

LEARNING THE WAY: A series on the Sermon on the Mount

“Out of Sight”

Matthew 5:17-26 and Matthew 6:1-6

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 29, 2107

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At the same time as we go through January and February, we're digging deeper on what some consider the most important part of Matthew: the Sermon on the Mount.

Today is the third of six Sundays where we dig deeper into the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5, 6, and 7.

Please open your Bibles.

In Matthew 5, Jesus speak about righteousness, a common term in Matthew, a word in Greek which is related to justice. In chapter 5 Jesus has 6 different teachings where he invites his followers into a deeper righteousness, using the same formula: You have heard it said, but I say to you.

Last week we heard Jesus say “You have heard it said love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemy.”

Throughout the SOM, Jesus is calling his followers to a new and deeper level of righteousness, of learning God's way.

Today, we continue to think about this new righteousness in chapter 6. The word piety is the same Greek root for righteousness.

Maybe it's time for us to reclaim the word righteousness, to seek to be genuinely authentic people, to be right with God and right with neighbors and right with ourselves.

Interestingly, the word for righteousness has the same word for piety in Matthew 6, where Jesus talk about religious practice.

Listen for God's word.

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

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 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.

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Do you wash your hands after you go to the bathroom?

Apparently a lot of us don't. Various studies and surveys suggest that even though we have some awareness of germs and bacteria and other icky things, we sometimes don't take 15 seconds to wash our hands.

And it seems we are more likely to not wash our hands when we are alone. Years ago, I heard on the radio about a study showing that when men were alone in the restroom they usually didn't wash their hands, but when someone else was there, they usually did.

While I couldn't find that study from years ago, I did find an interesting new device that tracks how often the soap dispenser is used and keeps track of what percentage of people entering a restroom use the soap and presumably wash their hands. The percentage is visibly displayed, so people feel like they are part of the process. Initial results suggest that the display encourages hand washing.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2971931/Do-wash-hands-going-loo-62-men-40-women-admit-don-t-bother.html>

Isn't that interesting? To varying degrees our behavior is changed by the presence of other people.

Apparently the same can be true of our religious practice. Jesus points out the hypocrisy, the acting of some religious people—looking good in public, but all for show, and not from the heart.

He invites us to think hard about what we do, religiously and otherwise, when we're out of sight, when no one else can see us.

Jesus' teaching makes me think about a tree. A tree with good roots, roots that are out of sight, can bear good fruits. In order to have those good (and visible) fruits, the roots (which are out of sight) need to be good and strong.

One evening this week, I went to a local bank ATM, and when I drove up, I found the card of the person in front of me. I beeped my horn as they drove away, but they were gone. After my transaction, I called the 800 number on the back of the card I found, to report the card and to offer to bring it to the bank the next day. The person on the phone told me that the card had already been reported

missing and the account was closed, so I could just cut up the card and throw it away.

While I was glad the person had taken steps to fix the problem and while I was relieved I wouldn't have to go to the bank the following day, I admit that part of me was disappointed that I wouldn't be seen as the nice person who turned in the ATM card.

So instead I'm telling you about it, so at least I get some credit.

We humans are funny creatures. We want our goodness to be seen. But that can get us in trouble.

In the classic sitcom "Seinfeld" there is a memorable scene where quirky George Costanza is at an Italian restaurant getting some food to go, making small talk with the owner who is getting his order ready. After paying for his food, George makes a dramatic effort to put something in the tip jar, but as he does, the owner turns away.

George is clearly bothered that the owner didn't see his act of charity, so he reaches in the tip jar, with the apparent intent to re-tip and hopefully be seen. Unfortunately, the only thing the owner sees is George taking money out of the tip jar, so he chases George out, telling him to never come back.

Jesus teaches us to do the right thing, whether anyone is watching or not. He said "Beware of practicing your piety before others." He knew the danger.

Our challenge is to be righteous, without becoming self-righteous. Our calling as Christians is to repent, to turn around, to change direction and to go the right way, the way of God.

