

4. Double Agents

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[0 : 00] You join us in the middle of a series in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. So if you turn to page 811, we're looking today at Matthew chapter 6 and the first 18 verses.

And this follows on from the section which began in chapter 5, verse 20. For I tell you, says the Lord Jesus, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, which really, as we saw, was no righteousness at all, well, unless it exceeds that, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

On to chapter 6. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you give to the needy, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

[1 : 13] And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, don't heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they'll be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then like this. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[2 : 17] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

And when you fast, don't look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Well, let's pray together. Our gracious Lord, we thank you that we can call on you this afternoon as our heavenly Father.

Father, we thank you that as your children, we can trust you to hear us and to answer both for our good and your glory. We thank you that as we open up your word together now, you know our needs.

[3 : 24] And so we ask you to bless us, Lord, by your spirit. Give us open ears and loving, obedient hearts for the glory of your Son. Amen.

Well, in front of us, we've got 18 verses in which the Lord Jesus is facing us with one very simple question. Just who are you trying so hard to impress?

Or to put it another way, whose glory are you really worried about? Most of us by nature are desperate to please, aren't we? We hate the thought of letting people down.

We hate the thought of our boss or family or church seeing through us. And of course, the same went for the people listening in to Jesus' sermon.

The question, though, is who exactly they were worrying about. You see, the Sermon on the Mount divides the whole human race into two groups of people.

[4 : 25] But it's not the division that we normally make, the believer and the atheist. No, everyone here believes in God, all right. The alarming thing is that there are Christians sitting in both camps. You see, the two groups Jesus sees in the crowd are the disciple and the religious hypocrite. In fact, the only time he mentions the Gentiles is to show that they're just the same as the religious folks, the hypocrites.

So how do I know which group I belong to? Well, what separates the two is whose praise they really value. The Christian's focus is on their gracious heavenly father.

We've seen that all along, haven't we? They're the pure in heart. Not sinless, but their love and their loyalty is undivided. And if you looked at the religious man, well, you might well think just the same. After all, the Pharisee looks far more godly and spiritual, doesn't he? But the truth which Jesus sees through is that he's a double agent. He serves two masters.

[5 : 39] Outwardly, he looks every bit the humble evangelical. But it's not the king of grace he's trying so hard to impress. It's you and it's me.

Well, beware, says Jesus, verse one. Watch out. Because hypocrisy is a seriously easy trap. An easy trap to fall into.

And if, like most of us, you're desperate to please, the trap door gapes wide open. But in the end, a double agent is always found out.

And it's a tragic way to live a life, isn't it? Because it traps you in a lie, a tragic lie. Your whole life becomes a frantic pretense built on a terrible misunderstanding of God.

Because far from impressing your father in heaven, that life of hypocrisy is the way to lose the thing you value most of all, his smile and his praise.

[6 : 46] So over the next 17 verses, Jesus shows us what he means with three different examples. Three ways that we might be tempted to play up for the sake of men instead of our father.

In our giving, our praying, and our fasting. And each time, do you notice, it's the same pattern. Don't do it like the hypocrites to be seen by others, but do it honestly.

For your father who sees in secret. So we're going to look at this very simply. It's the difference between the life of the hypocrite and the life of the Christian. One is trapped in a performance, and the other is trusting in a father.

Firstly then, the life of the double agent, a life trapped in a performance. Hypocrisy is still the one fault none of us can stomach, isn't it?

It's the one resigning offense left for a politician. Except that what we hate about hypocrisy is the double standards. We hate someone telling us to give money while secretly they're faking their expenses.

[7 : 56] But if you look a little more closely, that's not quite what's going on here. It's not that the religious hypocrite doesn't practice what he preaches. It's something a little more uncomfortable than that.

He's giving money all right. He's a regular at the all-night prayer meeting, and he loves a good fast, this guy. No, the problem isn't that he says one thing and does another.

In fact, he's doing plenty of it. The problem is that it's all play-acting. That's what a hypocrite is.

Verse 2, the word means a performer, someone who struts to church like he struts upon a stage.

And the great danger for every one of us is getting trapped in a life that is little more than show. So beware, says Jesus. That way of greater righteousness, we saw back in chapter 5, was about a heart captivated by our Father's glory.

So be careful not to practice all that righteousness just for a bit of cheap applause. Well, I don't know about you, but I find these three little pictures quite embarrassing.

