

Where's Your Worth? by Jeff Strite

Matthew 23:1-23:12

OPEN: "Sometime, when you're feeling important
Sometime, when your ego's in bloom
Sometime when you take it for granted,
You're the best qualified man in the room.

Sometime when you feel that your going, would leave an unfillable hole,
Just follow this simple instruction, and see how it humbles your soul.

Take a bucket and fill it with water,
Put your hand in it, up to your wrist,
Pull it out, and the hole that's remaining,
Is a measure of how you'll be missed.

You may splash all you please when you enter,
You can stir up the water galore,
But stop, and you'll find in a minute that it looks quite the same as before.

The moral of this quaint example is do just the best that you can
Be proud of yourself, but remember, there is no indispensable man."

APPLY: We all want to think that we're indispensable.
That we have value. That the world NEEDS us.
In fact, when I was a kid I took that belief that the world needed me to the extreme.

Now this is how my young mind worked:
When I went to bed at night and went to sleep, the world stopped.
And what was more, I believed that BEFORE I was born the world didn't exist.
And when I would die, the world would cease to exist.

Now, why would I think that?
Well I thought that because, when I was asleep I couldn't see things, feel things, hear things. And how can they exist if I don't know they observe them? And before I was born, the things I was TOLD had happened, well I had never seen those things or heard them or touched them so they couldn't possibly have happened.
And of course after I die, well if I don't experience the world it doesn't exist.

Everything that existed depended upon MY observing them. And when I stop observing them, they would cease to exist.

Now was that true?

Of course not!

But the very fact that my little childlike mind perceived my value made me realize something that WAS true:

I am special.

I'm unique.

I'm a remarkable creation of God.

And so are you.

But we are not special because you (or I) believe that we are.

You and I are special because GOD SAYS we are.

He created us to be special.

You and I are valuable. We are unique. We are a remarkable creation of God.

ILLUS: There's a cute T-shirt I read that says:

"I know I'm special because God don't make NO junk"

And the Bible says that's true.

You and I are special because we've been made "in the image of God." (Genesis 1:27)

We've been "made just a little lower than the angels"

And have been "crowned with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:5)

And even more than that, God thought we were so valuable to Him that He sent His only begotten Son to earth to die on the cross for our sins. To take our place on the cross.

Think about that.

God believes that you and I were worth dying for.

And, once we accepted that truth and decided to become Christians, He regarded us as being so valuable that He placed His Spirit inside of you and me. And then He commissioned us to do special things in His name.

As Ephesians 2:10 says: "... we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

That means:

You and I are special

We are unique

We are a remarkable creation of God

We are valuable because God made us valuable.

God made us valuable. It is His ownership of us that gives us significance.

ILLUS: Think about this for a minute

How much would you pay for a toothbrush? Would you give \$5? \$2? 50 cents?

Well, what you pay for a USED toothbrush?

Now, what if that toothbrush was once owned by Napoleon? How much would you pay then?

Well, at auction, somebody paid \$21,000 for it.

Or, how much would you pay for a set of fake pearls?

\$20/ \$30... maybe as much as \$100?

What if that set of pearls had been owned by Jackie Onassis Kennedy?

Her fake pearls went at auction for a little over \$200,000

Or how much would you pay for a piece of sheet music of a song you could play on the piano? In 2003, an original autographed piece of sheet music by Beethoven went for over \$1.5 million.

Now my point is this:

That toothbrush was used.

The pearls were fake.

And the sheet music was just a piece of paper.

They weren't valuable because of what they were.

There was nothing intrinsic to them that gave them worth.

They were valuable ONLY because of who had owned them.

And the Bible says the same thing about us.

We have value ONLY because of Who owns us - because God has made us in His image.

Now, there are some people who don't understand that truth.

They don't look to God for their self-worth.
They don't look to God for the value and importance.

They look elsewhere.
And when they do that they end up warping the value that God has placed in them.

That's what happened to the folks in our story this morning. Jesus confronted the Pharisees - men who were so righteous that...

- * they fasted often
- * they prayed regularly
- * they went to church ALL THE TIME
- * And they tithed religiously (every 10th berry in their gardens)

These were highly religious people.
And yet Jesus condemned them!!!
Why?
Because their righteousness was all about THEM... not about God.

