

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Siloam Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, Marion, NC, Ash Wednesday Joint Service, March 8, 2017

Doing the Right Things for the Wrong Reasons
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March 8, 2017

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Our scripture reading this evening tells us ways in which we can honor God, things that all of us should be doing.

You may be wondering why I skipped over verses 7 to 15 in the reading. Did I leave out something? Something important?

Yes I did. What I left out is the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that our Savior taught us. In Matthew 6 the Lord's Prayer is bracketed by a list of things that we should be doing to honor God. Why the scripture is like that I don't know. What I read and the Lord's Prayer are totally different things. Today we are entering the time of Lent, a time of reflection and penance which the scripture that I read addresses. The Lord's Prayer is distinct from that which is why I omitted it.

That said, the scripture which I did read addresses things that pious Jews were expected to do but which many fell down on as many people do today. Giving to those in need, prayer and fasting were fundamental to the Jews and should also be with us.

The problem is that back then and still today, people gave, prayed and fasted quite often for the wrong reasons; they were doing it for self-aggrandizement, not to honor God. They put on a cloak of false piety, more to show off to others than to truly honor God. They were doing the right things but for the wrong reasons.

Some people like this regularly come to worship but really don't worship. They give worship lip service. They come to be seen; to give the impression of piety. But when the worship service ends, they leave and do nothing at all until the next Sunday. Christ is ignored during the week, unless they have a work or business advantage to give the appearance of piety --- perhaps by wearing or displaying a cross at their place of business or by sticking an ichthys, the fish symbol on their car or in business ads and cards. That is false piety and our scripture reading warns us that they will have no reward in heaven.

People widely “blow their own horn” about what they give to others. They are called hypocrites in our scripture reading. I am sure that you all know people like that. They contribute to the church, the United Way and local charities and are quick to let it be known how much they have given. Looking more deeply at their giving, the amount of their gifts is trivial in terms of what they could give. Their gifts are far less than would otherwise be possible for them.

Do you remember the poor widow that Jesus pointed out to the apostles in the Temple? She gave all that she had, two coins of minimal value. The rich people in the Temple gave large sums, sums which they easily could afford. The widow gave all that she had; just two tiny nearly worthless coins.

What the others gave was meaningless to them; what she gave likely would have meant her going without food that night. Jesus said, *“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For any of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had to live on.”* (Mark 41:43b-44). As our scripture reading says, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Another admonition in our scripture reading concerns fasting. Today most people don't fast unless it is an effort to lose those extra pounds they put on over the holidays. Typically today we instead give up something for Lent. That harkens back to the type of fasting that people did in Biblical times. But again, it is common to hear people tell what it is that they have given up for Lent.

The scripture reading says, *“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.”* This reminds us not to make a public issue of fasting or whatever else it may be that you might give up for Lent *“so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

And last, we are charged not to be hypocrites by praying publicly. That too is false piety. As the scripture says, *“... 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.” Personal prayers are your personal conversation with God, not anyone else.

These Days (March 5, 2014) said, “God wants personal contact with us. Whenever and however we practice our piety, we should make personal contact with God. We are not to be looking around to see who notices us. We are not to be hoping to be seen by others.

*“Ash Wednesday is a fitting day to heed our Lord’s call to be focused on God. Lent calls us to be faithful with God and to God.” **

Amen.

**The original wording of the quote uses “I-contact” instead of “personal contact.”
Note: All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.*