

# “A Model for Praying and Acting”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 18, 2018*

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 58:6-12

Matthew 6:1-18

“Jesus’ vision of the church’s faithfulness is not one of rigid obedience to a list of rules and regulations; but of genuine devotion and integrity of action.”<sup>1</sup> We have seen this as we have looked the Sermon on the Mount over the past few weeks: Jesus’ message to the people gathered about who they should be as his community of followers. They are to salt and light for the world; this is their identity not just as individuals, but also as his people, the church.

In this passage, Jesus talks about three important aspects of faithful living: charitable giving, prayer, and fasting. The point is the same when applied to each of them: these are not to be done in a way that attracts attention to oneself, or God will not reward them. True Christian faith keeps the focus on God and the neighbor in need and avoids righteous self-absorption.

These three disciplines were familiar and prominent parts of the Jewish religion. At the heart of this passage is the translation of the word Jesus uses in the very first verse: piety. But, for Jesus’ audience, and for us as well, this term is too narrow, implying only the personal and spiritual. The words “justice” and “righteousness” have a broader sense of societal practice and relationship; they are about the community.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 5, verse 20, Jesus uses the same word, saying, *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

In the first century society of Jesus’ day, a person’s good reputation was gained by doing public, honorable actions. Those actions which displayed a person’s wealth, power or status were visible and honored by others; as were their public displays of charity and piety. But Jesus tells his followers that they are not to be motivated by nor oriented toward approval from human audiences; he replaces the court of public opinion with God’s favor. Thus, he offers a new way.

In his day, like ours, it was commonly seen as a reasonable reward for those who gave charitable gifts to be honored by having their names associated with their contributions. But the focus of giving should not be on the giver, but on God and the

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<sup>1</sup> “A People of Salt and Light” from *Center for Parish Development*

<sup>2</sup> Warren Carter from *WorkingPreacher.com*

ones for whom the gifts is being given. Otherwise, Jesus says, givers have already received their reward.

In the next section, Jesus is not speaking of genuinely corporate prayer, when it is done with and alongside other members of the community of faith. He is speaking of private prayer that some might do in public for the purpose of gaining attention for themselves. Private prayer is for the purpose of communicating with God and experiencing God's presence. To pray for another reason therefore represents the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus condemns.

Then, Jesus turns to fasting, which – when it is done today – is usually done precisely to draw greater attention; not necessarily to the fasters themselves, but to protest or highlight some worthwhile cause, such as world hunger. But for ancient people, humbling oneself before God by abstaining from food or drink was a natural religious expression. And so, it was nothing to brag about – at least that's what Jesus taught – for those who made it into a public spectacle; well, they had already received their reward.

So, what do almsgiving, prayer and fasting have to do with us today? These righteous acts must come from a place where we hold our treasures: from our heart; and in our heart, we must hold what is most important to God; which is that we consider not only ourselves, but what is most important to God, the welfare of others around us who are in need.<sup>3</sup>

Verses 7-15, which lay at the heart of this passage, show prayer to be an integral partner in doing justice and righteousness. Here, we find the words that form the foundation of what we call the Lord's Prayer. The disciples, having watched and listened to Jesus pray, ask if he will teach them how to pray. Jesus offers them this model.

And after years of recitation and repetition, sometimes we'll say, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." and that's the last thing we remember. And if you're like me, sometimes you want to really feel the words, so you vow to try harder next time. But the same thing happens again. It's like when you get in the car, start the engine and buckle your seat belt, and the next thing you know, your car is parked at work. You have no recollection of anything in between: the other cars, the cross streets, the stoplights. The route is so familiar that when you drive it your mind can disengage. That's what sometimes happens when Christians pray the Lord's Prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Jesus offers us a model for prayer that is very private, yet inclusive. "Our Father, who art in heaven..." This is the only place that we ever hear Jesus use the phrase *our Father*. Every other place in the gospels, Jesus speaks of *my Father*. *I must do the will of my Father*. *My Father loves me because I lay down my life*. Finally, following

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Carvalhaes from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>4</sup> Vic Pentz, "Tugging at God's Heart" from *Day1.org*

the resurrection, he includes us, but even speaking with Mary Magdalene, the risen Jesus says, *Go, tell the disciples that I am ascending to your God and my God, to your Father and my Father.*

This is the lesson that Jesus is teaching to his disciples: that his Father is their Father, that his God is their God. And, therefore, my God is your God; our God, our Father. We share in a common family; because we are children of the same God, we pray for and with one another; whether in public or in private. We don't need to try to impress one another; we don't have to have all the right words. Instead, we pray in order to seek the presence of God and participate in God's mission. Whether we are giving alms, fasting, praying, or practicing any other righteous act, we are showing forth our true identity: we are being salt and light for the world.

When Jesus offers us a model for prayer, he gives one that is simple; in contrast to the long-winded, hollow piety of many first-century religious leaders. Jesus commends brevity, privacy and simplicity in order to keep his disciples from being distracted by anything they might do themselves; or looking anywhere else than to God.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, sometimes our praying of the Lord's Prayer can seem so monotonous and empty. How many times have we prayed the same words at the close of a meeting, or on the way to the communion table; how many times have they been printed on a bookmark or made into a needlepoint wall-hanging? Sometimes we stick to these words because we don't know what else to pray, or whether the words we come up with would be adequate or acceptable.

Vic Pentz, formerly the pastor at Peachtree Road Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA, seeks to remind us that we can no more pray a bad prayer than a preschooler can draw a bad picture. "When your child or grandchild or niece or nephew scrawls a picture with crayons," he asks, "do you stand back and say, 'Oh my! The proportions are all off?'" No, you take that picture and put it up with a magnet on your refrigerator door. In the same way, God treasures every one of our prayers."<sup>6</sup>

The Lord's Prayer, Jesus' model for prayer, "provides a vision for the life of faith of the Christian community. It focuses the community's attention on the primary issues of the kingdom: the holiness of God's name, the appearance of God's gracious will in human affairs, and the basics needed for life and community: daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus offers us a model of prayer because he wants his followers to pray; and thus, to find a greater and deeper spiritual connection with God, our Father. Jesus wants us to

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<sup>5</sup> Irving Arnquist and Louis Flessner, "Preaching on the Lord's Prayer" from *Word and World*

<sup>6</sup> Vic Pentz, "Tugging at God's Heart" from *Day1.org*

<sup>7</sup> "A People of Salt and Light" from *Center for Parish Development*

pray humbly, simply and honestly. Jesus wants us to go into a closet, if necessary, in order to avoid praying for the wrong reasons; in a way that seeks to impress others. His words are a model for prayer; they are not the only words we're allowed to pray.

And so, at the close of this morning's public prayer, I am going to ask you to join with me in praying the Lord's Prayer, but to use some words that probably are not familiar to you. We will pray responsively: side one being those sitting to my left, and side two those sitting to my right.

These words are acceptable to God. And so are the ones that you find in other prayer books or devotionals, and those that you craft yourself. God is our Father, an intimate God that we are close to, and who rejoices each and every time we pray. To God, we can pray about the seemingly smallest things as well as the most absurdly cosmic. Nothing is too tall an order for our Father who art in heaven. AMEN.