

The Practice of the Disciple

Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

March 1, 2017

I wonder how many people are in churches tonight for this start of Lent? Not a great many, I bet. But you came. Boy, you must be spiritual. To come on a Wednesday night to church and have ashes put on your head. Wow, you must be something.

But looks are deceiving. It was a raining day in the city. A businessman was inside the lobby of a hotel. As he was about to leave, he mistakenly picked up the wrong umbrella. The rightful owner saw this and called attention to the man's mistake.

Embarrassed, he offered his apologies. Finding his own, the businessman went on his way.

The incident, however, reminded him that he had promised to buy both his wife and daughter an umbrella. To his delight, he found that a local store nearby had them on sale, so he bought two. Just as he was getting into his car with his unwrapped purchases, he saw the man he had encountered in the lobby earlier. Lobby man was eyeing him suspiciously. Seeing the three umbrellas hooked over his arm, the stranger exclaimed sarcastically, "I see you had a good day after all!" Things are not always what they appear to be on the surface.

But clearly, you are spiritual.

There is something about the practice of the Imposition of Ashes that draws us here tonight. Seekers don't come to Ash Wednesday service. Disciples do. People who are seeking the Lord in their lives.

For tonight is a reminder of our mortality: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is a reminder of why we are mortal: the human condition called original sin.

But Ash Wednesday also reminds us of the new life in Christ, for though we were conceived in sin, we can experience transformation through the blood of Christ, and the mark that we receive on our foreheads is a reminder of the mark of salvation God has placed upon us when we are born again.

So, tonight is a night of disciples, and therefore, in our time remaining, I want to talk about discipleship matters. I want us to be encouraged – and yes – challenged in our discipleship.

And who best to learn from than Jesus. I want to invite you to turn in your Bible to Matthew 6. Matthew 6 is part of the Sermon on the Mount, one of the greatest sermons ever preached. In it, we find such memorable things as:

- The Beatitudes.
- You are salt, you are light of the world.
- Eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.
- Go the extra mile.
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
- The Lord's Prayer.
- "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."¹

¹ Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

- Don't judge, lest you be judged.
- "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."²

Some good stuff, right. Well, let's look at another passage in the sermon. Matthew 6:1-6. I'm going to be reading from the New Living Translation:

*"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."*³

Jump down to verses 16-18:

*"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."*⁴

To the Jew, there were three great cardinal works of the religious life, three great pillars on which the good life was based: giving to the poor, prayer and fasting. All these things are good, and Jesus is not for a moment disputing that. What troubled Him was that so often in human life, the finest things are done from the wrong motives.

In tonight's Gospel lesson, Jesus makes this point: "Take care not to try to demonstrate how good you are in the presence of [people], in order to be seen by them. If you do, you have no reward with your Father in heaven."⁵

A wealthy television evangelist was dying in his mansion, and his flock gathered round to ask him for his last wish. "Before I die," he said, "I would like to take a ride." And they asked the rich pastor what he required for that final ride before entering the kingdom of heaven. And he said, "I would like a very small camel and a very large needle."

All his life he had talked about the good things, the religious acts, the Christian way, but what were his real motives if his wealth was so great. So often in human life the finest things are done from the wrong motives.

But that doesn't mean that we should not do these things. In fact, they are part of the practice of the disciple. Let's look at the three listed here.

First, the disciple will practice good works in their life.

There are many good works practices that the disciple should do. Galatians 6:10 reads:

² Matthew 7:7 (NIV)

³ Matthew 6:1-6 (NLT)

⁴ Matthew 6:16-18 (NLT)

⁵ Matthew 6:1 Barclay paraphrase

*Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.*⁶

Jesus here highlights giving. In His day, giving to the poor was the most sacred of all religious duties. It was so sacred that the Jews used the same word both for righteousness and almsgiving. To give alms and to be righteous were one and the same thing. There was a rabbinic saying: “Greater is he who gives alms than he who offers all sacrifices.” Almsgiving stood first in the catalogue of good works.⁷

But Jesus also warns that good works readily lend themselves to wrong motives. It was Jesus’ warning that, when acts of piety are done with the sole intention of bringing glory to the doer, they have lost the most important part of their value. A person may give to the needy, not really to help the person to whom they give, but simply to demonstrate their own generosity, and to bask in the warmth of some one’s gratitude and the praise of others.

Jesus reminds us to check our motives for the practice of good works. Matthew 6:1 in the Message Bible reads, “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.”⁸

Charles Spurgeon said, “There is no reward from God to those who seek it from men.”

