

“Practicing Righteousness”

Introduction: From doctors who work at the Mayo Clinic, to physical therapists, to athletic trainers – all have come to recognize in recent years the importance to our physical health of what is called “core work.” Core work is comprised of exercises for one’s “core” – your abdomen, pelvis, and lower back. When this area is strengthened, your entire body benefits, from reduction of back pain, to better posture, to a decreased risk of injury, to greater ease of climbing stairs or carrying an infant or skiing down a mountain or through the woods (and perhaps even sitting for an hour on old wooden church pews!).

There is also, it is helpful to know, core work for Christians, core exercises that Jesus gives us that will strengthen our faith and our ability to live a more genuinely human life. Jesus begins to speak of such exercises as he moves to a new section in his Sermon and begins to talk about *practicing righteousness*. Up to this point, he’s urged us to live as salt and light by seeking to live out of a deeper righteousness, being concerned about anger as well as murder and lust as well as adultery, being faithful to our promises and true to our word, and laying down our rights to the extent of loving even our enemy.

The question is, how do we do these kinds of things, more of the time? How can our hearts be formed such that we can live distinctively by grace, through the Spirit, revealing the beauty of God and the goodness of his reign? Where Jesus goes next is helpful in this regard as he now gives us three key core exercises to do – giving, praying, and fasting. Let’s hear what Jesus has to say about each and then think about how these operate and how we are to practice them. [READ]

There are four words that Jesus uses as he describes each exercise: “when,” “hypocrites,” “in secret,” and “reward.” Let’s use them to guide us through the text.

I. When

A. “When you give to the needy,” “when you pray,” “when you fast.” The word, importantly, is not “if,” but “when.” That is, Jesus expects his followers to put these exercises into practice. It’s affirmation, I think, that Jesus knows our spiritual growth doesn’t just happen as we sit back and enjoy the gift of forgiveness and new life that he brings. Instead, he anticipates that, as Paul put it to the Philippian church, we will “work out” our salvation (Phil. 2:12):

...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Yes, God is working in us, but it doesn’t mean we make no effort. Grace, as Dallas Willard is fond of putting it, is opposed to earning, but it is not opposed to effort, or diligence (Heb. 6:1; 2 Pet. 1:5). As Peter urges:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

B. Giving, praying, and fasting were three of the primary practices of Jewish piety, and Jesus expected his followers to continue to make the effort to put them into practice as they lived out the gift of God's salvation by making space for the Spirit to work. Just a quick word on each.

1. Giving: Scott Cormode, who helped us think about hospitality last week, also has some helpful words about giving. He observes that grace is a two-sided coin, with gratitude on one side and generosity on the other. Gratitude directs us to remember grace, to notice the many ways in which God has bestowed his undeserved favor on us. On the other side of the coin, generosity completes our gratitude.

Generosity – giving to meet the needs of others – is the way we practice grace. Giving, then, is a habit, an exercise, a discipline, that brings us more deeply into the realm of the beauty of God's grace, moving us to recognize how we have been blessed as we think about how we might bless others.

2. Praying: This is one of the primary ways we communicate with God. Praying includes both speaking, as well as listening. Jesus actually gives us a format or outline to use to help us to pray, which we'll look at next week (vv. 9-15).

3. Fasting: This exercise is not meant to help us learn to be without food, though it may include that. Rather, fasting helps us to experience and rest in the provision of God's presence while we're saying "no" to something we don't think we can do without. Fasting can teach us to say "no" to those desires that may be preventing us from living a genuinely human life and becoming more like Jesus.

II. Hypocrites

A. All of that said, there is a right way and a wrong way to put these exercises into practice. My physical therapist always gives me a stack of exercises to do between appointments, and she always makes sure she goes through each one with me before I leave her office, to make sure I'm doing them correctly. Doing them wrongly is not only not helpful; it can be harmful. Jesus gets at this in each case with the word "hypocrites." It's actually a word that comes from the world of the theatre. In an ancient drama, actors did not wear make-up, they wore masks to represent the parts they played. Thus, on the outside they were one thing, but underneath they were another. What Jesus is highlighting is that there were those who were "acting" when doing these exercises. They loved the stage and wanted others to observe them and think them wonderful, while inside nothing was changing.

1. So they'd hire a trumpeter to announce that they were about to bring a big gift into the temple. Whether literal or just a caricature, they wanted to "blow their own horn," we might say and try and let others know how generous they were being.

2. Or when they stopped for fixed-hour prayer, praying at nine, noon, and three, they made sure all those around them could see that they had stopped to pray.

3. Or when they fasted, they made sure they appeared gaunt and unkempt, seeking to communicate that they were going through a real, yet heroic, struggle, so weren't they so spiritual!

We may not hire trumpeters, but we're not above "letting slip" what percentage of income we may be giving, or wanting our name on a plaque. We may not pray in the middle of the street, but might be concerned about how theological we sound when we pray in public. We may not try to make ourselves look ragged when fasting, but aren't beyond talking about what a difficult time we may be going through since we haven't eaten in awhile.

What was wrong about each practice as Jesus saw it was not the practice itself, but the way many were practicing it. They were seeking to promote themselves, to feel good about themselves, to find their security in what others thought of them.

III. In Secret

A. To guard against this, Jesus urges his listeners to do their exercises “in secret.” Our Puritan ancestors had a wonderful phrase that captured the essence of what Jesus was saying. “Live for an audience of One” they said. That is, get off the stage, forget about the crowd, do what you do for God, and don’t worry about anyone else. A spiritual discipline is done not to earn God’s favor (another way we might be inclined to offer such wrongly), but to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit and let him do as he pleases. Offer yourself to him, make space for him, and see how he uses your offering of that time and that space.

B. So, Jesus directs, when you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, just give as a natural course of events in your life, without drawing attention to it in any way. Pray simply, quietly, and not to impress a crowd, or congregation. Fast by living the way you’d live on any other day. Take a shower, brush your hair, put on clean clothes. Let God be your audience, and don’t worry about trying to impress others in some way.

IV. Reward

A. Impressing others, if that’s your aim, warns Jesus, will also be your only reward, and it won’t last! The applause of the crowd will quickly die away. Jesus doesn’t specify what the rewards are that he holds out for us, but we can imagine that they include knowing the love and faithfulness of God more deeply, that they include resting our identity in God and not in what others think of us, that they include living a life that is more in accord with the way our Maker has designed us to live, that they include drawing others into the orbit of God through lives that shine with God’s glory.

B. As you think about “in secret” and “reward,” one exercise you might consider doing during the remainder of this Lenten season is what one writer calls “secret service.” That is, to help you focus only on an “audience of One,” and not worry about the crowd, find an act of service that you can do without letting anyone know what you have done or why you have done it. As God to help you discover what this might be. As you talk to people, pay attention to any need that might surface. Plan a way of meeting that need without anyone knowing. Then, follow up with God on what this was like for you. Are you content that God, and only God, knows about it? Did you receive a reward? What was it? What, if anything, changed in your heart?

As we seek to grow and be strengthened in our faith, as we desire to be salt and light in the world around us, don’t forget to do your core work! Put into practice the exercises Jesus gives us and models for us, and may you be blessed as you make space for him in your life.