



Be Aware

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Matthew 6:1

[Jesus said] *“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”*

If I remember right, I was in the fourth grade. It was a beautiful spring day, and I wanted to go to the Woolworth’s Five & Ten Cent store downtown. If I followed the streets, it was an eight block walk. But even back then, I always wanted to take the shortest route. The shortest route was to walk through the high school property, following a diagonal route. I knew that would get me to Woolworth’s quicker.

With the sounds of birds singing carrying across the beautiful blue sky, I headed off to Woolworth’s. I was about half way up the steep hill that ran beside the high school when I saw a pack of dogs come out from behind the band room at the top of the hill.

The dogs stopped. They looked down the hill. They spied me. They started barking. Their barking sounded angry. Their bared teeth looked vicious. They started running toward me.

I knew they were going to tear into me. My ears were assaulted by their snarling howls. I imagined the feel of their sharp teeth ripping into my legs. My nose filled with their rancid odors.

Instinct told me to get the heck out of Dodge. I turned around and ran. I ran faster than I had ever run before. I ran all the way back home. I threw open the kitchen door, jumped through, and collapsed on the other side - winded, heart pounding, but safe and un-bitten.

The truth is those dogs didn’t even follow me down to the end of the block. But, that little episode changed my attitude about dogs. That little boy

who was scared by that pack of dogs has never felt completely safe around barking dogs.

Even today when I come up to a house that's posted with a sign, "Beware of Dog," I become that little fourth grade boy again. If the dog starts barking and charging, my heart starts pounding. My hands start sweating. I want to turn around and run away.

The posters of those signs, the owners of those dogs always say the same thing. "Don't worry," they say, "old Rover's a sweetheart. He wouldn't hurt a flea."

Well, maybe so, I think, but your "Beware of Dog" sign fooled me! Whenever I see the word "Beware," I am on edge - like when I read today's scripture. In this scripture Jesus posted a great big sign that said, "Beware!"

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before men..."

When you read the Gospels, you will see that Jesus had a prejudice against people who made a public show out of their religion. He didn't like people who were always talking about how religious they were, people who were always performing public rituals so other people could see them, people who always played the religious card in any situation. Jesus didn't like them, and he told you and me to watch out for them.

"Beware," he said, because that kind of thing can put your soul in jeopardy (and he wasn't talking about a television game show).

"Beware," he said, if you act like that you'll be putting yourself in peril.

"Beware," he said, and he made it clear. He doesn't want you acting that way. Don't try to impress other people with your religious fervor, with your public goodness, with your righteousness, with your moral superiority. Jesus never liked people who acted that way.

Back when he was living in Palestine there were several groups of people who wanted to impress everyone else with how very pious and good they were. They were the kind of people Jesus didn't like. He didn't trust.

"Beware," he said, of the Shoulder Pharisees. You may not have heard of them, but Jesus knew who they were.

If you have read the Old Testament, you have some idea about how many laws and rules there were for the Jews. There was at least one rule and law for everything, from the kind of underwear a priest should wear to the kind of food a woman could prepare for Sabbath-day dinner. It was astronomical. Most people didn't bother with most of those laws, but the Shoulder Pharisees

wanted to obey them all - every single one. They made their strict adherence to the religious laws their life's work.

Just to make sure everybody knew the laws they were obeying, they sewed little reminders on their shoulders for every law they obeyed. The more things they sewed on their shoulders, the more pious they obviously were.

It was easy to pick out a Shoulder Pharisee. They wore their religion on their sleeves. They would strut down the street with all those tassels jiggling and swinging. Everybody could see the evidence of their goodness.

It reminds me of watching the Ohio State University Buckeye football team. At the beginning of the season, every player's helmet is the same: red with a gray stripe and a big "O" painted on the side. But through the season, every time a player had a good play - a touchdown scored, a fumble recovered, a quarterback sacked - a little buckeye would be pasted to the helmet. At the end of the season, you can easily pick out the good players by counting up the number of buckeyes on their helmets.

The Shoulder Pharisees thought they were the star players of their team. They had all those buckeyes hanging from their shoulders!

Jesus didn't appreciate that. He told you to beware of that kind of public show.

Jesus said, "Beware" of people like the Bleeding Pharisees.

Back then, women weren't considered "real" people. They were treated as possessions, as commodities, as servants, as chattel. At best, women were second class citizens - not quite as low as a slave, but no where near equal to a man. Religious men would not talk with women in public. The Bleeding Pharisees wanted to show their piety, so they took it a step further. Of course they would never talk to a woman in public. What is more, they wouldn't even look at a woman in public.

