

The Greatest Show on Earth

Luke 11:1

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The religions of the world are preoccupied with performance. Prayer, rituals, works, and traditions give people a false sense of righteousness. And this is not a new phenomenon; in fact, Jesus confronted the same themes 2,000 years ago. The Pharisees were the masters of seeming righteous, they performed in all the right ways, but their hearts were far from God. As Jesus calls them out for their hypocrisy, we can glean a valuable reminder about what true worship—and what truly living for Christ—is all about.

Until just a few years ago, a traveling circus had become a household name. It made its way by train around our country and even traveled overseas to other continents.

It began as the Barnum and Bailey Circus, named after its founders—P.T. Barnum and James Bailey. They later merged with the five Ringling Brothers, and in 1919, this traveling circus began billing itself as the greatest show on earth.

The circus would run from 1871 to 2017 and over time, millions of people of all ages came to see it, including my own family when the circus came to Raleigh. We were spellbound by the high-flying acrobats, the lion tamer, the elephants,

the overpriced popcorn, the actors, the costumes, and of course, the clowns.

It lived up to its billing; it was indeed something amazing to see.

But it occurred to me, as I began to dig into the passage before us today, that this famous three-ring circus—while it ran for nearly 150 years—wasn't the greatest show on earth.

The greatest show on earth doesn't have anything to do with animals; it has everything to do with humans. The greatest show on earth isn't a three-ring circus; it's religion.

Religion worldwide is quite a show; it has more money, more pageantry, more clowns, and a never-ending supply of actors and costumes.

The truth of the matter is that we're all originally members of that circus. Because of our fallen sinful nature, when we're born, we're automatically given free tickets, not to see the show, but to become part of it.

It wasn't long before our original parents, Adam and Eve, started putting on a religious show. In fact, the first religious costumes were made by them, out of fig leaves, so they could pretend everything was alright with God.

And from Adam and Eve to this day, religious activity has been the greatest, longest running show on earth.

To set the stage for what Luke records next, we need to listen in as Jesus invites His audience to get off the train that's traveling from one insincere religious act to the next.

Mathew's Gospel gives us the most information to set up the scene for us, so we will start our study in Matthew 6. Let me start by telling you that by the time Jesus arrived, Judaism had developed into something akin to a three-ring circus.

The rabbis were teaching that there were three primary religious activities, they were called the "three pillars of a good life": giving money away, fasting and praying.

William Barclay, *The Gospel According to Matthew: Volume One* (Westminster Press, 1958), p. 185

Now Jesus never condemns these three activities. They were good activities and there's nothing inherently wrong with them. The problem was that these three

activities had turned into a three-ring circus, complete with costumes and clowns that had just messed everything up.

So, Jesus is about to address these three activities head-on. Luke deals only with praying, so we'll focus our attention on that, more than the other two, but let's touch down on all three to get a sense of where Jesus is going.

Matthew chapter 6 and verse 1:

"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."

Matthew 6:1

One author paraphrased it this way: "[Don't] try to demonstrate how good you are in the presence of others, in order to be seen by them; if you do, you have no reward with your Father in heaven."

Ibid

In this opening verse, the key word in this warning is the Greek verb translated, "to be seen" or "to be noticed by others." It's the verb *theothēnai* (θεαθηναί); it's the same word that gives us our English word *theater*.

Jesus is effectively saying, "Don't become an actor; don't put your piety on stage; there's nothing wrong with giving money, fasting, and praying, just don't turn it into a production.

Jesus is saying, “Don’t put on a religious show. The critical issue is not that *people* see you, but that *God* sees you.”

God is your audience, but in the world of religion, that will never be enough. And that’s because they’re not doing it for God anyway.



What are some of the easiest ways to “perform” righteousness? How are you tempted to put on the mask of religion?

The clue here is the repeated use of this word “hypocrite.” (v. 2, 5, 16)

The original word *hupokrites*, which gives us our word *hypocrite*, is a word that referred to an actor who wore a mask during their performance. Those masks could be smiling, winking, frowning, or shouting. The actor essentially hid behind their mask.

Jesus is pulling off the mask of these religious actors.

