

Minding and Mending My Heart

As many of you know, Diane and I are in the process of moving to the Bay area from Southern California. You may not know that until my mid-twenties I lived in Malibu where many of today's stars make their homes. I've lived most of my life surrounded by the influence of Hollywood. I have encountered some of the biggest actors and actresses of today and from the past. Sometimes I'd meet them through my employment with a home improvements company and other times just by shopping at the same grocery Store. They were generally pleasant people. But I always had to remind myself that they weren't the characters they portrayed. It took me a few seconds to remember that they were, after all, only actors and actresses. They were pretending.

But when it comes to my desire to follow Jesus, He doesn't want me to pretend. He wants me to be genuine and sincere . . . to be real and authentic in my faith and actions. In chapter 5 Jesus exposed commonly held beliefs which fell short of God's original intention. In effect, He raised the "bar" of righteousness for those who choose to follow Him. But it's not just a matter of doing more or better things. Jesus isn't setting up a higher standard for us to perform to. That was the practice and tendency of the Pharisees. A tendency to do the right things God wants me to do but for my own "performance" motives. You see, God doesn't want me to pretend when I do right things. But that's exactly what happens when I have selfish motives. If I do right things with wrong motives, it reveals that I have a heart problem Jesus calls "hypocrisy."

Hypocrisy hurts me because I feel like a phony, I fear discovery, and I fail to experience God's reward. Also, hypocrisy hurts those around me because it turns people off to seeking time with me, involvement with the church I attend, and even a relationship with God I love. Children

are especially alert to hypocrisy, as all parents know. Their hypocrisy antenna is always "up."

So how can I avoid doing right things for wrong or selfish motives? Jesus calls me to do a "heart check" . . . like the commercials for "Americascan" and "Heart Check America. My heart drives my emotions and directs my decisions. Hypocrisy is a disease that attacks my heart and deadens my relationship with my heavenly Father. And if you think your heart is fine, let's look at Jeremiah 17:9 to see what God says about our hearts, "**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?**"

As we start to look at chapter 6, we need to preview three important inter-related concepts Jesus addresses. The first is "hypocrisy." My motives, not my actions, reveal whether I am a hypocrite or not. The Greeks used this term to describe a stage player who acted from behind a mask. In other words, a pretender or impersonator. I know I don't like being called a hypocrite. I don't think anyone does.

Next Jesus talks about "secrecy." Secrecy means to hide from others what we do or who we are. Remember; however, even though you can hide things from man you can never hide them from God. The secrecy mentioned in chapter 6 is not a contradiction of Matthew 5:16. The balance between Matthew 5:16 and 6:1 is that we are to be seen doing good works but we must not do good works in order to be seen.

Finally, He uses the idea of a "reward." The core of what He says is that your reward will come from the ones or one to whom you reveal your right acts. Jesus says you cannot pursue a reward from men and expect God's reward as well. In fact, He uses two different words to describe each reward. We'll explore that more as we come to it in the passage itself.

Before we continue, let me ask you a question. What actions or attitudes would cause you to identify someone as godly or righteous? Possibly you might think that someone who attends church would fit that category. Certainly, you might think of someone who gives money to meet the needs of others. You probably would identify Community Group Leaders who devote themselves to study and lead others in discovering life-changing truths in God's Word as godly. You might see an usher in that light as well. And the list goes on. All of these are legitimate expressions of our love for God and this church family. But there is a hidden danger. Jesus wants me to know about it and show me how to avoid it.

So how does Jesus use these three concepts to help us mind and mend and keep our heart healthy? What are the symptoms that tell me I have a heart problem? It's time to look at verse 1 to see how Jesus diagnoses my heart problem.

Diagnosing My Heart Problem (6:1)

First Jesus says to **"be careful."** Or, as the King James Version says, "take heed." He's saying I need to turn my mind and attention towards something. To take a moment and think . . . to consider or ponder what He's about to say. Jesus is asking me to analyze and evaluate myself. What He wants me to examine is my actions and why I do what I do. If I don't, it's like pretending I don't have an illness or refusing to go to a doctor or dentist for fear they may find a problem.

