

“Means of Grace” | Matthew 6:1-18

We began the sermon of the Mount by looking at the Beatitudes, those promises of Jesus for those who will truly follow Him. We read there that the pure in heart will see God, and the peacemakers will be called children of God. What a wonderful thought: we put our faith in Jesus for salvation from sin, and we are adopted into God’s family. The God who created the universe and all that there is, and who sustains everything by His all powerful hand, he has adopted you and me into his great family, inviting us to walk with him now through this life and enjoy the glories of his heaven when this life is through. In our passage for today we are given permission to call God “Our Father.”

You are adopted, you are part of God’s family, and heaven is now your true home. So tell me about your Heavenly Father. What is He like? What things delight Him? What things disgust Him? Can you give gifts to your Heavenly Father? Does He give you gifts? What do you know about your Father who is in heaven?

I am afraid many people would be stumped if I asked them those questions. Though it is true God is greater than our minds and imaginations could ever comprehend, God still wants to be known by His children. The God revealed in scripture is revealing himself to us, making Himself known to those who will open their hearts to Him. This was a big part of the incarnation, why Jesus came to earth. As Jesus said, “If you have seen me you have seen the Father.”

How well do you know the Heavenly Father? Where do you start to know God? Graciously God has given us ways to draw near to Him, to know Him better, to hear His heart. In our Wesleyan tradition we call these ways “means of grace,” while others might call them spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices. These are practices that allow us to know God better, to hear His voice and respond to His leading. Though there are many, in our text today Jesus touches on just three:

- Almsgiving (Giving to the needy)
- Prayer
- Fasting

Jesus starts his discussion on these means of grace, or “acts of righteousness” as they are called in verse 1, with a warning: Don’t do these things for the sake of bringing glory and attention to yourself. If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven, and you will not get to know your Father if you are only looking at yourself.

Jesus starts by speaking about giving to the needy. This is what some translations call “alms”. This was giving to help the poor who had to beg to survive. The righteous would certainly give the tithe to the local church, synagogue or temple, but this was above that. This is a response to the needs of people around us – the family struggling during COVID 19, the pensioner who fell behind because they needed some extra medicine, the children who come from homes where

addiction eats up too much of the income, leaving little food on the table. In Jesus' day, the needy often showed up at the temple because they knew there would be people there wanting to add alms giving to their worship. Others stayed close to the synagogues because this is where the distribution of help to widows and orphans took place.

Giving to help these people is something Jesus praises. In fact he said earlier in the sermon on the Mount that "blessed are the merciful." What Jesus condemns is people who give to get praise from the crowds, those who make sure as many people as possible see their acts of charity so they will be applauded. Jesus says in verse 2 that those who seek the applause of people will not get the approval of God: they already have their reward. The word used there is, "they are paid in full." You see, there is no double dipping, according to Jesus. You either get the applause of people or the approval of God – but not both.

So what Jesus is challenging his children to understand is that the motive, the heart of what you are doing, is as important as the act itself. Giving alms is a good thing, for you may even save a life by helping the poor and destitute. But if you are looking to be recognized by people through this act, then your motive is wrong. To help simply because there is a need is more in keeping with God's children.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. Listen to what he says:

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

So we see here how giving alms becomes a means of grace, a way to know God better. As we help others, we are doing it unto the Lord. God is there in every kind act, receiving our generosity to himself even as we help the needy he brings across our path. But we give not to be applauded by people, but simply to help someone in need. The right hand should not know what the left hand is doing. In other words, we will not go about promoting what we have done – we will leave that up to God.

Giving to the needy then is a means of grace, a way to help us get to know our Heavenly Father better. What greater reward than to know God better, and experience His presence in our lives.

Jesus goes on to talk about prayer. When we think about means of grace – ways to draw closer to God and get to know Him better, usually this is the first thing we think about. Once again Jesus gives very specific instruction about prayer. Jesus warns his followers not to do acts of righteousness to gain the attention of people and receive their applause. When you pray, find a quiet spot and seek an audience with the Lord there. There is a place for corporate prayer, the prayers of God’s people as they gather for worship, but the word Jesus uses for prayer here is personal and private prayers. Why are you praying – to prove how righteous you look to others, or to really communicate with God?

