

What is your focus? Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Media profiles, branding, spin doctors, advertising strategies, networking, are probably terms my grandparents never encountered. However I am sure people were still concerned about their public image. Some years ago I recall reading some old cuttings related to the death of one of my forbears in the late 1800's. One spoke of this lady as maintaining her mental acuity uncompromised to the last, the other spoke of the cause of her death as senile dementia. No doubt one was written with a view to honour her image, the other as a standard official document. As people we care about how others perceive us. We are encouraged from an early age regarding the importance of having a good reputation. Yet patterns of behaviour can develop quite surreptitiously.

We do not always stop and consider what is motivating us. However like me, I assume you have realised periodically that you were really doing certain things just to please someone, sometimes that is a reasonable motive, human relationships require actions based on consideration of the other. The passage we looked at today is about the motivations behind our religious practices. Each of the practices mentioned require a measure of self-discipline.

Fasting, prayer and giving to the needy were expectations of the followers of God. Jesus does not give a specific command to engage in these practices, it is assumed that his followers will be doing these things, his instruction was regarding the motivation behind how they did these things. Were they doing it to please other people or to please God? Were they interested in human approval or Divine approval?

Jesus is speaking about people whose outward expressions of their faith had become a source of gaining kudos in the community. He is pointing his followers back to following God, to the depth of their relating to God personally, to that which no-one sees, except God. It is about - What do we (or they) do when no-one is watching?

We live in a very different culture to those whom these words were originally addressed. Acts of piety were highly esteemed by their broader culture, in our culture people seem to be embarrassed by such practices. In America church involvement seems to be a badge of honour, whereas in Australia it appears to be a choice which one will often be called upon to justify. We often struggle more with faith being seen only to be a private practice, which is not discussed in public forums. The effects of religious beliefs on our public behaviours are often concealed.

However as followers of Jesus we too are called to do everything in such a way that God is honoured.

Jesus speaks about four particular practices. Firstly Prayer. Prayer is to be God-centred, the choice of words is somewhat inconsequential, this is an encounter with God, there are no mandatory words or phrases, but we are called to engage with God, knowing that God hears. Prayer should not be assessed for its effect on the one praying, or those hearing the prayer (if its in a public context), it is to be wholly focused on God.

It reminds me of Jesus parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying. The Pharisee's prayer though addressed to God seems to be seeking approval of those listening also, *"I thank You that I am not like this tax collector....."* Whereas the prayer of the Tax Collector *"God be merciful to me a sinner"* was wholly focused on God. As we enter Lent it is a good time to look again at our own praying, to examine our approach to prayer, do we become too focused on our word choice rather than our focus on God in prayer? How are we going with our discipline in prayer?

Secondly Giving to those in need. Our giving should be done with a generosity of heart, which does not need recognition. It is a gift of service, a gift of love. It is an offering to God directed towards an individual. In times of financial uncertainty it is easy for fear of the future to limit our generosity. It requires discipline to continue to see the needs of others and to remain open to the ways in which we can demonstrate generosity in response to such needs.

Prayer and Giving have remained strong practices of followers of Jesus to this day, however then Jesus speaks about fasting. This is not something we often hear about in our churches, however to my friends in the Coptic Orthodox fasting is a common aspect of how they live out their Christian faith. As in Biblical times they use fasting to assist themselves to give earnest attention to God, to listen to God, to pray, to worship God. This is the type of fasting Jesus was advocating here.

In the early Christian church during one such time of fasting the church sensed God directing them to commission Paul and Barnabus to a specific work.¹ Jesus encouraged his disciples regarding the value of prayer and fasting in the work he was calling them to do.² Fasting should also prompt action, actions like serving the marginalised and being a voice for justice.³

The discipline of fasting is focused on building a greater awareness of God and responsiveness to God.

Finally Jesus speaks about the issue of possessions. The instruction begins with the words *“Do not store up”* which can be rendered *“stop storing up” “for yourselves treasures on earth”*⁴ It points to a re-orientation away from one type of acquisition to another.

Is your eye fixed on God or someone or something else? In a consumerist culture, we are particularly challenged to act counter-culturally in our approach towards our possessions. Jesus encourages his followers to live simply and to focus on what God alone can provide, treasures that endure.

The significance of our attitudes to our possessions is reinforced in the closing statement, which reminds us of the interconnectedness of the things which we treasure and the whole core of who we are as people. *“Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”* It is helpful to periodically reassess, What priority is our relationship with God having in the ways we spend our time and money and in the things we treasure, in what we seek from others?

As followers of Jesus we affirm that God alone is Lord over our lives. The practices of our faith, things like our praying, giving, fasting and our attitude to possessions should give form and substance to the reality of what God is really like.

Eugene Boring has said, *“You can tell what people believe not so much by what they say in church, but by the assumptions on which they habitually act.”*⁵

¹ Acts 13:2-4 NRSV

² Matt 17:20-21 NRSV

³ Isaiah 58

⁴ Matt 6:19a NRSV

⁵ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander e. Keck Ed. *The New Interpreters Bible: A commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Nashville, TN. :Abingdon Press, 1995) 206