Notice verse 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.”

Matthew 6:2a

Down to verse 5:

“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.”

Matthew 6:5a

Then again, down at verse 16:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.”

Matthew 6:16a

In other words, they got their costumes on; they’re ready to give you a religious show like you’ve never seen before.

Piety had become a public demonstration of pride.

So, what the Lord does here is effectively deconstruct everything His disciples had grown up to understand about giving, praying, and fasting.

Let’s go back to verse 2 and take a closer look as Jesus says:

“When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you.”

Matthew 6:2a

No one is certain what Jesus meant when he referred to sounding a trumpet. We have no evidence that the Pharisees had their own trumpet players out there on the street, so every time they gave money away, they struck up the band.

Alfred Edersheim makes the point that this was figurative language; we do know that in the Temple there were horn-shaped receptacles along the wall in the court of the Gentiles where people put their donations.

Quoted by Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, General Editors; [The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 9](#) (Zondervan, 2010), p. 198

The receptacles were shaped like the flared end of a trumpet, attached to the wall and the flared end of this brass receptacle funneled the money down into the box.

When they did that, it would echo around that court; every coin rattled into that opening as people dropped their money into the mouth of that trumpet. They were effectively 'sounding the trumpet'.

Later Jesus referred to rich people casting lots of money in Mark 12:41.

So, to put it in today's economy, imagine you want to give \$100 dollars; you can either slip 2 fifty-dollar bills into the trumpet, or convert it into 400 quarters. That would be a lot more fun. You could stand there and empty your bag and make all kinds of noise.

Imagine the attention you would get—wow! Listen to that! People will be so impressed with your obvious spirituality.

But Jesus isn't impressed; notice what He says at the end of verse 2:

"Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

Matthew 6:2b

In other words, they wanted attention and they got it; that attention they got was their reward.

Now again, it's not wrong to be recognized for giving, but if you give in order to be recognized—to get your name on that brick—that brick is your reward.

So, make sure you enjoy it. Go stand by that brick and take a selfie—take a picture—because that's your reward for sounding the trumpet when you gave.

By the way, the English created an expression from this called "tooting your own horn."

Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor; [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 44

You see, this statement by the Lord is asking this simple question: Why are we giving? What's the incentive behind your investment?

I wonder how many people today are giving to charities and to the church, but their internal motive that moves them is a tax advantage at the end of the year.

John Phillips, [Exploring Matthew: Volume One](#) (Loizeaux Brothers, 1999), p. 110

There's nothing wrong with deducting your donations for tax purposes; I'm all for not paying Caesar a dime more than is due him. But if you're giving primarily because you want that tax receipt at the

end of the year, then Jesus would say, “That tax receipt is your reward—enjoy the deduction.”

I can’t help but wonder what will happen when charitable giving is no longer tax deductible.

Now, **in verse 5**, Jesus introduces the 2nd pillar of good living according to Jewish teaching: the pillar of spiritual activity known as praying.

Again, notice what Jesus says here in verse 5:

“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.”

Matthew 6:5a

Again, don’t misunderstand: there’s nothing wrong with praying in public—Jesus did; there was nothing wrong with praying at intersections. I’ve prayed many times at intersections and it’s usually, “Lord, please change that red light into a green light.”

In the Lord’s generation, there were set times for the Jewish people to pray: 9 am; 12 noon, and 3 in the afternoon.

In addition to those stated times, they prayed for every conceivable thing; there were prayers in connection with rain, fire, the lightning, the sight of the sea, receiving good news, even on the occasion of using new furniture. Again,

there’s nothing wrong with that kind of praying. In fact, it was intended to bring everything of life into the presence of God.

Adapted from Barclay, p. 194

It’s wonderful when prayer is an ongoing conversation with the Lord.

The problem was—Jesus makes it clear—that they are praying here **to be seen**. *Theothenai*, “to put on a little theatre.”



Put these truths in a 21st century context. What are some ways Christians today can try to be seen engaging in some act? What are the “street corners” and “marketplaces” of today’s Christianity?

