

# The tyranny of living for the approval of others

There is a beauty in self-forgetfulness (D. Bonhoeffer)

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides his followers with teachings about how his followers may become as he was. Having provided this framework in the first part of the Sermon, In Matthew 6, Jesus turns his attention to two major areas that might hinder people in that growth process and keep them from participating fully in God’s Kingdom reality: the desire for the approval of others and the desire to secure oneself through material wealth.

Today we focus on the first misplaced desire: The temptation to seek the approval from others as we practice the disciplines of doing good deeds, praying and fasting (Matthew 6. 1-18).

**Key thought to remember:** Jesus cares about my behaviour and he wants to modify it a lot. Right behaviour is not enough, I need a right posture of the heart.

## Read Matthew 6. 1-4

In first century Jewish community, the practice of “almsgiving” was part of the fabric of society. Faithful (“righteous”) Jews would contribute to the “welfare” system of the time by giving money at the local synagogue. Money (coins) would be placed in a ram’s horn during the synagogue gathering. The dropping of coins in that horn would make noise which lead to the danger of drawing attention to yourself with how much coins you put “in the kitty.” A ram’s horn was also used as a wind instrument and Jesus is playing with words in verse 2 when he refers to “when you give alms (coins in the rams horn), sound no trumpet (don’t make a show by dropping coins in such a way that it draw attention to your giving).” That is what the religious leaders use to do, the hypocrites, those pretending to be virtuous but wanting to be praise by people.

## Questions

- Is being generous just about money? What else can you give generously?
- Read the quote. How is it relevant to Jesus’ teaching?
- On paper, the whole idea of keeping our “acts of righteousness” to ourselves seems like a very good idea. But is this easy to actually do? Why or why not? In what situations are we most tempted to tell others about the good that we do?
- Do you know someone who discreetly cares and do good deeds around him/her? What is attractive about that person?

### Gospel Of Matthew

Our culture is obsessed with image. With looking good, over being good. With applause and accolades from people, rather than attention and approval from the Father. And it’s exhausting. Always trying to keep up. Stay cool. Stay informed. Well read. Up to date. En vogue. We end up living with our emotional state rising or falling based on what people are (or aren’t) saying about us. We end up living into a stereotype from our culture, rather than our identity and calling from God. Living under the tyranny of the approval or disapproval of other people.

# The tyranny of living for the approval of others

There is a beauty in self-forgetfulness (D. Bonhoeffer)

In being generous with our money, with our time, with helping out and doing good, Jesus invites us to consider two attitudes:

1. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.
2. Do it in secret

We are born with the desire to be noticed. When we come out of the womb, we cry for attention (literally!). Children need to be noticed, affirmed and encouraged.

Some of us who have not received the attention, encouragement and love at home might have embarked in a life of trying desperately to get the approval of others through working hard, looking good, achieving success, materialism, popularity, good deeds, etc.

- How does the quote from Dallas Willard help you understand Jesus teaching in verse 3-4?
- How do we live free from the tyranny of looking good, being noticed, getting the attention and approval of others; rather than simply for the reward of the Father?

Jesus has a practical invitation: we can all do it if we want to experience freedom. It's an invitation, we do not have to do it, but if we are willing to accept the invitation and put into practice his solution, we will gradually find freedom.

## Action

Do something small this week in secret (helps someone, write a card, volunteer, make a phone call) and after you have done it, pause and image the Father smiling on your good work and let that smile be enough for you! Repeat throughout your life.

## Prayer

Father, when I do good things and give money to the church and to good causes, you see it and that is enough. Fill me afresh with your love for your creation, your people and your world. Amen.

Gospel Of Matthew

“The kind of people who have been so transformed by their daily walk with God that good deeds naturally flow from their character are precisely the kind of people whose left hand would not notice what their right hand is doing – as, for example, when driving one’s own car or speaking one’s native language. What they do they do naturally, often automatically, simply because of what they are pervasively and internally. These are people who do not have to invest a lot of reflection in doing good for others. Their deeds are “in secret” no matter who is watching, for they are absorbed in love of God and of those around them. They hardly notice their own deed, and rarely remember it.”

Dallas Willard