

29. Don't be a pretender

May 15, 2016

Do you know what these five men have in common? They all are pretenders. I don't know if any of them ever actually have been in the military services or not, but they all are pretending to be someone they are not. You might have heard the words "Stolen Valor". It is against federal law to pretend to be a Soldier, Airman, Sailor, and Marine for financial gains.

It is one thing for this type of scam to happen in the world, but it is a very disheartening thing to see many Christians trying to be someone they are not. They are known as hypocrites. Often unbelievers would claim, "I won't go to church, because there are too many hypocrites in the church."

Hypocrisy is hideous. What cancer is to the body, hypocrisy is to the church. It is a killing agent. Unfortunately, hypocrisy is also addictive. And even though Jesus reserved His most severe words of condemnation for the hypocrite, we still seem to prefer this pretentious and pious lifestyle to the truth and authenticity.

Jesus is systematically going over the things that the Pharisees cherish and are proud of: giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. Some of us might say, "What's wrong with them? They are all good." You are right, if they were done in a godly way. The problem was that the Pharisees didn't do this to bring glory to the Father in heaven, rather only to themselves. This is a very relevant topic all of us should take heed into our hearts.

A. PLEASING THE LORD, NOT ANYONE ELSE

Matthew 6:1-4 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 3 But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

During the time of Jesus, the original offering box was located in the secret chamber of the tabernacle. That is where wealthy people would go in and drop their money into the offering box that is known as "Trumpet" without anyone knowing the original reason for the name. Later, the poor go in and receive the gifts from God through those wealthy people's donations.

However, the Pharisees saw this great way of helping the poor and made the best of it for themselves. They made a small size trumpet and took it out to the street corner and blew it before they started to hand out their gifts to the poor. When people heard the trumpet noises on the street, they saw the Pharisees and their money that they are waving in the air. Jesus tells us that they just received their rewards in people's "Woo!" and "Ahh!"

For the first-century Jews, helping the poor was equal to righteousness. It reflected God's own righteousness, which was so often expressed in His mercy. But this pure act of righteousness became adulterated with the showmanship of the Pharisees.

I asked y'all to underline "they have their reward." The verb 'have', "apecho" in Greek, should be translated "receive in full" and used on receipts. In other words, Jesus is telling His disciples and the people around Him, as well as to us that the only reward the hypocrites will ever receive is glory from men on earth, nothing from God in heaven. Not good, uh?

When we give things to the people who need or have less than us, we must do it quietly and discreetly. God does not value what we do, but why we do. It is about the motive in our hearts which only God sees clearly.

In our church, Calvary Chapel of Sahuarita, we do not pass the offering plate, as you can tell. I am not saying that passing offering plates is wrong. We simply believe that God will lay the desire of offering and tithe in your hearts to put them in the Agape Box to support this church. I strongly believe that where God guides, God provides. That's why we choose not to have one of those typical "Building Fund Thermometer" to show how much money we received from our congregation. In my opinion, it is a psychological manipulation.

I don't have any idea who is giving how much in our church. Some people tried to let me know in the past. One man insisted that I should know how much he gave to the church so that I could be thankful to him. I offered him his money back. Don't look around, he didn't like my answer so he left. Your tithe, offering, and extra money to the benevolence fund are between you and the Lord. Why should the pastor of the church know about it, unless the giver has an ulterior motive?

Helping the poor is a part of God's heart. It is one of the lesser reasons the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, because they didn't take care of their poor according to Ezekiel 16:49. But it becomes wrong for any of us to use that opportunity to make ourselves look good. If there is anyone who should look good in helping the poor, it is our God, not us. So, if we want to help someone, or giving our money to this church, or some worthy organization, let's do it quietly. Then the Father in heaven will reward us for our obedience.

B. PRAYING TO THE LORD, NOT ANYONE ELSE

Matthew 6:5-8 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

These hypocrites prayed not to be heard by God, but to be seen by men. This still is a common fault in public prayer today, when people pray to impress or teach others instead of genuinely pouring out their hearts before God. You don't need to use Old English style language to impress God, nor should you use any big theological words in your prayer to show off your Christian vocabulary. Such showy prayers are an insult to God. When we mouth words towards God while really trying to impress others, we then use God merely as a tool to impress people. Just speak to the Lord as you do to your friend with honesty and sincerity, nothing fancy.