They were timing their performances to bring them to the most public place at the time of prayer, at the downtown marketplace or at a busy intersection. Jesus says here, “**at the street corners**.” Not just on the sidewalk but on the corner, where you can be seen from all directions.

They just happened to arrive at that intersection at 9:00 AM or at noon or at 3:00 PM.

Sometimes they would time it, one historian wrote, so that the call to prayer coincided with them arriving at the top stair of the temple porch. Oh, they would

be compelled to stop and turn and then pray with maximum visibility. And the people would ooh and aah, “Aren’t they something!”

Again, Jesus says here in verse 5:

*“Truly I say to you, they have **received their reward.**”*

Matthew 6:5b

They had everyone’s attention and approval except one Person—the Lord Himself.

Again, there’s nothing wrong with praying in front of a congregation or a Bible study group. The problem isn’t your location, it’s your motivation.

Are you trying to impress somebody with your eloquence? Your scripture memory? Your vocabulary? Let’s admit that we struggle with that. If you’re the third person to pray in a prayer group, you’re spending time during the first two prayers figuring out how to start your prayer.

This passage is about to remind us that Jesus isn’t impressed with vocabulary, but with authenticity; He isn’t interested in formality, He’s interested in simplicity.

And don’t overlook the fact that He’s about to teach His disciples how to pray a prayer that takes less than 20 seconds to pray.

Now let me mention the third pillar briefly here as Jesus again deconstructs all the disciples had learned from their religious three-ring circus.

Notice down here at verse 16:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

Matthew 6:16a

The Pharisees were known to rub ashes into their cheeks to whiten them and make themselves look pale.

Fasting was a way for a person to focus on the Lord, for the Jewish people it was a national observance on the Day of Atonement.

By the time of Christ, the religious leaders had decided once a year wasn’t spiritual enough, so they began fasting two days a week.

If you read a Bible Custom’s book, you will discover that during the days of Christ, there were two days reserved for shopping in the marketplace, two days where people crowded into the towns and villages to barter, buy and sell.

Those two market days were Mondays and Thursdays. Is it any surprise to learn that the religious leaders had chosen to fast on Mondays and Thursdays?

Hey, the greatest show on earth needs the greatest number of spectators. Again, that phrase appears here in **verse 16: “that their fasting may be seen by others.”**

This was a Broadway production.

While fasting was to focus attention on God, they had turned it into a way to get attention for themselves.

And once again Jesus says here at the end of verse 16:

“Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.”

Matthew 6:16b

They wanted people’s attention; they wanted people’s compliments. Well, all that attention and all those compliments were their reward in full; that’s all they got.

You might be thinking, I’m so glad I’m not a Pharisee.

Have you ever fasted and were disappointed no one noticed you were skipping lunch?

Have you ever given money to God and made sure somebody else knew about it?

Have you ever spent time in prayer and made sure someone else heard?

Have you ever been used by God and couldn’t wait to spread the news?

The truth is, we have more Pharisee in us than we can see in us; we have more Pharisee in us than we can see in us.

We find it nearly impossible to keep our spiritual disciplines a secret; it’s just no fun if we can’t turn our piety into a parade.

Charles Spurgeon, the English pastor from the late 1800s, commented on this

text by writing, “God observes; and He is audience enough.”

Now with that, Jesus becomes even more specific about praying by telling us how *not* to pray.

Let’s go back to verse 7:

*“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they **think** that they will be heard for their many words.”*

Matthew 6:7

In this brief statement, Jesus exposes **three misconceptions about prayer** that exist to this day.

First: The more often you repeat your prayer, the more likely God will hear you.

But notice again verse 7:

“And when you pray, do not use meaningless repetition.”

Mathew 6:7a

Now again, there’s nothing wrong with praying the same prayer request over and over again. Jesus did that in the Garden of Gethsemane. But it wasn’t meaningless, it was meaningful.

That request was the burden on His heart!

The Greek word for **empty phrases or meaningless repetition** means to babble or to chatter; to have your mouth in motion and your mind in neutral.

To mindlessly repeat the same words over and over again.

One of the characteristics of false religion is the meaningless repetition in prayer.