We have been watching some episodes of West Wing in our house over the past month or so. I didn't watch the show when it originally aired, but I'm enjoying it now, with a president (admittedly a fictitious character) who is intelligent, determined, and deeply shaped by his Christian faith. I love the way he reflects on complex issues, trying to do the right thing.

And I appreciate that President Bartlett is a man of righteousness. In one episode, he goes to a rare book shop to buy gifts for his staff and family. One of the PR

people is begging him for a photo, to show the public what a kind and thoughtful person he is. But he refuses, wanting to just do good without good PR.

I think we all know that satisfaction of doing a good deed in secret, a random act of kindness, that no one else will ever know.

But what about prayer, and Jesus' words about prayer?

As one who prays publicly a fair amount, his words get my attention.

I am aware of the temptation to pray with lots of fancy words and clever phrases to impress people. Especially university people.

“O Beneficent deity of the splendid created world, most exceedingly overflowing with magisterial presence, your magnanimous....”

I know there is a time and a place for a well-crafted prayer, with carefully chosen words. But there is also more time and place for genuine, heart-felt prayers, which use simple, heart-felt language to lift up our joys and concerns, our thanks and our needs before God.

In the first chapter of a deep and rich book about many different types of prayer, Richard Foster focuses on what he calls simple prayer, which “involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving Father.” (*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, p. 10)

I think about my friend and spiritual mentor Jim Flynn, a Catholic priest that I worked with in Nicaragua a long time ago. He has a life-long commitment to justice for Central America, to working for peace, to advocating for the forgotten. And as far as I can tell, it's all grounded in what he does “out of sight.” He is a regular pray-er. I know, because several times in our travels in rural Nicaragua, I caught him in the act. He would get up early, find a cup of good Nicaraguan coffee and with his prayer book, begin the day by connecting with God. Until I interrupted him.

He pays attention to the roots by saying his prayers, and the result is good fruits in his life.

So the gospel today seems pretty clear, that we need to say our prayers and do our good deeds in private, and thus become more righteous and more godly people.

There is only one problem, and it comes from chapter five in Matthew. Just one chapter before telling people to do good in secret, Jesus says this:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

How are we supposed to let our light shine, if we supposed to do our good things, like prayer and charity, in secret? Isn't Jesus contradicting himself?

I think the answer lies in our hearts, in our hopefully growing sense of righteousness. If we are striving to repent and welcome God into our lives, if we are trying to do the right things—in private and in public, then I think we get things right.

Michael Johnson is the director of the Boys and Girls Club here in Madison and a tireless advocate for kids and for justice. So when I see his videos on Facebook about helping families in need or spending the night outside to support homeless, or when I read about him meeting with police and political leaders, I know his heart is in the right place, and he inspires me to do good.

Anne Lamott has written and spoken poignantly over the years about struggles with Christian faith, addiction, parenting, and life. When she tells her story and says the two most important prayers are “Thank you, thank you, thank you” and “Help me, help me, help me” I know her heart is in the right place and she inspires me to pray more deeply and more sincerely—in public and in private.

Adam Hamilton is pastor of a 20,000 member Methodist Church in Kansas City, who seems as genuine and sincere as any Christian I know. So when he talks about picking up trash as he walks into church or about how he gets on his knees to pray in the morning and in the sanctuary of the church, I am inspired to be a more faithful Christian with deeds and in prayer.

I get the sense that these good examples, these people who are shining brightly, are doing the right things when they are out of sight of the public. When they are out of sight of others, they nurture their roots, and thus they live with good fruits.

What you do when you're out of sight of anyone else matters. What you do with your free time, your TV time, your computer time, your family time... It all matters.

As we train ourselves out of sight to do the right things, as we encourage each other day by day to read our Bibles, to say our prayers, we grow as Christians, we grow in genuine godly righteousness.

We learn, and we live, and God's light shines into the world. Amen.