

Matthew 6:1-4
Flourishing in Humility
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Well I would like to add my greeting to you this morning, and to thank Charlie for leading us through our worship. This morning we are continuing our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. However, for the next three weeks we will focus particularly on the notion of a life that is flourishing.

This is the time of year when we begin to think about and pray over the financial needs of the church for the coming year. A few weeks ago Terrence got up here and gave a report that generosity and giving has increased this year, and that our dependence upon endowment reserves has been far less than in years past. This is great news, but even better news is that we have been able to add a second Godly Play classroom for our younger children. Even better news is that we have given more generously to mission and local partners this year than in years past. Even better news is that we have opened a Montessori based Preschool with a wonderful full-time director, Addie Neher. Even better news is that we are seeking to be more faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ in all we do, and because of it our financial picture is increasingly one of health.

And yet, we all know how dramatically life can turn: a pink slip on a Friday, doctor's diagnosis, a relationship that cools to the touch. In a life that flourishes with Jesus Christ, it is important to keep our eyes on the horizon for potential threats to our spiritual wellbeing. We need to run a spiritual diagnostic every once and a while. The irony of the text Charlie read for us is that the warning Jesus gives, he gives to those of us who are deeply concerned with our walk with God. That the manner in which we carry out life of faith matters as much as the act itself, the heart matters as much as the act.

One of our favorite things to do on weekends together as a family is to go on hikes. Ross Run or Hanging Rock are two of our favorites to explore around here. Those of you who have hiked before know these pesky little occurrences called tree roots that can pop up and trip you up if you're not paying attention. And so, it's the job of the person walking out ahead to let those behind know if there is a root coming up on the path. The irony is the roots that can trip us up and cause us to stumble are a part of the very same trees we are looking up at in wonder as we walk.

Our work, our actions, the things we put our minds to can yield great fruit, I know this.... But lying along the ground are the roots of that very same work that, if exposed, can trip us up and cause us to stumble, and can even cause us great pain.

Jesus begins this chapter by warning about "your righteousness." **"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."**

Wait a minute, just one chapter earlier Jesus says let your light shine, you are salt of the earth and light of the world. Is Jesus contradicting himself? Is Jesus just being inconsistent in his message? Or is there something deeper at work here, with which he intends to lead us deeper with him?

Righteousness is our desire to be upright, blameless, above reproach in the sight of others and God. But the subtle danger, the root that pokes itself up to trip us up, is the way righteous acts and appearances make us feel. Our righteousness massages the most self-centered of all human desires, the desire to create an identity, a brand, a name for ourselves. Jesus warns that when our brand is trending, the danger lurking is that the approval we receive from others will be our reward.

It is all about branding these days, it's not just enough anymore to have a skill or a product to offer, the key to getting noticed is the experience you offer, the brand. The ability to fan this flame is literally all around us, most of you have the tool do it in your possession as we speak. With this I can push a button and take a picture or record myself speaking, maybe offering a tip on a home project or recipe I'm perfecting, or singing a song that I just wrote or showing off how wide my range is, the very same device can also be used to record and spread partisan political vitriol. And with a push of a button it is literally available for the entire world to see.

There is a Jewish proverb that warns "whoso makes great his name loses his name." God does not speak to us over the adulation and approval of others, God always speaks our name in the still small voice that is only audible when his is all that we're listening for.

Jesus warns us about doing our righteousness in front of other people in order to be theater for them. Theatrical righteousness, righteousness that is concerned with doing noticeable good, is repelled by Jesus in a unique way. He says if you do things just for the reward of people's approval, you will have already received your reward. What starts as a child's "watch me" can over time become an adult's unspoken "notice me."

Verse 2 Jesus gets even more practical: whenever you give alms, when you do your charitable God work, do not sound the trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets. This Greek word Hypocrite (*hypo-cratoi*) literally translates as play actor, one who performs on stage in front of an audience. In chapter 5 Jesus tells us that righteousness is a deep concern for the well-being of other people. But now we are warned against showing that concern in irresponsible and spiritually dangerous ways. For example: giving a gift of money *can* help someone. But when given in an ostentatious way that gift is delegitimized. What could have been a great good is turned into a wrong.

In the words of the Philosopher Holden Caulfield from JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* "If you do something good, then after a while, if you don't watch it, you start showing off. And then you're not as good anymore."

Remember story of the widow's mite, who gave sacrificially out of her poverty, while the pharisees gave very visibly and publicly out of their abundance in order to be thought well of. The approval of the crowd was their reward, while Jesus praised the heart of the woman and her gift.

This is a challenging text, the contradiction that Jesus appears to present is actually the process by which we mature as his disciples. Jesus begins by issuing instructions for us to follow, which many of us will say: "glad to take up the cause, after all Jesus could use my endorsement among my networks." But what Jesus needs is precisely not spokespersons, but grateful recipients.

There has been a lot of buzz in the last few weeks about the spiritual transformation of Kanye West, and how his newly discovered faith in Jesus is being expressed publicly at his concerts and among

the young celebrity culture. Those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about, ask your grandkids. Those of you who aren't grandparents and are younger than 60 years old, consult your Facebook feed. Throughout the Church's history there have been powerful public figures who have wanted to lend their credibility to Jesus, giving him a seat at the cultural table.

But does the name Dolores Hart ring a bell to anyone? Dolores was a budding starlet in the 1950s and early 60s, co-starring in 10 films in 5 years opposite some of Hollywood's biggest male stars Robert Wagner, George Hamilton, and Elvis Presley. But in 1963 shockingly Dolores gave it all up and took up orders as a nun at the Abbey of Regina Laudis monastery in Connecticut, where she serves to this day.

In 2012 a Documentary Short Film was released to wide acclaim called *God is the Bigger Elvis*, telling her story. Faithfulness for her was not leveraging her platform to speak out for Jesus, but accepting the yoke of life with him and giving up her life on the silver screen to receive her life in obedience to Christ. She heard the same call as the Rich Young ruler, to sell all that she had and come and follow him.

Jesus says when you're doing your good deeds, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Jesus is seeking to form us into people who are so utterly unself-conscious and unself-impressed that our delight is simply knowing that we are obeying God. That acts of mercy and generosity are the effortless outflow of a life of immense gratitude. People who know that to love and to serve others is to participate in the life and body of Christ here on earth. These are the people who are nourished and strengthened by this holy food, so that as we decrease and he increases we are lifted with him to the heavenly banquet table where all his children are VIPs.