[9 : 13] Because although they seem laughable, I think most of us can see enough of ourselves in them to squirm a little bit. First comes the giver who blows his own trumpet, verses 2 to 4.

And perhaps in Jesus' day, when there was cash to be handed out, people really would sound a trumpet to summon the plebs and draw a bit of attention. Or perhaps Jesus is just having a little bit of fun at the hypocrite's expense.

Maybe it was really a golden brick in the church wall with the donor's name inscribed on it. Or a businessman grinning for the cameras as he hands over the six-foot check.

Or maybe even, it was people much more like you and me, without all that much money to give at all. Because all of us can put on a show, can't we?

I wonder if you've ever had that uncomfortable moment when you're visiting a church and the offering plate goes around. It's happened to me once or twice when I've been away teaching in India and sure as anything, I won't have my wallet on me at the time.

[10:22] And inside, you're absolutely dying because you know just what people are thinking. Here's that rich British preacher and he can't even be bothered to reach into his own pocket. But that awful embarrassment we feel inside when we've forgotten our wallets just shows that we're worrying about the wrong people, doesn't it?

Even in my not giving, I've fallen into the trap of worrying about my audience and not my father. Next comes the man of prayer with a voice as deep and spiritual sounding as a hammy old actor. We meet him in verses five to eight. And when he talks to God, you'd think he was giving him a theology lesson. Except that he's not really talking to God at all, is he?

When he goes on and on in the church prayer meeting, well, it's you and me he's really praying to, verse five. The performance looks oh so spiritual, but it's all for show.

In fact, verse seven, babbling away like that is pagan, really. That's the big shock. According to Jesus, the Pharisee and the Gentile are just the same at heart.

[11:35] And clearly neither of them knows their father any better. The Gentiles think that if they heap up empty praises, verse seven, their far off deity might just hear them.

They feel they have to impress God, twist his arm into acting. And the hypocrite, well, he has to impress men. But it looks just the same.

They walk around in flowing robes and like to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. And for a show, they make lengthy prayers. That's what Jesus said in Mark's gospel, not when he was talking about the babbling pagan, but the waffling religious leaders.

And how impressive it can look when the actor plays his part well. So good that the poor young Christian at the prayer meeting feels embarrassed to pray at all.

You do feel totally inadequate, don't you, when it sounds like the man next to you has swallowed the King James Bible and out it all comes in his prayers. And then there are those of us who can't put on a good show, but we're still just as worried about how we come across.

[12:46] So we perform by keeping our mouths shut. Just avoid praying in public at all. And although the symptoms look completely different, it's just the same disease.

Worrying about men, trying to impress other people. Or finally, in verses 16 to 18, there's the woman who gave up everything for Lent except telling people what she'd given up.

And so she moans about how much she's missing and she updates her Facebook page every day with a countdown to Easter until her friends are sick to the back teeth of her. And although fasting once had something to do with humility and repentance, it looks far more spiritual to her if you do it all for a good cause and then let everyone else know.

All the world's a stage, said Shakespeare, and all the men and women merely players. And how right he was. Except that it's the other players on the stage that we want our applause from, isn't it? Well, be careful, says Jesus, because you'll get exactly what you want. If you let yourself get trapped in a religious performance, you'll get plenty of applause.

[14:02] How generous he is. How godly. How spiritual. How mature. How servant-hearted. In fact, you'll win so much applause that there won't be any left from the one watcher whose opinion actually matters.

Did you notice how each picture ended up like that? Truly, I say to you, they have received their award. It's a sort of word you stamp on an invoice.

Paid in full. Nothing left. What a pitiful thing that would be to spend a whole life in Christian service and then miss out on life with the Father.

For the one honest critic to say to us, good performance, but none of it was done for me. Be careful, says Jesus.

Don't even praise yourself. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, verse 3. If you give generously today, don't even let it factor into your giving tomorrow.

[15:11] By all means, give wisely. Balance the checkbook. But for pity's sake, resist the urge to keep all your receipts. Because if you get into spiritual bookkeeping, well, you're giving for the wrong person.

Well, that's the righteousness of the double agent. A life desperate to look good in front of others. And how different it looks to the life of the disciple.

One is trapped in a performance and the other is simply trusting in their Father. So let's look at that before we close. Trusting in a Father.

I wonder if you noticed how that word Father crops up in every single paragraph. And to know the Lord as your Heavenly Father takes away so much pressure, doesn't it?

All the need to perform and play up just disappears. because a child knows that their father will always be there for them. They can trust him to treat them fairly and kindly and not forget those little things they do out of love for him.

