

Do I Look The Part?
Matthew 6:1-6 & 16-18
Rev. Jean Smith

The Season of Lent is a special time in the life of a Christian. It is to be a time of reflection, a time of self-examination, a time when we look at our lives and ask questions like: “Am I living as I should?” “Do I look the part?”

We all have certain expectations of how we think things should be and how we think certain people should act. When people don’t meet those expectations, we notice. Dr. Ed Smith was seeing patients in his Family Practice one day when he heard his office staff laughing about something. The laughter continued and even got louder so he decided before he went into the examining room for his next patient, that he would check out what was going on. He slipped into the file room and asked, “What’s so funny? I can hear you all the way down the hall?” One of them spoke up, saying, “Well, doc, it appears that you have a very interesting patient coming up,” and she pointed to the window looking out into the waiting room. There was a woman dressed in tight jeans and a halter top with long blond hair, complete with body piercings and tattoos. The doctor said, “I don’t get it. What’s the so funny?” The office staff replied, “Well, according to the New Patient Information Form she just filled out, she’s a nun.”

So when the doctor met the woman in the examining room for the first time, he said, “So, you have a very interesting occupation according to your form.” The woman replied in protest, “I ain’t got no occupation. I wrote on the form “nun.”

How quickly we are to notice when others don’t look the part they claim. Inconsistencies in other people can give us a good laugh, but there’s nothing funny about someone claiming to be a Christian when they’re not living like one.

What does a Christian look like anyway? Here’s what Jesus has to say:

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

“But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-6 & 16-18)

According to this passage, a Christian is to be a person whose life is filled with charity, prayer and fasting. In the practice of true religion, these are the exercises of the sincere believer. We are to be people of compassionate giving, prayerful living and frequent fasting.

But Jesus warns us against doing these things for the wrong reason. ***“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*** (v. 1) The ‘acts of righteousness’ to which Jesus is referring are: 1) giving to those who are in need, 2) praying to the Father in heaven, and 3) fasting from something for a time so that we can be more involved in prayer and helping others. That something has traditionally been food, but it could be an activity other than

eating, like watching television or playing video games. The purpose of fasting is to make more time for prayer and study and helping others.

These 'acts of righteousness' are to be gifts unto the Lord, as a sign of our gratitude for all that He has done for us in Jesus Christ. They are to be offered to the Lord as gifts of gratitude for His grace and mercy. We are to do our 'acts of righteousness' for the Lord. When we do them for others to see so they will think more highly of us, then we have failed to do them for the right reason.

Jesus isn't telling us to hide the good things we are doing. He wants us to let our light shine before others. In the chapter just before the one I just read from Jesus tells us, "*Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:16) Now it appears that he's telling us the opposite thing. "*When you give...do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*" (v. 3) According to this, we are to give in secret. We are to pray in secret. We are to fast in secret. How do we let our lights shine before men AND do our acts of righteousness in secret?

I want to suggest to you that the light we are to let shine comes from our gratitude to God and not from the acts themselves. It is our motive for doing the giving, the praying and the fasting that gives light to the world. It is our gratitude to God that shines light in the darkness of a broken and sinful world. We do our good works, not so we can be noticed, but so Jesus can be noticed. He is the Light of the World and the source of all goodness and light. Our good works are to point to Him, not to ourselves. We are to do our good works in His strength, not our own, so that He receives all the glory. Our good works are to be a gift of gratitude to God for the self-less sacrifice of Jesus Christ who went to the cross for us, paying our penalty and dying our death so that we may be restored to a right relationship with our Father in heaven.

Our alms-giving, our prayers, and our fasting are to be given unto the Lord as gifts of gratitude. Living a life of sacrifice as a way of expressing gratitude to God is the mark of a sincere and authentic Christian.

When we do acts of righteousness in order to impress others, we're doing them for the wrong reason. We're doing them to draw attention to ourselves. In essence, we are robbing from God and God will not let us enjoy what we have stolen from Him. He will not let us keep what we have stolen from Him. When we pray or give or make sacrifices to impress others we will inevitably end up seriously disappointed, angry and even resentful when others don't notice us and when praise doesn't come to us and even when it does it will feel empty because God will not allow us to keep what is rightfully His.

In a devotional titled, *A Six-Point Formula for Spiritual Failure*, author Patrick Morley, the founder of the Promise Keeper movement, talks about this very issue. He shares the story of an elder named Ed. Ed gave his whole life in service to the church and after twenty years he was so disillusioned and embittered that he walked away. Morley says what should make us shutter is the frequency with which this scenario repeats itself. We all know people who have become embittered and have walked away, not only from the church but from God, too. Morley says the only thing worse is perhaps people who have become embittered and yet stay around to criticize and find fault with those who are trying to sincerely serve the Lord for the right reason, which is out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us.

