

10. *Personal Faith*

But when you pray, go into your store-room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:1-18

A private affair?

More than ever before the 20th Century has pushed faith to the private area of life. Personal opinions or mystical views of life are permitted as long as they are kept out of public life. Society and state are being secularized: faith has to be satisfied with the inner room.

The rejection of God and His authority over our lives forms the motif for this development. Belief is something personal and free, as long as the believer does not give the impression of adhering to an authentic worship of God: that would contain an indirect appeal to all people because God, of course, stands above everything. Modern man doesn't want anything to do with a God like that and correspondingly Christians are expected to scale their faith down to a private affair.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about a pull-back to the inner room too. He, however, places this in a totally different context. His foremost concern is to include God rather than keeping other people out. Everyone here has to make a personal choice because our faith concerns the all-encompassing reality of God. We will all come to stand before a living God who will reward people for what they said and did. Our future depends upon Him. Far from being a private affair, faith is a major significance for the whole world. For that reason living with an outward faith which suffices itself to fall in step with other people is inadequate: everyone needs the inner-room personally. Not because faith is a private affair but because it places us in front of no one less than the holy and almighty God Himself. He sees the hidden corners of our personality: those areas have to be filled up too.

Personal religion

The danger constantly facing the church is for faith to become a facade without a framework to support it. At that point the life of faith becomes roll-playing. In this regard Jesus uses the characterization “actors” three times in verses 2, 5 and 16: the translation “hypocrites” gives the impression of a false appearance. The term employed, however, points to play acting. That can be done in all sincerity. An actor can play his role perfectly. Only: the role is not the actor. The actor is often a completely different person than the one he portrays. Thus there are many who perform the part of “pious prayer” without also kneeling before God in their inner room. Jesus urgently warns us not to belong to those who act out their faith.

An actor performs in front of men, in front of an audience. In the same way a person can deliver a believing “performance” in front of his neighbors, church or world. Like the actors of that time trying to attract attention to their performances by blowing a trumpet, so also there were people who literally sounded a gong before they helped someone else, for example, with alms. The synagogues and street corners bore the inscriptions registering the names of those who had made a contribution to city or synagogue. Givers like that already have their reward: they harvest the desired applause during the performance of their act of charity.

Even prayer can become a one-act play in front of men: “But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.” They already have their applause: everyone admires their zeal for prayer.

Even humiliation before God through fasting can degenerate into a farce when a person shows everywhere his somber face. The person fasting makes himself unpresentable in order to show himself off to other men, (verse 16). No corner of religion is free of the danger of roll-playing aimed at men.

True religion, however, orients itself to God alone. The point of it all is that *He* sees us, and He sees us when other people do not. In our own room, in our free time, in the evening and at night. What are we like when the door closes behind us? Everybody has to face this tense question. God inspects men behind the scenes. Then it will become evident: was he an actor or a true believer?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches how personal religion must be. At the mountain He instructs the people of Israel that decisions are not made at the temple but in the silence of everyone's personal life. Not because religion is a private affair, but because religion is in reality service to the living God who looks into the heart and sees its hidden corners. The passport of faith into the kingdom of heaven must bear our own name!

Helping in silence

Jesus gives three examples of how to experience personal religion. The first concerns mercy. He says: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (verse 3). Some translations restrict this verse to the giving of alms, but the word which Jesus uses is broader in scope. It encompasses giving to the poor and performing all kinds of services for people ill or in need. Aiding someone else should take place in silence. We don't need to count our good deeds on our fingers and we shouldn't congratulate ourselves with a pat on the back. Some people bubble over about all the help they have given. Jesus teaches us neither to openly brag in front of others nor to be inwardly satisfied with ourselves. We may not even secretly congratulate ourselves because we have helped someone else: don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. God alone will congratulate us for our mercy as reward for what we have done. But then our helping must be for Him, in secret and unnoticed, without a fuss about it either for ourselves or for others.

In practice, gifts and aid often quickly diminish without the presence of contributor lists and social control. At that moment the true value of our help comes out. When people cannot see what we do, the genuineness of our personal religion will become evident.

Significantly, Jesus' first example focuses on helping our neighbor. How will a man ever love God, whom he does not see, when he refuses, in silence and for God, to really help his brother, whom he does see. The first priority of our inner room for God is a hidden door to our neighbor. The commandment to love our neighbor is on par with the commandment to love God. The love for our neighbor forms the simplest measure of our religion.

Praying in the inner room

The second example which Jesus provides concerns prayer. Many prayers were uttered by the people of Israel, just like in the church today. But prayer does not yet thereby become personal service to God. Jesus says: "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen" (verse 6). Jesus uses a word which is often translated as "inner room." That translation might give the impression that every believer needs a large house containing a private bedroom for everyone, even children. Most of Jesus' listeners possessed only a small, one-room apartment. This word, however, does not go over their heads. Jesus is speaking about a store-room or cupboard. Every room has its special corner or basement for storing things. The family does not live there. You have to go out of your way to get there and having closed the door, you are standing in the dark: away from everything else. In that store-room, however, everything is lit up before God: praying in seclusion, hidden away. No one needs a private room for that. A small area, even dark, is large enough to reach to heaven. The first question for a believer is not whether he says grace at the table or prays along in church but whether he also prays all by himself. Prayer becomes pure religion in private. Prayer at the table and in the church loses its value before God, if we do not know or neglect to do it secluded away and in silence.