What are some easy ways to mindlessly repeat prayer, rather than consciously talk to God? What prayer “routines” can become more of a subconscious habit than a genuine conversation?

Muslims will pray, “God is God” several thousand times during a funeral. They’ll repeat one word over and over again until they are exhausted.

Buddhists put a written prayer on a wheel and then spin the wheel, believing that for every revolution of the wheel, the prayer ascends to God; maybe the 30th time around God will read it.

Catholics with their rosaries count off their repeated Hail Mary’s and Our Fathers—maybe if they say it fifty times, God will finally listen.

False religion demands so much from them because they know so little about God. God is not begrudging.

Adapted from Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew* (Crossway, 2013), p. 162

He’s not distracted; He doesn’t just answer the squeaky wheel.

Persisting in prayer, using meaningful words shaped by your need and coming

from your heart, isn’t repeated because God is hard of hearing, but because we are.

We need to hear, and then hear again, from our own lips that we are depending on Him—waiting for Him—entrusting ourselves to Him.

But He’s always listening.

My wife can ask me to do something to help out; she will have to ask me several times before I finally actually listen to her. I’m looking at her, I hear her, but I’m not really listening. That’s one of the things she loves about me!

It is a misconception of prayer if we think God is like us, that maybe He will really listen if we repeat it ten times.

The second misconception is this: The longer you pray, the more likely God will pay attention.

Notice again what Jesus says here in verse 7:

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them ...”

Matthew 6:7-8a

During the days of Christ, it was a popular view, even among the Gentiles, that many words, that long prayers, would eventually tire out their gods—sort of weary them, wear them down into finally granting the request.

Let me quote a couple Rabbis from Jesus' day. One rabbi taught: "Whoever is long in prayer is heard by God." Here's another: "Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard."

Barclay, p. 195

Imagine how shocking it would have been to hear Jesus say, "That's what the Gentiles do; that's how the pagans pray, not the believer."

Now there's nothing wrong with a long prayer; but you can pray a very effective short prayer, like Peter who walked out on the water to Jesus and then began to sink under the waves and Peter prayed, "Lord, save me."

Jesus didn't say, "No, no, start with, 'Our Father who art in Heaven...'"

When you bow your head, God doesn't tell Gabriel, "Get out your stop-watch, if he makes to 10 minutes, send him an answer; if he makes it to thirty minutes, back the truck up and let him have everything."

The world of religion thinks like that; not the disciples of Jesus.

That leads me to the third misconception, here it is: The more details you provide, the more likely God will know what you need.

Notice **verse 8; Jesus says:**

"Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Matthew 6:8

So, pouring out the details of prayer is more for our benefit than His; it's more for us to verbalize our request and work through our need and communicate our desires and then our submission to His will.

God knew a million years ago what you will need a week from now.

Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God?

God has never learned anything. He's always known.

Jesus is *reminding* us that our Heavenly Father never needs to be *reminded*.



What hope does this truth give you? How are you encouraged knowing that God is aware of your needs regardless of if or how you communicate them?

Prayer is not to remind God of everything we need; prayer is a reminder to us that He will give us everything we need; that He will do everything in us and through us and for us that we need; and that in the end, He was everything we truly needed.

So, is it any wonder that we all come to this same point now? Everything we have just studied is an introduction. It leads us to this account in Luke's Gospel, chapter 1. We come to the same place the disciples came to as they say to Jesus here in verse 1:

“Lord, teach us to pray...”

Luke 11:1b

In other words, we don't know how.

I find it incredibly fascinating that the disciples never asked Jesus to teach them how to raise the dead. They never asked Him how to walk through a closed door. They never asked Him how to make bread and fish separate into thousands of pieces. They never asked Him how to turn water into wine.

The only thing recorded in Scripture the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them was this: “Lord, teach us how to pray.”

And Jesus will.

Now that the Lord has taught them how *not* to pray, He will teach them, and us, in less than 35 words, how to pray.

You see, the Lord isn't teaching us how to put on a show religiously, in what has become part of the greatest show on earth.

He's not going to teach us how to perform on earth; He will teach us how to commune with our Father who is in Heaven.

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