

“Keeping It Real”

Matthew 6:1-18

Series: In Not Of Week 4. Act Honestly

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It makes you take a double take. You recognize the haircut and sweater of Mr. Rogers. But as he sings and plays the keys, you suddenly realize it's the voice and face of the Terminator: Arnold Schwarzenegger! His song tells children there are other ways to deal with your anger. But it's so realistic you expect him to end with “Get out of my neighborhood! Hasta la vista Baby!”

It's just one of the latest developments in Deepfakes – pictures and videos created by Artificial Intelligence. Using facial-mapping software, Deepfakes are very realistic impersonations of people – usually politicians, actors, musicians and other celebrities. With this technology, Deepfake creators can spread misinformation by making the person do or say something they did not. AI is making it increasingly difficult to know what's true and what's not, what's real and what's fake. The difference can be dangerous. For example, in March 2022, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Ukrainian public was surprised to see a video of their president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, urging the military to lay down their weapons and surrender to the invading forces. As the video spread on social media and the news, Zelenskyy's office quickly denied its authenticity. The video was a Deepfake created by Russian propagandists.

Jesus had some strong words to say against FaithFakes – people who act religious, pretend to be pious, do the right things but for the wrong reason. In Chapter 6 of the Sermon on the Mount He teaches how to spot FaithFakes and how to have DeepFaith.

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. Matthew 6:1

Jesus focuses on three specific ‘acts of righteousness’- giving, praying and fasting. He begins by teaching us the wrong way to give, pray and fast. He says to avoid **Putting on a Performance for People**.

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. Matthew 6:2

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. Matthew 6:5

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. Matthew 6:16

These passages are often misunderstood. Some believe Jesus is saying we should never talk about money in public, especially not in worship. Those who feel uncomfortable praying out loud point to these verses to support silent prayer. The same can be said for fasting. Yet Jesus isn't afraid to talk about money. Many of his parables involve money: the Rich Fool, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin, the Hidden Treasure, the Good Samaritan. Nor does Jesus forbid praying aloud. If He did, He immediately breaks that rule four verses later when He prays what we call the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus wants us to avoid turning giving, prayer and fasting into a performance. PBS commentator Bill Moyers was once the Press Secretary to President Lyndon Johnson. Moyers was also a Baptist minister. Once Johnson asked him to say grace at a meal in the White House. When Moyers began praying softly, the President interrupted him with "Speak up, Bill!" Speak up!" Bill Moyers stopped in mid-sentence and without looking up replied steadily, "I wasn't addressing you, Mr. President."¹

Jesus does not want us to show off. His word for Deepfake is "hypocrite." It literally means an actor, someone who pretends to be someone he or she is not. The phrase "to be seen by men" describes someone performing on stage in the spotlight. If you give, pray or fast to impress people, Jesus says, that's all the reward you'll receive. And fame is a worthless reward. Just ask someone who is an actor in the spotlight: Brad Pitt. He once told Rolling Stone Magazine,

Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that. I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it doesn't help you sleep any better, and you don't wake up any better because of it.²

Let's not use giving, prayer or fasting to impress other people. In fact, one of the worst thing we can do is be people pleasers. There is only one person to please: your Father in Heaven and He loves you unconditionally. Let's daily live to please Him.

This leads to a second problem to avoid: **Passing Up an Appointment with God.** 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. Matthew 6:3-4

But 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. Matthew 6:6

¹ From Don Oberdorfer, Washington Post in Reader's Digest, April, 1980.

² Rolling Stone (10-28-99).

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 6:17-18

I know we are supposed to “pray continually” (I Thessalonians 5:17). Many of you tell me you even pray while you are driving. Considering the aggressive drivers around here, I completely understand. I just don’t recommend you do that with your eyes closed. I’m sure there are a lot of people on the roads using God’s name – not all of them are prayers.

Giving, praying and fasting are a lifestyle. Yet they only become a way of life when we make time for them and practice them. Humans are full of good intentions. We intend to give, we intend to pray, some of us even intend to fast. But then life gets in the way and urgent demands crowd out what’s truly important. We need help to turn our good intentions into good actions. That’s why we have Celebration Sunday next week – it turns our intentions into a decision about giving. That’s why I give you a bookmark to help you read verses from the Sermon on the Mount and get more out of them. It reminds you to make time to read God’s Word and pray.

