

On practising your piety

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Text: Matthew 6:1

Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Introduction

In our scripture reading from the NRSV, the word ‘piety’, in “beware of practicing your piety,” is used to translate the Greek word ‘righteousness.’ At this point in his sermon on the mount, Jesus is returning to a theme he introduced earlier when he said, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) Other translations of this text use the word ‘righteousness.’ “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them” (NIV); “Be careful not to parade your righteousness before others to be seen by them” (Revised New Jerusalem Bible); the New Living Translation puts it this way, “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others.” To be fair Jesus does go on to talk about what we might call our spiritual practises—alms giving, prayer, fasting—prompting the NRSV translators to use the word ‘piety.’ Even so, I would invite you to consider that this teaching of Jesus can be applied to all aspects of right living.

1. “Righteousness” has a two-fold meaning in scripture. Foundationally it means “right-relatedness.” The righteousness of God is God’s act of grace wherein he absorbs our guilt and rights us with himself. Thereafter our relationship with him is no longer capsized but righted. Reconciled to him, no longer estranged from him, our relationship with him is righted. This is the primary meaning of “righteousness.”

The secondary meaning refers to the right conduct of those who’ve been righted with God. If we are righteous in the sense of rightly related to God, we are thereafter to live righteously by doing what’s right.

Jesus maintains that our acts of righteousness are not to be done for show, to be seen by others; that is, in offering our spiritual practices to God our hearts are to be

rightly focussed; thus our discipleship furthers the righteousness of God. In which sense of righteousness: primary or secondary? In both senses. As we offer our spiritual practices to God we witness to the truth that life was meant to be lived oriented to God. Therein we lend credibility to that gospel by which men and women come to be reconciled to God, rightly related to him, righteous.

As we offer our spiritual practices to God we also further the righteousness of God in the secondary sense; we do what's right. Doing these things for show undermines the gospel: to offer these acts to God in the way our Lord teaches is to be a doer of the Word, both the Word of the gospel by which we were reconciled to God and the Word of gospel-command by which we behave in the world as Jesus Christ first behaved in the world. We know that Jesus was a man of prayer but he didn't parade his prayer life; we are told that his pattern was to go to a solitary place to pray. To follow our Lord in this way is to produce righteousness. We produce God's righteousness in both senses: we magnify the gospel of reconciliation (right-relationship with him) and we obey the command to live righteously.

2. What Jesus is warning his followers against has two linked elements: it is not action before others as such which is the problem, but action before others with view to being seen to be doing good. The desire to create an impression of piety and virtue is what is being criticized. If that is what you do right acts for then you already have your reward—people regard you as a religious person or as a 'good' person.

I subscribe to a Church Humour news letter and I think the point Jesus makes here was illustrated by a picture of a man standing on a busy sidewalk holding up a sign written on cardboard that said; "Most short-term missions trips are just vacations that make you feel better about yourself." (See slide) To be clear, I don't think that all short-term mission trips are as advertised here. However, it does illustrate how easily our motives can get mixed up with personal benefits.

I think it important to note that Jesus isn't saying you shouldn't be seen by others in doing what is right or in the doing of spiritual practises. In gathering for public worship we are seen to be worshipping by others. Jesus is not saying there is no place for public prayer. Nor is Jesus stating that the fact you support financially the church or other agency dedicated to relieving suffering in our world should be hidden from view. Remember the day Jesus was sitting at the temple watching people place their alms in the receptacle dedicated for collecting the funds and a

poor widow came and put in a tiny amount, all she had to live on. Jesus found no fault in her being seen to give.

“Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them” said Jesus, “for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Notice this second part; “for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” This is repeated positively when Jesus advises that to do them secretly, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” The heart of the matter is the answer to the question, who are you doing these things for. It is important to note that ‘doing righteousness’ does not set a person in right relationship with God, according to Jesus. This is self-righteousness. One of the hardest things for ‘do-gooders’ to understand about the gospel is that all our righteousness is as filthy rags. God comes among us in Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost and in that action declares that we all stand in need of a Saviour. To tell God we have things under control is to disdain the Saviour of the world.

In Isaiah God calls the prophet to announce the rebellion of his people; they outwardly observed religious practices but were not a people who practised righteousness otherwise. The people actually complained that there was little point in observing a fast if God wasn’t going to hold up his end of the deal and answer their prayers. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” “Look,” answers God, “you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them.”

God’s indictment was that they fasted to serve their own interests. That fasting was to be for God, was lost on them evident in the pattern of their lives. Being rightly-related to God calls from us a life patterned after the God we serve. A life lived after the pattern of our Lord. Spiritual practises done for the sake of show or thinking it puts God in our debt reveals a heart that has not embraced the gospel. We offer ourselves to do right things because of what our Lord has done in setting our relationship with God to rights through faith. Doing right is always response to the grace of God, for the believer.

3. A minister friend of mine writes a weekly blog reflecting on our Christian life. In one reflection on Jesus’ temptation he wrote, “Jesus encourages all disciples, each whose lives are being threatened by the Satan, with words of commitment.

They are a reflection drawn from the ancient Scriptures. Set out within the records of the Old Testament, in the book we call Deuteronomy, these words set the profile of commitment for disciples. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only...” (6:13).

As I read that blog while reflecting on Jesus’ admonition to do our acts of righteousness for the sake of relationship with God (the essence of ‘in secret’), my heart was blessed in thinking of the positive side of what Jesus said, “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” On the other side of all the commands of God that marks certain things out-of-bounds is the vast goodness of what is to be done. The other side of the command not to steal is the wide open joy of giving, of caring for the life of others. On the other side of ‘don’t do you righteousness to be seen by others’ is that vast and unending joy of walking in company with Jesus and doing for his sake. Surely this is what Jesus has in mind when he warns us of cheap imitations; he has in mind the wonder he knows in walking in intimate obedient company with the One he calls the Father.

As our society has moved farther and farther away from its roots that were profoundly shaped by Christianity we are bombarded by now dominant ideologies that are counter to the good news of Jesus Christ. As a minister, it is my experience that pressures abound to cave on gospel truths that were once commonly held. Truth is now said to be an individual construct, ‘your’ truth or ‘my’ truth. Stricken from imagination is the idea that life is given by God constituted by certain givens, such as ‘God created them male and female’; we are now thought to be able to define ourselves however we wish. How do we navigate these winds that are blowing in other direction? What do we cling to against the tide of cultural change?

Doing right for His sake guides you in a world that has abandoned notions of right and wrong. Practicing the righteousness God has called from us for no other reason than relationship with him is a refuge in the storms that are blowing. And don’t you find that more and more our faith is done in secret in a world that has no place for it? This is not to say that we are to hide our faith. It is to say that being intimately grounded in relationship with Jesus, while not seen, is the reality that holds us in and through all these things.

Worship the Lord your God; doing your spiritual practises for Him is, according to the gospel, to be rooted in reality. It is to live life according to the true narrative of the world; the narrative that God is weaving in our lives for his purposes to save. Jesus said, “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” While Jesus did

not name the rewards it seems to me that there is a joy in life that is only found in relationship with him. Could we not consider that this joy is part of the reward God gives? Of course Jesus will go on to say that we should store our treasures in heaven. The Apostle Paul, speaking of God's wisdom revealed in Christ wrote, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him". (1 Corinthians 2:9)

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.