

Series: **BRIDGE TO NOWHERE** - January 11, 2009

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18; 7:1-5

I. INTRO

- A. In the recent US presidential race, one of the issues that came up was something called, the **Bridge To Nowhere**. I was fascinated by the thought of a bridge to “nowhere.” So I did a little research.

-Apparently the bridge was the size of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco—and would like Ketchikan, Alaska with the international airport on Gravina Island—and the 50 people who live there. The controversial part of it was that it would cost \$398 million to build—and there is already a short ferry ride that only costs \$5 a person—for a two-way trip.

-The **Bridge to Nowhere** got it's name from a T-shirt drive held, actually, to support the bridge project—which ultimately got dropped because of the massive pricetag.

1. I was born near Pittsburgh, PA. You can't get anywhere there without crossing a bridge. Bridges are important. But you want them to actually **work**—to get you where you need to go. Unlike **this** bridge. Watch this footage! **[BRIDGE VIDEO CLIP]**
2. I thought a little more about this, I realized that I have built *bridges to nowhere*. I can remember as a teen spending a lot of time and effort to impress a girl—but it was a bridge to nowhere. Any of you guys been there?
-A bridge to nowhere is a place where you invest blood, sweat, tears and money—and the pay-off is **zip! Nada!**

- B. Jesus didn't use this exact analogy—but He did talk about us using our acts of devotion to try to impress others. And He said, in essence, “You're building a bridge to nowhere!” Let me read the specific passage—and let's see if you agree:

“Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and

again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

“And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18 NLT)

-Wouldn't it be a shame to spend your life doing good things—noble things—only to find out one day that it doesn't count; you've been building a **bridge to nowhere**?

II. **SMILE FOR THE CAMERA!**

- A. There's a core life issue here that Jesus probes into. It's our desire to be noticed and admired by others. If we live a quiet life of love and devotion for God—and a life of kindness and generosity toward others—we *will* be admired eventually. The problem is—**we want it now!** The thought of just blending in—being seen as part of the mass of humanity is unthinkable.

-So, let's all just admit something up front. We say things like, “I really don't care what other people think of me!”—but we actually **do!** Jesus *knew* this—and that's why He tells us to not let this need corrupt the good things we do. He says, **Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others.** (Matthew 6:1 NLT)

1. Jesus is talking about taking shortcuts—something that He was tempted by Satan to do. Earlier in this same book, Matthew 4, Jesus is tempted by Satan to throw himself off the top of the temple in Jerusalem and come up without injury. It would be a shortcut—which is what *bridges to nowhere* are--to impress others into admiring and following him.

-The fact is that Jesus was human—and he too was tempted by Satan to take short-cuts that avoided pain and humiliation and sacrifice—and maximized admiration, glory and fame. He just never gave in to the temptation to impress others. We do.

-Anyone here ever done something—or had a conversation, or in some kind of a sly way, made sure a group of people *knew* something good about you—that, to be really honest—was intended to coax a little admiration out of them? I caught myself saying something not long ago that, if I'm brutally honest, was designed to get someone to join the Ken Davis fan club! That's a scummy thing to admit--but it's true!

2. Why do we do stuff like that? Well--it *feels* good to be admired, doesn't it? We want others to think we're cool. People go to great lengths—and spend a *lot* of money on cool. By the way, does someone have a good definition of **cool**? I found one in Webster's—it means...*moderately cold*.

-Or, we want to be admired for being athletic. Fit. So we slip clues on how much we exercise, or what sports we like.

-The list is almost endless when it comes to this desire to be admired. We want to be admired as wise, clever, gorgeous, sexy, successful, funny, daring, knowledgeable, radical, gifted...or **tough!** If we get too old for any of those (you know, when we're 80 or 90) we'll settle for wise! Noble!

-We do care what others think! Sometimes we care **too** much. We have this nagging feeling down inside, "I'm not good enough!"—and in an attempt to make it go away we either put others down—or we go over the top in trying to impress. We want people to know we're **special!** But the truth is that this need to be admired is this black hole in our lives. More is never enough. More attention. More admiration. More fan club members. You can get addicted to admiration!

