

One Sermon That Changed The World

Our God Who Sees In Secret

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West Side Church of Christ

Searcy, Arkansas

A Conversation with Nathan Guy & Casey McDonald

Scripture Reading

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”
(Matthew 6:1-6)

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:16-24)

[Set up 2 chairs on stage. Interview style]

EXTERNAL VS. INTERNAL MOTIVATION & VALIDATION

NATHAN: I finally got around to taking my Enneagram test last week. It confirmed what most of my friends already knew about me. According to this super serious, absolutely perfect, character-defining, God-affirming, couldn't possibly be wrong test, I'm a 3 which is called the "achiever." These tests tell you good things about your number, then they go and ruin it by telling you bad things about your number. An "achiever" likes to accomplish some things, finds validation in big achievements, and is the kind that usually at least desires to climb the corporate ladder and "make something of himself." He also can be difficult to work with because he always wants to achieve greatness and can wear others out trying to make everything they touch turn to gold. I told Katie that can't possibly be right; the test is wrong and I'm so glad that's not me. I'm actually an introvert, often quite shy, run away from stress, and enjoy being home with my family over any large gatherings. Besides, I didn't have very good grades in high school, and I scored average or below average on all my standardized tests. My IQ test said I was extremely average. I kept listing all the reasons I couldn't be a 3. I don't want to be a 3.

As it turns out, an "achiever" says nothing about your natural ability or natural tendencies. It says everything about your will. Then it dawned on me. I went chasing after degrees from prestigious colleges, finished my dissertation early, and (with no training in business or administration) went ahead and took a job with the title of "President" and immediately became the boss for nearly 200 employees and had to oversee a \$5M budget. So...yeah, I guess I am a 3! I want to fight these tests. But sometimes, you just have to admit what you are.

CASEY: I'm Casey and completely underwhelming after those truths we just learned from Nathan. I also am a type 3 which is probably why we work so terribly together. Of course, I'm kidding! The truth about being a 3 I don't want to admit is the "focus on the presentation of success, to attain validation." In other words, even if I'm unsuccessful in a venture, I want it to look or sound successful in order to be validated by others. This is a slippery slope. I think a good Pharisee would have probably been a 3 as well. I've always thought I would have made a good Pharisee and the Enneagram somewhat confirms that possibility.

Another truth I don't want to admit is my concrete sequential learning style. The "concrete sequential" style is this: "I want my information presented sequentially with concrete facts and data. I learn well when one example or concept follows another in a linear way. Hopping around is a problem and can create frustration and confusion." So, when Nathan suggested us co-preach and I saw the text jumps from giving to fasting while completely skipping prayer (to be discussed

next week), I naturally started having convulsions. I don't want to admit that about my personality, so thanks for asking.

NATHAN: There's something else about myself I don't like to admit. I am what you call a "people pleaser." That doesn't mean everyone who knows me is pleased with me. I know some of you were already thinking that. What it means is that I hate confrontation. I hate hurting people's feelings. I want you to like me, and my temptation is to say what I think you want me to say, and to become what I think you want me to become. And that means I thrive off of "external" validation. I cringe when I realize how many Michael Scott Office quotes hit too close to home:

"Presents are the best way to show someone how much you care. It's like this tangible thing that you can point to and say, 'Hey, man, I love you this many dollars worth.'"

"Do I need to be liked? Absolutely not. I like to be liked. I enjoy being liked. I have to be liked, but it's not like this compulsive need to be liked, like my need to be praised."

Those describe me more than I care to admit. How about you?

CASEY: People-pleasers can be so annoying...I say that as a people-pleaser myself. What challenges me most in the life of Jesus is how He did not aim to please people. Some of the things he did and said pleased people, but that was not His objective. His goal was to seek and to save the lost and teach the disciples how to live for the purpose of godliness. How others react to that lifestyle is out of my control. If someone is not pleased with me, but I'm exuding Christ, why should I care? But I do and I hate to admit it.

NATHAN: When you accomplish a task, some of you know you did something good and worthwhile. You know it even if no one says anything. You know it even if others say they don't like it, or that you they don't appreciate it. That is called "internal validation." I don't know what planet you come from. But I wish I had more of that at times.

CASEY: Internal validation is a great motivator for wanting to do more of what you just accomplished. When you finish a project and take a step back, there's a level of excitement about the finished product sparking the desire to repeat that feeling. In spiritual disciplines, this feeling might manifest after studying a Bible text and you realize it stirred up a hunger for more. Maybe after giving to

someone anonymously and seeing the joy it instills motivates you to help someone else in the same way because you know it was a worthwhile endeavor.

