

Loved Always Sermon Series
“We Perform”
Matthew 6:1-4
Rev. Joy Laughridge
March 8, 2026

We begin the third week of Lent today which brings us to the third week in our *Loved Always* sermon series. Our series is tying into a devotional that our music director has written that many of you are reading, and each week we're focusing on one Scripture and reflection from the daily readings.

Today we are looking at a passage in Matthew that comes from the Sermon on the Mount. These verses are part of a longer passage that is typically read at the very beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, and in the passage, Jesus talks about three different spiritual practices: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. This morning, we are just looking at the first four verses where Jesus talks about giving to the poor. Let's listen to the Scripture.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.² “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

As we listen to these words, it is not lost on me that we have just embarked this month on a very *public* campaign to bring in and collect 5000lbs of food for people in our community who are

struggling with food insecurity. We haven't literally sounded a trumpet, but we've done the equivalent with flyers, and social media posts, and through verbal invitations. There is nothing secret about the March MEGA Drive, and now this morning we hear Jesus saying, "beware of practicing your righteousness before others..." Is this when we ought to say "uh oh," and rush to take the social media posts down and throw the flyers in the trash?

Well, what Jesus says in Matthew 6 certainly can be applied as we do our food drive this month, but he isn't just condemning or discouraging all public good works. Sometimes public expressions of faith and good deeds can be done for good reasons. One good reason for making a big deal of our food drive this month is so that more people can get involved which will hopefully translate into more food for more people who need it.

So, public good deeds aren't automatically bad, *but* going public *can* make us vulnerable to certain temptations which is what Jesus is really getting at in this passage. He names the particular temptation when he warns against practicing our righteousness in front of others so *that* we can receive praise and recognition from them.

I know it's easy to read a passage like this and be quick to say, "that's not a problem for me. My good works are motivated purely by my love for Jesus and a desire to do his will." Or, "my generosity is motivated by the genuine compassion that I have for others who are in need. It is enough for me to know that I have helped someone, and I don't need anyone to recognize me or give me any kind of reward."

I do not doubt the sincerity of any of us who would say those things. Many of us do good works because we like to and want to. That is one reason I love this congregation so much. Because you are such faithful doers of good, but I wonder if can we also be honest and

say that when we do get praise from others, it does kind of feel good, doesn't it? Admittedly, my love language is words of affirmation, so I am especially susceptible to getting a good feeling if I'm praised, but I think we all feel it to a degree. When you get caught doing something good, you stand a little taller and your smile stretches a little wider before you even have a chance to think about it, and maybe you feel something that feels like acceptance, or worthiness, or validation. It's almost a feeling of relief like, *Shew! If others can see that I'm a good person, I must be a good person.*

If you do think or feel something like that after you've done something good and been praised for it, it's not a sign of some kind of moral deficiency. There *is* an inner need inside of everyone for the assurance that we are loveable and have purpose, so it's not wrong to want to feel those things. The problem that many people run into is that we are prone to go looking for validation and love in the wrong ways and in the wrong places.

Within the bounds of Christian culture, we are generally well warned about the dangers of turning to money, or drugs, or sex, or power to satisfy our deepest longings, but maybe we are less attuned to the danger of what Jesus brings out in this Scripture. Here, Jesus confronts us with the possibility that we can go astray even with religious activity and good works. We can even turn these things into another means by which we try to prove ourselves and our worth. I can confirm this from my own experience.

As I have reflected honestly on some of my own experiences as a child in church, and attending several summers at Bible camp, and as a young adult attending a Christian college, I have come to realize that sometimes my religious zeal in those environments was motivated by self-serving interests. I could feel that itch - the need to know that I mattered, and that I was good enough for the people in my

community, and, even more importantly, for God – and I found out that I could get that itch scratched if I did good stuff that impressed people. Without realizing it, my faith was becoming very performative.

In Joshua's devotional reflection on this passage, he talks about this temptation and points out that most of the time we don't set out to perform. I know that was never my conscious intention. When I would volunteer as a 10 year old to lead a prayer out loud at camp, I didn't *think* I was doing it so that the adults would come up to me afterward and tell me how proud of me they were and what a wonderful little disciple I was, but I do think now that that was part of it.

When we do good works or devote ourselves to spiritual practices that could be observed by others, most times we probably don't think it's about seeking validation and significance through our performance, but it can happen subtly and gradually. Joshua says, "We learn what is admired. We notice what gets praised. We internalize expectations. Over time, we begin to shape our behavior around how it will be received...The motivation becomes mixed."

In my own experience of this, my faith and my good works began to feel quite burdensome, likely for the reason that Joshua mentions. My attention had moved slowly away from God and toward an image I was creating. There may have been some authentic good in my good works, but there was that performance mixed in that created distance between myself and others and between myself and God.

The distance grows because performance becomes an obstacle that stands between ourselves and others and ourselves and God. Like good actors, we get wrapped up in thinking about how we can make the performance better because our sense of worth and

significance has become tied to it. Soon, the works stop being about love for God and others. They can become more like a fix to make us feel better, while we convince ourselves that everything we're doing is genuine.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he warns about being like the hypocrites. In Jesus's day, a hypocrite was an actor - someone who pretended and wore masks. When our faith becomes a performance, we can become like actors hiding behind a mask, too.

The solution that Jesus offers to this problem in the Sermon on the Mount is to take it off the stage and let go of the performance by doing your deeds in secret. What better way could there be to test the authenticity of our works and motivations than by removing the possibility of being recognized and praised for our works? It's not a hard and fast prescriptive command for all times and situations, but it is a corrective that opens a doorway back to God if we will walk through it.

Jesus says that if we will let go of chasing human praise as a reward and let God alone be our audience, that God will and does reward us, and the reward that God gives is better than public affirmation. When we allow God alone to be our audience, the reward is intimacy with God who confirms that we are already loved and accepted. We don't have to prove our worth to others, or ourselves, or God. We can rest instead in the grace we have already received, and that sets us free to love God and others without all the self-consciousness that pushes us toward the stage.

The prophet Jeremiah once said that the human heart is deceitful, and it's true that sometimes it is hard to understand or know the real motivations of our hearts. Why do I do the good that I do? We might think we know, but if we sit with Jesus and ask the Spirit

to search our hearts, there may be mixed or hidden motivations revealed that we weren't aware of. Through Jesus's words, we hear an invitation today to take that time to stop, and think, and ask God to show us what is really going on in our hearts.

To be clear, we aren't meant to be discouraged today from doing works of love like our March food drive, or from coming and joining in on our evening prayer service where people might see you praying! It's ok to keep doing good things even if it does turn out that we have mixed or even unvirtuous motives, but it's also good to examine our hearts as we keep moving toward Jesus and toward the freedom that he offers. That's the reason for pausing to wonder about the motivation of our hearts. It's the reason to pay attention to whether our good works are helping us build intimacy with God or if we are using them in an attempt to get something that we need.

If through honest prayer we discover room for change or growth, this is when Jesus reassures us with the truth that we are loved always. Even if we have been performing, we are loved. And because we are loved, we can stop the act, rest in God's grace, and discover the freedom to love and serve without trying to prove anything at all. Amen.