

Introduction

I'd like to begin by quoting one of my favorite lines in literature. In William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, the character Jacques says, **"All the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts."** Note the instructive metaphor Jacques uses there. The world is a stage and we are actors on it.

That metaphor implies that we have an audience as we live out this one life on earth that God has given us – and we do. Actually, it's two audiences and that's what I'm going to preach about today – what those two audiences are and to which one we should play.

Two Audiences

Verses 1 and 5 reveal the first audience. It's what Jesus calls **"men,"** meaning people. He declares regarding them that they will **"notice"** or **"see"** what we do. That's true isn't it? Be sure that the people we know and meet will do two things. First, they'll observe what we do. And second, they'll judge us on the basis of what they see. They'll think approvingly or disapprovingly of us. The bottom line is this. All the people in our lives have opinions of us, good or bad, based on what they see from us. That is one audience – an audience of many.

Jesus reveals another in verses 4 and 6. He talks in both verses about, **"your Father who sees."** Because God's presence is limitless, He observes everything we do. He also judges us on the basis of what He sees. After getting a "D" on a fourth-grade history test for which I didn't study, I came home and buried the test in the backyard. Neither my mother nor, until now, anyone else ever knew I did that – except God. He observed and judged what I did. God has an opinion of us, good or bad, based on what He sees from us.

Those then are the two audiences we have. One is an audience of many, people. The other is an audience of One, God.

Playing to an Audience of Many

And in this text, Jesus teaches us to which one we should play.

Look at the opening line of verse 1. He mentions, “**practicing your righteousness before men.**” He then discusses just two of many acts of righteousness in verses 2-6: giving to the poor and praying. He also identifies the motive of many people in practicing them. According to verses 2 and 5, it’s “**that they may be honored/seen by men**”. That’s their motive and Jesus reveals what it compels them to do. They make it known to people that they’ve given and prayed.

I enjoy how He describes that in verse 2. They “**sound a trumpet.**” We say it differently but the meaning is the same. They “**toot their own horn.**” They promote the good things they do so others will know. They have their own public relations department and it’s them.

This text is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago when Jesus spoke it. Consider, for instance, a professor who always follows the signing of his name with his degree, “**Ph.D.**” Or a retired physician who routinely tells others about the pro-bono work he did. Or a pastor who has vanity license plates that say “**The Rev.**” Or consider this - why institutions put the names of contributors on publicly displayed plaques or name buildings after major contributors? It’s because, according to fundraisers, people are much more likely to give if it’s going to be made known that they did.

Verses 1-6 are timeless. It’s inherent in human beings of every generation. We toot our own horn. We promote the good things that we are, achieve, or do so others will know. We have our own public relations department and it’s us.

Now, tooting our own horn is just one specific example of a broader human behavior - playing to an audience of many. Verses 2 and 5 reveal that playing to an audience of many is a matter of motive and behavior. People’s opinions of us drive and determine what we do. Our intention and action are rooted in what they think about us. We speak and act in order to get their praise or to avoid their criticism. We say and do things

so that they will approve of us, or will not disapprove of us.

That's what it means to play to an audience of many, which we can do in countless ways. Take praying in public for instance. I have to admit it. For much of my life, what those who heard my prayers thought drove and directed how I prayed. I wanted them to think I was a good pray-er and prayed so they would think that. Or take deciding whether or not to start a summer born son a year later in kindergarten. One mother told me that she had wanted to do that with her son but didn't. When I asked her why, she replied, "**My family and friends would have considered me a bad mother if I had.**" However we do it, almost all of us do it in countless ways. We play to an audience of many.

Playing to an Audience of One

But we shouldn't. Jesus makes that crystal clear in this text. Notice how He says we should give to the poor and pray. According to verses 3-4 and verse 6, it's "**in secret**" so that "**your Father**" sees.

Os Guinness coined a phrase that defines what Jesus is calling us to do here. In his book *The Call*, Guinness acknowledges the universal human craving for recognition and praise. He also identifies celebrated persons who had more than their fair share of it like Mozart, Andrew Carnegie, Marlene Dietrich, and Sharon Stone. He then urges his readers to reject that craving and to "**play to an audience of One.**"

That's precisely what Jesus is calling us to do here. Never play to an audience of many. Always play to an audience of One instead. That One is God. Playing to audience of One is a matter of motive and behavior. Only God's opinion of us drives and determines what we do. Our intention and action are rooted in what He and He alone thinks about us. We speak and act in order to get His praise or to avoid His criticism. We say and do things so that He will approve of us, or will not disapprove of us. Simply put, we care everything about the approval and disapproval of God and nothing about the approval and disapproval of people.

