

Spiritual Show-offs

Jesus said, “Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, TO BE SEEN OF THEM, else ye have no reward with your Father in heaven” (Mt 6:1). Years ago I was pastoring in Los Angeles and served on a steering committee to host an area-wide National Day of Prayer event. Most of the other pastors on the committee were Evangelical or Pentecostal. Since I had been invited to do one of the prayers at this event, I wanted my pastor friends to see that Presbyterians could pray too! So when my turn came, I went to the microphone, lifted my hands in the air, and I prayed long, I prayed hard, and I prayed loud. Immediately after I sat down, one of the pastors leaned over to me and said, “That was an anointed prayer!” And unbeknownst to me at the time, a photographer for the LA Times was at the event, and he took my picture as I stood there with arms raised, eyes closed, and mouth full of the praises of God. The next day in the paper, there was my picture right on the front of that section!

Possibly it was an anointed prayer. But some weeks later, the Lord gently helped me understand that my praying long and hard and loud had not been done to seek Him as much as it had been to seek praise from my fellow pastors. So, the reward I received was their comments and my photo in the paper—but that was it—no praise from the Lord. See, that is our choice. We can do our “acts of righteousness” to be seen by others, and if so, then whatever “reward” that brings us will be it. Or, we can do our acts of righteousness before the secret eye of Him alone—and Jesus will reward us. We get to pick. For me, having repented of such behavior many times, I now choose to seek the praise of the Father and not men.

There is nothing wrong at all in having others witness our “acts of righteousness.” In fact, often it is required that we do so. Jesus said, “Let your light shine BEFORE MEN; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16). We certainly cannot give way to fear and hide our public witness of Jesus. Remember Jesus also said, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father’s glory and with the holy angels” (Mk 8:38). What our choice must be though, especially when it comes to doing things in public considered “spiritual” or religious, is to do those things exclusively for the praise of God, whether others applaud us or condemn us. God knows our heart. He knows what we do to honor Him. And He will reward us for it!