NATHAN: Others of us can accomplish a task, and if the people around us express disapproval or lack of interest, we begin to question if what we did was actually good or worthwhile. Is there anyone else in here who has that tendency? That is called “external validation.” If you ever sat in your elementary school desk and wondered why the kid next to you jumped for joy when the teacher placed two of the cheapest, flimsiest gold stars by his name on the board, it was for people like me.

It’s not a sin to find some level of validation from your surroundings. In fact, it can be a good thing. Proverbs says only a fool won’t listen to instruction. And it is a mark of wisdom and courage to seek out advice. It is good to change course when all the signs tell you that you are heading into danger. Feeling pain in your hands when you touch a hot stove may be uncomfortable; but it just might help you keep your limbs! And even “People-pleasing” is not all bad. What did Paul say in Romans 15:2 “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

CASEY: External validation can help us recognize when we have provided something of value or something worthless. This also can hurt at times. Particularly if there is a church program from yesteryear that is no longer fulfilling its purpose or there is nobody showing up to support it. That doesn’t negate its value or worth, but it’s a way we often validate a program or ministry. So the strength of external validation is tangible evidence and feedback that something you are doing is worthwhile.

THE PROBLEM OF SHOWINESS

NATHAN: But a great danger for external validators (and for all of us) is more than nervousness when our deeds are seen by others. It is the temptation to do things to be seen by others. People-pleasing in that sense is not just bad; it’s wrong. Paul asks the Galatians, “Am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal 1:10). Paul learned that from Jesus himself.

In our passage this morning, Jesus begins a new section of his teaching with these words: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 6:1).

Jesus uses the word “hypocrite” several times in our text, which makes me think Jesus is challenging any Christian who does his Christianity to impress others. Maybe a politician who could care less about Jesus, but wears a cross and goes to church when the cameras are out in order to court the evangelical vote. This is the kind of thing people were doing even in Jesus’ day (Josephus, *Life* 290-91).

And he uses 3 particular examples—praying, giving and fasting. But it was common to use 3 examples to represent the whole enchilada. Jesus here is talking about all your deeds of righteousness—the way you “do” your religion. Don’t do it for show. [Note—not against doing such in public; after all we publicly pray in church. So its not a sin to pass collection baskets without blindfolds]. But a constant challenge because “doing it for others to see us do it” is a such a common problem. Story: getting ready for church. Don’t want to go, but “we have to keep up appearances. What would the neighbors think?”

CASEY: The word Jesus employed for “practicing” is used broadly in ancient times for “bringing something into being,” or “bringing something to pass.” It’s the same word Jesus used in the conclusion, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **does** them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24, ESV). The problem Jesus raises in this section is not that these disciplines should never be done in public, but rather they should be practiced with the right motive.

Others may see you give, pray, and even fast, but our motive should be for the glory of God and not of ourselves. Looking back earlier in the sermon, Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). Practicing your righteousness is so God will receive glory.

NO PUBLIC REWARDS?

NATHAN: If I want to know why we tend to “do religion for show,” I don’t need to consult textbooks; I only need to look within. Vainglory is not just one of the 7 deadly sins; it is often considered the most wicked. And there is a reason for that—it is incredibly deceptive. John Cassian was an early church father who once said “if you want to avoid all vices, then you are most ripe for (or vulnerable to) the sin of vainglory.” Think of it this way: what if you came to believe that you can’t save yourself; all you need to do is to repent. So you repent...and then you think to yourself, “didn’t I repent magnificently?!” C. S. Lewis once said he is most vulnerable to sin right after a great spiritual victory. Can you see how

vainglory is perhaps the most insidious? Even if you conquer anger, lust, and dishonesty; even if you come to love your enemies like Christ loves them...perhaps hardest of all is this: how proud of yourself are you for doing so? And how much do we desire for others to know just how good we are?

CASEY: We have a saying in our culture, "Give credit where credit is due." This holds true for our righteousness as well. At a very early stage in life, parents give praise for good behavior. We call it positive reinforcement. This works beautifully by the way! However, some people struggle to grow out of that need for public recognition for good they have accomplished. As Christians, our aim is to redirect all glory and praise to our God. I'll be the first to admit I am terrible at this and strive to do better. A practical tip might be to get better acquainted with the language in our conversations: "Praise God!" or "Glory to God!" Obviously it is polite to thank someone for a compliment to something you accomplish, but follow it up with praise to God.