During the summer between by freshman and sophomore years in

college, I worked at the Chrysler Amplex factory in Van Wert. We got three breaks during each eight-hour shift: 12 minutes, 20 minutes, and 12 minutes. The first day I was there, I left the break room to get back to the furnace I was loading on time. Several of the permanent workers there stopped me as I did and told me to stretch out the breaks four or five minutes. I immediately had a decision to make. Play to an audience of One. Leave breaks on time and get God's approval and my co-workers' disapproval. Or play to an audience of many. Stretch out the breaks and get my co-workers' approval and God's disapproval. I chose the first. I played to an audience of One.

The Rewards

Those then are the two options before us in the real world of our everyday lives. Play to an audience of many or of One. If we're wise, we'll choose the audience of One. Jesus explains why.

In verses 2 and 5, He teaches that those who play to an audience of many "**have their reward in full.**" He also teaches in verse 1 that they "**have no reward**" from God. His point is this. When we do things to get a reward from people, we get no reward at all from God.

There's a reason for that. It's because God rarely intrudes where He isn't wanted. So, when our aim is to get something from people, He steps aside like the gentleman He is and lets us get that. He responds to our expectations, and since what we expect is from people, that's exactly what He lets us have – what people can give, and nothing more.

Years ago, I was asked to speak at a Malone University chapel service. So I did, hoping to impress my former professors there and get their praise. I did get a little of that but that's all I got. I didn't get anything from God. That illustrates what happens when we play to an audience of many. We're seeking a response from people and so, often get that – a response from people. We aren't seeking a response from God and so, never get that – a response from God.

In contrast, notice what happens when we play to an audience of

One. Jesus tells us in verses 4 and 6, **“Your father who sees in secret will reward you.”** God always comes where He’s wanted. So, when our aim is to get something from Him, He comes and lets us get that. He responds to our expectations, and since what we expect is from Him, that’s exactly what He lets us have – what He and He alone can give.

What happens is this. Playing to an audience of One places us within the flow of God’s kingdom. In that flow, His presence and the powers of the age to come do two things: transform what we are and enhance what we do. Those are God’s rewards for playing to Him, two gifts that no person can give: transformation and enhancement.

Listen to a pastor’s testimony about just that. After years of preaching for people’s approval, he decided to begin preaching for God’s alone. To assist him in that, he also decided to do what Jesus says in verses 16-18, fast in secret - in his case, every Saturday before he preached. Two things happened as a result. First, he was transformed. His faith dramatically deepened, he says. Second, his preaching was enhanced. One day, the woman who ran the church’s tape ministry told him that the orders for sermon tapes had doubled since January. **“I can’t explain it,”** she said, **“But whatever it is, keep it up.”**

We now know what we should do. Play to an audience of One not many. We also know why we should do it. When we play to an audience of many, we get what people can give. But when we play to an audience of One, we get what God can give, which is far better.

Get in Touch with Reality

That’s the “what” and the “why.” Here’s the “how”. Get in touch with reality! Which is more important - the approval and disapproval of the many or of the One? How we answer that determines to which we will play. So let’s get in touch with reality and answer it rightly.

Consider two facts about the audience of many.

First, we’re rarely on people’s minds. Let’s face it. The people to whom we’re playing have lives of their own. Almost none of them, as a

result, give us nearly the thought we think they do. Let's take a little survey here. I'm going to ask you a question about me, since all of you know me. How many of you spent a total of at least 10 minutes thinking about me this past week – apart from any conversations we had? No one. It's a fact of life. Almost all the people to whom we're playing have interests and concerns that occupy them far more than we do. They may give us some fleeting thought here and there but that's about it.

Consider a second fact. People's opinions of us are temporal. They will die and never think of us again, in this earthly setting at least. There were two people whose approval I sought for much of my adult life. But both are dead now and, as Ecclesiastes teaches, their approval or disapproval of me matters literally not at all.

Now let's consider two facts about the audience of One.

First, we're always on God's mind. He preoccupies Himself with us. He thinks unceasingly about us. How many minutes did you think about me last week? Less than 10. How many minutes did He think about me last week? 10,080, which is all of them. It was the same with you.

Consider a second fact. God's opinion of us is eternal. On judgment day, He'll publicly declare His opinion of us. He'll then determine our eternal destiny on the basis of that. When He does, the only opinion that will matter to us is His. I won't care what my wife Jill thinks about me. I won't care what my sons Moses and Aaron think about me. I won't care what you think about me. I won't care what our General Superintendent, John Williams, thinks about me. I'll only care what God thinks about me. It will be the same with you.

Conclusion

That's the reality and we need to get in touch with it. We'll find if we do that getting people's approval and avoiding their disapproval isn't worth the effort. I'm not being flippant in saying that. It's true. It isn't worth the effort. But getting God's approval and avoiding His disapproval is. So, make the effort. Play to an audience of One.