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**Vainglory: Image is Everything**      *Matthew 6:1-8, 23:27-28*  
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***The Gospel of Matthew 6:1-8***, “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. 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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 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. 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. 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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

**Matthew 23:27-28 (NRSV)**, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, **which on the outside look beautiful, but inside** they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. **So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside** you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Thirty years ago in 1989 on the set of a commercial in the Nevada desert for a Canon Rebel camera, 19-year-old tennis pro Andre Agassi was instructed to step out of a white Lamborghini, lower his sunglasses, and utter the words, “**Image is everything.**” “Image is everything?” Agassi asked the director. “Yes. Image is everything.” Agassi shrugged and did as he was told. But Agassi couldn’t shrug off what those three, seemingly innocuous words would come to represent. By the summer of 1989, they sounded like a confession. Image, according to the media and many fans, really was everything to the kid from Las Vegas. Three years earlier, Agassi had burst onto the tennis scene—sporting acid-washed jean shorts and heavy-metal hair, and hitting his forehand, as John McEnroe would say, harder than anyone, ever. It seemed only a matter of time before he would be No. 1 in the world and winning Grand Slams.

Agassi’s attitude and outfits only became more outrageous; even his hair, went from real to fake. **But the substance below the style failed to materialize.** By later in 1989, Agassi, tired of being asked when he would win a major, found himself on the verge of burnout. His “image” problem only seemed to sum up his career to that point. Agassi wrote in his autobiography, *Open*, “Overnight the slogan becomes synonymous with me. Sportswriters liken this slogan to my inner nature, my essential being. They say it’s my philosophy, my religion, and they predict it’s going to be my epitaph.”

Andre’s commercial slogan quickly moved beyond tennis into the world at large. As for Andre the man, the storm those three words caused was raging all around him. “Come on Andre—

image is everything!” fans screamed at him from the stands, whether he won or lost. The words hurt, Agassi confessed later, and they didn’t go away.

At the end of 1989, in the midst of the Canon controversy, Agassi turned a corner when he introduced himself to Gil Reyes, the strength coach at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas. The two, through their pioneering conditioning work, would spend the latter part of Agassi’s career turning the rebel into a champion, and making the world forget all about his image.<sup>1</sup> Three years later he won his first major, at Wimbledon, and forced his critics to admit that there might be some substance to the man after all. Agassi would go on to be ranked No. 1 in the world and became one of the sport’s most dominant players from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s and generally considered by critics and fellow players to be one of the greatest tennis players of all time.

The vice or sin we’re talking about today is **Vainglory**, which isn’t a word we use or hear much anymore, but it’s all around us. The root of vainglory is pride; both pride and vainglory seek to make us the center of the universe. **Vainglory is the AAA vice: it’s about Appearance for Attention and Approval. In other words, Image is everything.** What vainglory wants isn’t excellence, **but the appearance** of excellence and all the attention and social approval that comes with it. Vainglory wants the image, the show, and the right people to notice. **Vainglory literally means “empty of glory.”** When we have the vice of vainglory, we’re taking pride in what is vain or unworthy of glory. **Vainglory comes in many forms, but there are four main ones.**

1. A quality, appearance or action **you don’t have and fake having. Sometimes we seek glory for qualities we only pretend to have** — pseudo accomplishments on overly embellished resumes, exaggerated stories of our past athletic feats (“glory days stories”), or even things people fake with their physical appearance. In these cases, our reputation isn’t even for something real. My mother liked a BBC comedy show that was broadcast from 1990-1995 called “Keeping Up Appearances.” The central character is an eccentric and snobbish lower middle-class social climber, Hyacinth Bucket, who insists that her last name is pronounced “Bouquet.” Hyacinth lives to impress, and she has no patience for people who pretend to be superior because that makes it “so much harder for those of us who really are.” Assured of her own eminence, she spends her days trying to make sure everyone else is, too. **Sometimes we seek glory for qualities we only pretend to have, and fake having to try and make ourselves appear better than we truly are.**
2. A second form of vainglory is a quality, appearance or action **that isn’t worthy of glory from an eternal perspective. Sometimes, we seek glory for things that have no real or lasting worth.** Our lawn is perfectly trimmed and our house is perfectly decorated, our job title or advanced degrees sound prestigious, we drive a car that symbolizes a certain social status or financial success. Maybe we dress and act in certain ways to make sure others know we are “good Christian people.” These things may mean a lot to us right now,

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<sup>1</sup> 1989: IMAGE IS EVERYTHING—ANDRE AGASSI'S INFAMOUS AD by Steve Tignor, Tennis.com, 8.30.2015

but from an eternal perspective, our concern to build a name and reputation for ourselves reveals our investment in our appearances to others, far above the worth of the goods we use to win their approval.

3. A third form of vainglory is a quality, appearance or action **that's immoral, unkind, malicious, or illegal, but has gained you positive attention.** Sometimes people even seek glory by doing things that are wrong—winning laughs by cutting others down, gossiping or winning social points with slander or backbiting or ridicule among those we seek to impress. People even commit sins or crimes to be known as cool and earn street credibility. Good, bad or otherwise, so much of what we do aims at worldly attention, approval, and applause. It is fueled by empty reputation-seeking.
4. The fourth form of vainglory is **a truly good quality that we have, but that we've taken all the credit for, or have used to enhance our own reputation, rather than giving God the credit for God's gift to us. In other words, keeping the glory for ourselves.** Even putting on a good Christian “show” can be a vainglory trap. This form of vainglory can spoil the other virtuous things we do and make us hypocrites like the people Jesus criticizes in *Matthew 23* who strive to appear holy on the outside, but inwardly are full of hypocrisy.

