

Shaping and Being Shaped

Menno Mennonite Church

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Purpose: To examine the work of the advice on piety as the work of being shaped by God's way.

Message: As disciples, we are moved and shaped in prayer toward the work of God's Kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-18

Synopsis: Prayer and spiritual practice is often a thing that is difficult to really to get a grip on. We go through stages; from a childhood list of all the 'blessings' we wish upon those we love to the more difficult, pleading conversations of times of personal trial. Many times, we simply look awkwardly at times where prayer is expected, not quite sure what to say and who would want to say it. Most often, we look to our experiences of prayer and practice as opportunities to shape our relationship with God, sharing what is near to our heart, and asking that we might encounter the holy in life. The model that Jesus offers, us however, asks us to seek the kingdom even in the midst of our deepest moments of prayer; seeking that the will of God might be done, praising God for who God is, seeking God's will in all things. The role of practice is less for our public image of what we are doing, but rather calls us to privately seek to be shaped toward the ways of God in all things. In these models of prayer and practice, Jesus is calling us out of our selves yet again, and into the way of being shaped for living out the way of the kingdom.

6 “Beware of practicing your piety before others
in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “So whenever you give alms,
do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

³ But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And whenever you pray,
do not be like the hypocrites;

for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues
and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.
Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

⁶ But 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.

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“When you are praying,
do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do;
for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

⁸ Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶“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.
Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,
¹⁸ 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.

There is something about the basics of living; of faith. There are rituals and mechanisms that we take for granted—the way we go about the day, the devotional touches that we add in without a whole lot of thought, or sometimes, care. It is the stuff we do day in and day out without really giving it much thought, largely because for most of us it is what we have done for time out of mind from the very beginning of our respective memories. It is our practice; it is our life; it is our way of being to the point that we don't think about it that much anymore. Unless, that is, that we happen to be in public and the occasion calls for a blessing where we all look awkwardly around and, well, try to find a pastor to do the honors. Anyone but us, in any case. I am guessing that this isn't so much that we are taking the advice we find here commending us to a private, personal piety as much the thought of publicly finding the right word for something that we might have done for years now in public just scares beyond comprehension. We might declare the priesthood of all believers but not when hypothetical public discomfort is on the line.

So it would seem that we would be right at home with this part of the handbook of the Kingdom. Pray so that no one knows it? Give when no one is watching? In a tradition known for its inclination to the quiet and inconspicuous this would seem to be right in our wheel house. We can almost see ourselves smiling and nodding knowing that Jesus, right as always, is for once not talking to us. For we know that the hypocrites are not the like of us and we can cheer on all the way. For all that radical, world turning stuff that Jesus has been doing, here is a line that we can know, trust and work with quite easily.

Yet we know that there is a lot that we can learn about prayer, about connecting with God. There are no easily formulas and the means and metaphors that work once might not stand up to the changes of life and living on the other side of the hardness of life. Besides; prayer is something, we assume, we just do—a natural conversation that happens time and again without effort or second thought. But to get to that level of familiarity takes an intention and practice that most of us might feel well beyond us. So we fall back on the way things usually are in our world and living.

My brother and I shared a bedroom in the early growing up years. Stacked on bunk beds, we would share the rituals of good night—an occasional story, good night hugs and the articulation of our prayers as a bedtime devotion. Like something out of an old Lassie re-run we would each take our turn, articulating an ever-growing list of those people in our lives that we wanted blessed, and those blessings in our lives that we wanted to receive. It was fairly idyllic, in

a Rockwellian sort of way. Until, at least, we figured out what we were doing. When we reached the point of realizing that this was our chance not only to talk to God, but to also be heard talking to God, we, unsurprisingly for two brothers, became competitive prayer-s. First it was making sure my list was more comprehensive and more empathetic than the other. Then there were points for phrasing and length; if you could slip in a scriptural reference, so much the better. Pretty soon, I think we began expecting the heavenly host away off yonder to be holding up scores (oooh—he remembered that he has a test tomorrow—extra credit for him. And now he’s attempting the double blessing of others whilst asking for a new bike—a high degree of technical praying there...). Before too long, the more that we could ask, and the longer the list of our requests (and the more words we can make them in), the more thoroughly we had prayed. You know; the basics of being kids and learning how to pray.

