

Sunday February 11, 2024
Lesson 11: True Devotion
Scripture: Matthew 6:1-8

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. We conclude with this final unit titled “Faithful Prayer.” In lessons with faithful prayer, we will both learn what prayer is and how this discipline applies to our walk with Christ. Today’s lesson will be to encourage us to honor Jesus through acts of genuine Christian devotion.

Our lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew, one of the biographies of Jesus in the New Testament. The scripture passage today is set in what is known as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the gospel’s first and longest collection of Jesus’ teachings.¹ This sermon sets Jesus as the primary teacher and the counsel he gives is to be actualized in the behavior of his disciples. In the surrounding passage of our scripture lesson today, Matthew turns to three religious practices by means of which better righteousness can be exhibited including charitable donations, prayer, and fasting.² These practices are known as traditional to Judaism and would have been well-known by the original audience. Everyone knew charitable giving, praying, and fasting were given as religious practices to acknowledge God and to give glory to God alone.

One of the main practices to distinguish Jews from other was in their understanding of charity. In contrast to their surrounding Greco-Roman society, Jews regarded giving money to the poor as a religious obligation and not merely a humanitarian one as grounded in the Torah (Deuteronomy 15).³ They were encouraged to give financially and would give devoutly. Yet here Jesus encourages them to take a step forward, inviting them to give both anonymously and not encouraging a public spectacle as if one hand does one thing while another does something else.

This focus with charitable giving then moves to prayer. As Jesus addresses prayer, he is not pursuing those who lead in corporate worship but with private prayers. At the time of Jesus, it was customary for Jews to pause in whatever they were doing at about 3:00 p.m. to offer prayers in conjunction with the evening sacrifice in the temple.⁴ There is no formulaic prayer given as they are simply to be prayers which are private.

Unfortunately, Jesus knows there are those who do not use this private prayer time as an opportunity to glorify God. Instead, the “hypocrites,” (Greek for actors), will stand in the public square during this time. The audience is not God, but those who stand around them. Jesus tells the people this is the only reward they will receive as God is more focused on the heart and motivation of the prayer. Jesus also encourages them to think of the words in prayer and to not consider them to manipulate God, but instead as naming what God knows is on their heart.

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 33.

² Ibid., 63.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 64.

Application

The scripture lesson for today comes with perfect timing as this coming week we will enter the season known as Lent. Lent is the forty-day period before Easter where we recognize Jesus' ministry as well as his suffering and death before his resurrection. During this season, Christians are invited to participate in meaningful spiritual disciplines to grow closer to Jesus as we ponder and reflect on what he did for all of humanity. The spiritual disciplines of fasting, charitable giving, and prayer all play an important role in this season. And the lesson we read today will most likely also be read this upcoming Ash Wednesday to remind us of the real reason for why we should pray and how we are called to do so.

Prayer is such a beautiful discipline and as we discussed last week, prayer can happen any place, any time. Yet today we are given some gentle caution and counsel about how we pray and where we pray. We are reminded prayer is not about us or what other people see of us; prayer is about God and the relationship we have with the Lord. When prayer becomes more of a spectacle than a discipline, we not only weaken our witness as Christians, we also do not bring glory to the Lord.

I had a colleague recount a hurtful experience about prayer to me the other day which fell right in line with our scripture lesson. They were talking about how there some stressful events had taken place in her church. Some of them were caused by outside forces and some were caused by daily struggles they faced. Eventually though, some church members began to act out, slandering both her and other laity, more so in closed room conversations. One person stormed off without talking to her or to other lay leaders about their decision to leave the church.

What was interesting was at a community gathering, this individual was called upon to pray. Another community leader, not familiar with the dynamics of their church, began to talk of how this person was so deeply spiritual and such a great person of prayer. The person prayed and yet there was something off as the individual praised God and talked about the power of community. For my colleague and her church leaders there, it was hurtful as this person had not really demonstrated spiritual or emotional maturity, leaving deep wounds within the body as well as individually. While this individual praised God for community, they had neglected to consider the words of Jesus to love one another and to encourage each other with grace and forgiveness.

Hearing my colleague tell such a story impressed upon me about how we are to watch ourselves as people of prayer. We are all guilty of being hypocrites, as we say one thing and then do another. As I write this today, I can think of several times just this morning I have either talked ugly about people or at least had mean thoughts of what I would like to say to them. We've all said, "I just want to love like Jesus," and then either by aggressive or passive aggressive behavior, done something which is not loving at all. And we have all talked about praying and its importance without doing it. Instead, it is easy to talk about how we are a person of prayer and how we are devoted to following Jesus. Because everyone knows this is what good Christian people are supposed to say and do.

The scripture lesson today is not to shame us about public prayers and how we are all sinners. If only saints could pray publicly, none of us would be to the task including preachers! Instead, the scripture lesson today invites us to think of how in prayer we are to offer ourselves to the Lord and to be honest about everything. It is where we wrestle with ourselves, our fears and anxieties, and where we wait for the Lord to help guide and direct us. And even if it doesn't come in the moment or the way we desire, in prayer we are reminded of how God is the one who both sees and hears us.

One of my mentors who is a spiritual director often talks about how in prayer, we

surrender to God which means being honest about ourselves before the one who already knows what is present within us. Praying in private is a beautiful act because there is real rawness and vulnerability can take place. We can name to God how we are scared, alone, anxious, and all the many other things taking place within us.

Yet private prayer is also powerful because as we engage in going before God, we can also hear things, both good and scary, about ourselves which are helpful. Our false piety and self-assurance are replaced with both humility and confidence in God who will help us bloom and grow. While we may receive accolades with public prayer, it is private prayer where the true transformation happens, and God fills us with what we need to honor Jesus with genuine acts of devotion and reverence.

How have you seen prayer used as way to promote oneself instead of actual Christian devotion? When are times you have felt God transforming you in private prayer? Why do you think it is important to contemplate how prayer impacts our daily living? How have you seen God use private prayer to help bring healing and wholeness? Who are people who help you grow in your prayer life?