

Righteous Practices

February 22, 2023

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I was in seminary, I was afraid above all else that I was going to be a terrible pastor, and not just because I am a perfectionist with people-pleasing tendencies (at least according to my Enneagram). No, I believed I was going to be a terrible pastor because I didn't pray enough. My friends and fellow seminarians prayed before every meal; I didn't. Truth be told, I only said grace when I was asked to do so. They prayed every morning and night; I didn't. They read devotionals and their daily Bible passages; I didn't. I only ever opened the Bible for classes and for sermon prep while a student pastor. So, I went through seminary, all of seminary, thinking there was something defective about me and that I would inevitably fail as a pastor. What I didn't realize at the time was that I'm not defective, just different. My prayer practice (if it can be called that) comes from sitting at the piano and playing songs few, if any, persons will hear and getting lost in the music. It's in those moments that I truly feel closest to God, where all worries of this temporal world melt away and all that's left is this state of bliss that is beyond words. It is this very state of being that Jesus instructs us as his followers to have in all three of our spiritual practices; those of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

The first of the elements of discipleship Jesus discusses is almsgiving, what we would understand as "offerings." He speaks of how the hypocrites draw attention to themselves while they do it so that others might acknowledge them and praise them for it. Jesus says, instead, to do this in secret, that only the Father would know and reward your efforts. However, there is a certain limitation to this idea of almsgiving being "offerings," much like there is a limitation to my definition of "prayer" as being strictly prayer in the literal sense, devotionals, and Bible reading. Rather, the word I would suggest in its place would be "charitability," because "giving alms" is more than just giving away money or even physical possessions. It's giving of one's time to help those who are marginalized or less fortunate. It's as much giving our own money as it is giving energy and talents towards raising money. If it's easier to think of "almsgiving" as involving physical possessions and not intangible items like time, energy, and talents, try reallocating what money you would spend on things you don't need. For example, instead of buying cookies, ice cream, candy, and all the things that satisfy your sweet tooth, give the money you save in not buying those things to soup kitchens, food pantries, and groups supporting the impoverished and hungry. Jesus' ultimate message here is that we should give of that which we don't need or of which we simply have excess, and to do so not out of wanting to receive admonition or simply to check off a box to say we fit this designated mold of what a Christian does, says, or is. When you give, whatever you give, however much of it you give, do so out of love, out of a deep desire to see God's will done rather than your own. Additionally, Jesus adds to pray in the same way that you give.

Jesus' second lesson is then about the practice of prayer. Just like his advice with almsgiving, he advises again not to be like the hypocrites, who stand on street corners and in the synagogues, praying loudly to again draw attention to themselves, boasting of how great they are before all persons. Jesus says, rather, to pray in secret, that our Father might be the only one who knows. Jesus' point is that prayer should not be about enhancing one's relationship with our fellow human, but solely about enhancing our relationship with God. With that said, I'm

going to attempt to relieve any stress that some of you might have, worrying that you don't know how to properly pray. I'm going to share with you all right now the ultimate secret of praying, one that was shared with me for when I do grace at meals, "Prayers of the People" here in worship, or otherwise: pray only what your heart leads you to say. There is no formula you have to follow to say a prayer. There is no rubric for what can or cannot be said in a prayer at any given time. There is no grading system by which to measure if your prayers receiving a passing or failing grade. So long as you are speaking from the heart and doing so out of a place of that same unconditional love that God shows to us through Jesus, then you are praying the way Jesus wants you to pray. What's more, it doesn't have to be prayer in the literal sense. Your "prayers" could come in the form of knitting, cooking, housework, those things that come as second nature to you and that allow you to focus just enough to block out all other distractions but just enough where God's presence becomes fully aware to you. If your prayer practices help you to feel at one with God, to set aside every worry and burden of this world for just a moment and be fully present with God, to feel that level divine presence and therein bliss and peace that I feel each time I sit at the piano, then you are doing it right. Then again, there is still another way to practice discipleship during and outside of this season of Lent according to Jesus.

Lastly, Jesus moves from speaking on prayer to speaking about fasting. Today's reading is part of the larger "Sermon on the Mount," delivered shortly after Jesus returned from his 40 days in the wilderness, where he fasted all the while, never once complaining of hunger. In today's passage, Jesus speaks about how the hypocrites fast, intentionally distorting their faces and groaning so as to let others know they are fasting, and therein get acknowledgement from others about how devout they are for doing so. Jesus says, instead, to fast so that others do not know except our Father. Here is where our practice of giving things up for Lent comes in, because, while we traditionally think of fasting as not eating, it actually does not have to be food-related. Very truly, "fasting" has more to do with the reestablishment of power than the object given up. The point of fasting is to reestablish that you are in control of your cravings (be they food, gambling, alcohol, etc.), not your cravings that control you. Imagine your life, your temptations no longer directing your actions, your thoughts, your words, but rather, you have them under control. Imagine a world where, likewise, your emotions no longer drive you to hasty words and actions that are later regretted. In this scenario, you're no longer focused on fighting off or feeding your cravings, no longer concerned with what your temper or melancholy will drive you to do or say. Rather, you're left with an opportunity for your focus to be redirected towards God and the work They have called you to do in this world. How great of a feeling that would be to know you are doing God's work and showing forth the Love of God in this world. How great of a world we would live in if all persons across demographic lines focused on God's work and not the constant drive towards self-fulfillment.

Very truly, it is in these three practices of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer that we rediscover our relationship with God. So, why then must we do these things in secret? Why not shout about our love for God and our willingness to sacrifice for Them from the rooftops? Why does Jesus so strongly emphasize this point? The reason he emphasizes this is because it causes us to evaluate our reasoning then for doing these things in the first place. If we do these things in secret, we would receive no acknowledgement from others congratulating us and complimenting us on our faith. The only people who would know then are you and God. In fasting in secret, you find you have the power to overcome temptations/sins, leading to a more righteous lifestyle.

By praying in secret, however it is you choose to pray, you would pray then for what is in your heart, what you actually mean, leading to a more righteous lifestyle. By giving offerings in secret, you are giving because you want to, not because you'd receive acknowledgement for it or because it checks off a particular box. Without the benefit of public acknowledgment and praise from fellow children of God, your intentions are realigned with a holier, more righteous, and more Christ-centered intent. You do these things not because you have to, but because you want to. You do these things not out of seeking self-glorification, but with hallowing God's name in mind. You do these things not because it brings you closer to brothers and sisters, but because it brings you closer to God. This is Jesus' ultimate point, that righteousness and humility abound not within the limelight before our adoring fans and judging eyes, but rather within the shadows. So, I ask: how and where will you practice righteousness this Lenten season?