3. I believe this longing to be liked, to be desirable—to be admired is, at the core, very natural. It's not **wrong** to have that desire—but it **is** wrong to wrap your life around it!

B. Well, in this passage, Jesus talks about how **dangerous** that desire for admiration is when it gets sucked into the spiritual arena. He says, **When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! (Matthew 6:2 NLT)**

1. In our culture, the word **hypocrite** **never** means anything good—or even neutral. It's come to mean someone who's a fake; who doesn't actually live what they say they believe. In Jesus' world, **hypocrites** would've been followed by the paparazzi, featured in **People** magazine, and had their love lives featured on **Entertainment Tonight**. The word **hypocrite** meant **actor**. They were the people on stage in the theatres that Rome had built all over the Empire. Everyone had heard of **hypocrites**.

-Being an actor isn't a bad thing at all. Some people are **very** talented at impersonating someone else—sounding like them, looking like them, acting like them. In our world, you can make a lot of money at acting if you're really good.
 -Jesus takes this very colorful image—and says, "When you do good things for others, or talk to God, or deny yourself—and you're actually doing it to impress the audience watching you—let's just call this what it is. Theatre. Acting. You're **playing the part** of a devoted person."

2. Jesus uses three different illustrations of this kind of stuff. The first is **giving to people in need**. I think Jesus was using a little bit of humorous exaggeration when he talks about religious people giving alms—and then blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to make sure **everyone** noticed. His point is that when do something that's intended to express compassion—and then subtly—or not-so-subtly draw attention to ourselves over it, we aren't as clever as we think. It's **obvious**—and probably humiliates the people we help.

3. The second illustration Jesus uses is prayer. He says:
“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. (Matthew 6:5 NLT)

-Man, does this one ever hit *me* between the eyes! Because of my role, I do a fair amount of public praying. I don’t think Jesus is telling us to *not* pray corporately—I think He just asks a simple question: “Who are you actually praying *to?*” Because if you’re actually praying to the people around you—trying to impress them with your god-talk—well, that’s where you get your answer from!

4. The last illustration Jesus gives is that of fasting; doing without something—usually food—for a period of time for the purpose of prayer. It’s the discipline of self-denial; telling your appetites, “You aren’t in charge—I am.” Jesus says:
And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. (Matthew 6:16 NLT)

-I think Jesus is having some fun with the religious people who did this. The Pharisees and Teachers usually fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. So imagine this dignified-looking guy coming out of his house with a serious case of bed-head—with a little powder rubbed on his face to make it look pale. I mean, wouldn’t you want to say, “Wow! Are *you* ever spiritual!” It’s like Jesus is saying, “Hey—why not just hold up a *mask on a stick* like all the other actors!”

5. Jesus was pretty clear about what happens when we grandstand with acts of religious devotion. The paraphrase of this passage in **The Message** says: **“Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding. (Matthew 6:1-2 Msg)**

-You have to consciously choose which audience you will please—God, or others. I once tried to please three audiences! In Grade 12, I did a final term paper—and, with slight modifications, handed it in for three different classes. It didn’t work. My English teacher gave me an A+, but my Economics teacher gave me a B- and I got a C in Problems Of Democracy.

-Doing something spiritual and noble for the purpose of admiration twists these acts of devotion into something else—and it’s not noble or spiritual. Jesus says, “Be *careful!*”

III. STUCK ON THE BRIDGE

- A. Here’s the question I want to raise: how is it that really good, well-meaning people—like these religious professionals—become *actors; hypocrites*? The things they were doing were noble—but is what you’re doing *still* noble if you’re a poser—if you’re playing to the crowd?

