

Telling Stories of Integrity
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Three chapters in the Gospel of Matthew make up what we've come to call the Sermon on the Mount. Jacob Edson, Editorial Director at Bible Gateway, calls it, "Jesus' foundational ethical and spiritual lesson" ([What Is the Sermon on the Mount? Its Context, Summary, and Application | Bible Gateway News & Knowledge](#)).

Here in these chapters we hear much about what it means to follow Jesus and to be those who help build God's realm on earth. Throughout this sermon we are reminded that the way of Jesus is not the way of the world and that God's kin-dom will turn many worldly expectations on their heads. And throughout these proclamations we are invited into a relationship with God that is far deeper than mere rule-keeping.

Our reading today comes from right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

Here Jesus is speaking about religious practices. And much like the Hebrew prophets who came before him, he isn't critiquing the practices themselves, but rather critiquing how they are often approached and how their use is often twisted. In doing so, Jesus points people to the purpose behind the practices.

See, if we pay attention, we will notice that this passage sets up a contrast between hypocrites and who we are asked to be. New Testament Professor Danny Zacharius writes, "The term 'hypocrite' (*hypokritēs*) originally referred to stage actors, those who performed for an audience. In the same way, Jesus critiques those who perform acts of righteousness—giving, prayer, and fasting—merely to be seen by others. Instead, he calls for a different way: one that is unseen by human eyes but fully visible to God" (Danny Zacharius, [Commentary on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

And often we are tempted when reading passages such as this to get caught up in the perceived restrictions or rules.

Do not give alms, in other words donations or charity, as a way to draw attention to yourself; give in secret so no one knows what you are doing. People have used this as an excuse to not respond to needs right in front of them or as an excuse to refuse to even talk about the responsibility we have with the resources we own.

Do not pray on the street corners; pray in your room in secret. People have heard this and used this as an argument against any type of public prayer.

And yet, these responses miss the mark of Jesus' intention. Because we see Jesus give generously in many ways and we hear him praise the giving of others and talk often

about our responsibility to share. We see Jesus pray, sometimes alone as he steps away from the public eye, but also with others and in the midst of crowds, even here in the Sermon on the Mount teaching his followers to “pray then in this way...” (Matthew 6:9a) as he offers the words Christians around the world know as the Lord’s Prayer, words we still pray today.

Because Jesus isn’t saying that these aren’t important faith practices, in fact he encourages those around him to participate in all of them. Jesus isn’t talking about the what or the how of praying and fasting and almsgiving. Rather, he is addressing the why.

See, that’s the deeper question that he is inviting us into.

Why are you giving? Is it for recognition? Is it to see your name on a plaque or on the side of a building? Is your giving about controlling the activities of the person or organization with whom you share?

Or is the why of your giving driven by something deeper? Are you giving because you understand that we are all connected to each other, that we are all better off when we are *all* better off, when we are all more whole? Are you giving because you have a relationship with a generous God and that shapes you into a generous person?

Why are you praying? Is it because you were told you were supposed to? Do you pray in an attempt to strike a bargain with God? Do you pray to be seen? Do you pray to look holy?

Or do you pray because your relationship with God is so real that you can’t help but be in communion with the divine? Do you pray because you want to be shaped by the heart of God?

Why do you show up for worship on Sundays? Why do you volunteer in the community serving at Free Lunch or Houses into Home, at the food pantry or the winter clothing distribution? Do you do these things out of guilt or because you’ve been pressured? Do you do these things so people will see what a good person you are?

Or do you do these things because you believe in the value of your neighbor and you are committed to their wholeness?

What’s your why?

“Self-proclaimed agnostic A. J. Jacobs wrote a book titled *The Year of Living Biblically*. He was determined to live by the Bible’s rules and disciplines, literally, in modern-day New York City. Other than his wife’s coming close to kicking him out of their little apartment for his occasionally self-righteous behavior, what Jacobs found is that sometimes the life of faith is (or can be) about cognitive dissonance. *Put yourself in a practice in order to learn it.*

“At the conclusion of the book, what Jacobs found was not radical conversion but rather genuine openness of faith, a direct result of the practices and disciplines he had introduced into his life. The truth is that Jacobs lived religion very publicly as an experiment, but the real change happened in the quiet of his heart as he learned to pray where only God could hear” (Maryetta Anschutz, “Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21” in *Feasting on the Word*, 24).

Jesus isn’t speaking against practices that sometimes do happen publicly, but instead is asking us to consider where those practices are rooted. And Jesus is inviting us, when we root them in a relationship with God, to be open to the ways we are shaped and changed by that relationship. Jesus is inviting us to be open to the reality that sometimes what we have been doing because it is expected can become what we do in response to the One to whom we belong.

One of the questions that Jesus seems to be asking is this: Who are you when no one is watching? Are you still who God calls you to be?

Whenever I think of that question, I think of the word integrity. Integrity can be defined as “the state of being complete or undivided” ([INTEGRITY Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)).

Jesus, seems to be saying that the people who are participating in religious rituals for recognition are divided people. They are doing the right thing, but for the wrong reason. And that matters to Jesus.

But to be undivided is to root our why in the love of God. To be undivided is to root our why in the life of Jesus. To be undivided is to allow our actions to be rooted in a living relationship with the divine, a relationship that changes us and shapes us.

If no one noticed, would you spend time in prayer anyway?

If no one complimented your efforts, would feeding people at Free Lunch still matter to you?

If the church didn’t send you a tax statement at the end of the year, would you still give your offerings?

Why do we do what we do? What motivates us?

Jesus invites us into a life of integrity, a life where our why, our motivation, our reason aligns with our action. Jesus invites us to live in relationship with God in such a way that we are changed and shaped by it, in such a way that that relationship is the reason we live as we do. May it be so.