

“Practicing Righteousness”
Deut. 12:5-12; Colossians 2:16-23;
Psalm 51:15-17; Matthew 6:1-4

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As Jesus continues his sermon on the mount, he begins this section with a little warning: Beware of practicing your piety before others. There are a couple of interesting things there. One is I don't know why the NRSV translators all of a sudden switched to using the word “piety” because the word in Greek that's behind that has previously been translated as “righteousness,” or as I like to translate it, right relationship. The NIV Bible (New International Version) actually translates it as “acts of righteousness.” You can get to “piety,” but today, when we think of piety we probably think of something more along a devotional line than along the lines of how we're living our lives.

Jesus is talking here about doing. It's translated here as “practice” which is probably helpful at this point, but the verb behind it means “to do,” “to accomplish something.” So he's talking about practicing right relationship. He's really going into a set of passages here about practicing things we can do.

As we started out in Matthew 5 a few weeks ago, we talked about the Beatitudes as the ways we will become. It's a way of being that leads to some things that happen. What Jesus has been talking about is, “As you follow me, you will become this way. You will be this kind of person.” Now he's shifting and saying, “Here are some things you can do in the process.” We could see some things that we could do out of what he said already, but here, he's actually beginning to talk more about the doing. What do we do?

One of the things we know that we do when we follow Christ is we begin to share and give of ourselves. There is a giving that comes from following Christ that we're called to do. That's one of the reasons we chose to introduce Stewardship today because Stewardship is about our response and our giving to the work of Christ.

So as he begins to talk about doing something, or giving, it's one of the things we are called to do. We have been given the gift of God's grace, the gift of life, the gift of creation and all that we have, and there's a response in giving. It's almost, though, that it is assumed that we will do this giving. *When* you do your giving. *When* you give alms. *When* you help another in need. There's almost an assumption that we will share with one another as we follow Christ.

What's interesting, then, is that he gives us this little warning. He gives us an overall warning at the beginning: Beware of practicing your right relationship before others. Then he goes back to it again: When you do it, do it in secret. That means to just do it so others can't see you doing it. I want to spend a little time thinking about that.

He says, “Don't let your left hand see what your right hand is doing.” It's a contradiction, almost, isn't it? Earlier, right after the Beatitudes, he said, “Don't put your light under a

bushel.” Let who you are shine. Now, he’s saying, “Don’t let others see what you are doing.” I think there’s a difference. I think what he’s saying is, “When you become my follower and it becomes part of who you are, your light will shine. Don’t try to deny it or put a veil over it.” But, when you’re planning to do something, there are a couple of things you have to think about. One, it’s not just for show. I don’t know how many times I’ve been with friends, known friends, or seen myself go home and act in a very different way than I had just pretended to act when I was with other people. I know of families of my friends when I was growing up. The family acted like they were perfect when they were at places like church, but sometimes when I visited their home, I had a different experience. I think Jesus is saying that it’s not about acting, not about pretending. In fact, the way not to pretend is to not let anyone else see what you are doing. There’s no need to pretend if nobody else sees us. It’s about those times when nobody else is looking and how I act then. Am I able to give with nobody watching? What it makes me think of is voting. We all go into the voting booth and come out again, and nobody knows what we did. Yet, it’s an incredibly important act that we do.

I sometimes wonder if much of what happens in the world – if people are followers of Christ, anyway – happens in ways we don’t see partly because people don’t want it to happen where it’s seen. What is the struggle here? Jesus is inviting us to act because he knows that what we do affects how we feel. Our actions affect our attitudes. One of the favorite examples of that for me is to realize that when I’m feeling bad, if I actually try to smile, and I do, it actually changes the way I feel. There’s been research to show that kind of thing. It’s always amazing to me that all you have to do is smile and all of a sudden your feelings shift because of an action you did.

Jesus is inviting us to do something, some action that changes our attitudes. Everybody knows that if we practice something we tend to get better at it, if we actually work at it. Sometimes it feels like we shouldn’t have to work at the things we’re called to do, but it feels to me that Jesus is inviting us to do just that—to *do* so that we can *be*.

So as we think about Jesus inviting us to give without being seen, he’s also doing something else. If we do something, like giving, just to get attention of just so that people will see us, we can turn a good action into something it wasn’t originally designated for. I think there’s a hard part of this because if we do something, we kind of want people to know. We want to have some accolades. We want that pat on the back. But Jesus notes how easy it is for that to turn from giving into getting. He’s warning us how easy it is for us as human beings to turn the giving into a getting. So sometimes we have to do what we do in ways that can’t be seen.

It’s a powerful thing, isn’t it, to want others to know and to want to be encouraged by that. Some of that is OK, but I think we have to be careful because it can turn so easily from giving to getting. It’s interesting that the word in Greek for evil has a sense of twisting to it. Something you can easily twist or something that gets twisted. Something that was good can be twisted into something that’s not good. So while Jesus is inviting us to participate and to practice our giving, our sharing, he’s also warning us at the

same time how easy it is to turn that around from giving to getting, and to focus on ourselves.

As he goes on, he says, “Your Father in heaven will see what you have done.” I struggle a little bit with the end of this because it feels like we’ll just get the prize if we just do what’s right. But if you look at the word, I think what it’s suggesting is that it is by doing what Jesus says that we will recognize the fulfillment of the promise. It takes us on a path that opens life up to us in a way that we can see it in the actions we do, in the giving versus the getting. It opens us up. It changes our lives.

Jesus is inviting us into what I would call a spiritual practice of sharing, of giving. But he notes that in doing something good there is always a temptation, and this one seems to be to turn the giving into getting. So it’s pretty clear what this invites us to do: to share, to give, to extend the love of God that’s been given us to those who might need it in their lives. He just tells us to watch out for how easy it is to turn the giving into a getting and to be all about us, ourselves.

But if we live out the activity, the actions can change our attitudes and we, I think, can know the joy of the giving that isn’t about getting the accolades, but recognizing the gift and how it helps someone else. I invite you to give, to share, to follow Christ in that way.

Let’s pray:

Lord, we do know how hard it is to focus on what you really call us to do, to give cheerfully out of love and because we know your grace, to share your love through our lives. How easy it is to want to turn it to be about “me” and about “us.” Help us to follow Christ, to give, to act, that our attitude might be one of love and grace. Help us not twist it around so it’s about the getting for me. Let it be a giving because you have given to us, because of the love you’ve shared with us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.