-No relationally intelligent person would do that to someone they loved, would they? How many of you wives or girlfriends would be impressed if you found out that the guy you life was wearing a hidden mike so his friends could listen in to your conversations? That would be a little disturbing, wouldn't it? You'd feel like you were on the **Truman Show!**

-A couple of things come to mind. First, admiration **feels** good. It always has—and always will. When others compliment you, congratulate you—become your fan club—over time, it stokes something really subtle in your heart. No one ever starts out to be an actor—to do good things in front of others—but you get addicted to the esteem of others. Like any addict—you **need** it, and over time you'll do almost anything to get it.

1. But there's another factor. I think something was going on in the religion of that day that almost **always** happens when it comes to religion and acts of devotion. In the religious system of that day, led by Pharisees and teachers of the law, giving to the needy, prayer and fasting became the **markers** of true spirituality. You couldn't be seen as a devoted, truly spiritual person and **not** do them.

-Do you understand what I mean by **markers**? This stuff gets used in marketing quite a bit. If you're a **good Mom**, you...what? Feed your kids stuff they **really** like, buy safe cars, get rid of germs. If you're a **good boyfriend/husband** you...don't buy your sweetheart doghouse gifts, and you shave and wear good deodorant. If you're a good **driver...?** You don't...get **caught** speeding!

-Please understand, being generous and compassionate to people in need, talking to God, and taking charge of your appetites are all extremely good and admirable things. I need those disciplines in my life—and **want** them in my life! -Here is **precisely** where it gets a little messy. Religious people are expected to have markers like these for others to respect them. And sometimes religious people, like the ones Jesus was referring to, have the **spiritual markers** of faith—but that's **all** they have. It's like keeping a wine bottle from a very good year of wine in your wine cellar—and putting it on the table at meals—long after the wine is gone.

2. Most eras of religious history have had **spiritual markers**. Spiritual markers are those things in any religious tradition that put you on the inside track and make you **somebody**. To over-simplify it, in the Holiness Movement the markers were lists of things you didn't do. In the Missions Movement, the markers were a big missionary pledge and missionary conventions. In the Charismatic Movement, the markers became spiritual signs, like speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy.

-All these movements—and there have been **many** of them—represent God doing something really good and new with his people. But over time they harden and crystallize. See, spiritual life is intended to be motivated by a passionate love for God and a passionate love for others. Markers—like wine bottles without wine—remain long after the passionate love for God and others

has cooled. Markers keep people on the *inside track*. “See—I **do** this—I’m one of you!”

-The actors or hypocrites Jesus was referring to were simply doing impersonations of the people with the original passion—to get the same admiration those people got. And spiritual markers are a danger for us, too. To do acts of devotion to fit in, rather than out of passion and love for God and others.

3. There’s one more danger Jesus addresses when it comes to the expression of our devotion. It’s **seeing** these things as a form of magic; as a way to get God to perform—do what you want Him to do. It shows up in what Jesus says about prayer.

“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!”

-Sometimes people see giving like that. They’re thinking, “Hmmm. If I give this...then God will give *that*.” The truth is that God **does** make it possible for us to give—and He does make it clear that giving is a **blessed** way to live. But don’t you think it’s a little twisted that we **give** in order to **get** something from God?

-Sometimes people will **fast**—and see it as a way of obligating God to do what **they** want Him to do. But **Jesus** says that these acts of devotion—giving, praying and fasting—are expressions of love for God and for those He loves—not as a means of getting **God** to do **my** will—and make me look good in the process.

-In my humble opinion, treating prayer or anything else as a form of magic treats God as if clueless—and can’t see beyond our actions into our hearts.

4. If we don’t see what we’re going—and see this stuff for what it is—it ultimately moves to a darker, more sinister place. The first place it goes is pride. When we do things to impress others—and they’re still impressed, even when it’s just good acting on our part—we begin to believe our own press. We begin to see ourselves as special--a cut above others, really. Our opinions are better, our insights are more profound—**God is lucky to have me on His team!** Pride and smugness in the spiritual arena, friends, is **deadly!** It stinks—and we’re so used to the smell, we don’t even notice it! But God does.