Many centuries ago, buddhist monks were told to pray in repetition by their superior monks until they get answers. One smart monk came up with an idea, "Prayer Wheel." He wrote down his prayers on pieces of paper and attached them on his wind chime that rotated. Each time it makes noise and spins, he convinced others that his prayers were repeated. It was a big hit. It became very popular. One Spaniard catholic monk was visiting in that region and learned about this Prayer Wheel and took it to his homeland Spain. Eventually this westernized Prayer Wheel became something known as "Rosary." Repeating the same prayer without thoughts is in vain according to Jesus.

If you are praying to someone other than God to hear your prayer, you completely missed the point of prayer. As I have said many, many times before, our prayer changes ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. I know that it is a popular and soothing thing to say, "Prayer changes." We don't have the power to change the situation we are in, nor do any of the mere few uttered words or phrases out of our mouths have any power to change anything. But the Lord our God who created the entire universe from nothing certainly has the power and the willingness if what we ask for is according to His will.

Just in case some of you think that repetitive prayers like the Pharisees' no longer exist in the Christian community, think again. In the last decade or so, contemplative prayer became popular with many so-called Bible teachers. One of them is Beth Moore. She said, "A true lover of God once spoke about practicing God's presence. To me, that's such a part of contemplative prayer. That we are able to absorb the reality that as we commune with God through prayer that he is with us that his spirit for those of us who are in Christ fills us that we are drawn near to him that our souls find rest in him."

Do you know what contemplative prayer is? Contemplative prayer is a dangerous practice that has been creeping into the Christian church via Roman Catholicism. It is a form of eastern mysticism that has been packaged in Christian terminology. In brief, it is a way of trying to commune with God by emptying one's mind, focusing on a word or phrase, and practicing the presence of the divine through inner, silent contemplation. Hogwash!!! That's exactly Jesus tells us NOT TO DO.

Our God is not interested in our chanting or humming with an empty mind. Prayer is speaking to God the Father in heaven in the name of our Lord Jesus as the Holy Spirit leads in our hearts. Finish your prayer, get up and go and work or do something for the Lord. Don't sit there and just make noise like a whining baby. Let me say this one more time, the doctrine of contemplative prayer is a heresy.

From v9 to v15, Jesus is teaching us how to pray. We are not going to learn that this morning. We will dig in more next Sunday about "prayer." So we will save it until next week.

C. FASTING FOR THE LORD'S GLORY, NOT ANYONE TO KNOW

Matthew 6:16-18 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Our Lord Jesus changes subjects now, from giving, praying to fasting, but the term that threads its way through the passage remains the same: personal devotion to God should be expressed privately, not for public show.

The definition of fast is: To practice abstinence as a religious exercise from food voluntarily for a time, for the mortification of the body or appetites, or as a token of grief, or humiliation. Fasting can be practiced for a multitude of reasons and several different ways to do – from complete fasting without any water and food for a limited time period to eating light food. Generally, it is practiced to deepen a person's devotion to God.

Of itself, fasting is no guarantee that God will bless, because fasting must be accompanied by sincere humility and brokenness before the Lord. If fasting is only a formal religious ritual, it accomplishes no spiritual purpose other than empty stomachs and prideful hearts.

So, the reason the Pharisees were using is anything but honorable. It involved showy displays to impress their audience. For it was not uncommon at that time for some Pharisees who were fasting to leave their hair deliberately unkempt, to wear rumpled clothes, and even to apply white flour to their faces to accentuate their paleness of their skin color from fasting. These hypocrites were not worshiping God, rather exalting their own false spirituality.

Let me put this in our terms. If you fast, because you felt that the Holy Spirit is leading you to do so, by all means, you should do. Set your time – fasting a meal, a half day, a day, etc. Don't try a 40 day and 40 night fasting. Either you will break your fasting or we are going to have a funeral for you. While you are on fasting, when the meal time comes, you go to the area where you can be alone with the Lord and the Bible, seek Him through His Word and prayer. When you are done, go back to what you've been doing as if you haven't skipped a meal. Don't tell anyone that you are doing fasting. Again, it is between you and the Lord.

By the way, don't be so impressed with ourselves that the Lord chose us to be His children and servants. The Lord tends to recruit His followers from the bottom of the pit, not the pedestal.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Your Christian belief should not be showy, rather sincere.

If we are not serious about it, we should be out of it. It will do more harm than good by playing games with God.

2) Pretending our high spirituality might impress others, not God.

God sees all, there is nothing hidden from His sight. God is not impressed by what we do, but why we do – the motive.

3) Our devotion to the Lord is cultivated in seclusion, not on stage whether it is in giving, praying, or fasting.

We give, pray, and fast in obedience to God. There is nothing to boast about it. If there is anything to boast, let's boast about our God who died for our sins and rose again from the death.