# The Main Thing: An Audience of One!

Sermon Preached by Rev. Chuck Coke at St. John’s UMC Staunton, VA

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# Matthew 6:1-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### Concerning Almsgiving

**6** “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

**2** “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **3** But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A1-7%2C33&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23287a)]

### Concerning Prayer

**5** “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **6** But whenever 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.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A1-7%2C33&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-23289b)]

**7** “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Last week in our first sermon in our The Main Thing series we encountered our theme verse Matthew 6:33

33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We saw how this is a call to seek first Him and his Kingdom and his righteousness while trusting him for the provision of our other needs and wants because he is trustworthy. As he sent Ravens with bread and rest to Elijah as he fled for his life from Ahab and Jezebel he will provide as we seek him - not as we expected perhaps but he will provide. Above all as we seek him he will provide above all else Himself, his kingdom and his righteousness which are far greater than all the other stuff we strive for.

In short as CS Lewis said

You aim at heaven you get earth thrown in, you aim at earth, and you get neither.

So let us not fear but be confident trusting the Lord as we seek him. Knowing that when seeking him might mean loss in some aspect of meeting our needs, he promises that our need will be met in the way he deems best. Which is the best way it could possibly be met?

This morning in our passage we have two groups of people aiming at earth with laser precision.

First, wealthy people would have their servants blow trumpets before them to draw everyone's attention before they gave money to poor people or to the synagogue. The scripture says they did this so that people would see them. Perhaps it is simply another way of flaunting their wealth and reminding people how important they are. Maybe it is a way of getting praise from people and possibly winning favors as a result of their generosity to the poor.

Then we have another situation where people stand on street corners and pray aloud so that all could hear and see them and then praise them. This is not talking about street preachers whose desire is for people to come to Christ, or people on a prayer walk where you simply pray for those you see or the community you are walking in, or a service in the park but about people praying in such a way so that they would receive plaudits. This is an individual standing on the sidewalk in front of the Split Banana making themselves as conspicuous as possible and praying as loudly as possible so they can be seen and heard by others and reap the benefits of being thought important or righteous etc.

While these are profoundly egregious examples this kinds of aiming at earth in the guise of spiritual activity is not limited to the ancient world.

One day in my early twenties I was walking with a young woman on what might have been our first date. As we were walking from the Metro Station to the church where we were going to see the Oslo Gospel Choir I spied a homeless man across the street. Impulsively I ran across the street and gave him some money. I think I was hoping to impress her with my generosity and thoughtfulness. When I returned to her she had a look on her face and said “Why did you do that? I do not normally give to people on the street because I do not know how they will spend the money.” Then I had to admit to her that I did not normally either but that I think I was driven by the thought of impressing her.

I gave not to follow the Lord, or even really to help the man, but to win points with this young woman. Fortunately for me it did not work, otherwise, I would have been encouraged and reinforced in a selfish pattern of spiritual practice.

Jesus says about actions like these were we seek reward from others he says

3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And

6 But whenever 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.

Jesus is calling us to act only with an ultimate audience of one. Our Father in heaven who gives far greater rewards than any other audience can offer no matter how great their reward may seem in the moment. With Him alone as our audience his values and his desires will be determinant not our own. If we seek to love and please the King in our actions and desire only his pleasure and response we will be seeking the Kingdom of God and in the process be enthroning him in our hearts and pushing ourselves a little further off the throne.

As we seek him first - keeping our eye only on the audience of one the King, the only true judge the only one whose opinions really matter in the end he will reward us we are told. God is faithful and his rewards are lasting.

He might not act as we expect but he will give us a reward we truly need and will transform us by his grace. His reward is far greater than anything we can earn on earth. Hear Galatians 6:8-10

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8 If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Eternal life in its multitude of forms is the reward God gives and it is far better than anything we might gain by being focused on this world.

Heaven though and Eternal life might seem far off - though Jesus says

# John 17:3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

3 And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Eternal life is a present as we experience as we know God through Christ.

So in this present time we see and experience hints and glimpses of the fullness of his blessing in 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul in raising money for the Church in Jerusalem says

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

I think part of the reward envisioned here is provision of what you need so that you can continue to be generous or to grow deeper in prayer or whatever it is you need to move in every good work. That is indeed a powerful reward.

As we serve or give generously he will give us what we need so that we can continue to do the good work he has set before us.

Aim at Heaven you get Heaven and Earth, so that you can aim at more heaven.

I pray the idea of that thrills your heart.

Let us not cheat ourselves like I nearly did. Let us have Him as our one and only audience as we walk out our discipleship as we are able.

In seeking Christ’s Kingdom we are seeking to have him always and only on the throne of our hearts. When we act for any other audience including ourselves we are putting ourselves on the throne of our hearts. As we act only for an audience of one, trusting in him, we dethrone ourselves and seek his kingdom.

In the Movie the Chariots of Fire there is a main character called Eric Liddell. He is leaving church in Scotland just before he is to leave for the Olympics and his Father and Sister are trying to convince him to give up the distraction of running and join them now on the mission field rather than later. He sympathizes with them but he says that he needs to run because “When I run I feel his pleasure” we see why later in the movie because of his faithful witness why that would have been. It would have been so easy to say Father and Sister your right I will go join you now but his audience was an audience of one and that audience member for that time at least felt pleasure in his running and so he would run.

Let us remind ourselves of the true extent of our audience the audience of One. Let us remind ourselves of his faithfulness. Let us then act to please that one audience member trusting him for his blessing, his reward in his time and way will come but far more importantly we will in the process be seeking his kingdom and be shaped to be more like him. Amen.