Personal prayer, more so than prayer in public, often ends up becoming an emphatic and repetitious request for many everyday, petty things. Praying then becomes a private plea for nice weather and good health, for everything we think that we need. For that reason Jesus also says the following about our personal prayer: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (verse 7-8). Nervous in their prayers, unbelievers don't know when to stop because they are uncertain as long as they do not possess. Jesus teaches us to pray in faith: Our Father knows quite well what we need. We don't need to spend many words and we can also rest assured in it. The form and content of praying in silence should make that apparent.

As a positive example Jesus then recites the prayer which

we know as “the Lord’s Prayer.” Twenty centuries of a praying church have given this prayer a tremendous depth of sound and association. You could easily write a book describing it as the crystal in which all the truths of the faith sparkle. While reading the Sermon on the Mount we need to keep in mind, however, that Jesus taught this prayer as an example of praying in private. Curiously enough, the Lord’s Prayer has now become the most public prayer in the liturgy: it is often spoken in unison and out loud. It is perhaps the most little used prayer in the inner room too. That’s odd. Jesus did not forbid us to bring inner-room prayer into the common liturgy. We forfeit something, though, when we no longer primarily view the Lord’s Prayer as a personal prayer, in the darkness of the cellar. There it ought to regulate the heartbeat of our praying.

Over and against restless prayers for our private needs Jesus places a short and powerful prayer with which we can praise God. The Lord’s Prayer is often divided into six sections, but in fact it begins with one, intensive three-part supplication for the coming of God’s kingdom. When the promises made by John the Baptist are fulfilled, the era will dawn in which things on earth will be like those in heaven. In God’s kingdom everyone will hallow His name and do His will. Having heard the good news that the kingdom of heaven is near because God’s Son has appeared, we must repeatedly pray with heartfelt desire that God’s glory really inundates the world now too. The second section of the prayer asks that we may be allowed to enter that kingdom as well. Our requests are minimal; daily rations for the road (daily bread), grace for sinners (forgive us), and safe-conduct for people who cannot make it on their own (deliver us from the evil one). In short we must learn that our personal prayer is aimed at God’s coming and our entrance. We have to learn to pray in faith (thrice) and ask with self-understanding (in need). Shouldn’t our prayer behind closed doors, kneeling before a bed or chair, be turned into the frequency of God’s Gospel for us? When God hears the echo of His promises in our personal prayers, He will reward us accordingly. Whoever knocks at the right address: to him the door will be opened.

Hidden fasting

The third example which Jesus gives is closely bound up with the second one. Fasting and prayer belong together. In our time

the term fasting is also used in pleading for the voluntary reduction of consumption for the sake of the environment and underdeveloped countries. Regardless of how good this might be, breaking with extravagance and luxury should not be termed "fasting." True fasting represents coming to repentance before God. For a few days or a few hours the prayer forgoes food and festivities in order to be completely devoted to humiliation and devotions. Fasting was common among the Jews, and Jesus does not abolish it. He says "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face" (verse 17). Other people don't need to see it: only God does! Maybe the Jews thought: but who controls whether anyone fasts or not? Jesus wants to teach them that fasting has value only when it is done uprightly before God and not before men.

Fasting expresses an understanding of guilt before God. Knowing himself to be a sinner before his Holy Father, the faster covers himself in sackcloth and ashes. Whoever fasts renounces all his rights and throws himself as a supplicant before His Creator.

Even today fasting can turn into a show with dark suits, long faces and a lot of weeping in the church. As a reaction to this some have become proponents of a "happy" Christianity. Still, fasting before God is essential for "happy Christianity." A Christian knows how miserable and guilty he is before His God and how much he has to be forgiven. Jesus had already spoken about that in verses 14-15 following the Lord's Prayer. Prayer is a request to enter the kingdom of grace. Praying this is difficult if you are still hard-hearted against your own debtors, and fasting hooks up to this. Forgiving Christians are not gracious people because they easily let something go by, but because they know how heavily in debt they are to the heavenly and holy God. This makes them forgiving towards other debtors and drives them to fasting before God.

Since a fast must take place in secret, it cannot be identical with collective days of fasting. Nevertheless, it doesn't say much for their sense of guilt when Christians never see reason for personally abstaining from extra things or festivities without being required to.

By pointing to fasting in secret as demonstrating humility before God, Jesus shows that our physical posture in the inner-room takes on great significance. A supplicant *kneels*. God

observes the preparations for our prayer and our posture. No man sees that: for that reason it is so important! Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward.

Public reward

God rewards personal religion openly in His public kingdom. Then it will appear that true religion is not a private matter. Those who helped in secret will be shown mercy (5:7). Those who prayed silently while hungering and thirsting for righteousness, will be satisfied (5:6). Those who fasted and mourned here unnoticed will be comforted (5:4). Even the public reward in the coming kingdom of God is very personal.