The Pharisees didn't look at God for their self-worth. They looked at themselves. They used their worship like a mirror, not to reflect God's glory, but to reflect their own.

ILLUS: Years ago, there was a song by Carly Simon entitled "You're so vain."
She was singing about an ex-boyfriend who was so caught up in himself that when he went parties she sang that while he was there "you had one eye in the mirror as you watched yourself go by."
(LONG PAUSE)

I've done that.
I have entered a crowded room that has a mirror in it and guess who I looked for first in that mirror?
(I pretended to preen in front of a mirror).
We've all done it.
We want to make sure our hair is in place. That our clothes look acceptable.
And - of course - we want to look at ourselves.

ILLUS: In fact, I read somewhere that when they design hotel lobbies they'll often put large mirrors in the lobby. Do you know why? Because people complain less about waiting for slow elevators when they're occupied looking at themselves.

My point is this: we all get caught up in our reflection.
We all want to be seen. To be important. To be valuable.
But that desire to be important can make it so that our Christianity gets warped.
And if we're not careful, our faith can be deformed by the very traps that snared the religious and righteous of the Pharisees.

1. The first trap is that of looking at church as a place where OTHERS should change. Jesus said the Pharisees were prone to "...tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." Matthew 23:4

They saw their worship as a place to pass judgment on others.

You know how that works.

"Gee, that was a great sermon. I wish Fred had been here to hear that one. HE really needs it."

OR "I hope Mary heard that one. She really isn't living up her faith and that is something she should pay attention to."

It's so easy to do.

And frankly, we're all tempted to do it at one time or another.

What's particularly frustrating is when a preacher or teacher falls into this trap.

A preacher/teacher can make powerful sermons that condemn sin in others... but not in themselves. They load their gospel gun and go hunting for bear.

Why would they do that?

Because it makes them feel powerful, righteous and holy, because they've proven that they're better than everybody else

Jesus called that sin.

The best way to defuse this trap is to realize it is sin, and then to commit ourselves to applying any Biblical warning to ourselves. We should FIRST consider how we should obey Bible before we ever consider using applying it the lives of others.

ILLUS: I find that my best sermons come when I ask myself how a Bible passage applies to ME, because if I can figure out what the Scripture says to me, then I can explain it to you and it will makes sense to you. I always start with the assumption that we're all the same kinds of people. We all have the same temptations and failings.

When I do that I protect myself against tying heavy loads onto your shoulders that I

don't care about. I protect myself from condemning people in the church for things I'm as guilty of as they are.

2. The 2nd trap is to desire to be seen.

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues" Matthew 23:5-6

This is where a person does what they do in church in order to be SEEN

ILLUS: In the last community I served I remember going to a community hymn-sing at a denominational congregation in town. The song leader would announce the hymn number from the hymnal, the congregation would turn to the song together, the organist gave the introduction, and we then we'd all sing through the first verse. Now, in most hymn sings you go directly from one verse into the next until you sang last verse.

But this hymn-sing was different. In between each verse the organist put in a lengthy interlude.

It was frustrating. I'd be finished with the first verse and be ready to start singing the next and I'd have to wait on this guy to play 4 or 5 measures in between.

Now why would that organist do that?

Why put in all those extra notes that nobody really cared about anyway?

Because he wanted you to know how skilled he was.

He wanted to be seen.

Any time anyone does things in the church to be seen, you can be assured --- God sees. And He's not going to be impressed.

In fact you can be assured... God will be appalled, offended, insulted that you or I would attempt use HIS worship to show off.

How do you protect yourself from this temptation?

Well, you need to humble yourself and deflect any praise you get back to God.

ILLUS: Corrie ten Boom once told a friend, "... people thank me so much and it used to worry me because I didn't want to get a big head. So I began to collect those compliments like flowers.

'Thank you,' I'd say. 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

Then at the end of the day I'd kneel down and I'd say, 'Here You are Jesus, they're all

Yours."

ILLUS: I protect myself in another way.

Sometimes people will compliment me after a sermon.

And I'll often reply: "It's hard not to preach a good sermon when you have such good material to work with."

