

## **“Warning: Prayer Can be Hazardous to Your Health”**

*Reading: Matthew 6:1-34*

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Pick one of your most valuable relationships – maybe with one of your parents or children, maybe your spouse or a friend you’ve known since childhood – and think for a second about what it is that you value about that relationship. What are some of the good times, the best times, that have shaped that relationship through the years? What are some of the ways you and that person have expressed love and value to one another? Now imagine one day that person comes to you with their checkbook in hand, writes out a big, fat check, and hands it to you along with a very long itemized list. And when you ask them what this is all about, they tell you that they have been keeping track through all the years of the value of everything you have done together, every gift you’ve given them, every meal you’ve shared, every tear you’ve shed together, every laugh and every inside joke and every cup of coffee. They’ve been keeping track of everything in your relationship from the very beginning and they’ve assigned a dollar value to each moment, and now they’re paying you back for your friendship. They thank you for your service and now they’re settling up, and that’s the end of it.

Maybe if you’re hard up for money there are a few of your relationships you wouldn’t mind cashing in, but I’d bet most of us would be incredibly taken aback if we were informed that one of the people we treasured most considered our relationship with them to be nothing more than business. Business relationships are fine in their place, but friendships or family relationships or marriages are fundamentally different, and putting a dollar value on them spoils them. In the relationship you have with, say, the cashier at the grocery store, you give them money and they let you walk out of the store with food, and that’s the extent of the relationship. That’s fine if that’s all you’re looking for, but a deeper relationship is open-ended and is generally characterized by a lack of keeping accounts. So it would probably be very hurtful to learn that someone you loved and thought loved you in like manner had instead been thinking of you as just business.

This commodifying of a relationship with a loved one, putting a price on what ought to be fundamentally unquantifiable, is at the root of the horror of the parable of the prodigal son, told to us by Jesus in Luke 15. We didn’t read it for today, and it’s not directly connected with the Sermon on the Mount, but it’s a perfect illustration of what’s behind the passage from the Sermon we read. You remember the story of the prodigal son: a man has two sons, and one day the younger son comes to him and demands that he have his inheritance now, in effect saying that his father is as good as dead. The younger son takes his inheritance and wastes it on wild living in a far country, and when he hits the bottom he comes to his senses and returns home. His father is watching for him and leaves behind all decorum and dignity and runs to meet him. During the party to celebrate the younger son’s return, the older son gets offended that his brother can insult his father and selfishly waste a huge portion of the family wealth, only to come home and receive a lavish welcome. He’s offended that he has shown the proper respect to his father and has been responsible all along, but none of that seems to have counted.

I don’t know about you, but I have at least some sympathy for both of these brothers. Often when we tell this story we focus on the younger brother’s reckless lifestyle as he wastes his inheritance, because let’s be honest, many people secretly envy him and all the so-called fun he must have had. The conventional way of looking at this parable is to conclude that we’re supposed to look

down on the younger brother for his choices, but then we all know someone who has made terrible choices in their life, and each one of us has made at least a few mistakes. That doesn't excuse his choices, but the real tragedy in this parable comes before and after the wasteful life. The real tragedy comes with the younger son demanding his inheritance from his father, and the older son being jealous of his father's generosity. Both of them – the prodigal son and the responsible son – are reducing their relationship with their father to a transaction, business, a commodity. They both look at their father and wonder what they can get out of him. They do it in different ways, but it's the same appalling sin.

What does that have to do with the Sermon on the Mount? It's the same basic problem implied in Jesus' teaching for us today. Not the commodification of our relationships with loved ones, though that's also a problem – no, this is the commodification of our relationship with God, reducing God down to what we can get out of Him and what we can use Him for. We will never see the kingdom of God if we think of God as nothing more than a means to happiness, enlightenment, success, or a way out of hell. We will never understand what God is doing if we think God exists only to get people out of trouble and do what we think He ought to do. This is where prayer and giving to the poor and fasting and other spiritual disciplines can get dangerous: if we're not careful, we can take a beautiful practice like prayer that is intended to build a beautiful relationship with our Father and instead think it's bought us some credit with God, and eventually God needs to pay up.