Jesus directs me to look at my **"acts of righteousness"**. Righteousness is, basically, doing right things. Acts of righteousness include more than the three illustrations Jesus gives in chapter 6. These are only examples to make his point. The idea behind this phrase would include everything I might do in the name of serving or being obedient to God.

And here's what I am asked to examine: am I doing these acts **"to be seen"** by men? What's my motive? I need to examine my motives and be sure that God is the one I am trying to please, not people. Jesus wasn't criticizing people for doing righteous acts. No. He's

not talking about WHAT I do but rather HOW and ultimately WHY I do what I do.

The real force that generates wrong motives is pride. My pride can take two forms. First, I may not want people to know what or who I really am. And there's a second kind of pride. It's the kind of pride Jesus is talking about in chapter 6. It is a pride that attempts to project myself as someone or something that I am not. This second type of pride motivates me to do things so that others give me attention and recognition. We look good to others but what does God see and think? You know the passage, 1 Samuel 16:7b, **" . . . The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."** God is not impressed by my attempts to impress other men. As for the reward mentioned here, again, we'll discuss that when we look at the first "Heart Check" Jesus gives us. Let's do that now.

Heart Check #1: My Giving (6:2-4)

When we see the word **"So,"** that means that what follows is related to the concern and warning Jesus just presented. What's coming is the first of three examples, or heart checks, that we can use to evaluate our motives. We'll only look at the first two today. Also, Jesus says **"When."** Both here and in verse 5, there is an assumption that the right acts mentioned here would be the natural and normal practice of every believer. Jesus says "when" not "if."

The first "heart check" Jesus gives me is why I **"give to the needy."** Let's not get hung up on the method of giving. Jesus is aiming at why we give. He says that when some people give they **"announce it with trumpets."** This practice is hard to identify in history. Best estimates are that it could mean anything from the literal hiring of trumpeters to precede a wealthy giver to the sound coins landing in a synagogue's offering box. This passage may be the source for our expression today of someone "tooting their own horn." What we can be certain of is that these givers made a big show of what they did. They made sure they got everyone's attention.

Why is this giver called a "**hypocrite?**" Because they are pretending to meet the needs of others but in reality they are meeting their own needs for approval and recognition, "**to be honored by men.**" They were showing off. Using their wealth to bring attention to themselves. Jesus says, this being their motive, they have "**their reward in full.**"

And what is the reward for this person? The notoriety and praise they just received from men. It is like receiving payment for a bill you submitted. A simple payment due for services rendered. It's like when your boss sees your work and pays you for it. It would be the same for a waiter or waitress when a customer pays their tab but without a tip. Jesus says, "You wanted recognition? You've got it." It's a reward you will have until the day you die. And then you will have nothing.

My "heart check" has diagnosed a problem. Now, Jesus gives me the cure, the correction for what my heart check revealed. What is His prescription? He gives it in verse 3. He says when you give to the needy, "**do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.**" This is a difficult expression to understand but let me use a true story to illustrate what Jesus meant.

Recently, in a group of successful Christian Silicon Valley executives, one member of the group was extolling the virtues of a particular national Christian ministry. He wanted to influence his colleagues to join him and become active financial supporters. What he didn't know was that one of those listening had already been financially involved with that ministry for years and was a substantial giver.

So how did this second executive react? Did he jump in and say, "I've given to that ministry for years too!" Did he say, "I'll match anybody's gift to that ministry.?" No. He said nothing. He brought no attention to his giving. He kept his giving secret. But remember, you can only keep it secret from men. Our heavenly Father sees and knows exactly what that executive and we do in secret.

Jesus says that if I do right acts secretly and without trying to get man's attention and praise, my

heavenly Father will see it anyway and I will receive a reward. But this reward is different from the reward of the hypocrite. The reward God gives to those who do right things simply because it pleases God will be re-paid over and over again. Moses understood the value of this reward. Hebrews 11:24-26 says, "**By faith Moses . . . chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.**"

The Father's reward for those who do right things with right motives makes the reward of the hypocrite puny and insignificant by comparison. I can remember that as a child, all I wanted to do was to please my father and feel his approval. And our heavenly Father wants us to have that same focus on Him. If I focus on receiving man's favor, I will miss the joy of a deepening relationship with Him. The reward we receive from our heavenly Father is both here, a deepening intimate relationship, and future, a warm welcome into God's presence for all eternity.

