

Echoes from the Mountain: The Sermon on the Mount
“Practices of the Kingdom: Give, Fast, Pray”

2.19.17

Text: Matthew 6:1-16



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“What is your understanding of the spiritual practices? What are some of the practices in which you regularly participate? Why do you think the word ‘disciplines’ has, at times, such a negative connotation?”

“What are some of the ways that you find helpful in preventing the practices from becoming rote and lifeless?”

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (NIV)

“Why do you think Jesus referred to it as ‘your’ righteousness? Why do you think he distinguished between the righteousness (rightness; as it ought to be) of the Law and the righteousness of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20)?”

“What masks are you utilizing: the “successful” mask? The “confident” mask? The “you can’t hurt me” mask? The “composed” mask? The “I know I look like I don’t care what you think about me, but I desperately want you to like me” mask?”

“Have you ever stopped giving because another failed to express, what you believed to be, the proper gratitude? “Would you be as altruistic and philanthropic if it didn’t come with a tax break?”

“Why are you doing it? Who were you hoping would notice? Whose opinion matters most to you? Why does hugging yourself seem less than satisfying?”

Read 1 Timothy 4:7-8 and dialogue about how Paul’s idea of “training” correlates with Jesus’ encouragement toward practicing righteousness.

Teaching Notes...

We are being presented with a Story that, in unmistakable ways, clearly holds this God as central. He offers himself in unapologetic ways as *peerless*; not just the best possible option of all of the gods

available, but the “only” God. He is unflinchingly committed to his own glory (*“weight, significance, recognition”*), not because nothing else matters, but because everything else matters because of him.

“For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen”. Romans 11:36

We become aware, very early on in our decision to apprentice ourselves to Jesus, that we are ill-equipped for this journey.

We have a long history of doing life according to ourselves (“flesh”; self-indulgent life). We have developed deeply ingrained systems of thought and belief which set the trajectory for our lives. Our lives will not “auto-correct”. Our determination must be accompanied by a commitment to practicing a renewed way of life.

Transformation is the process by which God re-directs our passions so that they are now pursuing the right things.

Paradoxically, it is the very same desires (value, significance and security) which lead us away from God, which he utilizes to lead us back to himself.

For centuries, spiritual guides from varying traditions (Jesus included), have championed the importance of spiritual practices for spiritual health (e.g. “disciplines”, “means of grace”).

The practices are all meant to provide some form of “pause” (interruption) in our lives which allow us to be available to and available for God.

Practices are the things we determine to do, consciously and with regularity, which enable us to, eventually, do them freely.

Disciplines (order; practice)...

... always provides clarity and direction for your passions. It allows you to determine that to which you will give yourself and who you are becoming.

... are not to be confused with spiritual health and transformation. The practices, themselves, cannot change us. The objective is not proficiency in the practices, but becoming like Christ.

... are always directed toward a spiritual encounter (experience). The practice, itself, is intentional and predictable. The encounter is mysterious and ‘un-manageable’.

... are only fulfilling as they are practiced. Disciplines which are formed and intended, without practice, are ultimately frustrating and deceptive.

It’s the paradox of the fulfillment and settled-ness we experience as a result of not simply attempting to re-invent ourselves, but in abandoning ourselves for life in Jesus. The conviction that in giving, we are never depleted.

In context, the righteous acts are behaviors that correspond with or promote the goodness of the Torah (Law; guidance). Following the NT period, the rabbis recognized devotedness in (3) main movements: **care for the poor** (giving, cancelling debt, allowing them to glean the field), **Torah study**, and **prayer**.

There is always:

- ... the act itself (validated and honored),
- ... the intention (motivation; “your righteousness”),
- ... the restored response.

Jesus addresses not the rightness of the act, but the righteousness of the practice.

“Wait a minute, Jesus! You said that we were a light, not to be diminished, and a city set on a hill for all to see. You said we should let others see our good deeds (5:16), now you’re saying that we should be more covert in our practices. Which is it?”

There dwells within all of us this desire to be noticed; to be validated; to be needed which can too quickly self-congratulatory and self-deceptive.

We spend a lifetime on this journey toward ‘wholeness’... integrating all of the parts of our lives; trying to get our ‘inner-life’ to match up with our ‘outer-life’.

The challenge is that, as humans, we are famous for our ‘duplicity’. The Greeks had large open-air theaters, one of which was in Sepphoris, just north of Nazareth.

Masks enabled an actor to appear and reappear in several different roles, thus preventing the audience from identifying the actor to one specific character. Nothing really about changed about who you were, but simply who you were presenting yourself to be. These people were called “hypocrites”-- - ‘one who wears a mask’.

Hypocrisy contrasts what we present to the world and who we are, present before God.

Hypocrisy is this deceptive and destructive amalgamation of a public life (persona) that is out-of-sync with the inner-realities. It becomes so deceptive that, at times, it becomes unavailable to the individual in consideration [You’re the last to know.]

“When you give...”

They are the ones who are so wonderfully unaware of themselves. Their activity flows so naturally from who they are, they don’t even notice. They are able to give without having their names put on a brick.

“When you pray...”

Notice, it doesn’t say that they “love to pray”, but that they love to pray “publicly”. Why? Because it’s not prayer that’s directed toward God, but everyone else. It’s taking this opportunity for intimate conversation with God and utilizing it to impress or manipulate another.

“When you fast...”

It’s intentionally being emptied in order to be fulfilled; to deprive ourselves in order that we might receive.

The Pharisees were in the habit of fasting twice a week (Luke 18:12). They would often wear clothes which signaled their piety [“sackcloth”- itchy, uncomfortable]. They would often put ashes on their faces, and distort their appearance. Jesus says, “*Stop looking pathetic: take a bath, slap some gel in your hair.*”

“They have received the reward...” (Gr. *yield*)

Principle: you will always find what you seek because you will always seek what you desire.

Jesus can legitimately say, *“They have received their reward”*, because the recognition of others was specifically what they were after. This is so relevant in a culture of performance reviews and quotas and awards banquets and padded resumes. A culture in which our sense of identity, significance and security is so performance-oriented.

Jesus offered the antidote for our addiction to our approval with (2) transformative phrases: **“to Father”** and **“in secret”**.

Psalm 91:1 identifies the ‘*secret*’ as an environment of safety and trust where we are liberated from our addiction to approval. Where we are learning to live free of the control of the opinion of others and are learning to live as beloved children of a good and benevolent Father.

The more “secretive” we become, the more pronounced our public impression (impact).

Jesus was both conspicuous (to get sight of) and inconspicuous; both noticeable and hidden. In this posture, we are actually able to do things “publicly”, but “secretly”.