Plan out your giving, praying and fasting. We ask people to make a pledge to God’s work at Woodside because a commitment helps you make it a regular practice. This is why you hear me preach repeatedly about making time in your schedule for Bible reading and prayer, for worship in a large group and study in a small group. These plans help you make these a regular practice in your life. This is why it’s good to designate a time to fast – to sacrificially give up to God something valuable – so you discover how God is more valuable than what you give up. These appointments with God turn good intentions into a lifestyle of good actions.

Nothing compares to a daily appointment one-on-one with the King of the Universe. It takes time, planning, and commitment to do what Jesus teaches. I know it’s hard to find a room that is distraction free. But it is worth it. Why is a daily quiet time with God so essential? I am married. I am married when I am at work, in the car, at the grocery store. I am married even when I am not with my wife. A couple can be married, be in the same house, yet never be with each other. Healthy relationships require one-on-one time for communication and cooperation. This is especially true of your relationship with God. You are with the Lord all the time. Yet there is no substitute for time alone with Jesus. When people ask me why their spiritual life feels flat, my first question is: how is your quiet time? Are you making time to be alone with Him?

That leads to the third thing to avoid: **Pushing Our Agenda on God.** At the end of each of these three spiritual practices Jesus says,

Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:4,6,18

So is that why we give, pray, and fast: to get rewards from God? A person might assume, ‘if I just give more to God, pray more to God and fast more for God, He will fulfill my wishes, do my will and follow my agenda.’ Some churches preach what’s called, “Name it and Claim it.” They say if you are following God’s Word, if you are a child of the King

then, as a King's kid you should be able to name and claim whatever reward you want from a larger house to a luxury car to the latest iphone. They use giving, prayer and fasting for selfish reasons – to push God to give them what we want. But what if your guaranteed reward doesn't arrive? Then, these preachers say, it's your fault. You don't have enough faith. Keep trying harder. And when this doesn't happen, many ask, "Do giving, prayer and fasting work?"

It's a difficult question. And maybe the question is the problem. Giving, prayer and fasting are not machines that we use when they work and discard when they don't. We do these three not because they give us results, but a relationship with God. That would be like forming a friendship, getting married or raising children only to achieve the proper results. A woman took her husband to the doctor. After giving the man a thorough check-up, the doctor said to the wife, "I don't like the looks of him." She replied, "I don't like the looks of him either, Doc, but he's always been good to the children, so I'll keep him." True relationships are based on love not results. Giving, prayer and fasting give us a relationship with God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches a radical, some say blasphemous, idea. He calls God "His Father" and teaches us to do the same in prayer (Matthew 6:6, 9). We do not appreciate what an earth-shaking, life-changing gift this is. In the Old Testament, people trembled in fear before the Righteous and Holy God. To stand in His presence meant instant annihilation. But now the Son of God opens the door for us to have an intimate, loving relationship with His Father. Jesus says giving, prayer, and fasting are the way we deepen that relationship – to have Deepfaith. The reward is a loving, healing, soul-strengthening relationship with your Heavenly Father.

The primary purpose of giving, prayer and fasting is not to change God or to change our circumstances (although that happens sometimes), but to change you and me. The Apollo astronauts made it to the moon because they aligned themselves with its gravitational pull. They did not think, for one moment, that they were pulling the moon towards themselves. Giving, prayer and fasting do not so much convince God to do our agenda as it draws us closer to God so we can follow His way. That's why, at the center of these verses is the prayer which says, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Giving, prayer and fasting align our lives with the gravitational pull of God's Kingdom. We pray, tell God our requests and then submit to His will. That's the way to keep it real.

I started this sermon with a Deepfake picture of Mr. Rogers – a Presbyterian minister who created a television show in Pittsburgh for children. Let me tell about another Pittsburgh native who quietly served the children of that city. For 30 years, Albert Lexi was the shoe-shine man in Pittsburgh's Children's Hospital. He buffed and polished thousands of shoes for a mere \$5. Over time fewer people got their shoes shined. Albert seemed like a relic of the past, probably overlooked by many who pass through the hospital corridors.

Overlooked but not forgotten. Albert leaves behind a legacy. From the very first pair of shoes he shined, Albert resolved to give a third of his earning and all the tips to the Children's Hospital Free Care Fund, which helps parents who can't afford to pay for their sick children's medical costs.

How much can one shoe-shine man give? Over \$200,000.³
Albert Lexie was the real deal.

³ Associated Press, "Pennsylvania shoeshine man gives hospital \$200G in tips" (2-21-13)