

The Sermon on the Mount: Giving and Praying
John 14:8-14 and Matthew 6:1-15
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Blessed are the pure in heart, for they are the ones who shall see God. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the most scrupulously religious among you, you will never enter the kingdom of God. Be perfect. You know, I did give you fair warning that things weren't going to get any easier, so it shouldn't come as a surprise to hear Jesus tell us in today's scripture: "Beware of practicing your piety, [that is, your righteousness], before others in order to be seen by them for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Jesus' teaching in this section of the Sermon on the Mount raises some fascinating questions about how faith is lived out in three specific areas, three "spiritual disciplines" that people of faith have practiced for millennia as part of being holy, sanctified people: giving, praying and fasting. Does Jesus mean, for example, that your name shouldn't appear on the annual alumni giving list at your alma mater? Does he mean that Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are wrong to talk openly about their philanthropy as a way to encourage other billionaires to do the same? Are all the plaques in hospitals, museums, schools and even churches that bear the names of specific donors a bad thing? Is Jesus denouncing prayer in worship? Should we not talk about our experiences in prayer, or attend prayer retreats, or pray in public? Are we not to discuss the programs we engage in, both individually and corporately, to feed people, provide clean drinking water, tutor disadvantaged children or support mission endeavors around the world? Which is it to be, Jesus? Are we to shine like a beacon on a hill with our good works visible to others or are we to keep the practices of faith to ourselves?

To get at what Jesus is saying we need to understand that Jesus first lays down a guiding principle before discussing specific applications of that principle. The guiding principle can be stated quite simply like this: for the Christian, **all of life is lived in the presence of God**. Now, obviously, the spiritual aspect of our lives is concerned with God and our relationship to God. But, again and again, Jesus makes clear that God's involvement in our lives doesn't stop there. To belong to God is to acknowledge that every area of our lives—the so-called secular or mundane as well as the sacred—is to be lived under God's sovereign realm. Jesus has already talked at some length about how that works itself out in our relationships: how love, fidelity, forgiveness and justice are to dominate our

interactions with others rather than anger, retaliation and retribution. Today he applies this guiding principle to our spiritual practices.

It needs to be said right away that Jesus is not denouncing public prayer nor is he saying that any gift other than an anonymous one is unacceptable. What he says is that there is a right way and a wrong way to go about these things. “Let your light so shine before men,” Jesus says a few verses earlier, “that they may see your good works and *glorify your Father in heaven.*” It is that last phrase that is the key. The right way to give or pray or fast is to do so in such a way that all the glory goes to God. The wrong way is to practice our righteousness in order to draw attention to ourselves.

As he has from the very first Beatitude, Jesus is pointing to the condition of our hearts. Whether our giving or praying or fasting honors and glorifies God largely comes down to the issue of motive, and the ultimate choice before us is always the choice to either please ourselves or to please God. Now, why do I say please ourselves rather than please others? Trying to appear spiritual for the sake of impressing other people, to get their attention and their praise, really boils down to an attempt to feed our own egos, to make ourselves the focus of attention, to inflate our own good opinion of ourselves. It is the sin of pride and self-centeredness that propels us to make a show of our spirituality. We have forgotten the principle that is to guide us, that all of life is lived before God. Instead, we’ve placed self at the center of the universe; we’re just using spiritual sounding jargon and spiritual looking activities to cover it up.

Leave it to human beings to take even something good like giving and prayer and mess it up. Are we aware of our motive for the good we’re doing? We can give out of pride or guilt. We can give to manipulate or control. We can use money to cover up, silence, buy out or pay back. Likewise, we can pray for show. We can direct our prayers more to the other people in the room than to God. We can be more self-conscious about how a prayer sounds than we are concerned with what it means; more invested in the rhetoric than the content. Being focused on the outward show of righteousness rather than on the inward state of one’s heart earned Jesus’ rebuke for being a hypocrite.

“Hypocrite” was the Greek word for a stage actor. In ancient times actors often wore masks that hid their true identity. That’s why the word later acquired the connotation of those who “act” one way in public and another way in private, and thus conceal their true nature. Most people know hypocrisy when they see it, but almost without fail we see it in others and rarely, if ever, see it in ourselves.

Though Jesus tells us not to be hypocritical, the truth is that it is almost unavoidable. In fact, perhaps there is nobody more hypocritical than those of us who profess faith in Jesus.

