

Are You Just Acting?

Matthew 6:1-8

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March 11, 2018

Last Monday night, the Oscars were handed out. Hollywood gave its top awards to those people who did the best job in movies for pretending to be someone else.

A very odd thing happened afterward at the Governor's Ball. A man named Terry Bryant swiped an Oscar. He stole an Oscar from Frances McDormand who won Best Actress for her performance in "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri."

He wasn't bashful about showing it off to some people either, saying "Who wants to wish me congratulations?"

But fortunately, after a photographer took his picture holding the trophy, the police were notified because the photographer did not recognize him as one of the winners and he was arrested.

Bryant was doing a good job of impersonating an actor with his trophy, but not good enough.

Some of you are good actors, too. Don't be so modest. You know you are. You just don't do your acting on a stage or in front of large crowds.

For example, some of you will point out to your teenagers the dangers of texting and driving and act as if you never do that in the privacy of your own car or truck.

Some of you complain about the government, and act as if you voted for a candidate, or that you side with one party over another, all the while knowing that you rarely take the time to vote.

Some of you hide things from your spouse. Some of you say you are sick and stay home from work when you are not.

When we come to church, we are all good at hiding our real selves from each other and sometimes we act like we have succeeded at hiding our real selves from God.

Let's be honest this morning. Let's take off the masks. We are all better actors than we give ourselves credit for. No one is going to give us an Oscar, but we should not want one for this kind of acting either.

When we pretend to be one way to win people's approval, while all the time we are another, we are no longer authentic. This makes us hypocrites.

The Greek word for "hypocrites" literally means stage actors. Jesus uses the word three times in Matthew 6 to describe the religious acts of people who were less than sincere in their actions.

Here are his three examples: when you give to the needy, when you pray, and when you fast. Jesus taught that they were not to do these things to bring attention to themselves, as the hypocrites did.

Before we drill down and look at each one of these individually, notice Jesus didn't even find it necessary to command religious people to do them.

It was a given that if you were faithful to God you gave to the poor, you prayed, and you fasted.

These were acts of righteousness Jesus expected people to do, however, you might recall that Jesus made a startling statement in Matthew 5:20, that unless their acts of righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they could not enter the kingdom of heaven.

That left people to wonder how it was possible for anyone to go to heaven.

Jesus wanted the people to see that even though the Pharisees had given their money to the poor, prayed, and fasted, they did these things in a way that forfeited their eternal reward.

It is possible to make our religion all about us.

But worship isn't supposed to be about us. It is supposed to be about God.

Jesus said when we give our money we shouldn't blow a trumpet and call attention to our giving as the Pharisees did in the synagogues and on the streets.

This appears to be one of Jesus' exaggerations, which might have brought some laughter.

It is doubtful that the Pharisees actually blew a trumpet to announce they were about to give their tithe, bragging about the amount of money they gave in the temple. In a humorous way, Jesus is pointing out how the people took something that should have been between them and God and made it about themselves.

Jesus said that we should not let our right hand know what our left hand is giving.

This is certainly an exaggeration, even an impossibility, that when we give to the needy we should not let our right hand know what our left hand is doing, so what we give might be done in secret.

Obviously, we cannot keep our right hand from knowing what our left hand is doing, but the point is that we should not be parading our giving habits to our neighbors. It should be a private matter between us and God.

When we give, Jesus is teaching that our desire in giving should not be the praise and approval of others. If that is our motivation, then whatever praise we get here will be our reward and it will short-circuit any reward the Lord might give to us in heaven.

Likewise, Jesus said that when we pray, our motives in praying should also be focused on God and not on ourselves.

This was the problem Jesus had with those who were standing out on street corners and in the synagogues praying. They were doing it to be seen by others.

Jesus had no problems with public prayer in the synagogue. That was normal. The synagogue was the house of prayer. It was the motive of the one praying that Jesus was calling into question.