[16:22] A dad just loves it when their child does something for him, doesn't he? Even if it's not really that impressive. When I get home from work and my daughter runs off to get one of her messy little finger paintings, she knows that I'm never going to make fun of her not in a million years.

I'll treasure it. Even if frankly it looks just as terrible as the one she did yesterday. I won't tell her that. And that's why a Christian doesn't need to perform because he can trust the good and loving reward of his Father.

We can quietly get on with serving him and we don't need to worry about whether other people notice, do we? Because it's all about the Father. And we know him.

We know, verse 4, that he sees even the littlest things we do, the things we do in secret. We can trust him to value them, can't we? So when you give, says Jesus, don't make a fuss about it, not even to yourself, verse 3.

Leave him to do that. And when you pray, verse 8, don't babble on, whether it's to impress others or to impress him. He's your father. You don't need to cajole him into caring for you.

[17:39] He knows what his children need. And when you fast, verse 17, nobody else needs to know about it. Wash your face and brush your hair and look cheerful because you're doing it for him.

You're reminding yourself how much you care about him and how much you depend on him, on his care and his forgiveness. And no one needs to know about that. In fact, it's when we don't draw attention to ourselves that our father often gets the most glory, isn't it?

Remember, that's what kingdom people are all about. We saw that in chapter 516. We want the world to see us and glorify him. So why now is Jesus suddenly telling us to do everything in secret? Well, because sometimes that's how he gets the most praise. One writer put it like this, when we're tempted to hide, we need to remember that we're salt and light.

That's when we have to shine. But when we're tempted to shine and to show off, well, that's usually a sensible time to hide. I think one of the most anxious times in my life was about five years ago when I gave up a career as a veterinary surgeon and started training for ministry.

[19:03] I was newly married and we knew that to survive that first year we had a lot of money to find. But the week came that I was due to start training and not a single bit of funding had come in yet.

And then one morning an envelope came through the door addressed in block capitals. It was completely anonymous with nothing inside but a 20 pound note. And I guess the only thing I'll ever know about the sender was that they didn't want praise from anyone but their heavenly father.

And of course it was barely a drop in the ocean really but it taught me that I could trust my father too. Well, the very next day a grant arrived for several thousand pounds but let me tell you it was the 20 quid which meant the most.

That was the envelope which brought tears to my eyes. And because I still have no idea where it came from the only person I could thank was my father in heaven.

And how much less glory he would have won if that little 20 pound note had come with a signed card. You see, for the Christian it's all about the father.

[20:19] That's clearest of all right in the middle passage, isn't it? In the Lord's Prayer verses 9 to 14 give us a little model for simple honest prayer to our father.

No long ramble no fancy words just an honest expression of trust. And we could spend a long time here but all we really need to see is how different it is to that miserable life of performance.

It's so simple just two halves addressed to a kind and loving father. The first half shows that we care about him verses 9 and 10 hallowed be your name would your glory be seen and your name be kept holy your kingdom come and your will be done just as in heaven.

It's praying for God's rule isn't it? His kingdom over us over our world because we care about him. And then the second half verses 10 to 13 that trusts him to care about us. Would you give us our daily bread our forgiveness our deliverance from temptation? It's trusting him isn't it? For our every need physical and spiritual.

[21 : 37] Trusting our father to care about us. And that's it. Nothing shows where our heart is more clearly than our prayers.

So who are we trying to impress? On the one hand there's a life of frantic religious pretense to win a cheap pat on the back.

And on the other there's a life of righteousness lived for our loving heavenly father. A father we can trust to treat us far better than we deserve.

A father whose glory we care about dearly. And a father we can trust to care about us. He doesn't ask me to pretend I'm something I'm not.

Just to be before the world what I am before him. And that friends is the greatest freedom a human being could ever enjoy.

[22 : 36] The freedom to live honestly before men and women. And in the end it brings the greatest reward a child of God could ever know.

Our father's loving smile. Let's pray. Father God we long to be before the world what we are before you. Living as children of light and truth and integrity.

So give us whole and undivided hearts father. Hearts which trust that you see and that it's your reward which matters. Teach us to be happy when we're overlooked by others and happier still to bring joy and glory to you.

Give us courage father when we need to shine and humility to know when to hide so that in all we do the cross of the Lord Jesus might be honoured and displayed for we ask it in his name.

Amen. Thank you for going to be going to be engaging