NATHAN: I think a healthy exercise to check our own pride is to ask this question: would I follow God if there was nothing in it for me? I know that sounds weird; after all, Matthew's gospel lists tons of rewards for faithfulness. But the Gospel of Mark hardly lists any rewards for discipleship. The message of Mark is this: God is God, and you are not; He is King, and will be King; will you serve Him because He is King? If we keep asking, "what's in it for me?" we will sound like James and John asking for thrones next to Jesus. But a crucial point is this: what brings us rewards from sinful men does not produce the praise of God.

Jesus tells us this. Notice that Jesus says of people who do their religion outwardly for showiness "they have their reward in full." (6:2, 5, 16). In Jesus' day, businessmen would frequently write that phrase at the bottom of a receipt; it means "there is no more reward left to give. This transaction is over." Jesus is saying, "you got your praise from people. Don't expect anything more to come from God!" (A. Deissman, *Bible Studies* (1923), p. 229; A. Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East* (1978), p. 110; G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (1967), p. 90).

The truth is that Christian living may sometimes produce fruit we can see, but most likely for the persecuted Christian, the fruit of your work is only noticed or acknowledged much later at the second coming of Christ (Mt 5:16 parallel 1 Pet 2:12).

CASEY: If there were no public rewards for our good deeds I think the pure in heart

would continue practicing righteousness and those seeking selfish reward would cease to do so. What would you do if nobody was watching or cared? Jesus warns against the wrong answer to that question. John Wooden, known for his winning career as UCLA's men's basketball, famously said, "The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching."

The Pharisees were motivated by public recognition. Jesus called them out using the same language as in this sermon, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others" (Matt 23:5). Our objective is to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees (5:20). To do that, we have to stop seeking praise and start giving praise to God.

NATHAN: The truth is that "secrecy" fits the context of this passage. All of this is helpful background for dealing with a textual problem. Some versions say God will reward you "openly" (KJV, NKJV); but the earliest manuscripts don't say that. They just say "He will reward you." The implication, it seems to me is this: He will reward you, but no one may ever know it, and you may not fully know or understand it, maybe not even in this life.

CASEY: That is a good assessment. I'll add this passage does not teach there will never be rewards, because there very well might be. There is no guarantee of public rewards for good deeds, however, Jesus's disciples should not expect public rewards.

THE POWER OF 'BEHIND THE SCENES'

NATHAN: When I read it that way, it is a challenge to my vainglory. It is also a blessing. God won't give me temptation to pride. He will take care of me, but he will love me enough to give me what I need, not just what I want.

And when I read it that way, I see the beauty and power of doing my Christian deeds "in secret." Think of it as working "behind the scenes." Stealth. In the dark. We actually value this highly, don't we? The power of magic is not in what you see; it's in what you don't see. The mystery of Santa Claus is not in what you see; it's in what you don't see. The reason we created a hero like Batman is because we see the beauty and power of doing good in stealth, in secret, in the dark. Jesus is actually tapping into an area we sense in our bones to be an area of incredible power.

CASEY: Most often in Scripture, what is done in secret is for negative reasons in

shameful acts (e.g. murder, adultery, stealing, etc.). When people act in secret it was mostly to hide something they are ashamed to be doing. Jesus turned this way of thinking upside down. Now the things we do in secret should be acts of righteousness to praise God. A healthy question we can all ask ourselves: Is what we're doing in secret for the glory of God?

NATHAN: We see Jesus working “behind the scenes,” don't we? Jesus in the dark? He heals people in private, and warns them to tell no one. He shares the good news one-on-one to a woman at a well, or a blind man on the roadside, or a leper on the outskirts of town. And, let's not forget—he dies in the dark; he binds Satan in his death; and it was very early in the morning, while it was still dark, that God worked his greatest miracle behind a closed tomb: He raised Jesus from the dead, then burst open the gates of the tomb. God doesn't just “see” in secret. He works in secret.

