

Matthew 6:5-18 (or 1-6, 16-21)

I remember in seminary I purchased a desk, one of those self-assembly products that come with not so great instructions. It wasn't the first time I'd made a purchase like this so I thought "no problem" boy was I wrong! I had to call my brother to come put it together. He said, "You know, it would be easier if they told you how *not* to do it!"

This is essentially what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount he tells us what not to do... but then he tells us how to do it right. In the sermon on the mount, the focus of our Wednesday evening Lenten series this year, Jesus tells us how not to do the spiritual disciplines of giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting, followed by how it should be done. These are core practices of our Christian faith. Jesus wants us to know how we can get it wrong and how we can get it right.

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 when I was in Zimbabwe and everyone was making a big deal about what they were offering... except they were giving vegetables, chickens, even a goat! The donation was highly visible so everyone could see how generous they 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 God.

Jesus' concern here is our motivation—where our heart is. Is our heart with God in heaven, or is it with ourselves? Is our heart with God 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. There was a movie released in 2015, *War Room*, that focused on this practice. In the movie the family turned around after initiating the practice of prayer in the prayer closet, known as the war room. 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 can hear how he places our prayer into our relationship with God. We pray with others (all the pronouns are plural). Even though we are to pray privately, Jesus is saying that isn't the only way. There is power in communal prayer. We don't pray to a distant, unfamiliar god but to a listening, loving, protecting, providing God, 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 God already knows, but short 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 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 God in heaven.

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" (Luke 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. All glory be to God.