

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – INTIMACY WITH GOD”

Matthew 6:5-18

When we started looking at this amazing sermon of Jesus’ – The Sermon On The Mount – we said that it is really all about attitudes, about the thoughts, ideas and values behind our words and actions. Without the right attitudes our actions are empty and our words meaningless: we descend into hypocrisy, the thing of which Jesus seems to be most critical in his teaching. Several times in the course of this sermon, Jesus tells his followers that they are to be distinctive, non-conformist – “*not like them*”.

In chapter 6 Jesus turns his attention to the three main markers of Jewish piety – almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Gordon dealt with the first of those a couple of weeks ago, but this Sermon is layered in such a way that each bit overlaps with what is before and after it, with references back and forward in each little section. This morning we’re looking at the section we’ve just read which most people take to be about prayer and fasting. If you look in most Bibles that have headings, you’ll see that this is marked “*Prayer*” and in most of the commentaries on these verses that’s also the case. Martin Lloyd-Jones, for example, entitles his chapter on this “*How To Pray*”, whereas Donald Carson has “*How Not To Pray*”, which sums up the balance that there is in much of this Sermon between Jesus’ positive and negative comments.

I don’t want to suggest that this section isn’t about prayer – it’s pretty obvious that it is – but I would say that it’s probably more about intimacy with God. It’s not about the mechanics of prayer, but, again, what our attitude to prayer, fasting and God should really be. At first glance, this might be read as Jesus saying that praying aloud or in meetings, forgiving and fasting are not particularly to be encouraged. (That would be of special interest to the vast majority of people who never attend a prayer meeting, I’m sure!) But Jesus isn’t forbidding – or even discouraging – that: the rest of the New Testament surely gives the lie to that. What he is saying is that what is important is not rhetoric or reputation or reward, but relationship with God.

Jesus clearly assumes that his followers will give, pray and fast – in vv2,5,16 he doesn’t say “*If ...*” but “***When you give, pray, fast***”. It’s part of what religious devotion is all about, in common with most other faiths. What he is keen to emphasise is that these things are to be done in the right way and, more importantly, for the right reasons. His followers are not to pray in order to be seen or heard or thought pious. They are to do it to connect with God. Once more, Jesus is saying that the way in which his followers practice their faith should be in stark contrast to the others. It is part of this call to distinctiveness. God is not looking for long prayers, long words or long faces, the kinds of things that might impress others. We are not doing this for other people’s benefit. We are doing it for the audience of one – and that one is God himself.

So, he says, prayer is not about impressing other people, doing it in public – at the front of church or in the prayer meeting. Those contexts for prayer have their place, there’s no doubt about that. The practice of corporate prayer is vital to the life of the church, as we read in the New Testament letters and we see exemplified in the story of the Early Church in *Acts*. Please don’t use Jesus’ words as an excuse for not praying with other people. But Jesus is saying that such things can easily become a place to show off, to parade our piety or demonstrate our eloquence. He talks about those who “*love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners.*” In Jesus’ day there were certain times of the day when the Jewish people were encouraged to pray and to help them in that trumpets would sound from the Temple mount at those times. Some people then made a great show of stopping in the street – “*on the street corners*” – and intoning long prayers so that others could see them doing it. I remember going to a friend’s son’s Bar-Mitzvah at the synagogue in Tottenham and as the rest of us were sitting reciting the prayers from the book (or, in my case, trying to find the right page in the book) there was one elderly Jew, with an extravagant prayer shawl, who stood up in the front row and as he recited the prayers with a deeply spiritual expression on his face, was constantly looking round at everyone else and clearly showing off his own piety.

But the danger is there for all of us. We like to “Pray and Display”, to come out with well-crafted sentences, to mention those things that others might have forgotten, to put an expression of mock sincerity into our voice, to speak in the kind of voice that we never use at any other time than answering the ‘phone to strangers. We are not, in prayer, addressing other people, says Jesus. We are praying to our Father, speaking to the audience of one. Queen Victoria once remarked of her Prime Minister Gladstone, “*He speaks to me as if I were a public meeting*”. That’s not what it is about.

Praying, speaking with God, is not about long words and elegant phrases, about repetitions and incantatory phrases, such as the pagans use. William Barclay, in his comments on this passage, writes about “*the superstitious incantation of a spell*”, as if saying the right words in the right order and saying them often enough is what does the trick. God is not impressed with the length of our prayers, but with the passion behind them, with the attitudes with which we approach him. Some people have the same idea about prayers as they do about sermons and mistakenly equate length with depth (and even, in some cases, volume with depth). In the church where I was brought up there was a man who prayed really long prayers which got louder and louder as he went on, to the point where he would often pick up the chair in front of him and repeatedly bang it on the ground as if he was somehow, like the prophets of Baal with whom Elijah did battle, afraid that God was asleep and needed to be woken up. Yes, we do need to pray with passion and we need to keep on praying, but we must move away from what Martin Lloyd-Jones calls “*the mathematical notion of prayer*”, the idea that there is a direct correlation between the length or loudness of our prayers and God’s answers.

Those who are ostentatious, who pray for the benefit of other people, whose prayers are performances staged to impress, “*have their reward*”, says Jesus. They have the satisfaction of knowing that others think their prayers are wonderful and their lives filled with piety. That’s really what they want, he says, and that’s what they’re getting. They enjoy the plaudits and the compliments here and now. In a sense, God doesn’t come into it. But prayer isn’t about reward – it’s about relationship. It’s about getting to know God, about deepening that sense of his presence, about becoming increasingly at one with him and with his will. If you do enjoy a real relationship with someone, if you have a sense of intimacy with them, then you’re content to sit with them, just to be in their presence – not to have to keep on talking or even shouting at them. Sally doesn’t need me to shout that I love her before she believes it. I don’t have to come up with an original and startlingly beautiful sonnet every time I want to express what I feel about her. Just sitting in the same room with her is often enough (and even taking into account the electricity used if we have the light on, it’s still cheaper than chocolates or flowers).