Sometimes our lives get so turned around that we feel like chucking the whole thing. These are moments of spiritual disillusionment and they occur when we follow the **SIX STEPS TO SPIRITUAL FAILURE**.

STEP ONE is to GO WITH THE FLOW OF LIFE. Don't give too much thought to knowing Jesus Christ more intimately day by day. Think of Him more as a distant relative than a close friend. Let life's natural currents take you where they may. Presume that spiritual growth will occur naturally. Don't expend too much time in reflection, examining life's larger purposes and meaning. It will only give you a headache.

STEP TWO is to IMMERSE YOURSELF IN CHRISTIAN WORK. One of the great secrets to finding spiritual disillusionment is to give yourself fully to the busyness of Christian life. Be there every time the church doors open. Cook the pancakes, balance the budget, call on all the first-time visitors. Spend your

time doing the work of God, and don't get bogged down in the Scriptures and in prayer for the saints. It's okay not to know your spiritual gifts because you can employ your natural abilities for service. Let your credo be: "To serve Him is to know Him."

STEP THREE is to DO MORE FOR GOD EACH YEAR. Measure your value to God by results. Keep records of your spiritual production. If you spent one hundred hours in Christian service last year, then make one hundred and twenty hours your goal this year. Make performance the acid test of your spirituality. Don't listen to idle chatter that faithfulness is more important than production. Be American – let performance be your standard.

STEP FOUR is to LOOK FOR CONSTANT FEEDBACK FROM FRIENDS. Measure your spiritual value by the feedback you get from other people. Depend on the appreciation and affirmation of the brothers and sisters. Savor the comments of your friends; turn them over and over in your mind. Believe what they say. Let their strokes provide energy, strength, and encouragement. Gain your identity in your accomplishments. Derive your self-worth from how others value your achievements, possibly in commerce, but especially in ministry.

STEP FIVE is to BUILD A REPUTATION. Pick service to God that is high visibility. Gain a reputation. Don't be satisfied being a servant; become the leader, get put in charge. If you can become somebody important, you can make a bigger contribution. Don't think much about doing service for the glory of God. He can manage His own glory. Do your service in such a way that you are noticed. This is an excellent way to advance to bigger and better opportunities to serve God.

STEP SIX is to CONCENTRATE ON WORK THAT HELPS PEOPLE. People really are very needy, you know, and if you position yourself correctly, you can become like a mini Mother Teresa. Keep telling yourself that working for the betterment of mankind is worth it. It is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. Convince yourself that you will leave the world a better place. Believe that the issue on Christ's mind is easing the pain of life alone, not seeking and saving the lost sinners. Don't focus on the distinction between showing human sympathy and confronting lost sinners with the loving claims of the gospel.

Morley ends by saying that the way to spiritual success is the opposite of the Six Steps to Spiritual Failure. He says, "*With Christ, success is not performance; it is surrender. To succeed is to surrender our motives, ambitions, and priorities to Christ. Seek to know Him more personally. Measure your worth and gain your identity by faithfulness to Christ, not by production. Let your service come from the overflow of a vital daily communion with the Living Lord.*"

One of the most meaningful articles I've ever read, on this subject of doing your good deeds unto the Lord and not unto others, was written by a young man working at a church as a youth minister. He was so overwhelmed by the negative comments and criticisms of some of the people in the church concerning his work with the youth. The harder he tried to do a good job, the more people found fault with him. In despair he turned to his father, who was a very successful pastor in a large thriving church and he bemoaned his situation. His father gave him this advice, "*My son, you have but one person to please as you do your work and that person is Jesus Christ. He is the audience you must please. Keep that in mind and do your work unto Him and you will succeed.*" (Charles Stanley to Andy Stanley)

We are to do our acts of righteous unto the Lord Jesus Christ. Our compassionate use of our accumulated wealth, our prayers on behalf of others, our fasting – all our acts of righteousness are to be done for an audience of One – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jonathan Edwards, the greatest Christian theologian and teacher our country has ever produced, wrote this in his personal journal: "*Resolved: that all men [and women] should live for the glory of God. Resolved second: that whether others do or not, I will.*"

Let us take the opportunity this Lenten Season to join Jonathan Edwards in this resolve to live to the glory of God, whether others do or not. Let us resist doing good for others to see and praise us, rather let us do good in such a way that others will praise our Father who is in heaven.