesus taught that our righteousness must be greater than that of the Pharisees (who obeyed the letter of the law) by having an obedience that includes our hearts and moves us from loving one another to loving our enemies. Now in Matthew 6, Jesus points to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and calls us live and act - to give, pray, and fast - for "the audience of one" whose approval alone is to be our goal.

III. Study the Text

- a. In verse 1 Jesus establishes the principle of non-conformity to the religious establishment. He refers to "acts of righteousness" or "acts of devotion" (from the Greek term "dikaiosyne" that has to do with justice, righteousness and charity). What is the appeal of being seen by others when one does such acts of righteousness? What, according to Jesus, is the true motive for these acts? Who is the proper audience to observe our acts of righteousness?

Note: Three acts of righteousness were commonplace - giving to the poor, praying and fasting. Jesus addresses each of these with particular attention to the motive that is to be behind them.

In Matthew 5.16 Jesus says we are to "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works." Here he suggests that our acts of righteousness are to be kept secret. Is there a contradiction here? Explain.

- b. Look at verses 2 through 4. We can rightly interpret the phrase "give to the needy" as suggesting any good deeds that are intended to help or serve others out of a deep concern for their well-being. Notice that Jesus does not say "If you give..." but "**when** you give..." He expected this kind of generous concern and response to the needs of others. But, how are you to give?

"Hypocrite" is from a Greek term that means "under judgment." It suggests being "play actors" or as one Bible commentator * has translated it "show offs." What is their reward? From whom is it received? By inference, if they are "paid in full" with the reward of the praises of others, what reward do they fail to receive?

How are you to give and serve others according to verses 3 and 4? What is the reward for giving this way? Who is the audience for our giving and serving others?

Note: "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" suggests giving generously without one's spouse or closest friends or neighbors being involved or observing or having a say. I think it is more significant to see the phrase as a call to seeking to be unself-conscious and unself-impressed in our generosity. Not only are there to be no external trumpet blasts but there is to be no internal music suggesting "I'm a pretty decent person for my generosity..." Jesus seeks to liberate us from having to be impressive to anyone, including ourselves.

- c. Verses 5 and 6 focus upon public prayers. In Jesus' day public prayers were practiced, usually praying out loud but in a quiet tone. Apparently Jesus wasn't impressed. Once again, what is flawed in the prayer practice of the "hypocrites" who are seen by others? What is the extent of their reward?

How are you to pray according to verse 6? I suspect that we don't run as much risk of hypocrisy in our prayer practices (except when we publicly say we will pray for someone yet fail to do so) than the risk of simply failing to pray... to go into a quiet, private place in order to converse with God and to have regular, intimate, private interaction with God. What reward will you receive when you pray this way?

- d. In verses 16 through 18 Jesus turns to the practice of fasting (voluntarily withholding food for a period of time in order to be more focused on God's presence). Once again, he assumes his disciples will fast. As you look through these verses, who is to be the sole audience when one fasts? What is the demeanor of the person fasting to be? How do you think God rewards the person who fasts this way?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. As you live and act as a follower of Jesus, how often are you conscious of God's presence? How conscious are you that God is the "audience of one" whose approval alone you should seek?
- b. In what ways are you tempted to seek the approval of others rather than God's approval?
- c. How can you further develop deep concern and generous response to the needs of others?
- d. How can you further develop intimacy with God in the "secret place" of prayer without distractions and without trying to appear "religious"?
- e. The practice of fasting is intended to enable us to better focus on God than on our physical needs. Would you be willing to practice some form of fasting - not for the attention and accolades of others, but simply to draw nearer to God?
- f. How will seeking God's approval above the approval of others impact the way you will give, serve others, pray, practice spiritual disciplines, do your job, interact with your spouse, children, neighbors, and deal with those who are difficult to love?

* Fredrick Dale Bruner in Matthew A Commentary: The Christbook Matthew 1-12

