

Pastor's Message – 2/28/21
Sermon on the Mount: Prayer and Fasting
Matthew 6:5-18

More and more, things we buy carry a label: some assembly required. I've had my opportunities to assemble things: model airplanes, lawn and garden equipment, furniture, faucets. Actual instructions are sometimes very sparse and pictures are more likely. I appreciate those, but what I most appreciate are the warnings: be careful, don't do this, etc. I appreciate the instructions telling me how not to do it and then tell me how to do it right.

This is essentially what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount with three great pillars of Judaism—giving to the poor, prayer and fasting. Clearly these three spiritual disciplines are core practices still today in our Christian faith. Jesus wants us to know how we can get it wrong and how we can get it right.

Just before our text today, in verses 1-4, Jesus has addressed giving to the poor. He makes it clear how **not** to give and how **to give**. How not to give is to make a big show of one's giving, doing it publicly so as to be seen. It would be like making sure you place your check in the offering plate face up so that the next person or the usher can see how generous you are. That's how not to give.

The right way to give, though, Jesus says, is to give privately or in secret, keeping the gift between you and God alone. Those who give the wrong way, the showy, public way, they already have their reward, Jesus teaches. People have noticed them—just what they wanted. Those who give the right way, the righteous way, on the other hand, their rewards are “in secret” deep within a loving, growing relationship with their heavenly Father.

Jesus' concern here is our motivation—where our heart is. Is our heart turned toward God and others or is it turned inward toward ourselves? Is our heart with our Father in heaven or with what others think of us? Jesus wants our giving to the poor to be deeply embedded in our relationship with God, not in our pride or our need for immediate recognition.

Jesus then goes on to address the other two acts of righteousness so revered by Judaism—prayer and fasting. In Lent especially, we Christians may perk up more readily to Jesus' thoughts on these practices. His comments are structured just the same way—how not to pray and how to pray, how not to fast and how to fast.

His focus here is very similar to his teaching on giving to the poor. The wrong way to put a prayer together, Jesus says, is to be sure others see and hear you praying in the synagogue or out in the streets—showmanship again. The wrong way to put a prayer together, he says, is to think that a prayer's value is in its length or in its use of key phrases repeated over and over again,

or in its ability to impress those around you. It reminds me of a five-year-old at worship who filled a pause in a very long prayer from the altar by asking loudly, “Isn’t he done praying yet?”

The right way to pray in your personal walk with Christ? Find a room, a private room, and there speak with your Father in heaven. You won’t get any applause for your prayer. No one will give you the “Intercessor of the Year” award. Yet your relationship with your heavenly Father will grow exponentially just as any relationship flourishes with deep and rich conversation.

Then Jesus goes one step further with the right way to pray. He says, “Pray like this,” and gives us “The Lord’s Prayer.” This is a model prayer, which in no way limits what we may take to the Lord in prayer. It doesn’t teach us in a limiting sense what to pray for, but rather models how to pray. “Pray like this ...”

As Jesus prays with us, we hear how he places our prayer into our relationship with our Father in heaven. We pray with others (all the pronouns are plural). We don’t pray to a distant, unfamiliar god but to a listening, loving, protecting, providing Father, who has all authority “in heaven” yet who is close at hand. The first three petitions reveal our humility before God’s name (“hallowed be **thy** name”) God’s kingdom (“**thy** kingdom come”), and God’s will (**thy** will be done on earth as it is in heaven”).

The model prayer Jesus gives us has no lengthy, run-on sentences, no newsy background which our Father already knows, but terse and simple requests. We pray for our everyday needs, for forgiveness, and for strength in temptation and deliverance from evil.

And Jesus does much the same with the practice of fasting. The wrong way to fast is to put on a miserable face in public to show how difficult our fast is and how pious we are. The right way to fast, as the right way to give and to pray, is to do so privately. Along the way of fasting, Jesus again promises great rewards, as we give up the material to focus on the spiritual. Those rewards are rooted deep in our relationship with our heavenly Father.

Jesus practiced prayer and fasting in his time on earth. He had his favorite secret places for prayer. One was the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem. There in blood and sweat, he took the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer to its deepest level. He prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Lk 22:42). His prayer and fasting took him to the Father’s will and to the cross. Ours is meant to do the same.

There is often a wrong way and a right way to put things together. So it is with giving and prayer and fasting. Jesus shows us how to do it right.

Amen.