

## “GIVING, PRAYING, FASTING, FORGIVING”

Matthew 6:1-18

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Sometimes people say that they don't care much for religion, they just think that if people lived according to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that would make the world a better place. What they mean is that religious practices and rituals aren't what's important; what we need to is love our neighbors, feed the hungry, refrain from judging others, try not to worry, and do as we'd like to be done by. Actions matter more than prayers and all that “spiritual” stuff.

That makes me suspect they haven't read the Sermon on the Mount all the way through, because Jesus doesn't say this at all. In the part we read today, he talks about three traditional Jewish practices – giving, praying and fasting – and he doesn't say these things are not important. He also, as you many have noticed, doesn't actually tell his hearers to do them. He simply *assumes* they will do these things; “*When you give alms....*” “*When you pray....*,” “*When you fast ...*,” he says. But he does have some things to say about how one ought to go about giving, praying, and fasting.

NT professor Doug Hare, commenting on Jesus' words, says that “the principle is very simple. True religion consists in acknowledging that God alone is God. True piety ... give[s] for and substance to this acknowledgement. Giving, prayer, or fasting, if undertaken for the praise it will win from others, is basically irreligious....” Anybody who pretends to honor God but is really seeking self-glory is a hypocrite. (p.65)

It's probably fair to assume that what Jesus says about giving, praying and fasting can be extended to apply to any spiritual or religious practices. But let's take a look, as he does, at these three:

Giving .... Today we've come to look at giving to help others, support a good cause, or benefit the community as a matter of individual discretion - something we do when and as we wish, or not. But giving, in the Judaic tradition (and in the Christian as well), was not a merely nice thing to do if you felt like it; it was considered an obligation, and not merely a humanitarian obligation but a religious one. In Deuteronomy, it's phrased as a “command” from God. (Deuteronomy 15:11). We can hear this too in Jesus' own words when he says that giving food or water to “the least of these' is giving to him. Giving isn't just because others have needs and we have compassion; it's obedience to God, honoring of God, giving to God who is present in God's children who are in need.

Which helps us understand why Jesus says that those who follow him are not to be ostentatious in their giving - trying to impress others, to gain influence or respect, to get your name on something, to feel superior or generous. That kind of giving may lead to the reward the giver is after but doesn't have God at the heart of it. The giving that comes from faith doesn't call attention to itself.

Now, that might seem odd if you remember back to something Jesus said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: “let your light shine before others that they might see your good works and glorify” God. Don’t we want our giving to be a witness and an example? The clue to unraveling that conundrum might be something that’s lost in translation: Jesus’ words about giving quietly are addressed to individual believers. But in the instruction to “let your light shine,” *your* is plural. The *community* is to be a beacon of God’s love; none of us is supposed to be about self-aggrandizement. God sees our quiet, faithful giving; that is enough.

Prayer .... Jesus’ words here about prayer aren’t about public prayers like we offer in worship together. He’s talking about private prayer. He’s certainly not advocating that believers give up corporate worship and just pray at home (or on the golf course!); we know that Jesus’ participated in worship in the synagogue. But in addition to corporate prayer and worship, Jewish custom was to pause for prayer three times a day. Just a moment to acknowledge God, give thanks, ask for grace and strength. But even a simple practice easily becomes a marker that says, “look at how faithful I am,” which of course implies “I’m more faithful than you are!”

You don’t have to be literal about Jesus’ words – only praying in a room where no one can see you – he’s making a point about the right *attitude* for prayer. True prayer is not concerned about what anyone else but God thinks. Nor does true prayer presume to instruct or manipulate God. It’s not long or repetitive prayers per se Jesus is against; just the mistaken idea that, if you get it just right, prayer can be a magical way of getting God to do what you want. “Your Father knows what you need before you ask.” Jesus says.

And then he shares a short prayer, which he may have intended only as an example, but which Christians all over the world now pray. We could spend a whole sermon or several just on the Lord’s Prayer, so I’m not going to say much about it except to note that its *content* is not specifically Christian, but it does very much reflect everything Jesus teaches in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Probably we should keep the context in mind whenever we pray it! The Lord’s Prayer is above all a prayer that acknowledges God is God. “Your will be done.”

Fasting .... Fasting is not a very big part of the practice of faith in our Protestant tradition, and most of us probably don’t know a lot about it. I had an opportunity to learn more about it a few weeks ago when Jerry and I went to a Ramadan event open to the community at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center. The imam there had some really interesting things to share about the practice of fasting as it’s understood in Islam. It’s not meant as an oppressive requirement but as a means of drawing people closer to God, helping them to focus on the need for God above all else. But what was most interesting to me is what he said about breaking the fast, at the end of each day. Eating is required, he said. It’s not permitted to fast longer, in an effort to be –or seem - more holy, more devoted, more spiritually mature. It’s not about punishing oneself; it’s not a competition; there is nothing to earn. It’s just about the connection with God. I thought how close that is to our own conviction that we do nothing to merit the grace of God.

The core idea behind fasting is humility before God. While its traditional expression is abstaining from food, there can be other kinds of fasts. Many people “fast” from television or other technology for a time, and focus instead on time for God. I talked with somebody the other day who has committed to a “fast” in which she is making phone calls to elected officials ... something she finds very difficult and requires her to give up her comfort zone and rely on God for courage. You might think of any sort of sacrifice as a fast ... remembering that a true fast is not primarily about what you do or don’t do, but about the posture of the inner self before God, who sees the heart.

I haven’t said much yet about forgiving, but it’s a powerful imperative woven through this part of Jesus’ sermon. It’s not exactly a spiritual practice in and of itself, and yet it seems integral to the practice of faith as Jesus envisions it. It’s most closely associated, in the text, with prayer, and particularly with prayer for forgiveness. What makes it possible for us, for anyone, to pray for forgiveness is the conviction that the God of Israel (the God of Jesus) is a forgiving God. When we refuse to follow that path, we’re revealing an unwillingness to let God be God, and that gets in the way of prayer and “blocks the flow of divine forgiveness.” (Hare, p. 68) When we ask for forgiveness for ourselves without willingness to work toward forgiving others, we are simply being hypocritical.

I’d suggest that an unforgiving attitude toward others gets in the way of giving, too, because it is essentially ungenerous and separates us from our sisters and brothers. It makes us forget that we, like all God’s children have been and often are in need of forgiveness, among much else. It gets in the way of fasting as well, because it’s a stance of superiority rather than humility. In fact, it probably cripples any spiritual practices because it places our unwillingness to forgive ahead of God’s mercy, which should be at the center of our practice of faith. In this too, Jesus wants us to let God be God. I’m not saying this is easy. Jesus doesn’t say that either, as far as I can tell. He’s just telling the simple truth about how unwillingness to forgive affects our relationship with God.

I came across this modern paraphrase of Jesus’ prayer we call the Lord’s Prayer. It captures the themes of this whole section of the Sermon on the Mount pretty well, so I wanted to share it with you. Let me end with it:

Loving Creator  
we honor you,  
and we honor all that you have made.  
Renew the whole world  
in the image of your love.  
Give us what we need for today,  
and a hunger to see the whole world fed.  
Strengthen us for what lies ahead;  
heal us from the hurts of the past;  
give us courage to follow your call in this moment.  
For your love is the only power,  
the only home, the only honor we need,

in this world and in the world to come.  
Amen.

Resources:

Matthew (Interpretation Commentary) by Douglas R.A. Hare  
Prayer from The Worship Well website; written by Sarah Dylan Breuer