Remember over the last few weeks we've read the Beatitudes, the list of blessings for people who rely on God that reveals the ethic of how Jesus' kingdom works, and we read the call to live for other people while also being defined by God's word to us, and last week we read about the powerful, challenging ways love is lived out in our lives. That passage ended with the call to perfection, the call to living in complete love as God our Father does: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And then we turn the page to our reading for today, and the very next verse says to "be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." We go from a reminder that love is perfection and perfect love is possible with the help of God to a warning that love can go awry. Things that look like love can in fact be destructive; they can take the place of the love that gives us life.

Jesus has just taught us how to show love to other people, even if they are our enemies, and now He teaches us about showing love to God. Love for God does not look like a business arrangement, and what look like acts of love for God on the outside can be dangerous to our spiritual health if we're in it only for what we can get out of it. I think of it like a golf outing with business partners: yes, there may be quality relationships involved, and on the surface it looks like you're all friends together, but really you're all there for what you can get out of one another. The warning is that if your focus is on the benefits you receive from this world through your spiritual practices, you will receive your reward. That sounds like a good thing, not a warning, on the surface. But the warning is that you'll miss out on the reward God actually has for you and instead receive something that won't last. You'll trade the love of your Father for a wasted life in a far country that will only be fun until the money runs out. You'll trade a life of belonging and meaning in a loving household for a life that is a flash in the pan.

The danger in giving to the poor is in trumpeting our generosity to others, expecting recognition, wanting to get something out of our charity. In our world where poverty has gotten more

complicated and we've learned more about how poverty works, we might be able to also talk about the danger of simply giving to a charity with little or no engagement with the problem. These days we're inundated with opportunities to give, and many people genuinely want to make a difference, but sometimes we give because we're really more concerned with *feeling* like we're making a difference than we are with actually making a difference. Because making a difference is hard work that often takes costly engagement with messy people.

The danger of prayer and fasting is that they, too, can become a public show. For them, the danger is that you gain honor in other people's eyes by showing how much inconvenience you're willing to put yourself through. If prayer and fasting and other spiritual practices for you are all about what other people think of you because of the show you put on, be warned: you'll receive your reward, but you'll miss out on the greater reward. The danger for God's people has always been to turn communion with the God of the universe into a shallow attempt to impress other people. Eugene Peterson talks about how we can "disincarnate" our love for God, we can abstract the reality of our connection with God through our physical acts and their impact and make it instead all about the intangible benefits we receive. Something like bending the knee in prayer can become about the appearance and the show, rather than the real, tangible change prayer can make in our lives.

So how do we avoid commodifying our relationship with God? Right at the core of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us one of the versions of what we call the Lord's Prayer. We could spend weeks just on this prayer alone, but Jesus begins the prayer with a twofold reminder of how we relate to God. "Our Father in heaven" reminds us that we can indeed be God's children, and He is our loving, good Father. But "hallowed be your name" reminds us that our Father is still the holy Lord and God of all creation, not our warm and cuddly daddy who just does whatever we want. We invite His "kingdom come" and His "will be done one earth as it is in heaven," welcoming His kingdom to be present around us in this life and making ourselves ready to participate. We remember that He cares even about our "daily bread," because His relationship with us is incarnate, present, real. We remember that we cannot rightly relate to God without rightly relating to those around us, and so our forgiveness is bound up in our forgiving. And we remember the temptations of this world, and we ask our Father to give us strength to overcome the tests we face.

Jesus also shows us that we can keep our relationship with God right by keeping it personal. Not that we don't talk about God, far from it, and not that we don't act out our faith by loving others. But if your spiritual practices do not have a private element to them – if you don't spend time in private prayer and worship and time in Scripture – if you don't invest in your relationship with God when no one else is looking, you may be running the risk of just making it a commodity, something that will benefit you in this life, and will give you your reward early. Without a personal side to our public actions and our visible acts of humanitarian charity, there is nothing that will truly last.

And furthermore, Jesus invites us to fight against the commodification of God by keeping our relationship radical. Give up the practice of worrying, because worry lowers our eyes from God and focuses on our own abilities and resources. And yes, worry is a practice, something we can learn to control. We can deeply trust in God's goodness and provision by giving up our treasures on earth for God's purposes, using our food, wealth, time, and other resources in ways that contribute to God's kingdom. That takes trust in God, and it looks weird in the eyes of the world, because it rejects the world's narrative of how you're supposed to live.

Today we have two ways of reconnecting with God: first, we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, one way of meeting with our God who is present with us. And second, we will have our prayer room open at various times during this week. You're invited to come to the table and the prayer closet to encounter our God who is present.



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