

Reading: Matthew 6:1-15 (NT page 970)

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Background to the reading

Our reading this morning cannot be taken literally. Jesus is making a valid point about the attitude of someone who follows him. He does not want people to follow Him who only do it to impress other people either through their giving or through their piety in praying so that others can see them.

He reiterates in both passages that God can see into the hearts of people. God knows all that is hidden and will award them.

Judaism in Jesus' day did stress that one should not perform deeds for the sake of reward but nonetheless promised reward, as Jesus does here; this reward is rendered at the day of judgment, as in Judaism.

Prayer, fasting and gifts to the poor were basic components of Jewish piety, and many Rabbis listed qualities in sets of these three.

The Greeks and Romans did not support personal charity. To them, wealthy contributions to public projects or to poorer people were meant to secure the giver's popularity. In contrast, charity was central to Jewish piety.

When Jesus addresses prayer He says that they must not do what many pretenders do to either pray in the synagogues or on the street corners to be seen by others. Instead they must go into a "tameion" which can be translated as "Any place of privacy, a room, closet where one cannot be easily seen" It makes sense because a closet or a storeroom would have been the only place with a door, because most people did not

have private rooms in their houses. Standing was a common posture for prayer.

We do not know if standard prayers were common in the time of Jesus. However we know that some did exist. Jesus felt the need to set a standard prayer for all his believers.

Jewish people commonly addressed God as “Our heavenly Father” when they prayed, although such intimate titles as “Abba” were rare. One standard Jewish prayer of the day (the Kaddish) proclaimed, “Exalted and hallowed be his ... name ... and may his kingdom come speedily and soon.”

Jewish prayers recognized that God’s name would be “hallowed,” or “sanctified,” “shown holy,” in the time of the end, when his kingdom would come, according to the Old Testament. In the present God’s people could hallow his name by living rightly; if they lived wrongly, they would “disrespect” his name, or bring it into disrepute among the nations. It was understood that after his kingdom came God’s will would be done on earth as in heaven.

“Give us our daily bread” refers to God’s provision of “daily bread” (manna) for his people in the wilderness in the Old testament. Prayers for God to supply one’s basic needs—of which bread and water are the ultimate examples—were common in the ancient world. Actually Jesus was saying they must ask God to give them just enough what they really need in order to survive.

According to the Old Testament laws, all debt had to be written off or cancelled every 7th and on the 50th year. Even the slaves were freed. So

when Jesus talked about forgiving debts, they clearly understood what he was meaning.

“And lead us not in temptation...” does not mean that God is responsible for temptation tempting us to fall. Parallels with ancient Jewish prayers, and possibly the Aramaic wording behind this verse, suggest that the first line means: “Let us not sin when we are tested. Some scholars have suggested an allusion to the final time of suffering here, which was expected to precede the coming kingdom.

Matthew end the prayer here although in some other manuscripts we find the words “ For thine is the kingdom and power and the glory for ever Amen”. According to researchers one reason for the addition can be that because Jewish prayers were commonly used in liturgical contexts that ended with a statement of praise. According to them later texts’ addition of the benediction to the original text of Matthew is not surprising.

The principle of forgiveness that Jesus states here seems to be that only people of grace know how to accept grace. Later Jesus said that they must be willing to forgive “Seventy times seven” which did not mean literally 490! It was a typically graphic Jewish way of saying “Never hold grudges.”

So what is Jesus telling us?

Whenever we give or pray, we must do it because it is God’s Holy Spirit who is directing us. If we give or pray just to be seen, God will know about it!

Amen

MP 987

Here is love vast as the ocean

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon verse 1 “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.”

As this is the month that we celebrate the birth of Robert Burns, the people’s poet I could not help to notice that he had a lot to say in plain Scots about people who are only “pretenders of having faith and showing pity”. In his day he saw how some people used their self appointed righteousness to condemn other people. Off course he was also condemned by his own actions but remarkably never made excuses for them. I could not help thinking about the “prayer of Holy Willy”.

In this prayer the elder Willie is actually using his prayer to justify himself and condemning the church treasurer who was also a respected landlord Gavin Hamilton. It was a church court case in the time of Robert Burns which I am sure attracted a lot of attention. But what Burns wanted to expose was the dangers of believing in the predestination of God. In the Protestant tradition there were some Calvinistic interpreters who claimed that according to Calvin some people are predestined to go to heaven while others are simply condemned to hell. But actually when reading Calvin carefully, it is not what he believed. Burns wanted to emphasize that this doctrine give those people who think they are predestined to go to heaven the power of self righteousness and an attitude of judging others as it is evident in the poem. Willie almost thinks he is a saint although he does mention all his transgressions but with the excuse that when these happened that he was intoxicated with alcohol.

I guess this is exactly what Jesus was saying we do not do. We are saved by the grace of God and not by our own righteousness. We cannot claim anything and we can most certainly judge no one. And we as

people who believe in Jesus Christ must be careful when we talk or pray or give. We can only pray and give because God has saved us through faith alone. God will decide and it is only His will.

God does not want us to pray or give to others with an attitude of self righteousness, thinking we are saved but others are not. He does not want us to be judgemental or pretentious with our words. He wants us to be honest and forgiving. He wants us to trust Him for providing us with all the things we really need.

And He wants our hearts to be in the right place – respecting and adoring Him as the sole creator of heaven and earth. And he wants us to talk with all people in a kind and loving way – never judging, never having an attitude that we have arrived while others have not, always including rather than excluding.

May our prayers always be different in that we seek the will of God and not the will of ourselves or relying on the will of other people or the world.

Amen