Instead, we are to do good works without desire for attention or recognition or approval. Do it out of love, “and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.”⁹

Second, the disciple will practice an urgency pray. Look again at verse 5ff:

When you pray... Notice He said “when you pray”, not “if you pray.” Big difference. Prayer should be the first thing you do when you face a challenge or a blessing.

COMMENT

Martin Luther, the church reformer, wrote, “I am so busy now that if I did not spend three hours each day in prayer, I could not get through the day.”

SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER

Back to the passage:

*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!*¹⁰

The story goes that one time when Bill Moyers was a special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson, and being a former minister from east Texas, he was asked to say grace before a meal in the family quarters of the White House. As Moyers began

⁶ Galatians 6:10 (NLT)

⁷ Barclay’s Daily Study Bible, Matthew 6:2-4

⁸ Matthew 6:1, The Message

⁹ Matthew 6:4b (NLT)

¹⁰ Matthew 6:5-8 (NLT)

praying softly, the President interrupted him with “Speak up, Bill! Speak up!” Moyers stopped in mid-sentence and without looking up replied steadily, “I wasn’t addressing you, Mr. President.”¹¹

Our focus for our practice of piety determines whether it is of earthly or heavenly benefit. A person may pray in such a way that their prayer is not really addressed to God, but to people around them. Their praying may simply be an attempt to demonstrate their exceptional piety in such a way that no one can fail to see it.

Jesus suggests that prayer in solitude is an important part of one’s prayer life.

PRAYING IN THE CHAPEL.

THE LAST WEEK OF MARCH WILL BE OUR WEEK TO PRAY FOR THOSE ADDICTED.

Make prayer and the urgency of prayer an important practice for you as a disciple.

Finally, the disciple will practice spiritual disciplines that occasionally interrupt their life. Verses 16-18:

“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.”¹²

Fasting is a spiritual discipline practice, as is silence, study, and meditation.

Fasting – going without food in order to spend time in prayer – is noble and difficult. It gives us time to pray, teaches self-discipline, reminds us that we can live with a lot less, and helps us appreciate God’s gifts.

However, I think fasting has lost some of its prominence. The Pharisees voluntarily fasted twice a week to impress the people with their “holiness.” While their motives were wrong, it doesn’t diminish the importance of the spiritual discipline of fasting.

I think we tend to minimize the importance of the practice of fasting because we are so influenced by our “get-it-now” society. We have little patience and self-control for those things that we want.

But fasting is a conscious act of denying ourselves the things we think we want.

Yet a person may fast, not really for the good of their own soul, not really to humble themselves in the sight of God, but simply to show the world what a splendidly self-disciplined character they are. A person may practice good works simply to win praise from others, to increase their own prestige, and to show the world how good they are.

Jesus warns us against practicing our faith for the wrong reasons, but He does not say not to practice.

Do you know the reason Microsoft put the games Solitaire and Minesweeper on PC computers? It was so that people could learn how to use a mouse.

Practice in the spiritual disciplines helps us use these growers of our faith to do and be what God wants for us.

¹¹ The Anglican Digest, Early Pentecost AD 1989.

¹² Matthew 6:16-18 (NLT)

Donald S. Whitney in his book, "Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life" has said: "Discipline without direction is drudgery."

He gives an example of a six-year-old boy named Kevin sitting one afternoon at guitar lessons. Outside are the other boys laughing and running - playing baseball - having fun. For Kevin the guitar lessons are drudgery. Then all of a sudden an angel comes and transports Kevin to Carnegie Hall where a guitar virtuoso is giving a concert. Kevin is amazed how the musician is able to play the guitar with fluidity and grace. Kevin gets excited and is enthralled by the concert. Then the angel then tells him - "Kevin that musician is you - years from now." Kevin says - "Wow!" and the next thing you know he is sitting back at his guitar lesson. The other boys are still outside playing baseball - but something has changed. Kevin now has a vision. He now has a direction. He now has a goal.¹³

God desires for you to be a virtuoso, playing to the glory of Him through your faith and your life. Engage in the practice of the disciple – not to impress others – but to obey and love God. "...And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you."¹⁴

Lent may begin with this solemn service that we are commemorating tonight, but thank God, Lent does not end that way. Lent ends with joy, because although you will remember your origin, sin, and the inevitability of death tonight, Easter turns the ashes of this Wednesday night and makes them lilies on Easter. God takes death and creates new life.

¹³ From a sermon by Tom Shepard, "The Importance Of Discipline In Discipleship" 1/16/2009

¹⁴ Matthew 6:18 (NLT)