Jesus also warns against long prayers that go on and on but really do not say anything. Pagans babble on, Jesus says, thinking there many words will get the attention of the gods. But our Heavenly Father, the one true God, already knows what you need before you ask him, so you can get right to the point.

It is in this context Jesus gives the disciples a model for prayer, which we call the Lord’s Prayer. Note how simple, yet how all encompassing it is. It starts with adoration to God. It then turns to simple requests, confession and a plea for strength in time of temptation. It is so simple, yet speaks of a God who is concerned about all areas of our lives. God invites us to draw near to Him in prayer. We are invited to call God “our Father.”

This teaching also comes with a warning. Jesus says that if we cannot forgive those who have hurt us – or sinned against us – then our Heavenly Father will not forgive our sins against him. Prayer is more than reciting words or presenting God with a needs list. It is also a time when we hear God speak to us, “searching us to see if there is any wicked way in us.” If God reveals we have not forgiven someone, then true prayer will bring us to the place where we can forgive. If we are not ready to be changed by prayer, then we are not really praying. We are simply going through the motions.

There is a story of a man who faithfully prayed three times a day. Like clock work he would bow at nine, noon and six to recite his prayers before God. One day this man was chasing an enemy, with the intent of killing him. As he was running after his enemy the time of prayer arrived and the man stopped his pursuit, knelt down and said his prayers, then grabbed his sword and continued his pursuit of his enemy. His prayers did not change him one bit, they were simply words that he mumbled out of duty.

That is not what prayer is about, Jesus warns. Prayer is life changing. Or at least it should be...

Then Jesus speaks about fasting. To fast is to give up food for a season so there might be more time to pray and seek God. Even the grumbling stomach reminds us that God is above everything else – even our stomachs! Many have found fasting a great way to draw near to God and lift their hearts and petitions to Him.

But even here there is a wrong way to do the fast. There would be some who want to draw attention to themselves, and point out how pious they are for giving up their meals for God. It

would be easy to make yourself look as haggard and awful as possible so people would ask, “Why do you look so bad?” and you can respond with the self-righteous response, “I am fasting!”

Jesus says that your righteous act of fasting should be known by God and God alone. He will reward you – so you need not seek the applause and compliments of people. And what is the greatest reward of all but to enter the presence of God and know His nearness as you seek Him. So put oil on your head and wash your face, so no one knows you are fasting. God sees you, and He will draw near to the heart that truly seeks after him.

Jesus addresses three means of grace, three religious practices that allow us to draw near to God and know Him better. However, each of these, helping the needy, praying and fasting, can become meaningless rituals if they are done to bring attention and glory to ourselves instead of God. Jesus says that as we help others, pray and fast God sees us, and He will provide the appropriate reward.

Pastor Randal Denny shares this story: “Mrs. Judson, pioneer missionary to Burma (now called Myanmar), gave her account of her first convert: “A few days ago I was reading with him the Sermon on the Mount. He was deeply impressed and unusually solemn. “These words,” he said, “take hold of my very heart. They make me tremble. Here God commands us to do everything in secret, and not to be seen of men. How unlike our religion that is! When Burmans make offerings at the pagodas, they make a great noise with trumpets and musical instruments, that others may see how good they are. But this religion makes the mind fear God!”¹

This man got it right. Jesus is calling his followers to fear God, put him first, and not seek the applause of people. In the Book of Acts Christians were arrested and tried for sharing Jesus, and they were commanded to stop, but the disciples said, “We must obey God rather than men.”

This morning I hope you really want to know your Heavenly Father well. God has graciously given us ways to draw near to Him and come to know Him better. Through helping others, praying and fasting we can draw near. Through worship, studying the Bible, partaking of Communion and even ministering to others we discover means of grace to help us know our Heavenly Father better.

I pray that if I come to you a year from now and ask you to tell me about your Heavenly Father, you will know more about Him than you do today. Why? Because you have spent more time with Him, and have availed yourself of the means of grace He has provided. You will not be earning God’s favour or storing up rewards in heaven you can cash in some day. No, you will simply be spending time with the living God and getting to know His heart and His plans for you and for our church and for our community.

I pray you will seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Amen.

¹ Randal Earl Denny, *Sunny Side of the Mount* (Beacon Press, Kansas City, 1980) p. 29.