CASEY: When Jesus would tell someone to go and tell no one about His miracles, scholars call this the “Messianic Secret” (Mark 1:44, Luke 5:14). He even told the disciples for a time to keep His identity secret (Matt 16:20). One possible reason for this was to keep His reputation secret from adversarial powers as long as needed. Another reason for Jesus's secrecy could have been to allow time for messianic understanding to develop before His inevitable crucifixion. Either way, Jesus worked for a time in top secret for a greater cause to fulfill God's will.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: GIVING & FASTING

NATHAN: So Jesus gives us resources to tap into this power—the powerful work of the Spirit in the dark, with rewards that are for our good even when we don't see it. Two of them are “giving” and “fasting.” (We will discuss prayer next week). We call these “spiritual disciplines.” What exactly are these?

CASEY: What are they: Spiritual disciplines are exercises performed by individuals or the church “for the purpose of Godliness” (Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 4). Paul instructed, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim 4:7, NASB). Paul wanted to empower Timothy to do work for the glory of God and not for man. Personal and corporate spiritual disciplines are for the purpose of godliness and not a way to find favor with God.

Why are they done in secret? What is the tempting motive when done in public? Have you ever been to a gym and caught someone checking themselves out in the mirror after a set? Part of the appeal of a gym membership is showing off, or at least, upping your workout when you see someone else going harder than you.

NATHAN: I know that giving—especially in secret—is a freeing exercise. It is an act of rebellion against materialism, consumerism, the desire to always have more, or to think I provide for my own needs. And blessing others in ways that can't be traced back to me is a way of being part of the “stealth” army of the Lord. What are some blessings you have seen in giving (and giving in private)?

CASEY: One of the greatest blessings I've seen in giving in private is there is no other place to direct your praise than to God. I have been on the receiving end of anonymous gifts and it encouraged my faith and increased my gratitude to God. I've also been on the receiving end of gifts from known sources and the praise is directed at the giver because I wanted them to know how deeply appreciative I was. The blessing of secret giving is the person is left with little options on where to direct gratitude and glory.

NATHAN: I confess that I know very little about fasting. I don't remember hearing much about it growing up. But the few times I have tried it have been meaningful. When I feel hunger pains, I am reminded that I want to want God like I want food. I suppose a stronger example would be holding my breath for a day (wanting God like I need air)—but I would die. So food is a more reasonable way to be reminded of that? I am sure there is more to fasting than that. Can you enlighten us on why fasting is listed here—and why even our Lord fasted?

CASEY: Fasting is another practical way to support one's spiritual strengths. “Christian fasting is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes” (Whitney, 192). The spiritual discipline of fasting is a way to humble oneself before God. In a spiritual assessment I conducted, “A disciple of Jesus fasts for spiritual growth,” was the lowest ranked amongst the disciplines. If the mark of fasting for spiritual growth can strengthen, it provides healthy support other characteristics of discipleship.

Fasting helps disciples exude humility by recognizing a need for God in physical sustenance. Also, fasting enhances giving by emptying the disciple from physical attachment. Fasting can greatly benefit disciples' prayer time, particularly by providing more time to do so. Finally, the assessment suggested fasting can support a disciple's effort to walk by faith by helping them focus on their next step with God instead of their next meal. So, I think Jesus included fasting here because it is a discipline that has the potential to enhance giving, prayer, and other spiritual exercises as well.

Jesus encourages us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). Lean entirely into God in your giving, praying, and fasting. He will take care of us.

NATHAN: We get prayer and we get giving. Why do we shy away from fasting? What are the objections and how do you deal with those?

CASEY: It is hard. Physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. One of the biggest objections is health concerns. People have to consume food for medicines and maintain certain blood sugar levels. Not eating poses a legitimate health concern for many. I suggest dealing with that by consulting with your physician. You can inform the doctor you desire to pursue the spiritual discipline of fasting and would like their help establishing a regimen where this can happen in a physically healthy way. Remember, fasting does not have to be for 40 days to be effective. Talk to your doctor about how you can go about incrementally increasing your times of fasting.

WRAPPING UP

NATHAN: To wrap up, my takeaway from this passage is not a “lack of tangible blessings,” but an invitation into real power: the power in the dark. Jesus gives us resources to tap into this power—the powerful work of the Spirit in the dark, with rewards that are for our good even when we don’t see it.

CASEY: Spiritual disciplines “in the dark” keeps our motives in check. There is still the threat of disciplining your body to try to gain righteousness in the sight of God. The ultimate purpose is for godliness (1 Tim 4:7b-8, NASB). Do you want to be more like God? Practice spiritual disciplines. Just know that you can practice all the spiritual disciplines with ulterior motives and not look a thing like God.