

“The Heart of the Matter: Practicing Righteousness Rightly”

Introduction: Last week, you may remember that our reading from the Sermon on the Mount (SM) ended with this rather bold directive from Jesus to his listeners: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). We said that the perfection to which Jesus is referring is the perfect love of the Father, and it forms a fitting conclusion to that section of the SM where Jesus has called us to matters of the heart: to refrain from anger as well as murder, to avoid lust as well as adultery, to be faithful to our commitments and promises, to do away with revenge, and to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

As we think about these things, and the picture of the good and abundant life that they reveal, the question becomes, how do we do them? How can our heart be formed to become more and more like the heart of Christ, so that we can take on the perfect, servant love of the Father and begin to live within the realm of God which Jesus pictures in the SM? Where Jesus goes next in the SM is helpful to us here because he spends some time having us think about what it means to “practice righteousness,” which is another way of referring to spiritual disciplines. The three disciplines that he mentions, as well as many others, are part of the “core work” that helps to form our hearts into the heart of Christ. As we will see, there is a right way to practice the disciplines, and a wrong and harmful way.

I. Loving Our Enemies – A Reprise

A. But before we get there, I want to take just a few minutes to make two brief follow-up comments from our topic last week, eliminating revenge and hatred and loving our enemies, based on what a couple of you said to me after worship last Sunday. The first comment is that Jesus calls us to pray for those people who are persecuting us. Now at first, we might not know what to pray, except for God to smite these enemies in some way! But if we keep praying, we just may find that it will change us. As we hold these enemies before the throne of God’s grace, we just might begin to see them in a new, more compassionate light, and it just might give us insight on how we can offer servant love to them. As one of you so wonderfully shared with me last week, this actually works!

B. The second comment I would make is that sometimes it doesn’t! While our hearts may change, our enemies might not! Thus, as we seek to love them, we might very well get bloodied. If we turn the other cheek in some fashion, it jolly well might get struck. If we offer to go the second mile in some way, we could easily get blisters. If we lend to those who might not be able to pay us back, we may end up having to do without for a time. But it’s important to remember that when Jesus offered servant love, when his heart became softened to the point of praying for his enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing,” it did not lead him to experience a group hug; instead, it led him to a cross where he got very bloodied.

We, too, may find the process of offering servant love to our enemies both painful and messy. When it does, we need to remember that Jesus entrusted himself, as Peter put it, into the Father’s care, into the care of the one who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). Our call is to offer servant love, as bloody as it might make us, and trust that our heavenly Father, who brought life out of death, will bring about justice in his good way and time. Our call is to love; his promise is to make things right, be it in this life, or perhaps not until the next.

C. So how do our hearts get there? Let's go on to chapter 6 in Matthew and let me take you back, for a moment, to our "triangle of transformation," to the diagram that gives us some insight as to how the Holy Spirit transforms our lives. We see that one of the points of the triangle, one of the ways in which we offer and open ourselves to the Spirit's work, is through the disciplines or habits of the faith. Kind of like scales, the practice of which will ultimately allow us to play a Beethoven Sonata, or like weight lifting, which will better enable us to do a Double McTwist when we're skiing a half-pipe, the practice of the spiritual disciplines serve as the "core work" of the Christian faith, enabling us to live the Christian life. But just as scales and weight lifting and core work can be practiced wrongly, so, too, can spiritual disciplines. And if they are practiced wrongly, they can do more harm than good.

II. Doing the Disciplines Wrongly – Playing to the Crowd

A. Jesus highlights three core disciplines – giving, praying, and fasting – and pulls them together with three words that are found in each section. The first is the word "when." "When you give to the needy" (v. 2); "And when you pray" (v. 5); "When you fast" (v. 16). The assumption is that each of these is a good practice, each is a good discipline that a follower of Jesus will seek to put into practice in their life of faith. The second is the word "hypocrites," which is found in the same verses (vv. 2, 5 and 16), and alerts us to the fact that these practices can be practiced wrongly, or for the wrong reasons. The third word is "reward," found in vv. 4, 6, and 18. It alerts us to the joy that Jesus has something good in store for doing this kind of "core work."