Now we come to Jesus' second diagnostic heart check: my prayers. Are my motives right when I pray? Do my prayers reveal that my heart suffers from hypocrisy? If it does, what does Jesus tell me to do about it?

Heart Check #2: My Prayers (6:5-8)

"**And**" takes us back to verse 1. So here Jesus is giving us another check for our heart. Once again He starts with a common practice of the day and labels it as hypocrisy. Think of it, what better place to get your ego needs met than standing in the synagogues or on the street corner. And again they receive the praise of men but that is all they will receive. The hypocrisy is found in that although prayer should be directed to God alone, these outwardly righteous pray-ers were actually directing their prayers to seek the notice and approval of other men.

If we find that we tend to pray to the audience like the person described here, Jesus gives us a prescription. He says get into your room before you pray. Now a room or a closet, as some have translated it, would be today's

equivalent of a storeroom. You could close and lock it and be secure from anyone coming in and discovering you in prayer. Again, Jesus' remedy to prayer that seeks recognition from man rather than intimacy with God is secrecy or seclusion. Don't miss that point. The context of the passage makes it clear that the purpose of this seclusion was not to be able to collect your thoughts. Rather, it was so you could pray in secret, without attracting the attention of men. The focus is not on solitude but secrecy, not method but motive. Jesus was no hypocrite. He practiced what He preached. Luke 1:35 tells us that, "**Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.**"

But what about us? It's not always easy or possible to find or get to a mountainside in Foster City. And don't get hung up on the room or closet idea either. Jesus' point was to avoid pride and a desire for self-recognition to infiltrate our legitimate desire to pray to our God. There are dozens, even hundreds, of places and ways that I can do that. I can pray on a bench by the Bay. I can pray as I walk, jog, or bike on a path. Some of you are in the car by yourself twice a day. And if your only option is to lock yourself in a room or climb a mountain, then do that. But remember that the purpose is to pray in secret . . . just you and God without an audience to impress. The same reward as the one who gives with right motives is given to the one who prays with right motives. There is no hypocrisy when our prayers are done in secret and only to be seen by God.

Jesus has a final caution and warning for us in verses 7 and 8. It concerns the practice of "**babbling.**" You've heard of psychobabble. Well, here we have something we can call spiritual-babble. It's the opposite of a clear and coherent prayer that flows from a personal relationship with Jesus and is a conversation with our Father. The nations and people who were not connected to Israel's God had resorted to this practice because they worshipped impersonal false gods.

Jesus ties an additional prayer practice of seemingly endless repetition or "**many words**" to "babbling." This is the repeating of words without interacting with what you're saying or to whom you're saying them. Apparently, the Jews had picked up the practice as well. The belief was that if you told God often enough what you needed and wanted you could wear Him down and get your way. If God didn't give you the answer you wanted the first, second or third time, just keep on talking till He says yes. Jesus is not against devoting time to prayer but to trying to manipulate God in the same way the pagans of that day tried to control their gods with many words that were meaningless and impersonal. That kind of prayer places God on the same level as false idols.

I have to confess, I sometimes babble. Sometimes I realize that I've been praying without really thinking about what I'm saying. It's just been words in the air. I call it praying "gobble-gook." I have to stop and ask for God's forgiveness. It's rude to talk to God or anyone when you really don't want to have a personal conversation with them.

Then Jesus shakes the very foundation of my prayer life when He says, "**your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.**" Well, I thought that was why I was praying, because He needed my input. If that's not the reason then what is it? Why do I need to pray? It is this: Praying means I recognize God's value and ability to meet my needs and my own inability to live without Him. Prayer proves that we love and trust Him. You see, my Father is intimately aware of my needs. That's what that word "knows" means. That's true because I have a personal relationship with Him. He doesn't need my input, rather, I need to wait and receive His provision. Prayer doesn't always change things but sincere prayer always changes me. Although the Father already knows our needs, He wishes us to grow in our trust and dependency on Him.

You know, it's very interesting. Jesus tells us that we shouldn't pray with repetitious words when we really aren't interacting with or have a desire to speak intimately with