

## **THE APPROVAL OF MAN**

### **“WHEN PEOPLE ARE BIG AND GOD IS SMALL”**

It was a cold night. This fugitive stood disguised before a fire, hoping that no one would recognize him. If he was discovered, he could be arrested, tortured, and even killed. He was in serious danger. He had escaped from the authorities, ran through the country side and eluded them for a while. Here he would be safe, so he thought... Suddenly, he was spotted. He denied that he was the man they thought him to be. He had to get away. He gave a sworn statement that he was someone else when questioned. He evaded their questions, and slipped out of their sight. Before the night was through, he had escaped the threatening questions of not a guard, nor a mob, nor even someone from the search party, but Peter had denied Christ before a little servant girl. He was willing to die for his claim rather than for Christ. When it was all said and done, Peter had succumb to the approval of man.

What caused this burly, tough, giant of a man to crumble on the spot? What made him pretend that he was something else than he really was? People were big and God was small. What people thought was more important than what God thought – a reality that all of us know about.

We all know what it is like to inwardly desire the approval of others, to ache to have the commendation of people, so much so that we are willing to do whatever it takes to get it, and make whatever compromises are necessary then keep it. How true is this of you? Take a minute with your pen, and check any of the following to see if they apply (before the Lord with no looking around):

- I have a hard time making decisions without the input of my friends.
- I become a different person, depending who I am with.
- I often exaggerate the truth to make myself look good in people’s eyes.
- I am one way with people that I want to get to know, and myself with those I already know.
- I behave differently when an authority is present, like a teacher, a pastor, or parent.
- I am easily embarrassed.
- I am known by the clothes I wear and the stuff I have.
- I compare myself with others to feel better about myself.
- My conversations tend to make me look good in people’s eyes.
- I often wish I had someone else’s life, clothes, hair, teeth, skin tone, car, boyfriend/girlfriend, or looks.
- I can be very cruel to someone in one moment, and kind to another in the very next.
- I can become a different person in order to get the things that I want from someone.
- I am uncomfortable when people ask personal questions.
- I have a series of standard, “pad answers” for people when they ask me how I am doing in certain areas.
- I can act interested in someone, even though I really don’t care.

- I sometimes withhold things from people because I fear how they will respond.
- I hide certain things about me because if people really knew them, they would think less of me.
- I know what the righteous thing to do is, but I don't because of what certain people will think of me.
- I have a hard time saying "no" to certain people.
- I feel most relaxed when no one is looking.

How did you rate? How many of the boxes above are checked? Here is the principle – if your life is lived for any other reason than being faithful to what you know God wants you to do, you are snared by the approval of man. Perhaps the most important Biblical text on the approval of man is found in **Matthew 6:1-18**:

<sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. <sup>2</sup>“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>3</sup>“But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. <sup>5</sup>“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>6</sup>“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup>“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup>“So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. . . <sup>16</sup>“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>17</sup>“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.”

This excerpt is from Jesus' famous *Sermon on the Mount*, where Jesus contrasted a true Kingdom citizen – a believer, against the make believer. The key verse of the sermon is **Matthew 5:20**, “**For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**”

- Who were the scribes and Pharisees?
- How would this statement have shocked the people of the day?
- What then did Jesus make as the test of salvation?

- What does that say about whose approval a kingdom citizen (a believer) lives for?

Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees in **Matthew 23:27-33**, “**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ...You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?**”

Jesus words to them are the truest commentary of their lives, and the surest test of ours – a mule dressed in a tuxedo is still a mule.

**what you are alone before God is all that you are, and nothing more.**

This passage then is about the choices that we must make alone before God, as to whether we will strive for His approval or live ensnared by the fear of man. Behind Jesus teaching, which focuses specifically on our spiritual disciplines (giving, praying, and fasting), His emphasis has to do why our motives – why we do what we do.

- Is Jesus condemning the practicing of righteousness in **v. 1**? What is he warning us against?
- What does Jesus’ language in **v. 2, 6, and 16** assume about you?
- How does Jesus condemn the scribes and Pharisees performance of righteousness in:

**6:2 –**

**6:6 –**

**6:16 -**

So the goal is to live righteously, purely for God’s notice, and not men. The question is: how big is your God? *In this study Jesus gives 3 contrasts that allow you to examine yourself, whether you live for the approval of man or of God, so that then you can make whatever changes are necessary to live your life in the ever near presence of God.*

## 1. WILL YOU FOCUS ON EXTERNAL ACTIONS OR INTERNAL ATTITUDES?

Here the issue is *why you do what you do*. In talking about the spiritual discipline of giving, Jesus referred to the relief efforts to the poor that were in the land. Some versions translate v. 2, “**when you give alms**” which is the technical term used to describe a merciful gift. But here, the religious hypocrites were taking advantage of the poverty of others.