And as that intimacy with God, that awareness of his presence, grows and deepens, so our understanding of him deepens and words are not always necessary – certainly not carefully constructed sentences full of biblical allusions. God’s awareness of us is such that, as Jesus says here, “*he knows what you need before you ask him*”. And as we grow closer to him so we become more and more aware of his will and his purposes for us.

And that intimacy is, almost by definition, on a one to one basis. It’s you and God. So Jesus suggests that rather than spending all your time in the synagogue and on street corners – at prayer meetings and conventions (Why is it that so many people who don’t want to join in the regular prayer in the context of a church will happily pay to go to some great convention centre for a prayer gathering with a celebrity Christian?) – you go and find a quiet, undisturbed place on your own. He suggest you “*go into your room*”, or, as some versions have it, “*into your closet*”, and pray. The Greek word that is used here is the word for a storeroom, usually the room in the house that had no windows and was quite small and possibly the only room that might have a lock on it. Go off and pray in private, says Jesus.

And there’s good biblical precedent for that. Read through the Bible and notice how many of the people that God really used were in the habit of praying alone: Jacob, Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, Jesus himself – they would all spend time alone in prayer with God, especially before important occasions or significant decisions had to be made. In his comments on these verses, the American Bible scholar Don Carson says this: “*The public versus private antithesis is a good test of one’s motives; the person who prays more in*

public than private reveals that he is less interested in God's approval than in human praise. Not piety but a reputation for piety is his concern." And if you haven't got a space at home where you can be alone with God and enjoy his presence and communicate in prayer with him, then why not come and use the prayer room at church. It's available twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. All you need to know is the code to open the door in the corner of the building and you can get that from the office, ask any of the elders or write it down now – C0316X.

And all that Jesus has said about prayer goes for fasting too. Fasting is something that we can use to help us concentrate on God, as a kind of spiritual discipline. But there's no need for a long face while you're doing it, so that others remark on your great piety. The hypocrites of Jesus' day would not only go without food, but would allow themselves to look unkempt and put on a sombre face, as if the seriousness of their manner was an indication of the seriousness of their faith. It's a bit like the girls I used to know at university who, if they felt a bit under the weather and in need of sympathy, wouldn't put on any make-up so that they looked really ill. Don't do that, says Jesus. It's between you and God so there's no need for anyone else even to know that you're fasting, let alone cover you with praise for the amazing depth of your commitment.

Once again, there's a danger that this could become a mechanical, ritualistic activity; an end in itself rather than a means to deeper intimacy with God. (Just a word of warning here. Not feeling you have to be constantly speaking with your partner can be a way of expressing your deep love for them. The same cannot be said for refusing to eat their food. You can only take these analogies so far.) Jesus talks of the hypocrites behaving like this. An early manual of Christian discipleship called *The Didache* (which means *The Teachings*) seemed to get the wrong end of the stick about this. In chapter 8 we read, "*Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays*" !

What we're looking at here is trying to focus on God, to get closer to him. This isn't about a false piety, but a real passion, a deep desire to know God intimately. It's not about a lauded performance, but discovering and enjoying the presence of the Lord. It's about an attitude of mind, a state of the heart, not about your appearance to others, about your reputation in their eyes.

What Jesus is giving us here is not a set of instructions. Even the Lord's Prayer, I would maintain, is a pattern for prayer not a prescriptive formula. We're not going to go into the Lord's Prayer this morning – that's something we've looked at on several other occasions – but although we do find it very useful to have shared familiar words to pray together, I'm not sure that Jesus gives it to his disciples as a fully formed prayer for collective worship. It's more an outline we can use, a framework for our own prayers. This is not a set of instructions but a gracious invitation to deepen our relationship with God, to explore our intimacy with him, so that we can come confidently into the presence of someone who knows us, loves us, inspires us, cares about us, without the need for pious and pretentious language, and without the need for ostentatious and over-acted demonstrations of religiosity.

And as our honesty and intimacy with him increase, so will our passion for him and for his will. When we begin to enjoy that sense of oneness with God, prayer becomes the natural conversation of someone at ease in the presence of their most loved and respected friend. The novelist Frederick Buechner writes this in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*:

"We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats out of us as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the skyrocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing over with our own lives. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world."

Real prayer, real intimacy with God is not about how loud are our shouts of hallelujah in public worship, but how real are our cries for help to the audience of One. It's not about how eloquent are our carefully worded petitions in the company of others, but how deep are our sighs of serene satisfaction to God in secret. Let's reflect on that as we listen to a piece of music. Those of you who come to the early service may recognise it: it's from Amy Grant's most recent album *Somewhere Down The Road* – "*Better Than A Hallelujah*".

Discussion questions on the next page.

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Jesus suggests that you go and find a quiet, undisturbed place on your own. He suggests you "*go into your room*" and pray. The Greek word that is used here is the word for a storeroom, usually the room in the house that had no windows and was quite small and possibly the only room that might have a lock on it. Go off and pray in private, says Jesus.

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Questions for discussion

1. What are the pros and cons of praying together in, for example, prayer meetings? Why don't more people do it?
2. What about public prayer during church services? Is that valid?
3. If God knows what we need before we ask him, why bother to pray at all?
4. How do you find a quiet space to pray? Share your experience with the group.

5. Fasting isn't practised as widely today as in the past. Is it still a worthwhile activity? Do you fast? Why/why not?