

Approval

Who here has heard of a journalist named *Brian Williams*? A few people? If you don't know about him, Brian Williams was among the most renowned journalists and news anchors in America and even the world, until fairly recently. He had taken over the much-watched *NBC Nightly News*, and was on track to become the next Tom Brokaw (I'm well aware that if you're under the age of 40, that probably doesn't mean anything to you—for purposes of discussion, he was on track to be the next Lebron of anchoring the news).

But *all of that came screeching to a halt* in 2015. In January of that year, Brian Williams talked on the air about a time when he was reporting on the war in Iraq, riding around in a helicopter with the military, and his helicopter was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade. According to Williams, his life and his crew's lives were narrowly spared, and they were kept *alive* by an armor mechanized platoon from the U.S. Army. Now, that's a crazy story, right? Something you would expect to happen to an award-winning journalist, right?

But here's the *problem* with the helicopter story: *it never happened*. About two weeks after telling that story on air, Williams had to go *back* on the air and *recant* the story, as well as apologize for it. Because as it turns out, there *were* helicopters that were fired upon that day, and one of them did have to make an emergency landing. But Brian Williams wasn't in *that* helicopter. *His* helicopter was traveling about half an hour *behind* that one, and it had to be grounded because of a sandstorm. Soon after acknowledging that he lied about the story, Brian was demoted from his position as lead anchor, and most would agree his career hasn't really been the same since.

So *what would make a person lie* about something like that? I mean just being on a helicopter in the middle of a warzone sounds pretty *bold*—if I did something like that, *you guys would probably never hear the end of it*. So why feel the need to lie and say that your helicopter was *shot* down, when it wasn't? Why *embellish*? Well, because that's a cooler story. And makes you *look* like a better journalist. And makes people respect and revere you more. You *lie* because even though being in a helicopter in a warzone is cool...it's not cool *enough*. Even though it's admirable, it's not admirable *enough*. And garnering respect and the admiration of your peers on a national stage, *apparently*, is a dangerous place to be.

For the past four weeks, we've been in a **series called *Killjoys***. We're looking at some of the more common "enemies of the soul" for followers of Jesus. So far we've discussed *busyness*, *apathy*, and *lust*. Which are all things that can pose real threats to your life and joy in Jesus if they go unchecked. *Today*, I want us to talk about a more subtle, but perhaps even more *insidious* threat: living for the *approval* of others. The approval of other people can be one heck of a drug, as Brian Williams would be glad to tell you.

But living for the approval of others **isn't limited to people** who lie about being in war-time helicopters. I'd venture to guess that many of us have "helicopter stories" of our own: times where we have wanted the praise of others bad enough that we were willing to say and do some pretty ridiculous things to get it. Times went we bent over backwards to be the type of person we felt like others wanted or needed us to be, and to get them to recognize us as such. The desire for *approval* is a deep-seated struggle for an awful lot of people.

So today, I want us to **look at a passage** where Jesus touches on that very struggle, and see what he says to do about it. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 6**. The passage we're going to look at is right smack in the middle of something people often call "the sermon on the mount." It's essentially a *greatest hits* collection of Jesus' teaching, all in one place. And he covers a lot of ground in it, from anger to conflict to integrity to lust, and a whole host of other topics. But in the passage we're about to read, Jesus is going to address the desire by some to live for the *approval* and *applause* of other people.

So let's see what Jesus has to say. We'll **read the whole thing** again, beginning in chapter 6, v. 1:

1 "Be careful not to **practice your righteousness** in front of **others** to be **seen by them**. If you **do**, you will have **no reward** from your Father in heaven. **2** "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 others. Truly I tell you, they have **received** their reward in full. **3** But when **you** give to the needy, do not let your **left hand** know what your **right hand** is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in **secret**. Then your **Father**, who **sees what is done in secret**, will reward you.

So **Jesus states his main idea** at the very beginning. *Everything* else in the passage (and really, all the way through v. 18), is reiterating the idea stated in v. 1: **be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others, to be seen by them**. That word

“righteousness” in v. 1 is used to *categorize* three different religious activities that follow in the rest of the chapter: *giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting*.¹ And that’s how we tend to think about the word *righteousness* too: to most of us, it is a *religious* word, used to describe things that religious people *do*.