As Christians we become adept at spelling out what we believe and why, but as soon as we tell someone what we believe, we are then confronted with all the ways our lives fail to live up to what we profess. We say, for example, that we are called to love, that love is one of the family traits that shows our resemblance to Christ. It sounds great—until, that is, we have to love real, specific people who are really a pain to love or worse, who are our enemies. The truth is that when we claim to be a follower of Christ, we stick out our theological necks, knowing they will be lopped off every time. But, that doesn't mean we give up.

Instead, we look to Jesus as the model of our faith and we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to activate that faith within us. Jesus' life is an example of belief and practice lining up. Jesus lived for God. He told his disciples that even the words he spoke were not of himself but were from God, and the works he did were only the works which God had given him to do. His whole life was lived for the purpose of glorifying his Father. There was a complete lack of ostentation about Jesus, because he was constantly seeking not his own honor but the honor of God.

It's easy to dismiss Jesus' alignment of motive and action as inevitable. He was God, after all! But, what if his alignment of motive and action, his lack of hypocrisy, wasn't so much a foregone conclusion as it was the result of his unwavering understanding that all of life is lived in the presence of God?

In one of the most poignant moments in the Old Testament, Hagar, Sarah's maidservant is alone and running scared in the desert, having fled her mistress's household under duress after conceiving Abraham's son—a scheme concocted by Sarah herself. An angel of the Lord finds Hagar and tells her to return to Sarah, but not before promising blessings too numerous for her to count. Hagar responds by saying, "You are the God who sees me."

To say that all of life is lived in the presence of God is to express the most profound blessing imaginable. God sees you. God knows your name. Not one hair on your head is unaccounted for. What impact might it have if our first waking thought each morning was, "God, you see me."? "I am in your presence and I will remain in your presence the whole of this day. Everything I do and say and attempt and think and imagine, is going to be done under your eye." If we hear that question and our visceral reaction is one of resentment or rebellion or fear,

then I want to suggest that our view of God and our understanding of God's love for us is in desperate need of examination. When we really grasp the depth of God's love and mercy towards us, the words, "God sees me" will be the most comforting, affirming, life-giving words you can hear. They are words to literally build and stake your life on.

Aware that we are seen and known by God, we no longer concern ourselves with trying to impress others, with calling attention to ourselves, with needing to be seen as right or spiritual or wise or successful or smart. Hypocrisy, then, is no longer an issue. Because we live life in the presence of God, we are free to be fully ourselves. The approval and adulation of the crowd holds no allure. Those are fleeting, empty rewards, and we are focused on a much bigger prize—we are focused on the reward of being with God which we will enjoy for all eternity.

When we live all of life in the presence of God, we will naturally want to develop spiritual practices that help us embrace and enjoy our relationship with God in ever deepening ways. Giving, praying and fasting all do that. We don't practice these disciplines for show any more than we practice them in order to earn something from God. Instead, we practice them because they open us to the work of God's Spirit within us, and we want that more than anything.

These disciplines are simple, but they are not easy. They are simple to understand in concept what is to be done, but they are not easy to execute. There are so many demands that compete for our time and focus and money. It's tantalizingly tempting to compartmentalize the religious part of our lives, to keep it safely tucked away on Sundays, so we can get on with our "real" lives the rest of the week. Can we, instead, hear in Jesus' sermon the invitation to pray before we give and give before we pray? To fast and give in order to make space for the Spirit of God to speak? To pray simply to be with God rather than to get something from God?

Sister Jody Kearney, who is a spiritual director at the Mercy Prayer Center in Rochester, New York, has said that the most wonderful and terrifying question in the world is, "How is your prayer life?" I agree with her. But, it's less terrifying when I remember that God is not judging my praying based on how articulate or well composed it is. God is not grading me on how theologically correct I am. God isn't concerned about how long or short I pray. Instead, I wonder if what isn't important to God is how ready I am to live my life, all of it—the good, the bad, the ugly—in God's presence where God's love can transform me. God does want me to be righteous, but it is a righteousness that God will give me,

not one I will earn. Still, how do I imagine God will form that righteousness in me, if I don't take advantage of the spiritual disciplines that open me to the working of God's Spirit? Men and women, our prayer closets are waiting and so is God. Amen.