

The right thing for the right motive # 4 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

Message for Sunday, June 19, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-18

Children’s Message: *Act out giving money to a homeless person on the street:*

Oh, you poor thing! How dreadful!

Here you go, some money to help you get some lunch. *While handing over the money, take a selfie which focuses on the money, not the other person.*

I’ll post this on my Facebook page so everyone can see what I did.

The person reaches out to shake hands, but I pull back as if he/she has some horrible disease. Oh, no need to thank me; that’s quite all right.

Have a good day. And remember: Jesus loves you.

Now ask the children:

- How loving was I?
- Is money the only way to show love?
- What would you have done differently?

Message: The right thing for the right motive — # 4 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus’ timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

What is a hypocrite? A pretender. A fake. Someone with two faces: one which they show in public, and the real face which comes out in private. It’s easy how it happens: we all want people to think well of us. It becomes a problem when it becomes part of our character, part of our religion.

Jesus describes three types of religious practice: helping people in need, praying, and fasting. All three are good things to do. Jesus didn’t command his followers to do these things; he simply assumed they were doing them, the same as any faithful Jew. I get this idea because he doesn’t say, “If you give to the needy,” but “When you give to the needy.” Likewise, he says, “When you pray,” and “When you fast.”

In each case, there were people who took something good, and perverted it so that it became something bad.

1) Helping people in need

Jesus summed up life in the two great commandments: Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself. That second one is why we help people in need. Because we love them. And why do we love them? Because they’re nice people? Not at all. We love others because (i) they are precious to God; and (ii) that’s how we’d like to be treated.

William Barclay wrote something interesting in his Bible commentary on this passage:

To the Jews, almsgiving was the most sacred of all religious duties. How sacred it was may be seen from the fact that the Jews used the same word—*zedakah*—for both *righteousness* and *almsgiving*. To give alms and to be righteous were one and the same thing.

So here we have this wonderful, good thing. And then some people twist it around so they’re really only helping themselves.

Matthew 6:1-2, New Living Translation:

“Take care! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give a gift to someone in need, don’t shout about it as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you, they have received all the reward they will ever get.”

That’s what I was acting out with the young people earlier in this service. Instead of drawing attention to ourselves to make ourselves look good, we just quietly go about our business of helping others.

I like this poem by Ruth Harms Calkin:

You know Lord how I serve you,
with great emotional fervour
in the limelight.
You know how eagerly I speak for you
at a women’s club.
You know how I effervesce when I promote
a fellowship group.
You know my genuine enthusiasm
at a Bible Study.

But how would I react, I wonder,
if you pointed to a basin of water,
and asked me to wash the calloused feet
of a bent and wrinkled old woman,
day after day,
month after month,
in a room where nobody saw,
and nobody knew?

That's exactly what Jesus calls us to do.

2) Prayer

a) Prayer is for seeking God, not impressing hearers

Matthew 6:5-6, New International Version:
“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites,
for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and
on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the
truth, they have received their reward in full. But when
you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray
to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who
sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

I don't think Jesus is telling us to never pray in public. Just a few verses later, he gives a sample of prayer which begins with “Our Father.” “Our” implies that this prayer is done together with others.

Rather, he's telling us to not to make a show of it. The prayer is for God, not to impress others who are listening.

Edward Everett was the pastor of a church in Boston, and was renowned as a flowery and elegant speaker. As a result, he was chosen to be the preacher at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery in 1863, where he delivered a two hour sermon. He was followed immediately afterwards by President Lincoln, who spoke for two *minutes*, giving his famous Gettysburg Address, “Four score and seven years ago...”

A newspaper reporter was sent to cover one of Everett's church services. The reporter described Everett's prayer as “the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience.” Note the irony: the reporter perceived that the prayer's aim was to impress the congregation, rather than being offered to God.

Again: prayer is for seeking God.

b) We pray to God who loves to help his children

Matthew 6:7, New International Version:
“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

We don't need to beat down the door of heaven in order to make God give us what we need. God is more than ready to hear our prayers, and desires to bless us. We simply present our need, and trust him: “Your will be done.”

Matthew 7:9-11, New Living Translation:
“You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.”

When we pray, we don't need eloquence or long prayers. Just speak to God from the heart.

3) Fasting

Fasting means going without food, perhaps also without drink. It could be for one meal, a whole day, or several days. It's intended to allow more time for prayer, and is a sign of special devotion to God. That's good. But like the other spiritual practices, it was abused.

Matthew 6:16-18, New Living Translation:
“And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.”

Many people made sure that others could tell they were fasting. They would leave their hair and clothes mussed. Some even put whitener on their faces so they would look extra pale. The purpose of their fasts had nothing to do with God; it was only a show to impress others how religious they were. That's why Jesus condemned this abuse.

Fasting can be good. And you can do it with much more than food. For example, some people

occasionally take a fast from anything with a screen: TV, internet, cell phone. Think how much time that would free up for prayer!

4) Our good deeds are not *for* God's love; they are *from* God's love

The good things we do, do not earn us favour with God. Our good deeds are not our “ticket to heaven.” Our salvation is the result of God's grace, not our goodness.

Ephesians 2:8-9, Good News Bible:

For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.

So we don't do these good things so that God will love us more. We do them *because* God loves us. Once we have experienced God's love—even though we've sinned and don't deserve it—then it becomes easier to give that love away to others.

Jesus did not come to *impress* people. He came to *improve* people. We are wise to follow him: our goal is not to impress others. Our goal as followers of Jesus is to allow him to improve us, so that we in turn can bring a blessing to others.

Next Steps:

- Helping people in need: Love is spelled T-I-M-E (not M-O-N-E-Y). Pray about whom you can help this week. Then do it.
- Praying: For most of us, our problem isn't trying to impress others with our prayers; it's that we hardly pray at all. Earnestly seek God in prayer this week.
- Fasting: Consider trying a fast, perhaps for part of a day. Take the time you would spend doing that activity, to pray and meditate with God.