But I want to argue this morning that **this idea of righteousness might be much broader than you think it is**. I think *righteousness* is actually something *all of us* seek after, whether we realize it or not. And we seek it *out through* a lot *more* than just religious activities. To help unpack why I say that, here’s how pastor **Tim Keller** describes the idea of *righteousness* (when in doubt, quote Tim Keller—that’s our strategy around here). He says:

[To be righteous means] I have passed inspection in the eyes of a significant other; I have been found pleasing to someone I want to please.

Honestly, that definition from Keller gets **closer to the original meaning of the word righteousness**. The word used in the original language is the Greek word *dikaioné* (which I would never make you say out loud on account of how I’m not 100% I pronounced it right). **But the word actually comes out of a courtroom setting. There, to be declared righteous meant that the court declared you just or innocent. It’s when the judge looks at you and says “you are in the right, and I am formally recognizing you as such.” It’s a verdict of approval, declared over you by someone you want or need approval from. So “practicing your righteousness before others, to be seen by them” is way bigger than just religious practices like giving to the poor or praying or fasting. “Practicing your righteousness” could actually include anything we do for the purpose of being seen by others, and be approved of by them.**

So follow me here. You can do **religious** things to be seen and approved of by others, like fasting or praying or worshiping or teaching the bible in a room full of people (big yikes for me there). You can also do **irreligious** things to be seen and applauded by others—for instance, hypothetically if your name is Sam Smith and you’re performing at the 2023 Grammys. *Hypothetically*. You can do **good** things—things like helping someone or caring for someone or being generous *towards* someone—but still do those things *primarily* for the purpose of being seen by others. You can do **bad** things—like acting out or throwing a fit or constantly complaining about your life—but be doing them *primarily* for the purpose of garnering the attention of other people. You can even do **neutral**

¹ Giving to the needy in v. 2-4, praying in v. 5-8, and fasting in v. 16-18.

things—things like posting to social media or wearing certain brands of clothing or living in a certain house or apartment—for the purpose of being seen and approved of by others.

So do you see **how pervasive this is**? So Jesus, in the passage, to be sure, brings up the specific examples of *religious* activities we do for other people's approval. But the *application* of this passage, I think, goes far *beyond* that. **There is virtually no limit to the number of things we do "in front of others, to be seen by them."** That phrase *there* in v. 1 "to be seen" in the Greek is actually just one word,² and it's where we get the word *theater* in English. As in, when you live in this way, it is like your life is *theater*: it's all done for the purpose of being noticed and applauded by people watching. **So if we are doing anything primarily for that purpose, Jesus is speaking to us here in what he says.**

Now, I do want to offer **two quick clarifications** here. It's important that we **don't hear what Jesus isn't saying** in this passage. **First**, Jesus is not saying "do not practice *righteousness*." He doesn't stop his sentence there. To Jesus, practicing righteousness is not a bad thing—in fact, it's a very, very *good* thing. **Second**, Jesus doesn't even say "*never do righteousness in public*." He says *be careful* about that, but he doesn't say you can't ever do it. *In fact*, in the previous chapter of Matthew, he tells us that we *should* "let our light shine *in front of* others, so that they might see our good deeds and glorify God."³

So **the warning Jesus gives in this passage is not against doing righteous things or even with where we do righteous things. It's with why we do those things.** It's with where our *motivation* lies. Is it for God? Or is it for the applause and praise of other people? Jesus' concern is with those who do the things they do for the purpose of being *approved of* by others.

And **Jesus actually has a name** in the passage for those who operate with that motivation. Look with me at v. 2:

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.

So people that live for the approval of others, in Jesus' words, become **hypocrites**. Now here's what's interesting to me about *that* word (**today's teaching is just all word studies**).

² The Greek word is θεάομαι, transliterated *theaomai*

³ Matthew 5:16

There's a vocabulary quiz at the end). But here's what's interesting about it. In Jesus' day, the word *hypocrite* was not actually a negative word at all. It was another word derived from the world of *theater*. Generally, actors in a play would wear *masks* to portray their various characters. The word for these types of actors was the word *hypocrite*. Best we can tell from history, Jesus was the first person to use that word as a description of a *negative* behavior. Jesus' point is that **when we live for the approval of others, it is like we too are wearing a mask**. It's like we are actors in a play. When we do that, it's not true righteousness; it's *theatrical* righteousness. It's all a show.

