**Audience of One**

**FBC Albemarle**

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In the 1991 Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, Gaston sits glumly in the town tavern after being rejected by Belle. Belle wants a man of substance, not just show. His “friends,” who themselves just want to be liked also, cheer him up by reminding him how popular and well-liked he is by everyone else. The lyrics of the song goes like this:

Ev'ry guy here'd love to be you, Gaston

Even when taking your lumps

There's no man in town as admired as you

You're ev'ryone's favorite guy

Ev'ryone's awed and inspired by you

And it's not very hard to see why

No one's slick as Gaston

No one's quick as Gaston

No one's neck's as incredibly thick as Gaston's

For there's no man in town half as manly

Perfect, a pure paragon!

You can ask any Tom, dick or Stanley

And they'll tell you whose team they prefer to be on

No one’s been like Gaston

A king pin like Gaston

According to the rest of the song, Gaston is known for his decorating everything with antlers, eating several dozen eggs for breakfast and having biceps to spare. Gaston is, as everyone can see, a dazzling specimen of manliness. Obviously, Belle was making a huge mistake!

Gaston did not lack for vainglory. Vainglory may be an unfamiliar and somewhat archaic word for a vice, but the problem it names is pretty familiar. Vainglory was on the original list of the “deadly sins” – a list of vices first compiled over 1600 years ago. They include lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Early on, it used to be eight deadly sins but somehow “vainglory” lost favor and was dropped from the list. However, I think it is worthy to be put back on the list.

Vainglory is defined as excessive elation or pride over one’s own achievements or abilities. Also it can be defined as boastful vanity. We see it everywhere in our culture these days. When a football player makes a touchdown or a tackle, they display their vainglory by hitting their chest or pointing to the name on the back of their jersey. When a person uses Facebook to “show off” what a fabulous life they have, it can be done with a spirit of vainglory. When models or celebrities have their pictures photoshopped in order to take away their blemishes, it is often done in vainglory. When a person tries to show off their intelligence, their loquaciousness displays vainglory. When a person wants to look important, their name-dropping becomes vainglory. Vainglory is driven by the fact that we are insecure in who we are and we gain our self-assurance through affirmation from others.

In today’s text, Jesus addresses three different occasions where righteous acts can cross over to the sin of vainglory. He teaches, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Notice these acts are things we should do as followers of Jesus. However, if we do them because we want to be recognized among people for being righteous, then the recognition is our reward for God will not recognize it in the kingdom.

First, Jesus addressed the righteous act of giving to the poor. As Christians, it is our duty to help the poor and care for their needs, as we are able. In Jesus day, as is often the case today, when a significant gift is made, it was recognized in the place of worship. There is nothing wrong with the recognition when it is done properly. However, where vainglory can creep into this righteous act is when it is given in order to be recognized rather than to purely assist the poor. When the recognition is more important, our heart is not in the right place and vainglory has overcome.

Second, Jesus called out those who prayed to be noticed for their piety and for their eloquent words more than the actual act of submission to our heavenly Father. In Jesus’ day, devout Jews would pray three times a day, often in public. They would go to the synagogue or stand on the street corner to pray. Often people would pray standing up and praying their prayers out loud. Again, there is nothing wrong with praying and even praying out loud. However, do we pray because we want to look religious? Do we pray to impress others with the beauty of our words? If so, we have already received our rewards.

Third, Jesus took on those who would fast for the sake of being noticed. Many in Jesus’ time would fast twice a week. Fasting would help them to focus on their spiritual lives as they observe the discipline of withholding sustenance from their bodies. However, rather than going about their fasting without being noticed, some would put on a sackcloth and pour ashes over themselves in order to gain attention. “Look what I am sacrificing for the sake of the Lord!” Their reward has already been given.

Giving money to the poor, praying and fasting are all spiritual disciplines designed to draw us closer to God. We should practice these in our lives. So, Jesus was not speaking against the disciplines. James Bryan Smith writes, “He takes three righteous and holy actions and shows how the condition of a person’s heart determines whether the discipline is a blessing or a hindrance.” The righteousness of our actions is determined by our hearts, not the results of the actions. When we act with a pure heart, we only have an audience of one. God is the only one that matters and God is the only one that should matter to us.

So how do we combat vainglory? It begins with humility and not fake humility either. Sometimes, we are good at what is known as a humblebrag. A humblebrag is false humility couched in "woe is me" complaining or self-deprecating humor that's designed to remind everyone that your life is still more awesome than everyone else's, and it allows the self-important person to boast about his or her achievements without any sense of shame or guilt. For example, an actress once said, "I just stepped on gum. Who spits gum on the Red Carpet?" That is a humblebrag. A supermodel once tweeted, "Recognized a gagillion times today ... even two casting directors said they were fans" #thisneverhappens. That is a humblebrag. Often we want to brag about something but we don’t want to be known as that guy or that girl. So we hide our brag behind a complaint or self-deprecation. Once again, God knows our hearts and he knows our intentions.

True humility is exemplified in Jesus. The King of kings and Lord of lords hung out with the outcasts of society. His closest friends were tax collectors, fishermen and known sinners. Though Jesus could’ve come into the world with power and force, he came as an innocent baby boy born in a manger in an ordinary town named Bethlehem. He could’ve been a king of the earthly kingdom but he chose to be a servant of people, even to the point of death on the cross for our sins. “Who, in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2: 6-8) We need to regard others higher than we regard ourselves. The key point is not to put yourself down but raise others up. We want to exalt others so that God will receive the glory! Nothing more and nothing less.

Not only do we need to live with humility, we need to fully understand what it means to have our identity in Christ. Too often, we allow our work, our accomplishments, our position, and our friends to shape our identity. If the people around us like us, then we feel good about ourselves. If we do well at work or if we receive recognition for a job well done, we have a good self-image. Your identity is tied to the external circumstances in your life rather than an internal understanding of who you are in relationship to Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love or his grace. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less. There is no amount of good works in the world that will make God love you any more than he already loves you. Conversely, there is no amount of failures in your life to make God love you any less. God’s love is unshakeable and unchanging. Only thing we can do is embrace this incredible love of God. When we learn to embrace it, we place our identity in the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus. We learn to do what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

When we live with true humility and with our identity in the strong name of Jesus, we realize everything is a gift from God. We no longer do good works for others to see. We no longer brag about what we do because God receives the glory. We know in Christ, we are saints who still miss the mark. We don’t have to look outside of Jesus to define who we are. We live our lives for the AUDIENCE OF ONE.