The Pharisees spent time praying out in the streets to draw attention that they were praying so people would see how holy they were. That is not the motive for prayer God is looking for.

While public prayer is important and plays a worthy role in our corporate worship, prayer is mostly personal and private. Jesus instructs us to keep it that way.

We will come back next week and focus specifically on how the Lord taught his disciples to pray.

Finally, Jesus said that when we fast we shouldn't make a big deal about it and show everyone that we are hungry because we have gone without food.

In fact, Jesus said when you fast, you should try to go about your business in a way that nobody knows you are fasting.

I used to think Baptists were terrible at fasting, but could it be that we are so good at fasting that we just don't let anyone know we are fasting? Nah.

My guess is that Baptists don't miss many meals to focus on Jesus. I don't think this has been our strongest discipline.

Fasting is much more than just giving up food. We could be creative and declare a technology fast, like giving up watching T.V., or going online, or limiting our time on our phones, anything that reminds us to focus our attention on the Lord.

Jesus obviously believed that fasting was important. He included this in his list, along with prayer and giving money to those in need, as a way to worship. More importantly, we know that Jesus incorporated this discipline into his own life.

In each case, with the giving of our money, with our praying, and with our fasting, Jesus made a promise to us. He said that if we do these things, God will reward us.

When we do these things as a part of our worship, Jesus will reward us with purpose.

Our relationship with Jesus gives us purpose. We know to whom we belong and the purpose we are called to live.

Instead of being consumed with ourselves, we are taught to look beyond ourselves to others. There we find people to care for and minister to.

Not only will Jesus reward us with purpose; Jesus will also reward us with peace.

Regardless of whether we are experiencing good times or bad ones, we can always find something to give, some time to pray, and the discipline to fast.

If we do these things, it keeps us from being self-absorbed and consumed with the difficulties life may be throwing at us. Many times, when peace is elusive, it is because we are filled with self.

Jesus wants to free us from being self-centered. He wants us to center our lives on Him. To do this, we need to be intentional. Jesus gives us three ways to do this.

Jesus gives us the disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting.

Giving is much more than just giving our money.

It is giving our time.

It is giving our abilities.

It is giving our resources.

It is giving our space.

It is giving our empathy.

It is giving our interest.

It is giving our compassion.

It is giving our love.

It is giving our patience.

It is giving our wisdom.

It is giving our understanding.

It is giving our knowledge.

It is making sacrifices.

Praying is communication with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is experiencing the presence of God through all our senses.

It is acknowledging that God is with us, that God leads, guides, directs, speaks, listens, corrects, nudges, pulls, comforts, forgives, anoints, and leads us.

We pray for ourselves.

We pray for friends and we pray for enemies.

We pray for all God's creation.

We pray for God's will to be done.

We pray for direction, peace, salvation, comfort, hope, and justice.

Any emotion that we have or feel, we can pray about and talk to God about because he knows us and understands us.

Fasting is the discipline of doing without to help us focus on Jesus and what Jesus wants to carry out in us and through us.

When we focus on Jesus, we are reminded of our purpose, which is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Denying ourselves isn't among our strengths, but Jesus said that it should be a part of our faith journey. The more we practice, the more a part of us it becomes.

Fasting is one way to discipline ourselves to become like Jesus.

The big question posed by today's text is this: "Are these disciplines a part of your daily life or are you just acting like they are?"

If we held the Oscars for those of us who were most likely acting like they were following Jesus, would you win? Would you have people fooled? Would people be surprised what you were hiding in your hearts?

That's not an award any of us would want to win.

If you are just acting, today is the day to step off the actor's stage and to fully embrace these disciplines and see what a difference they can make in your relationship with Jesus and in your relationship to those around you.

If you had to pick just one of these disciplines to work on worship the Lord which one would you pick?

Now that you have chosen one, what are you going to act on it or be an actor?

Remember, Oscars for acting are only awarding in Hollywood, not in heaven.

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