And I think this helps answer a question a lot of us have. And that's **how do I know when I am living for the approval of others?** How do we know when the desire for approval has begun to rule over our life, in unhelpful ways? Well, here's how I think Jesus would answer that question: **when you become a hypocrite about things that you do**. That's how you know. When there is *hypocrisy* in your life about a certain behavior or mindset or activity, there's a pretty good chance that *approval* has a greater place in your heart than it needs to have, at least in that area. Or maybe let's ask it this way:

**Where is there a contradiction between
your public persona and your private priorities?**

(You'll notice I made them all start with P so as to make them memorable)

Where is there a disconnect between the image of yourself you *project to others*, and the priorities you actually have? **Is there any arena of your life where people would be confused, surprised, or even shocked, if they had 24/7 access to your life?** That's usually a pretty good litmus test for hypocrisy. So for example, the people that view you as a person passionate about prayer and intimacy with God: would they be *confused* if they saw what your *private* prayer life looked like, or if they saw your lack of a private prayer life? The people that see you here on Sundays, hands lifted in the air as you worship Jesus, would they be surprised if they saw the types of things your time, energy, and money most regularly go towards?

People that think you have an *incredible marriage*—would they be surprised to discover how you actually speak to your spouse when no one else is around? People that look to you as an *example* of navigating dating in healthy ways—would they be surprised to know what happens between you and the person you're dating when you're alone with each other? Or, come up with your own example. You fill in the blank. **Are there any areas where people would immediately spot a misalignment between your public**

persona* and your *private priorities*? If so, that's *hypocrisy*. And I don't say any of that to put you on blast or heap shame on you. I say it to simply help you *identify* areas of your life that may be impacted by the desire for approval. ***Hypocrisy in our life is usually an indicator that, at least in that area, we are living for the approval of others in unhealthy ways.**

So I'll tell you **what asking that question convicted me of** a couple years ago. I felt like the Holy Spirit showed me that often, I work a lot *harder* to read and study the bible in order to teach it to *you* guys, than I do when I'm just studying it on my own. Now maybe there's some of that that makes *sense*—the stakes are a little higher to get it right when it affects other people, and that should probably motivate some diligence on my part. But at the same time, if I regularly *cultivate a habit* of studying a lot harder to teach a passage than I do to understand it on my own, that can easily become theatrical righteousness—where I am curating this image of myself in front of you guys as smart and well-read and knowledgeable of the Scriptures, when that *isn't* necessarily true of my *private* commitment to those things. Does that make sense? So that's what I'm asking all of us to diagnose in ourselves: is there anywhere that our public persona doesn't match our private priorities?

And just because I know our crowd, let me bring up one problem area you may not naturally think of. My generation and younger specifically are very much the **"social media" generation**. We don't just go online; many of us *live* online. And sometimes, that can become a prime outlet for hypocrisy. So, the people who scroll through your social media feeds and see you posting about things you're passionate about...the people who see see your perfectly posed and edited photos of you and your friends...or you and your family...or you and your kids...the people that see you post all of these different things that build your personal *brand* or *aesthetic*...can I just ask: *is the version of you they see online anywhere close to the real you?*

Or **is the whole thing a front**; a *mirage*? Is all of that just a way to garner the attention and approval and applause of whoever it is you're trying to impress? Because I'll let you in on a secret. People approving of the *online* you is not the same as them accepting the *real* you. And if you think it is the same thing, the *real* you will become lonelier and lonelier with every like and view that comes in. Because **we weren't made to be liked and viewed and shared on a screen; we were made to be known. Like actually known. And having a projection of you liked is a poor substitute for the real you known by others.**

So next, let's just ask: **what is the danger** in living this way? **What's the risk, at the end of the day, of living for the approval of others?** Jesus actually answers *that* here in the passage as well. It also is found in v. 2. Take a look there with me up on the screen:

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."

