

Practicing the Devotional Life

MATTHEW 6:1-18

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OUR SCRIPTURE READING TODAY BEGINS WITH these words: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Those of you with the King James Version will notice that the wording of MATTHEW 6:1 is a bit different from that of the New International Version. The King James translation reads, “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men...” It is my opinion, that in this case, the translation as it appears in the New International Version is more accurate. The subject that we will be looking at today and the next couple of times I preach has to do with this whole subject of practicing our “acts of righteousness.”

What are these “acts of righteousness’?” Here, they refer to things that are to be done privately so that people will not notice. And these private things are the things that bind us to God the Father. Altogether, in these 18 verses, there are eleven references to God the Father. So, in MATTHEW 6:1-18, we find teaching about the private ‘righteous acts’ that bind people to their heavenly Father. When people practice the ‘righteous acts mentioned in these 18 verses, they are practicing the devotional life, and the devotional life is the most sacred thing about the Christian life.

So far, in this Sermon on the Mount, we have looked at the kind of character required of a person, if that person hopes to become a member of God’s Kingdom. Teaching on Christian character is recorded in the section commonly referred to as “The Beatitudes” recorded in MATTHEW 5:1-12. Following the Beatitudes, in MATTHEW 5:13-16, Jesus describes the mission of those who have achieved the kind of character described in the Beatitudes; namely, the mission of witnessing or letting their lights shine in a world of darkness. Then, finally, we saw how Christians are to practically carry out their mission. They do it by following principles and not by adhering to a list of dos and don’ts set down by religious leaders. We ended that section last week when we talked about the principle of love. The last thing I emphasized about the principle of love was the importance of prayer. It is impossible to live out the principle of love or any of the other principles without prayer.

That particular point will now serve as a bridge to the

subject of the devotional life that we will begin to study today. Prayer is the central component of the devotional life. And the devotional life is absolutely necessary for us to fulfill our mission here upon this earth. Through the devotional life we are able to bond with God and find the grace needed to develop in Christian character and abide by the principles of the New Covenant. Only through the devotional life can we find the ability to have our lights shine and give God the glory He deserves. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of the devotional life as it relates to everything that has been said up to this point in our study of the Sermon on the Mount. It is absolutely essential.

In this section of scripture, the devotional life is divided into three parts represented by the words “giving to the needy” and “praying” and “fasting.” Each one of these words represents a vital component of the devotional life. If one of these three components is missing, the devotional life is incomplete.

In this present series of sermons I want to explain each part of the devotional life in detail. But before I do that, I will now give you a brief overview of each part so you can see how they relate to one another. Even though each part emphasizes a different element of the devotional life, all three parts have some common characteristics, and today we will look at these special attributes that bind all three parts together as one.

So, first of all, let me try to give you a brief explanation of the three parts to the devotional life and how they relate to one another. The central part is communication with God. This is the part represented by the words “when you pray.” Prayer is two-way communication. God speaks to us and we listen. We speak to God and He listens. Now those of you who have attempted to have quality communication with God on a regular basis know how difficult it is to pray in an environment where there are a lot of distractions and when you are not feeling emotionally or physically in the mood to pray. These distractions in our environment coupled with the emotional and physical weakness of our flesh make it absolutely necessary for us to work at creating an environment that will make meaningful prayer possible. The way the Bible tells us to create such an environment is by making up our

minds to do certain things that we would not naturally do or not do certain things that we would naturally be inclined to do. Basically, it means doing something that goes against the natural inclination of the flesh. When we do the things that go against our fleshly nature, we are subduing the flesh. And we must subdue or mortify the flesh if we ever hope to create an environment where we can carry on quality conversations with God. Fasting is one example of how a person might subdue the flesh. However, whatever method is used, the goal is always the same. The goal is to create an environment to talk to God.

So the centerpiece of the devotional life is talking to God and that requires subduing the flesh to create an environment where we can talk without a lot of distractions. And then there is the third part of the devotional life. It is the extension of the talk we have with God. After we leave that environment, that quiet place where we have had our quiet time with God, the devotional life does not end. Our minds should be filled with thoughts about God, and we should be consumed with the desire to share these thoughts with others so they, in turn, can give God the praise and glory He deserves. And this extension of our communication with God should even go beyond thinking. It should include planning and then following through on our plan to help other people understand truth so they can praise God. This extension of our communication with God is also a part of the devotional life. In a moment I will try to give a clearer explanation of this component of the devotional life. But before I do, I need spend some time sharing with you ***the special characteristics that each one of these components of the devotional life have in common.***

The ***first trait*** that is common to each one of these three things is that they are all to be done privately. Jesus said, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them." That is a description of the devotional life. Clearly, privacy is emphasized in the words of our Lord. But, in MATTHEW 5:16, Jesus also said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." There seems to be a contradiction between these two thoughts. One saying seems to be telling us to practice our religion in hiding while the other saying seems to be telling us to openly practice our religion.