5. And from there, it gets worse. It goes into judging others. Jesus said: **“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. (Matthew 7:1-2 NLT)**

-It’s easy to do, isn’t it? Instead of seeing the work of God as this amazing mosaic—worked on by people with **hugely** different passions and gifts and

perspectives—and realizing how limited our insight is—we tend to prop up our own sagging egos by judging. By cutting other people down to the place where we stand taller than they do—at least in our own minds.

-That's what the religious professionals did to Jesus. Imagine that. Here's God in human form—and in their own minds, based on the spiritual markers they set—**they** judged him as inferior to them and used their influence to get him crucified by the Romans.

- B. Jesus solution to this problem of playing to the crowd—doing acts of devotion for admiration from others was **very** straightforward. Fairly easy to do, really. If what you're doing really is an act of love and devotion to God—keep it between Him and yourself. Give to the needy, pray, and fast in ways that aren't obvious to others. Don't talk about it; don't grab attention. Let **God** honor you—because if you play to the crowd, you will find yourself on a bridge to nowhere—with no reward. Any admiration you get will be **long** gone by the time you stand before your Father!"

-But followers of Jesus still do that stuff, don't we? It's not a matter of understand what Jesus said—it's not that complicated. It's just that we...well, we want to feel important. Significant. Special. And it **seems** like we're getting away with it. But we aren't. People know—and God knows.

1. This whole issue of posers...actors...hypocrites, as Jesus called them, has plagued the church ever since it was started. The church wasn't real far along when selling property to help the poor became one of the spiritual markers. A guy named Barnabas sold a piece of property—and brought the money to the leaders to be used to help people in poverty. A **good** thing.

-But a couple named Ananias and Sapphira saw the admiration in other's eyes for him—and saw an opportunity. They sold a piece of property too—and brought **some** of the money in to help others—and pretended that it was **all** of the money. God's response? There's no really nice way to say this—He **killed** them. Bam—same day—they both went down. People understood that what Jesus said about posing—pretending—acting the part, without love—is very serious.

2. When people in our culture see someone who **talks** a good game—and may have everyone at church fooled—but doesn't live it; doesn't love, doesn't treat others with dignity and kindness—what's the typical response? "I don't want to be a hypocrite, and actor—so I won't have a relationship with God, pray, or give.

-Now. Does that make **sense**? Let me play with you a little on this. There are **nasty** dogs. Dogs who bite children and chase mailpersons and bite runners. I know. Does that mean all dogs are bad?

-Some people buy a new car—and it's a **lemon!** Really—there's something always wrong with it. So—are all new cars evil? Lemons? Of course not. Sometimes friends betray you. Is it a bad decision to have friends? No.

3. I want to narrow this right down. In this whole series entitled **Bridge to Nowhere**, I want to talk very clearly on what Jesus said about money. About controlling it and using it well; about keeping it out of your heart; and about giving it—using it to make a difference in people for eternity. Last Sunday, I talked about how **wealth** can deceive you and choke the fruitfulness right out of your life and leave you with **nothing** when you stand before God. We are deceived into chasing wealth—thinking it can do something it can't—care for the things we worry about. Money, friends, if it's not seen and used properly is **the** ultimate bridge to nowhere!

-Now. Do people abuse giving? Where, instead of giving out of a love for God and a love for others—give to **get something in return**. Like, to honest, they're buying spiritual publicity—or giving to **get** something from God? Of course that happens. Frankly, sometimes in our culture, people aren't giving out of love; they're giving to get a tax refund.

-But does it make sense, when you see that, to keep all you have for yourself and use that as an excuse to never give? **Not** giving is a **bridge to nowhere, too!** Jesus says that to make money the goal of your life and to spend it all on yourself is one of the most tragic things you can do—because it will leave you bankrupt in a place where you **most** want to have something to show for this life! Heaven. You will miss one of the most amazing opportunities you will **ever** have on earth—and that's to invest in the lives of others—who **also** invest in the lives of others—who **also** invest in the lives of others.