It comes naturally enough. When you are speaking in the same vein one after the other, competition is going to come, especially for brothers. But also it is the concept of prayer that we receive and that we know. The stuff we ask for in the world in which we live and we hope that God might move. If you survey the public broadly this is what we most often mean by prayer, and hope is the end of our piety. We pray that God might move in our lives and in the lives of those for whom we hold dear and hold them up to God. Sometimes, when we are honest, or when we have prayed and prayed and still the situation that we pray around remains unchanged, or worse, appears to have descended beyond our best hopes and expectations for the prayers that we did say. When we look at the prayers of Jesus himself it seems to take the same form—praying that the disciples might be held in the love that has held him at the end of his life, that the cup that he knew that he knew he must drink might, somehow, might pass him by. Yet; not my will, but thine come the end.

I think that is the difference right there—in praying into the way of the kingdom, as much as a petition, no matter how well intended to sway God. By all means: let us commend each other the care of the all mighty. But there is always the challenge to do so knowing that all the time God is wanting to shape us into the kingdom people that we are becoming. Which I think is what Jesus is getting at. Pray to shape the world, sure he says, but always be open to the way the God will time and again shape us in return as well, moving us always toward the kingdom. This sense of reward in the present and reward in the kingdom speak to the nature of being shaped for what is important not just now, but always. God hears our concerns, and are moved,

but invites us into the bigger work of being kingdom now. On that level this is the work of the broader sermon on the mount in inaugurating the kingdom is very much at work in these words as well.

Take a look at the Lord's prayer, the model that we are given for relating to God. We'll leave off the doxology part—the ending of “for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the Glory forever”—it just is not there in the best Greek manuscripts, as good as it is, but is not necessarily a part of the prayer. It's the way that we pray it, at least within the protestant tradition but it is not in the text. It starts out with three requests, but not the one's we are most used to: make your name holy, may your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. These requests are directed outward, asking God to bring about God's way in the world, for the kingdom to be established, for the fulfillment of God's way to be realized in all things. Then it is followed by the general requests that physical needs might be met, that sin might be forgiven, and temptation might not come. Short, to the point, but with endless possibilities, and endless meaning within so few words (a humbling reality especially to someone who loves a good turn of phrase, often many phrases in succession). There is a whole series of sermons out of the sermon alone; an infinite task of praying time and again “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

What is worthy of note here is what is not here. Where is the I? How do we pray, using this model as it is found, inserting me? You can't do it. You can't pray this prayer fully thinking only of self. It automatically and deliberately pulls us out of that, pulls us beyond ourselves into something different, something that calls us to change as much as it calls on God to change the world around us. The petitions for forgiveness, provision, and deliverance, are ones that we can strongly identify with, have deep, meaningful personal resonance to each and every one of us in profoundly personal ways, and are things that we each know we can pray in our own right for our own experience each and every day in big and small ways. We pray them because they are important, because we must.

Yet we pray not just for ourselves, our wants, our requests. As we pray we open ourselves to relate to God, as we listen for God's voice we are here called to newness, called to change, called to be shaped into the kingdom, just as much as we are called upon God to shape the world in which we live. We pray for peace in Ukraine and we are challenged to think about how we might build peace as well. In this relationship of quiet listening Prayer reminds us of who

and whose we are. We are becoming the very holiness, obedience, forgiveness that we seek within the prayer.

The Sermon on the Mount sets out the way of the kingdom, and asks us to things that, by Jesus' own admission will not come easily for us. Jesus has been reversing everything as he has set out the goals of the kingdom, and we are led to ask how are we to do any of this? It is not easy to forgive as we have been forgiven by God. It is in prayer, in relating to God in personal, private, authentic ways, Jesus says, that we are shaped in relationship to be able to take on the values of the kingdom and to be shaped more and more to walk the way of our lord. What Jesus is inviting us to go beyond religion, beyond piety, beyond expectation of what and how to pray and how to relate to God, and to honestly have a relationship with God, and in that relationship be shaped for the life of the kingdom. We are given a radical (rooting) prayer for a radical task, a model prayer that takes us beyond ourselves and points us to a future where God's complete will shall come to pass, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Not that this is easy. Not that this comes naturally, or without question. I am always challenged by what an important relationship prayer feeds, and the times in which I completely fail to feed it as fully as I might. The most natural prayer for me goes something like 'O God, who art in heaven—did you just see that bird fly by?'" The life of prayer is not a life easily or consistently lived. Yet we are called time and again into the practice being shaped in prayer toward full and final change.

May we pray always, and in praying, be shaped however slowly toward the way of the kingdom as God comes and answers not only our wants, but always our needs as well.