So **here's the problem** with doing things primarily to be seen *doing them by others*. You ready for it? **The problem is that's your only reward.** That's as good as **it will ever get**. That momentary rush of applause, that temporary boost in self-esteem, that quick hit of dopamine when someone approves of you—that is as far as it goes. Now there's no use in lying about it: *that is a good feeling*. I think we can admit that when other people notice us and approve of us, that is indeed a *reward*. That's probably why Jesus calls it...a *reward*.

But at the same time, I bet if we were honest, we would admit that **we often put in an awful lot of effort** to *obtain* that reward. Maybe even a *disproportionate* amount of effort. *Some* of us have spent our *entire lives* working *tirelessly*, even changing and adjusting our entire *personalities*, just to hear the occasional "good job" from another person. Or from a *specific* person. And listen: maybe there have been moments where you *achieved* that. Where you were on top of the world because you had so many people speaking well of you, saying good things about you, *praising* you. And it felt *fantastic*.

But at the same time, if we're honest, it's **never quite enough**, is it? Do you want to know how I *know* it's not enough? Because **we never stop chasing it.** **I would be willing to bet there has never been a moment in your life, or in mine, where we went "you know, I think after people recognizing that last thing that I did, I don't think I need any more human approval for the rest of my life. I'm all full. I'm good now."** That has never happened. And it never will. Because the approval of people does not *last*. It does not satisfy. It can never ever provide *enduring, lasting, abiding* joy. It can never *offer enduring* self-esteem. You will *always* need more of it.

And you know, **going back to our passage**, I find it so interesting that Jesus' warning against all of this is not *severe*: he doesn't threaten *hell* or *lightning bolts from the sky*—none of that. He just says "if you live your life for the approval and applause of other people, that is all you will ever get." You *have already received* your reward. So how

does it feel? Like you finally have what you've always wanted? Or does it feel like tomorrow morning you'll probably wake up and start the pursuit all over again?

And that's true, **no matter what "stage" you happen to be standing on.** Whichever *method* you are using to garner the praise and approval of other people, it will never be enough. You will never do enough good things, you will never be seen as mature by enough people, you will never get *enough* praise from others to feel like you can stop. There will always be more to do, another *achievement* to unlock, another *acceptance* to earn. There will never ever be a moment where you go "I'm good now. I've done enough things, I'm a '*righteous*' enough person in the eyes of enough people—I'm going to hang it all up and take some time off from all that." Theatrical righteousness won't let you do that. **If you live by the approval of people, you will die still wondering if you have it. The danger, Jesus says, is that you'll spend your whole life living for the wrong reward.**

So...**what should live for instead?** Well, Jesus is straightforward about how the only way to resist this type of performancism...is to **stop performing.** **If your tendency is to do all kinds of things "to be seen by others," the only way to fight that temptation is to starve it out. Choose to regularly do those things where they can be seen by no one except God himself.** Take a look at how Jesus puts it in the passage. In verses 3-4 he says this:

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.

Do you see what he's saying? Essentially, you need to **switch out whose approval motivates** you. **Instead of doing things in front of others to have them approve of you, you should practice doing things in secret where God approves of you.** Now, you may hear that and go "wait, that doesn't sound any better. For one, *God* seems like he'd be a way tougher person to please than other people—seems like his standards are even *higher*. Not to mention, that's *still* living for someone's approval." So is that really an upgrade, to build your life around *God's* approval?

But it *is*, and I'll tell you why. There is one *massive* difference between the approval of *people* and the approval of *God*. With the approval of *people*, you are perpetually living *for* their approval: to *obtain* it. You're working and changing and performing and impressing, and *maybe*, if you're lucky, you get *moments* of recognition and praise in the

midst of all of that. With *people*, you're working *for* a verdict of approval. You're working *towards* it.

With God—and you *have* to hear the difference here—you're not working *for* a verdict of approval. You're working *from* a verdict of approval. As in, you already have it. Look with me, for instance, at [2 Corinthians 5:21](#):

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us (i.e. Jesus), so that in him we might become the (what's that next word?) righteousness of God.