B. Let's go back, then, to the word "hypocrites" and think about how we might do these disciplines wrongly, and therefore harmfully. A hypocrite actually describes an actor in a play, one who assumes a role, one who pretends to be what he or she really is not. Those who were practicing the disciplines wrongly were thus play-acting. How? Jesus says that they were using the disciplines as a way of self-promotion, of having others look at them and be impressed.

1. So, when they gave money in support of the poor, they announced it with trumpets. Whether meant literally or metaphorically, they found a way to "toot their own horn," as we might say, to let others know how generous they had been.

2. Or, when they practiced fixed hour of prayer, stopping what they were doing at nine and noon and three to pray, they made sure that those around them could see and hear what they were doing. They were concerned, also, with making sure that their prayers were on the lengthy side.

3. Or when they fasted, they made certain that others could tell that they were doing something heroic. If they appeared gaunt and unkempt, it would communicate that they were having a tough go of it but were doing it for the Lord.

C. Importantly, Jesus isn't speaking against these practices; he's speaking about the way they are being practiced. What was wrong with each of these approaches is that they were not being done for the Lord but for the crowd. They wanted others to think well of them. What might drive us to think that way? Well, like an actor, we can be led to believe that we are only as good as our next performance. We are raised and conditioned to need affirmation from others in order to feel a sense of self-worth, to feel good about ourselves.

Illustration: It can be subtle. You can see it, for instance, in the bragging Christmas letter in which we read about success after success in the family that sends such a letter. When is the last time you read a Christmas letter that talked about a strain in a marriage, or a child who was in therapy, or a family member who came in last in a race or vocal contest? Instead, we read only about accomplishments. Jesus warns that such thinking can leak over into our spiritual life: "Look how

much I've given; hear how long and eloquently I'm praying; see how hard I'm fasting." "Wow, you must be really spiritual," is the response we long to hear from others. But Jesus warns that if we do get such accolades, if we take on the disciplines in order to impress others, it will be the only reward we will get. It's ok to have your gift acknowledged; it's ok to pray out loud in public; it's ok to fast, unless our primary motive is to be praised by others.

III. Doing the Disciplines Rightly – An Audience of One

A. How, then, are we to do the disciplines rightly? Well, it's about the spirit in which we do them, and about who they are being done for. Jesus uses the phrase "in secret." Our Puritan ancestors had a wonderful phrase that captured the essence of what Jesus was saying. "Live for an audience of One" they said. Do what you do for God, and don't worry about anyone else. Offer yourself to him, as a living sacrifice, and see how he uses your offering.

B A writer by the name of Robert Mulholland gives a simple yet very helpful definition of a spiritual discipline in this regard [*Invitation to a Journey*, p. 131]:

A genuine spiritual discipline is a discipline of loving obedience offered to God with no strings attached. We put no conditions on it. We put no time limits on it. We add no expectation of how we want God to change us through it. We simply offer the discipline to God, and keep on offering it for as long as God wants us to keep on

A discipline is not to earn God's favor (another way we might be inclined to practice it wrongly) but to place ourselves before him. We simply offer the discipline to God, and keep offering it to God, for God to shape us as he pleases. It has nothing to do with anyone else but us and God.

C. With these three practices, Jesus gives some examples. When you give, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give, in other words, in a quiet steady way, as a natural course of your life, without worrying about whether anyone else knows about it or not. Pray, simply, quietly, and alone, just you and God. To help us stay on track, Jesus gives a wonderful outline, known as the Lord's Prayer, (which we'll have to look at another time!). And when you fast, don't put on a show. Prepare yourself for the day just as you would any other. Take a shower, brush your hair and put on clean clothes. Only God has to know that you're abstaining from something for the day. God's reward will, at the very least, be a deeper relationship with him and a deeper sense of his love, which will result in a heart that is better formed to live and experience the abundant life that Jesus has revealed in the SM.

One little exercise you might consider doing during this season of lent is what one writer calls "secret service," or the discipline of secrecy. To train yourself to worry only about the "audience of One," find an act of service that you can undertake without letting anyone know what you have done or why you have done it. Ask God to help you discover what this might be. As you talk to people, pay attention to any need they might notice. Plan a way of meeting that need without them knowing. Then, follow up with God on what this was like for you. Can you be content that God and only God knew about it? Why or why not? Did you receive a reward? What was it? What, if anything, changed in your heart?

So during this season, think about what discipline you might offer to God, and then see what God does with it, and with you!