The best way to avoid pride is by giving the glory back to God... where it belongs

I don't deserve praise.

You don't deserve praise.

It's just an honor to be able to serve the great God of the universe and to be His child.

So, the first trap is the desire to use worship to judge others

The 2nd trap is the desire to use worship to be seen.

The 3rd trap is desire to use worship to gain a "reputation".

Jesus said of the Pharisees: "They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ."

The temptation to seek power, position or prestige in the church is not an easy one to avoid. If we don't have the proper attitude toward God we can end up trying to use God to gain those things.

ILLUS: A preacher told of a time when the congregation selected a man for eldership who wasn't qualified. He had no idea what the job was about, and was chosen because he was an important man with significant resources.

The preacher appealed to a leader in our brotherhood named George to come and give a lesson on what Eldership was all about, with an understanding of what had happened with this unqualified Elder.

George conducted the seminar, telling the men what Elders were expected to do, then he said: "You need to understand that your job as Elder is very important. It is also a very dangerous position to hold if you don't take it seriously. On the Day of Judgment, God will hold you personally accountable for every soul in this congregation. He will call you before the throne to answer for any person who leaves the congregation or whose spiritual life has fallen apart."

At this point, the unqualified Elder stood up and said "You didn't tell me that. I want no

part of this. I quit!"

What did that man want to be an Elder?

For the power, position and prestige he felt it would bring him.

And too many churches have men in position of responsibility who are in that position for exactly the same reason.

Preachers are no less tempted by this.

And one of the most significant ways a preacher can be tempted is by the use of titles. The 'title' represents the 'position' of importance the preacher feels he needs..

ILLUS: I heard of one denominational preacher who had always been called "Pastor"... that is until he got his doctorate. THEN he insisted he be called "Doctor" because (he said) "I've worked too hard to just be called a "Pastor". I deserve to be called "Doctor".

That man had an ego problem... and titles were his trap.

ILLUS: Now, if you've been at this church any length of time, you know I'm not referred to as "Reverend."

Anybody know why not?

To "revere" someone is to "hold them in awe."

(Again I preened a little then smiled).

Really. Do you think I deserve to be held in awe?

Who deserves to be held in awe? (God)

And people rarely call me Pastor Strite.

Despite what some people might think, "Pastor" is not my first name.

My first name is Jeff.

AND not only is pastor not my first name, it's not even my job description.

Who are the Pastors of the congregation? (the Elders)

I am NOT a pastor here... I'm just a preacher.

I don't have a title.

I don't need a title.

Just call me "Jeff"

Don't tempt me with titles.

I don't need them and I don't want them.

The temptation of wanting power, prestige or position can drag down Elders and Deacons and Sunday School teachers and anyone else with responsibilities within the church. Don't yield to it.

Don't take the glory away from God.

You and I don't need power or prestige or a "reputation" to be worth something to God. And if we do, that is a signal that we've got a problem... and ego problem.

We need to use our worship and service in church to mirror the glory of God"

We should never seek our own glory in life.

That belongs to God.

In Isaiah God declared:

"I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another..." Isaiah 42:8

AND "...I will not yield my glory to another." Isaiah 48:11

And let me repeat what I said earlier:

It's just an honor to be able to serve the great God of the universe and to be His child.

we should be committed to giving all the praise/glory/honor to God because it all belongs to Him.

CLOSE: Back in the middle ages, there was a Danish King (Canute) who ruled over England. As often was the case for Kings of that era, there were lackeys in the court who would praise this King talking about his greatness, power and invincibility.

The king finally became tired of hearing all this flattery and so he held a special event.

He gathered his court officials together and had a processional where his throne was carried down to the seashore where he sat for a few moments watching the surf.

As he saw the tide begin to come in, and the waves begin to approach his throne he commanded the waves NOT to come in.

But no matter how forcefully he ordered the tide not to come in, his order was not obeyed.

Soon the waves lapped around his chair.

One historian tells us that, from that day on, the king never wore his crown again.

Instead, he hung it on a statue of the crucified Christ.

The glory belongs to Jesus.

Not to us.

But we find our value and worth by belonging to Him

INVITATION