- Does Jesus say that these people were concerned about the poor in v. 2? What were they concerned about?
- What does Jesus say is their motive for giving?

NOTE: Tradition tells us that there was a place in the city where anonymous donors could give alms, and the poor could collect them without anyone knowing. They had other options than this public exhibition.

- How does Jesus say they did this in prayer, according to v. 6?
- How do they compare to the Gentile pagans in v. 7? What was the comparison?
- How did they parade their supposed piety with fasting in v. 16?
- What is fasting?
- Hollywood has a word for this – what is it?
- What were the religious leaders hoping that people would conclude about them as a result of their external show?
- What does Jesus call them over and over in this section? What is a \_\_\_\_\_?

**1 Samuel 16:7, “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”**

**Luke 16:15, “And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.’ ”**

- What does Jesus say we should do instead?

**6:3 –**

**6:6 –**

**6:17 -**

- Why would Jesus commend these?
- Does that mean if someone sees us giving, praying, or fasting, we are in sin? What does it mean?

## **2. WILL YOU EXCEL AT PUBLIC DISPLAY OR PRIVATE DEVOTION?**

Here the question has to do with *how you do what you do*. The comparison is what you do in private vs. what you do in public.

- How does Jesus say in v. 2 the hypocrites do to draw attention to themselves?

NOTE: Trumpets were not allowed in the synagogues for such purposes. Most likely, Jesus is referring to the various ways that the scribes and Pharisees captured people’s attention, AS IF they had blown a huge trumpet to announce their giving. A modern day equivalent would be to take a \$5 bill and exchange it for pennies and nickels, and walk over to the emptiest steel drum to dribble it out as loud and long as possible.

- Where does Jesus say that the hypocrites loved to give? What do you know about these kinds of places?
- How does this practice show up in their praying, according to v. 5?
- Jesus implies that did they put on their gloomy faces the same way, as they were making their way outdoors, where people would see them! What did Jesus say we should do instead in the following verses?

**6:3-4 –**

**6:6 –**

**6:17-18 –**

And the question to ask, as to whether you are caught up in this or not is: where does the bulk of your righteousness happen?

### **3. WILL YOU LONG FOR TEMPORAL REWARD OR ETERNAL REWARD?**

Here the issue is *what do you hope to get out of what you do* – what reward you hope to receive.

- What is the outcome, according to Jesus, for external, public righteousness?

**6:1 –**

**6:2 –**

**6:5 –**

**6:7 –**

**6:16 –**

- What does this tell you about how lasting their reward is?
- What must a person forget, who strives after this kind of reward?

**John 5:44, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?”**

**Galatians 1:10, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”**

- What does Jesus say we should strive for instead?

**6:3-4 –**

**6:6 –**

**6:18 –**

- What is the believer’s eternal reward (**Matthew 25:13-20; 1 Corinthians 4:5**)?

Nome, Alaska is a beautiful vacation spot on the edge of the Bering Sea. It is like many villages of the Arctic. The ground on which the community sits is frozen, sponge-like tundra. But if you visit Nome in summer you’ll see front yards full of broken washing machines, junked cars, old toilets, scrap wood, and piles of non-degradable refuse.

Tourists who visit Nome in the summer are amazed at the debris and shake their heads. How could anyone live like that, they wonder. What those visitors do not realize is that for nine months of the year Nome sits under a blanket of snow that covers the garbage. During those months, the little town is a quaint winter wonderland of pure white landscapes. If you are like Nome, then some changes need to take place.

#### TRUTH IN THE LIFE

- Perhaps the greatest change that needs to take place is that you be born-again. Religious hypocrites will not see heaven, said Jesus. Only true believers, who demonstrate the genuineness of their salvation by living for God when no one is looking, and then even when the pressure is on and everyone is looking. Maybe you need to seek His eternal forgiveness through Christ.
- Maybe you have become very good at living one way before people, and another way alone. Maybe you need to run to your Father in heaven and seek His forgiveness. Then you need to approach someone stable in your life who will help you be accountable to live for God when no one is looking. But beware of practicing your righteousness for his or her sake, but use them to help remind you that the Lord desires **“truth in the innermost being” (Psa. 51:6).**