**The remedy to vainglory includes gratitude, humility and truthfulness.** The *Letter of James* reminds us (1:17), “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” Any good we do is ultimately a gift from God. The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach is remembered for writing on each musical score he composed, “Soli Deo Gloria”—to God alone be the glory. What does the ‘score’ of our lives say? **Can “to God be the glory” also be the motto of our lives?** When we hear someone, who talks incessantly and inaccurately about how great they are, how smart they are, how they know more than anyone else about a topic, when they go on about how good looking they are and focus on appearances, we know we're in the presence of someone firmly in the grip of the sin of vainglory. When we hear someone talk about how good God is, how thankful and grateful they are, and who speaks truthfully and humbly – we're far more likely to be in the presence of someone who has put vainglory in its place.

The sad truth is that even when we win the approval and applause of others through vainglory, we don't find what we really seek because in many cases we're winning attention and approval for someone we're really not. Our creative ploys and cravings to get attention and approval from others can't give us the peace we need. Only God can know us and love us this way. In his letters to the Romans and Corinthians the apostle Paul repeatedly talks about the appropriate source of our boasting as followers of Christ. Paul heard the Lord say to him (2 *Corinthians 12:9-10*), “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, **I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” In *Romans 5:10-11* Paul writes, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, **will we be saved by his life.** But more than that, **we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,**

**through whom we have now received reconciliation.”** As followers of Christ if we’re to boast in anything, we boast in God and in our relationship with God through grace, not in our own accomplishments real or fake or our worthiness. We boast about knowing the Lord and the loving relationship we have with God.

If you think through a typical day, activity by activity, how much of what you do is driven by the need for attention and approval for others? It might surprise you. This is something most of us are susceptible to. Try to think of an example of vainglory in your own life. What is one thing you seek recognition for that is: 1) a quality, appearance, or action **you don’t have and fake having to try and make yourself appear better than you truly are**, 2) **that isn’t worthy of glory from an eternal perspective**, 3) **that is immoral, unkind, malicious, or illegal, but that has gained you positive attention**, or 4) **a truly good quality that you have, but that you have taken all the credit for, or have used to enhance your own reputation, rather than giving God the glory.**

To counter vainglory in our lives we can try practicing a modified form of the spiritual discipline of silence. Try not talking about yourself at all. This is much harder than it might seem. I have trouble with it. It can be challenging not to talk about our self or our own experience. It’s hard to fight the desire when others criticize you or you feel the need to say something to defend yourself or bolster your image, to make the choice to refrain from speaking. Instead, try to be a good and accepting listener to others. If we all loved and listened well, would we be as desperate to spend as much time and effort trying to be noticed and accepted by others?

I began by talking about tennis player Andre Agassi and I’ll close with this story. He retired from professional tennis in September of 2006, and went on to found the Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation, which has raised over \$60 million for at-risk children in Southern Nevada. In 2001, Agassi opened a College Preparatory Academy in Las Vegas, a tuition-free charter school for at-risk children in the area. He personally donated \$35 million to the school. He has become one of the most generous professional athletes ever and proven to be much more about substance than image.

Most of us don’t have \$35 million that we can give away, but what can you do today for which God will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”? Rather than being desperate for attention and approval for ourselves, we want to say with the Psalmist (*Psalms 44:8*), **“In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.”** Devoting ourselves to a life that glorifies God and enjoys the Lord forever will protect us against a superficial, selfish, shallow empty life spent focusing on appearances to gain attention and approval from others. The reward of giving up reputation-seeking and pursuing **gratitude, humility and truthfulness** is to have a chance to be truly known and loved for who we actually are. God is much more concerned with who we are on the inside rather than how we look on the outside for which I’m profoundly grateful. May we say with David in *Psalms 3:3* (NRSV), **“You, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.”**

**Blessing: *Jeremiah 9:23-24***, “Thus says the LORD: Do not let the **wise** boast in their **wisdom**, do not let the **mighty** boast in their **might**, do not let the **wealthy** boast in their **wealth**; but **let those who boast boast in this**, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; **I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth**, for in these things I delight, says the LORD. “

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. When we have the vice of vainglory, we are glorifying what is vain or unworthy of glory. What is one thing you seek recognition for that is:
  - a. a quality, appearance or action you don't have and fake having,
  - b. a quality, appearance or action that isn't worthy of glory from an eternal perspective,
  - c. a quality, appearance or action that is immoral (unkind, malicious, illegal), but that has gained you positive attention,
  - d. a truly good quality that you have, but that you have taken all the credit for, or have used to enhance your own reputation, rather than giving God the credit for his gift to you.
2. When you think through your day, activity by activity, how much of what you do is driven by the need for attention and approval for others?
3. What did you do today for which God would say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”?
4. Try practicing a modified form of the spiritual discipline of silence today (or this week). Try not talking about yourself at all. When others criticize you or you feel the need to say something to bolster your image or defend yourself against, make the choice to refrain from intervening. Instead, try to be a good and accepting listener to others. If we all loved and listened well, would we be as desperate to spend all that time and effort trying to be noticed and accepted by others?