The only way they could guarantee that they wouldn't accidentally see a woman out there on the streets was to keep their eyes shut. When they stepped outside the house, they refused to open their eyes. So, whenever they went anywhere, they kept bumping into walls, or trees, or whatever happened to be in their way. They fell down a lot. They got a lot of bruises, a lot of cuts. They bled a lot.

As far as they were concerned, the more bruises and cuts, the more blood and bumps the better. Their wounds were public proof of their piety.

Jesus didn't like that. He went out of his way to speak with women, to show they respect, to treat them as equals. He never saw the avoidance of women as a proof of piety.

Jesus said, "Beware" of the Tumbling Pharisees. They wanted to prove to the world how humble they were. They demonstrated their humility by refusing to lift their feet off the ground. Everywhere they went, they shuffled their feet on the ground. This, of course, caused them to keep tripping over every bump in the path. But they thought their shuffling and bent posture advertised their piety to the world.

Jesus didn't like their little side shows.

There's another word he called people like that. You can find it in the second verse of Matthew 6. The word is "hypocrite." Jesus had a real problem with hypocrisy.

Jesus didn't like people who put on a big, public show of their religion, people who advertised their piety, people who set themselves higher than all the others -

- all the while their hearts were stone cold,
- while they had no compassion or caring,
- while they showed no forgiveness or understanding,
- while they refused to love anyone who didn't meet their standards.

I bet you know some people like that. Jesus didn't approve of that kind of behavior. Jesus doesn't want you to be like them.

Jesus posted his warning sign. "Beware" of people like that, he warned. Don't be fooled by their apparent piety. Don't be taken in by their empty phrases. Don't be deceived by their "holier than thou" attitudes.

If your intention in being religious,

- if your goal in doing good is to impress your neighbors,
- if your motive is to be seen by men -
- you'll get your reward from them.

You'll get your name on the list of donors. You'll get recognition at your club. You'll see your face in the papers. You might even get a plaque from your congregation, but that's all you'll get!

You will miss out on the real rewards of a faithful life. Throughout his ministry on this earth, Jesus spoke about the rewards of a faithful life, of a life lived for God, of a loving and gentle and forgiving attitude.

When he called himself the Good Shepherd, he reminded people of the Twenty-Third Psalm. Remember what that Psalm says? It said you will not

want; you will lie down in green pastures, you will sit beside the still waters, your cup will overflow. He reminded you that there are far better rewards for a life lived in his steps, far better than the admiration of your fellow men.

Those rewards don't have a thing to do with a higher standard of living. Jesus never promised money in the bank, or a longer, easier life, or even a healthier life. Jesus didn't offer to make you better looking or more appreciated by your friends.

His rewards are different from that. Jesus said, "You who have been faithful in a little..." and the reward he offered was that you will be given responsibility over a lot. (Matthew 25:21)

The reward for living a faithful life is the requirement to be even more faithful! The reward for being responsible in small ways is to be given responsibility in larger ways. The reward for all the hard work you do is to be given more difficult work to complete. The reward for loving is being called upon to love more, to understand more, to forgive more. The reward for all your Christian involvement is to become more deeply involved.

What Jesus offers doesn't have much to do with knowing for certain that you're going to end up in heaven (that's God's decision, not yours);

- it doesn't have much to do with knowing for sure that you're one of God's favorites (remember, God even loves your enemies)

- it doesn't mean you know for sure that you're doing what he wants, or that you have the privilege of speaking for him, or that you have the right to condemn others (don't you have enough to do looking out for your own salvation?)

- and it certainly doesn't have anything to do with a self-serving, self-centered piety.

Remember: the good works you do aren't done to bring you rewards. The purpose of doing good is to cause others to praise God (not you!). When your life causes others to praise God, you will receive the greatest gifts you can receive here on earth: you'll have the peace of mind that comes with knowing you're doing your best, and you will have a family to love and support you.

When Janet, our children, and I moved here twenty years ago; we left behind all our friends. We are hundreds of miles away from our family members. We came here all alone, just the four of us.

But do you know what we got? We got a home. We got a family. We got all of you.

And that, my friends, is the real reward that comes with living a Christian life.

If you're looking for a loving family, you will find it here. The rewards of the Christian life come when you take the risk, when you get involved, when you choose to love somebody else.

That is the reward. That is the glory. That is the wonder of being part of a Christian family -

- a family that doesn't "beware" of each other's motives or actions,
- a family that doesn't put on airs, or put up a front, or put on a show,
- a family that doesn't condemn, or convict, or coerce.

It's just a family that cares, that understands, that forgives, that loves. In the name of Jesus Christ, a family that shares its love and concern.

That's nothing to beware. That's something to embrace.