Right now, if you have a relationship with God through Jesus, you have become the *righteousness of God*. **When God looks at you right now, he sees the flawless perfection, the perfect performance, the all-impressive *righteousness of Jesus himself*.** That is how God sees you *currently*, because of his son Jesus. Which means that any acts of righteousness—anything you *do* with his approval in mind—is not being done to *obtain* approval, but rather from a place of *understanding* the approval you already have. **God's acceptance of you is not a question mark. It's a *period*. It's an *exclamation point*.** It's not something he's deliberating on. It's not a verdict from him that you have to prove and perform your way *into*. It is already in your possession through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. You are *accepted* and *approved* of by him, *no matter what*.

And, at the same time, **this crazy thing happens when you realize you're accepted by God no matter what: you start *wanting* to please him You start *wanting* to make him smile.** Let me try to explain that. My son, **Whit**, is seven years old. So with every day that goes by, he is less and less a kid that needs us to do things *for* him, and more and more a slightly smaller human that can do a lot of things for himself. The other night, he started reading his little sister and *us* a bedtime story, instead of us reading it to *him*. He can make his own cereal...as long as the milk jug is less than 50% full, and then it's a disaster. But he can do quite a few things for himself.

He can **also do things for other people**. He was making valentine's for his classmates this week and on his own, also decided to make one for his teacher. He said "Dad, I made one for my teacher, and I gave her *two* lollipops because she needs it...sometimes our class is really bad." So he's also doing things for *others*. And I've started noticing that sometimes—not all the time—he wants me to *notice* when he does things for others. And it's hard to know what exactly is going on in a seven-year old's heart when that happens.

It could be a little approval idol taking root, but there's part of me that wants to believe it's something different.

Because here's the thing: I don't think Whit is *lacking* his dad's approval. Right? **He's not wanting me to notice what he's doing because he thinks his status as my son depends on him doing those things.** Right? Like if you walked up to Whit and said "hey Whit—why are you doing all these things," I really *doubt* he would say, "well, my dad has made it very clear that if I don't do these types of things, I will be out on the streets begging for money." That's not the situation. *Rather*, Whit understands that he already *has* my approval and my acceptance, and *because* that is secure, he *wants* to do things that will make his dad smile. And he *wants* to make us smile. **Not because his status in the family depends on it, but because his status in the family is secure, and as an established member of the family, he wants to make other members of the family smile.** And he does just that.

And I say all that, in part, because I don't know if **some of you have ever considered** that God the Father *smiles* at you. I don't know if many of us realize that right now, when the Father sees you and the things you do, he *delights* in you. Not because he didn't *accept* you *already*—he did—but because you're his kid and he's *proud* of you. And I think **because some of us fail to see God in that way, we are constantly trying to eek out a smile from other people around us. We need their approval, because we think that's the only place it can be found.** We're operating, functionally, as an empty cup, continually needing another person or other people to fill us up with their approval.

But **what is offered to each of us through the good news of Jesus is a Father who accepts us based on the cross, and who smiles on us constantly.** Even when we try to do what's right and we fail. Even when we try to do something good and it doesn't have the impact we thought it would. The God of the universe, our Father who's in heaven *and* in the secret place, *smiles* at you. And when you understand that, you're no longer an empty cup constantly needing to be filled by people's approval and recognition. You are a *full* cup, ready to overflow with righteousness into the lives and people and issues around you. **You're working from a place of recognition, rather than working for others' recognition. And that is a life filled with joy, because you're content in who you are.**

So can I just ask you: whose voice is more important to you? Whose voice is *louder*, more important? *People's* voice? Or *God's*? My prayer for our community here at City Church. is that **each of us would be so laser-focused** on the Father's voice and the

Father's approval, that there is virtually no difference between who we are in *private* and who we are in *public*. Because in both places, we are aiming to please the same person: our Father. And his voice is the loudest voice we hear.

So as we **respond by worshiping and going to the tables** this morning for communion, I pray that we can *realize* and *internalize* the approval of God towards us through Jesus. I pray that we can understand and comprehend his acceptance, his *smile* towards us as a tangible reality. So if you're a follower of Jesus, you're invited to head to the tables and remember all of that with us. And I pray that propels us into a life lived *from* and *for* the approval of the Father.

Let's pray to that end.