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**GIVING**

## Matthew 6:2-4

The words, “to give alms” comes from the same root word in the Greek as “mercy”. It is a particular way in which mercy is shown to the poor. Giving alms is the “second mile” beyond tithes, a regular expression of religious activity beyond the expected.

Jesus assumes that the disciples will also be “giving alms”. This particular activity is held up as part of the commendable character of both Tabitha (Acts 9:36) and Cornelius (Acts 10:2). The history of the early church shows that early Christians excelled in this expression of mercy.

TWO WARNINGS ARE SOUNDED! **One**: Don’t announce your giving. Commentators are undecided as to whether trumpets were used to indicate times of public fasting, whether the poor were summoned by the trumpet or whether Jesus was speaking pictorially. The One who asks you to envision a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle is saying, “Don’t hire a P.R. man to announce your gifts! Don’t worry about smiling into the TV camera or posting something on the Web.” In a day dominated by advertisements and the idolatry of the public image, to give with your eye on the onlooker is a real temptation. Does it make a personal difference to you if people know if and how much you are giving? That the pastor know? **Two**: Use only one hand. It takes two hands to calculate how much money one has – give some away and return the rest to the pocket. The very act of calculating, a real need in our stewardship of money can become a stumbling block. Our focus changes from the person whose needs we are facing to our own needs.

The reasons are simple. Any ostentation or attention seeking that gets people to notice us, feeds our self-satisfaction. The deed becomes a means to an end. “The real gift...does not flow from our proud hands, carelessly dropping the alms. It flows from the quiet chambers in which we give thanks to God for all the undeserved good things in our life which He has given us.” A particularly helpful reminder to me regarding unselfish giving comes from a devotional book I used a few years ago called *GOD CALLING*. One comment from it reminds me of my need to give constantly and believe it or not, it sounds like a selfish reason! The thought is “God does not pour into a stagnant pool.” If we wish to continue receiving blessings from God, we must continually give – not only to help meet the needs of others, but also to make room for God’s continual blessings on ourselves!

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**PRAYER**

Matthew 6:5-15

It is impossible to imagine any life of faith without prayer. Whether it is to pause before eating to give thanks or to callous the knees before God, prayer is indispensable in the life of a disciple. We are given both the PATTERN of prayer and the warning about our PRACTICE of prayer.

Volumes have been written on the Lord's Prayer. I will not duplicate our survey the field. Suffice it to say that this prayer was meant to be a pattern for our own prayers.

**The Lord's Prayer**

(traditional)

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever.

Prayer begins by addressing our Father. We're not orphans in an empty universe. Our Father is in heaven, far above all the dust, noise and clamor of our lives. There, on a throne (Revelations 4) He administers caring for the universe: knowing, directing, changing, intervening. Him, we adore! The consummation of His kingdom, we urge. The submission of our wills to the will of the King, we pray. Lest our prayers stop in heaven and never touch the earth, we pray for the needs of bread and clothing and shelter and cranky bosses and children and spouse that will arise today, The very treadmill of daily bread gives us many opportunities to ask for forgiveness and to extend forgiveness. We ask that we never be led into that encounter that will leave us in the hands of the Evil One. Even the quick noting of the Evil One reminds us Who really does have the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory. And for how long!

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When we pray, we have TWO comparisons which keep us on target. WE are not to be like hypocrites. We again meet the problem of verse two. Prayer can be a performance staged for applause of the gathered company. Not so for the Christian, the disciple of Christ! Prayer is best engaged in the “closet” with the door closed.

The closet has two uses in the New Testament. ONE means “storehouse” (Luke 12:24) – the pantry --- where all the resources for tomorrow’s food are kept; the place where the daily cares, securities and insecurities are focused. If this is Jesus’ definition, He is telling us to go to our desks or kitchens and there, surrounded by the sights and sounds of our daily existence, pray. The remaining two times the word “closet” means innermost room: the secret room (Matthew 24:2). If this is Jesus’ definition, the idea of a prayer closet is what He had in mind.

Hypocrites love to pray in front of adoring eyes of their public. There is something ostentatious in the way some enter the sanctuary and pray. Many public prayers are for the consumption of the hearers, instead of the hearers being given the privilege of eavesdropping on the conversation between and loving child and his Father. Let our prayers be fed in secret, away from the eyes and ears of others. Then you may have something to say in public.

The Gentiles also have problems with prayers (6:7). Their problems are they go in circles and talk too much. They babble – speaking without thinking. We are not to be like them either! The Gentiles think God will hear them because they use the right phrases. It is sobering to check ourselves on the meaningless phrases we heap together and call prayer. Even the pattern for prayer has become meaningless repetition. When was the last time you heard the Lord’s Prayer PRAYED rather than mouthed. When was the last time you PRAYED it? What about the temptations to feel that if you talk long enough, you’ll wear Him down and you’ll get what you want? There is nothing inherently valuable in an hour of prayer than in five minutes of prayer. Quantity does not count with the Father...quality does! The entire Lord’s Prayer from “Our Father” to “Amen” is 72 words in Greek and 64 in English. Prayer to the Father need not be long; it does need to be TO the Father!

**FASTING (Spiritual Discipline)**

Matthew 6:16-18

In the ancient world, fasting was a universally accepted form of religious devotion. Its use was widespread. Today, fasting is out of style, practiced by few. It is helpful to use a dynamic equivalent in order to apply this aspect of religious behavior today. Fasting was one of the common forms of spiritual discipline. By it, the person showed his willingness to limit a necessary good (food) for a greater good (communication with God).

Jesus does not touch the many abuses that can be connected to any kind of self-discipline. Isaiah 58, in the Old Testament, and Colossians, in the New Testament, deal with some of these excesses in spiritual discipline.

However, Jesus does assume there will be some form of spiritual self-discipline in life. The spiritual softness of many Christians is of concern to Him. The muscles have not been exercised, body tone is down. The wandering of a sheep instead of the self-control of an athlete characterizes much of too many Christians' lives.

When we are engaged in these exercises of spiritual discipline, it is for the Father, not for the followers! Don't wear your self-discipline as a gaudy tie inviting all to see. Don't be a dieter who is never seen to smile, hoping that by glum looks others will comment and condole. Instead, smile, be glad. Let the "diet" be a secret between you and the Father. Do it for HIM! This in no way rules out the use of "spiritual coaches". It does raise a "Beware!" When all is said and done, is my fasting or other spiritual discipline being done for the Father in the faith or for my friends. When people see the fruit of self-control, will they glorify me or the Father?

Richard Foster has done the Church a large favor with his book *CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE*. Whether writing of the inward disciplines or meditation, prayer, fasting and study; the outer discipline of simplicity, solitude, submission and service; or the corporate disciplines of confession, worship guidance and celebration, his book is a powerful reminder that spiritual disciplines are a "door to liberation."