But, I believe the difference between the public practice of our religion and the private practice of our religion has little to do with our outward appearance. The thing that makes what we do private is not whether or not we are actually seen by other people; rather, it is what is going on inside of our minds. If we desire to be seen by men, then what we are doing is not private. It is public whether people can see what we are doing or not. If we

are self-conscious about what we are doing, then what we are doing is public. It is not private. When Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men," He made it clear what our motivation should be. We must be driven with a desire to bring praise to our Father in heaven. That is the key to understanding the difference between the public life of a Christian and his private, devotional life. It all has to do with desire.

In a sense, Christians are called to attract attention to themselves while they, at the same time, hold back their desire to attract attention to themselves. And this is an extremely difficult thing to do. We have a tendency to do one of two things. One tendency is to live like hermits when it comes to our Christianity, even to the point where no one even knows we are Christians. The other extreme we tend to gravitate towards is to become egotistic, trying to show off our Christianity. But we must avoid both extremes. We must allow ourselves to be seen, but never desire that the attention will be focused on ourselves. That is a terribly difficult balance to keep. Outside of Jesus himself, I don't think anyone has kept it perfectly, and this leads me to my second point.

The ***second thing*** I would like to emphasize that all these components to the devotional life have in common is that they all involve struggle. The basic struggle that goes on when we try to practice these things is the struggle of choice. It is a choice of pleasing God or pleasing ourselves. Notice that I did not say the choice is between pleasing God or to pleasing other people. That is what it appears to be on the outside, but that is not the true nature of the choice. In all these examples, it seems that the people Jesus called hypocrites were out to win the favor of other people. Jesus talked about hypocrites who did their "acts of righteousness" so men could honor them. But the basic drive behind the desire to please other people is the desire to please self. We want to please other people, because we know that, when we do, they will think better of us. Man, by nature, desires more the praise of man than he does the praise of God. What he really desires is his good opinion about himself. It is not easy to let go of the strong desire to receive the praise of man. The struggle goes on with each one of these components of the devotional life.

Another thing all these components have in common has to do with the result they produce. The result is a deeper relationship with God in the present and a longing to be physically with Him in the future.

The deeper our relationship is with God, the more aware we will become of His presence. When I was a child I put a picture of Christ on my bedroom wall. It remained there for the entire time I lived at home. The

picture was Jesus with a crown of thorns on His head and a rather sad look on His face. But the thing that made that picture so unique was the fact that His eyes were always looking straight at you. It did not matter where you were in the room; the eyes of Jesus were always gazing right at you.

If we could somehow always be aware that God is watching us, things would change dramatically for the better. Unfortunately, few of us go about with such awareness, because our devotional life is weak and the only way to achieve such awareness is through a strong devotional life.

From the moment we wake up in the morning, to the moment we go to bed at night, we should be aware of God's presence. Wherever and whatever I am doing during the day, I must know that God is watching me.

But the devotional life not only produces strong awareness that God is watching us in the present, it also creates a longing to see Him face to face after we die.

In 1995, I met a Chinese pastor who had spent many years in prison in Mainland China for his testimony of Jesus Christ. He told me that one of the things that kept him going was a hymn he sang every single day he was in prison. Afterwards, he sang the song. "Face to face with Christ, my Savior, Face to face—what will it be? When with rapture I behold Him, Jesus Christ who died for me? Face to face I shall behold Him, far beyond the starry sky. Face to face in all His glory, I shall see Him by and by! Only faintly now I see Him, with the darkling veil between; but a blessed day is coming when His glory shall be seen. Face to face I shall behold Him, far beyond the starry sky. Face to face in all His glory, I shall see Him by and by!"

This is the longing that a strong devotional life will produce. There is no such reward from God for those who seek it from men. This is a terrifying thought, but it is the warning we find repeated in our scripture reading. "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

If we are concerned what people are thinking about our ministry—whether it be preaching or teaching or praying or leading a small group or any other service we are performing in the name of Christ—then we will receive a reward from people. They will recognize our faithfulness and hard work, and we will get the reward we are seeking. But, that is where it will stop. When we die we may even get a nicely written obituary, but there will be no reward from our heavenly Father.

What standard will God use on judgement day? Will he look at our bold proclamations of faith made in front of people? Will he look at all the good things we have done and all the meetings we have attended and the positions we have held in the church? Are those the standards He will use to judge us? Our scripture reading seems to tell us otherwise. In the end, the final test of our Christianity will not be our public life. It will be our private, devotional life. That is not to say we are saved by the devotional life. We saved by grace and grace alone. But our devotional life or lack of devotional life will be the final test of whether or not we are saved by grace.

This is an extremely sobering thought for many people who call themselves Christian but have no significant devotional life. I hope this thought will inspire some people in this auditorium to take the devotional life more seriously. And, for those who are so inspired, I want to give you some practical advice.

Each component of the devotional life is private, involving a struggle to please God rather than self. And each component of the devotional life produces an awareness that God is watching in the present and a longing to see Him face to face in the future. Now, we must begin to look at each component one by one.

