

## Expressions of Devotion

Matt. 6:1-18

How do you express devotion? In our passage we have three disciplines that are offered as ways to express devotion to God. They are alms-giving, prayer and fasting. We would not want to see spiritual devotion limited to these three disciplines but it is clear that Jesus accepted the premise that alms-giving, prayer, and fasting are each a legitimate way in which we can express our spiritual devotion. So, Jesus did not correct the list by adding or subtracting from it. His critique of these disciplines had to do with the way that they were being practiced by the religious leaders among the Jews. In each case, the act of devotion was made much of so that the maximum attention could be secured. When helping the poor in the synagogue or on the streets a trumpet was blown. This could have been a call to get in line if help was to be received, if so it may have inflicted an element of humiliation upon those seeking help. The trumpet also announced the identity and status of those who gave, making sure that their generosity did not go unnoticed. The posture of prayer was standing so that the devotee could be easily seen and admired whether the prayer was offered in the synagogue or on the street corner. The priority seems to have been maximum exposure. Then the third, and possibly most personal of these disciplines was fasting. But fasting became a public event when the devotees would abstain from washing themselves and carry themselves as those who mourn making it obvious that they were in the middle of a fast. Jesus warned that these practices had no spiritual value when they were done in order to impress men. His instructions were to do these things in secret so that they could be observed by God rather than publicly where they could gain the favor or admiration of the people.

Notice that Jesus critiqued the transactional motivation of these devotees. If you do your charitable deed before men to be seen of them, then you have your reward. If you pray on the street corners to be seen by men then you have your reward. If you put on a sad countenance and disfigure your face in order to appear to men to be fasting then you have your reward. Jesus announced that

the present gratification cancelled the eternal value of all of these observances. In fact, these public displays had nothing to do with God. His favor was not the question. The concerns of the devotees were popular and political. Religious observance had become for them a means of self promotion and manipulation.

The first principle of Jesus' teaching then in regard to these acts of devotion is that they are not to be practiced according to the example of the religious leaders. They missed the point for acts of devotion have the purpose of pleasing God. We cannot

mix our motives. This is not an opportunity to go for a twofer. If you are trying to impress people then you will not impress the Lord.

The second principle could be called "for His eyes only." In regard to charitable deeds Jesus said, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your charitable deed may be in secret that your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." In regard to prayer Jesus said, " when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." In regard to fasting Jesus said, "when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." In each case the devotee is to take care to hide his or her act of devotion from others so that it can be done "for His eyes only." Where these acts of devotion can be done in secret where only God knows, why would we want to make them public?

Let's agree that having the respect of our fellow disciples is important to us. You don't want to be thought of as self indulgent or as dishonest or as untrustworthy. Where our walk with the Lord is exemplary, it feels good if that is valued by the people with whom we serve. But these are issues that take care of themselves. If you try to manipulate or self promote, your attempt to be respected will have the opposite effect. Consider the story of Ananias and Saphira who sold land and then claimed that they had given all of the proceeds to the church when they had kept some for themselves. There was not requirement of expectation that they should give it all but by saying that they had they sought to lift themselves up and

gain status in the church. Their sin was exposed and they perished for their duplicity.

The third principle is that these specific disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting are positive and should be practiced by those who are the followers of Jesus Christ. These are not the only disciplines of the spiritual life for we could add Bible reading and study, acts of service to others, ministry in the church, exemplary Christian living in the home and more. This said, the value of these specific three should not be underestimated.

Why? Alms-giving is a means of sharing in God's compassion for the poor and defenseless. Remember James 1:27; "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Jesus was attentive to those who sought His help and the apostles followed that example when Peter and John healed the lame man and in further acts of healing and compassion.

Prayer is the means of being with God. Jesus said, "Go into your room and when you have shut the door, pray to the Father who is in the secret place..." So, in your room, as you pray, God is there with you. Even further, Jesus instructed us to pray as you would if you were talking with a person who was with you. "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him." The heathen or the worshippers of idols would repeat their prayers over and over trying to make sure that they were heard. When you pray in your room with the door shut you speak with a God and father who is there with you. He has no problem hearing you. He even knows what is on your heart before you ask. A child might ask repeatedly thinking that you may not be paying attention or that you must not really mean your "no". God has no problem with focus and He looks for those who are ready to submit entirely to His will. Prayer is the process through which we are reminded of who God is, of what He seeks from us, of the care He extends to us, and of the means He has given us to conform to His will.

There is a persuasive element in prayer. God is persuading you to respond to His love and care and to trust Him with your life. You have the opportunity to persuade Him that you are sincere and that you understand His purposes and that you desire to be a part of the work He is doing in His world. He has given you the capacity to discern His objectives and to become passionate in His cause and as such, He loves to be engaged in conversations about the best way to achieve His will.

Fasting is a means of bringing urgent matters before the Lord and demonstrating that these issues are urgent to us. The record of fasting by men and women of faith is both long and impressive throughout the Scriptures. Moses fasted on the mountain of God, Hannah fasted as she sought a son from the Lord. David fasted for his son who was ill. Daniel fasted seeking an answer to his prayer. Esther fasted seeking God's direction, Nehemiah fasted for Jerusalem, and Jesus fasted in the wilderness where He was tempted by the Devil. In every case there was an issue between the supplicant and God in which God's grace was needed and sought. Fasting intensifies the experience of prayer.

So the spiritual disciplines are not to be a means of impressing our brothers and sisters that we are devout. They are a means of approach to God through which we enter into His presence. They are about you and Him and no one else. No attention should be drawn to your time with God. You do not want to risk ruining the moment. When you secretly draw close to Him, you trust Him with your reputation. You allow Him to define that which is significant. You embark upon a journey whose destination is certain but whose path is known only one step at a time.