-This is the **ultimate** in gifts that keeps on giving—and extends through this life and on into eternity. It is this **amazing** opportunity! But when life is over, the opportunity is gone. Forever.

4. It is **so** important to see this in what Jesus says. In dealing with the hypocrisy going on, Jesus **doesn't** say, "Oh yes—hypocrites give to the needy to get their admiration fix and grow their ego—so you'd better not give!" As I mentioned before—the solution to bad motivation—playing to the crowd--is **very** simple. Let's read it from **The Message**:
- When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself...When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out."**
(Matthew 6:2, 4 Msg)

-According to all Jesus teaches, giving what we have to see God's plan accomplished on this planet stretches our hearts. Giving is a way to grow! Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "By the way, if you **ever** give something to someone else..." He says, **When** you give—make sure your motivation is clean. And clean motivation is...**love**. Love for God and love for others. Paul, an early church leader, says that if we base our acts of devotion on anything **but** love—it's nothing.

If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, *I could boast about it*; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:3 NLT)

5. Can anyone think of a **single** place in all the narratives of Jesus' life where He is recorded as either giving an offering or giving to the poor—or talking about his own giving? Why? Do you think He never actually gave? Or do you think maybe He did what he asks us to do. "Give—do it secretly—and don't talk about it." At the end of his life, soldiers gambled to see who would get Jesus' only remaining possessions, a little pile of clothes at the foot of the cross. Why did He give all He had—including his life? In some of his last words to his disciples, He told them: **There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13 NLT)**

6. I had a funeral last Wednesday for a woman who, in the last years of her life, usually attended The Olive Branch. She was Della Marek—97, almost 98 years old. Affectionately known by her grandchildren, Ted and Cheryl Marek, and great-grandchildren as **Nana Banana!** 97 years of history—a legend among her family members. When she died, Nana Banana had given away **everything** except for what would fit in a couple of banana boxes, no pun intended. Spunky, fun, grateful—and generous to the end. I told her family at the funeral. "From my perspective, everyone wants two things out of life. First, they want to have **truly** made a difference. They want a group of people in a room who say, 'Man, I'm **so** glad she lived and touched my life.' And second, everyone wants to go **Home** when life is over. Nana Banana had both."

7. Friends, Jesus, Son of God, is **telling** us about what matters. He's saying that if you want to make a difference in this world—it will come by loving God and putting Him first—and loving others as you love yourself. And to accomplish your mission, to stretch your soul to be like Jesus—to **love**--you have to learn to **give**. And it will take faith to do that. When the reward for giving of yourself seems to lag, you will be tempted to play to the crowd—and **lose** the reward.

-And **that** means that you and I will have to grow our faith to deal with the **fear** that comes at a time like this when our economy is upside-down; when there's this sick feeling inside, **Will I have enough** if I give? And it means that we have to keep our motivations pure, ignore the short-cuts, and stay off the stage!

IV. BRIDGING HEAVEN AND EARTH

- A. One of the block buster films of 2008 was **The Dark Knight**—the latest in the series of Batman films. What took this particular film over the top was the performance of Heath Ledger as **The Joker**—and then his untimely death from an overdose of prescription medication.

-I got a chance to watch the film over Christmas—partly out of entertainment—but partly out of curiosity. I had heard that Heath Ledger taking on this character of a bizarre sociopath so disturbed him that he couldn't sleep—and couldn't wake up. See, actors have to take on the persona of the person they're pretending to be. And the

further it is from who they really are—the tougher and more disturbing it is. I suppose you could say, in some ways, that **acting** took Heath Ledger's life.

- B. Acting is a form of entertainment. You can have a **lot** of fun doing it and watching it. But when it comes to your soul—when it comes to what matters most in life, you really **don't** want to act. See, you probably, over time, can't really fool people into thinking you're someone that you're not. But you **might** fool yourself—and that would be tragic.