I will begin today by looking at the part of the devotional life represented by the heading, "Giving to the Needy." Taking the traits I have just mentioned as principles to follow, *what practical advice and warning can I give you about this part of the devotional life?*

The *first thing* we must be challenged to do is to evaluate everything we do to help other people and determine whether what we are doing is private or public. Remember that the fundamental difference between private and public is inner desire.

Take the preaching of this sermon, for instance. What you see and hear this morning is an attempt on my part and the part of those who hired me to help people understand Biblical truth. Now how can I know what I am doing is part of my devotional life or part of my public life? I do it by analyzing my own motives. What consumes my thoughts during the hours I spend preparing for a sermon? Is it the beautiful truth that leads men to praise God, or is it my desire to hit a home run in the pulpit? What controls my thoughts and emotions even while I am preaching this sermon? Is it a longing to help you establish a stronger devotional life, or is it a desire to hear you tell me in the end that I have done a good job? I wish I could say I am always on the higher level, but that would not be telling the truth. I struggle just like the rest of you.

In MATTHEW 6:2, Jesus criticized the hypocrites because they sent people out ahead of them with trumpets to announce that they were coming along to give money to the needy. Does that mean it is wrong for us to announce the ministries we do in this church? Again, it all depends on our motives. Are we trying to draw attention to our ministry, or are we trying to draw attention to God through our ministry? There is a fine and delicate line between these two things. I think all of us, from time to time, cross over the line from private to public.

In MATTHEW 6:3, Jesus said, “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.” Here we see something very challenging. It is obvious that Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees for announcing to other people what they were doing. It was wrong for them to have those trumpets blown with the intention of having other people notice what they were doing. But now the words, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” tell us that we should not even announce it to ourselves. We shouldn’t be keeping track of the amount of time or energy or money we have given to help people. In the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the Pharisee prayed, thanking God for all the good deeds he had done. He had been keeping an account of everything. That is exactly what we should not do. But it is a very difficult thing not to do. We must do things as we are moved by God and led by the Holy Spirit, and then we must forget all about them.

Now I can tell you exactly what will happen when you live to please God only. You will shine with a radiance that comes from God. People will see how much you are in love with God and how much you desire to share God with others so they, too, can praise His name. They will be attracted to that glow. You will notice the attraction and you will be tempted to draw your attention away from God and to the attraction itself. In the face of such temptation, you must cry out to God for help. You must go back to your quiet place of prayer. That is where the inspiration for service began in the first place.

When I am talking to God and He communicates the truth of who He is to me, it is only natural for me to think about helping others receive the same truth. We must never suppress that kind of thinking. We must let it grow and we must act upon it without trying to draw the attention of other people and without keeping an account of what we have done.

Giving, in the way our Lord describes it, is the natural extension of prayer. It depends on prayer just as much as prayer depends on our success in mortifying the

flesh. Together, these three things make up the devotional life. It is a private life that involves great struggle to keep a balance. And it results in great reward. When a person gives in private, that person does not keep accounts, but God does. In heaven, that person shall be rewarded openly. Every detail that we have done in private to the glory of God will be announced and proclaimed and we will receive our reward. It will be the reward of looking at Jesus face to face and knowing that He is pleased with what we have done.

Let us not lose sight of that vision. If we lack that vision, then we are in desperate need of practicing the devotional life. Only through the devotional life can we receive such a vision. It all begins with a desire to grow in our relationship with God.

There are no substitutes for increasing the spiritual quality of our church. Adding on more activities will not do it. Teaching you more ministry skills will not do it. The fact is that the spiritual quality of this church will never increase without individuals making up their minds to get serious about their devotional lives. Next week I will talk about subduing the flesh. Many people have never really made a serious attempt at mortifying the flesh to creating an environment suitable for prayer.

Those of us who have been saved by God’s grace have the Holy Spirit residing within us. We must know that revival is ours if we want it. Do we want it? If we seriously practice the devotional life, revival is ours. In the weeks ahead, leading up to Easter, many Christians will make a renewed effort to draw closer to God. On many church calendars this period of time is called lent. I would like to challenge all of us to use this traditional period people call lent to either begin or renew your devotional life. Don’t announce to everyone that you’re going to do it. Just do it. Do it because you know Jesus wants you to do it. Do it to bring praise and glory to God.

Let’s begin to use these principles to evaluate our devotional life. Begin today by looking at the part of your devotional life relating to practical ministry. How much of it is done in private? Do we try to broadcast what we are doing? Do we keep accounts? I would like to challenge all of us to use the weeks leading up to Easter to begin/renew our devotional lives. The spiritual quality of our church will never increase unless we, as individuals, improve in this area. **The effectiveness of your sharing during a group meeting depends on how much you try to interact with this and other truth the Holy Spirit reveals to you throughout the week. Take mental or written notes of your interaction with the truth, and be prepared to share during your group meeting.**