

What comes to mind when you hear the word, Piety? Mirriam Webster says piety is: the quality or state of being pious: such as **a:** fidelity to natural obligations (as to parents) or **b:** dutifulness in religion. However *you* think of piety, today I do want to explore more about what Jesus means in the Sermon on the Mount when he talks about practicing our piety in relation to God and to those around us.

Jesus starts off with this:

Matthew 6:1 *“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.”*

What is your motivation? Jesus warns – at the beginning of this part of his teaching on the sermon on the mount – right before he brings in a lesson on prayer. Jesus warns: Beware of practicing your piety in order/so that you will be seen by people and admired for your work. In other words, do pleasing things for God, not for those who are watching.

Jesus continues the lesson – and gives examples of how people misuse their pious acts of almsgiving, praying and fasting. He uses a contrasting formula or pattern in rhetoric to show, instead, what God desires.

With minimal changes and a bit of flexibility, the pattern goes something like this fill-in-the-blank formula:

*When you _____
Do not do it like the hypocrites,
For they _____ in public
so that they may be _____ by others.
Truly I tell you, they have received their reward...*

*But when you _____
Do it in secret;
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Note this formula as we read through the passage. I will read most of the passage, and if you want, join me in verses 10-13 as we read the Lord’s Prayer together.

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.

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.*

⁷***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.***

⁹Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
¹⁵but 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, 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.***

ALMSGIVING

Let's look at the first "Whenever you" statement about almsgiving. What is almsgiving? What does that mean? It means giving materially to another as an act of charity and virtue.

Jesus says, whenever you help someone out – don't go blowing your trumpet saying, "Look at me! I'm being kind and generous!" or "Hey, vote for me because I'm kissing your babies and helping out at a homeless shelter!" But the truth is that we do look at those who give generously and extravagantly and we do think, "those surely must be good God-fearing people."

But Jesus says to give in secret so that our Father who sees what we do in secret – will reward us. Give unobtrusively, do your charitable deeds for God, not for upping your own image.

You get your reward instantly if you help another person just for public acclaim. *But the reward is in giving alms, not in having people watch you give alms.* The reward comes in doing something for someone because you love God. The reward comes in doing something for someone because you know that God loves them, and you want to learn to love them too. But the ultimate reward comes when you realize that you're not doing it for the reward.

PRAYER

Prayer was a significant practice in Jewish life – both as a worship practice, and to be done in private life. Jesus gives us three examples of prayer – two negative and one positive. First, he uses the comparison formula.

Pray for the right reason, not because you want to score points on the popular pray-er list. Just because a person doesn't pray in public doesn't mean that they don't have God in their lives. Similarly, just because a person prays publicly, doesn't mean that Christ rules their heart. It's what's inside that counts.

Jesus gives another example of how not to pray. He says,

⁷When 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.

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

Do you remember the showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18? The Baal worshippers spent all day entreating their god – they prayed, they beat themselves, they bled themselves, and nothing happened. Elijah just prayed quietly and the alter is consumed by fire.

We don't have to use grand language – we don't even have to sound intelligent when we pray. God cares for us, like a loving parent and wants what is best for us.

FASTING

Fasting was also a very important facet to Jewish worship and prayer. Throughout the year there were major feasts as well as major fasts. Some devout Jews even fasted twice a week. Fasting was a time for remorse, penitence and humility and the fasters would often emulate mourners in appearance and disposition. But Jesus, again, is saying that we need to do things for the right reason. Do not fast, do not make sacrifices so that others can see us and see how devoutly spiritual we are. That's not the point. Don't be pretentious when fasting – look normal, act normal – let it be between you and God.

So here is the context of the Lord's Prayer – and here, at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount we see integrity, and genuine worship shining through. Jesus reminds the people then, as he does us today, that God desires us to be true and honest in whatever we do publicly and privately – even in how we worship. Sometimes it is hard to discern people's piety. Sometimes we make judgements on their quality and level of Christianity based on the public acts of praying, and almsgiving. Similarly, sometimes people are all words and outward actions, but have no substance. It's like eating pretty food with no salt.

Instead of being harsh to each other and carrying grudges, wouldn't life be more joyous and freer if we left the judgement of other people up to God? God is not calling us to judge but God is calling us to share the good news of God's love as shown through Jesus Christ.

God desires for us to worship through our actions and our prayers and our sacrifices. God looks at our hearts. God looks at what is really going on in the secret parts of our mind and rewards us for our integrity.

It's when our hearts and actions match that God is truly worshipped. And this, my friend, is true piety.

May we all be pious people.

Amen