

Basic Training: Your Inside Voice
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Jeremiah 17:7-10; Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18. Let's listen to the Word of God. "[Jesus taught,] '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. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And 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. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.'"

When Jackson was young, he was really impressed with Henry Ford. He went to the Henry Ford Museum; his parents drove a Ford; the name is all over the place up here. No wonder he thought Henry Ford was a big deal. Growing up in Indianapolis, I had no idea who Henry Ford was. I did, however, know who Eli Lilly was. Hospitals, foundations, even a center that provided resources to local churches was underwritten by Lilly. Of the top 35 charitable foundations started by an individual or a family, only one doesn't have the family name in the foundation's name. When we watch PBS, every show starts with a list of major contributors and sometimes a video from one of them telling us how great it is to support PBS.

We like to see our name mentioned, as long as it's not the police blotter or the obituaries. We like being acknowledged. It was kind of a pleasant shock to see my weight loss highlighted a few months ago. We get a thrill out of it. But it also makes us think about why we do what we do. Do we live our lives for fame and acclaim? Or is there something more to it? As Christians, followers of the risen Lord Jesus, we aren't ruled by selfishness. In Matthew, Jesus keeps asking us to repent, to change our minds towards God. Tonight makes us re-think how we live out our faith. Do we do what we do to get noticed by others or out of a genuine love of God? Jesus makes us examine that.

Even in Jesus' day, tooting your own horn was a metaphor; there's no record that someone had their giving announced with trumpets. Still, everybody knew what He was talking about. There were twelve trumpet-shaped containers in the temple for offerings. You could choose when you gave....during a high-traffic time making a lot of noise, or during off-times when no services were being held. The same was true of giving to the needy. You could make a public display with a beggar, or you could take him aside to help him without drawing attention.

Prayer...the Pharisees had certain times of day when they prayed without fail. And if a Pharisee happened to find himself at the center of town right when prayers were to start, well then...everybody would get to see just what a wonderfully faithful person he is. History tells us that many Pharisees did just that. They wanted to be seen as pious and holy.

Surprisingly, the Bible doesn't call for fasting on a regular basis. There was only one official fast day in the Law, and while a few others were called to commemorate special events or to ask God's favor in a dangerous situation, it was rare. The Pharisees tried to prove their devotion to God by fasting two days a week. They made sure people knew it by not bathing or cleaning themselves those days. This got sympathy and established them as "spiritual giants."

But God wasn't impressed. Jesus doesn't call out any one particular group for doing it. He calls them all hypocrites. We know that word; originally, it meant an actor who wore a mask on-stage. Jesus calls their bluff. It's all a show, an act, a mask. They loved the attention and the recognition, but they weren't actually in love with God. Whatever reward they would get, even from doing good things like helping others, would be paid in full by earthly acclaim.

Jesus tells the faithful to do something different. The first time I read it, the metaphor that came to mind was using your inside voice. Does that ring a bell? Did any of the rest of you have your mom or dad tell you to use your inside voice? You had your outside voice when you were playing with friends out in the yard or on the ball field. But when you talked with someone once you'd come home, you used your inside voice. To use your outside voice inside was annoying and disrespectful, and it wasn't conversational.

Jesus says, "If you are God's child, if you aren't just an actor, act in a way that shows that what matters most is your relationship with God. Use your inside voice with Him. God knows what you do in secret just as much as He knows what you do in public, and He will reward you." We might ask why Jesus points out these three issues and not others. It's because they represent different facets of our life with God. Prayer is our heart life with God, our ongoing conversation with Him. Fasting is bringing our bodies in line so that we are focused on Him and not incidentals. Giving bonds our relationship with Him as we show compassion to His children. Every aspect of our life with God comes under this focus.

Jesus ends every admonition with secrecy. Yet just a few weeks ago, we heard this from Him in Matthew 5: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Well, which is it? How can we do things secretly and also do good deeds in a way that other people see them? Is this a paradox? We have to ask.

Here's why it's not: the light we have, the light that others see, the light that empowers good works that are praised by other people, that light doesn't come from us. That light is the light of the Holy Spirit working within us, the Holy Spirit that is now such a part of us that it is our light too. When people see what's going on inside of us, when they see us doing good things because the Holy Spirit is leading us to do them, they praise God because it's not *from* us. It's not *of* us, not of our human nature, but of God.

Those good deeds come about from an overflow of God's work inside of us. And God's work inside of us happens not *because* we participate in spiritual disciplines like praying and giving and fasting – as if we had control over God and were manipulating Him – but *as* we participate, even as He gives us the power to do those disciplines. Prayers and fasting and giving are not themselves the good works that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5. They are the spiritual disciplines that lead us to good deeds, and the result of being spiritually disciplined leads to our light shining.

Let's see how it worked in Jesus' own life. He healed lots of people, He cast out demons, He raised the dead. On many occasions, especially if they figured out that He was the promised Messiah, Jesus told them not to say who He was (Matthew 12:15-16, Matthew 16:20, Mark 3:12, Mark 7:36, Mark 8:30, Mark 9:9, Luke 8:56, Luke 9:21). He did many good deeds in secret out of love for people and for His Father who sent Him to us, not so He'd become famous. But word got out anyway. He healed so many people, taught so boldly and authoritatively, delivered so many from evil and sin, that people started to talk!

When we are genuinely people of prayer, people who spiritually fast – who lay aside earthly distractions on regular occasions to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing, people who give out of a desire to please our Lord and Savior, good things start to happen. But our prayers and fasting and giving aren't for public consumption.

We pray to God together in our worship, but the conversations we have with Him in our everyday lives are for Him and us. When we give up something for a time so we can listen closely to God, it's not for public gratification. You know how when you're in a really dark room for a while, your other senses get stronger? That's what a fast does for our spiritual senses. To fast so people would recognize your spirituality is like dieting on Twinkies. It not only doesn't work, it takes you farther away from the goal!

When we give, it's to share a little of the generosity God has shown to us. It's not from a desire to feel good about ourselves or even an obligation that we should do it. It comes out of joy that, wow, my God has been far better to me than I deserve! I don't need outside recognition because my joy is based in God and not you saying, "Boy, you did all that, you're so awesome."

So what's our first take-home thought for the day? *Let's re-think integrity.* Integrity is key to everything we're talking about. We typically think of integrity as being honest and having good moral principles; that's the first dictionary definition. But it goes deeper than that. When we say that a bridge has structural integrity, it doesn't mean the bridge has good moral principles. It means that it's able to carry the weight it's built to carry. It's sound, safe to use.

Integrity comes from the word *integer* – a whole number. It's not half or a quarter or four-fifths. It's whole. It means that all the puzzle pieces fit together properly without any extras or missing parts. If most of us know one Hebrew word, it's *shalom*, which means peace. The language root of *shalom* means wholeness and completeness. In other words, the peace that God has for us, the peace that passes all understanding, is peace that comes from being whole and complete and unified through our relationship with God. Peace comes from integrity.

Integrity is living a life that's consistent and unhidden and deeply, sometimes painfully, honest. Integrity says that when you're talking with God, you're talking with Him and no one else. When you're giving, you're giving because the Holy Spirit is compelling you to do it. No hidden agendas, no jockeying for position or making yourself look good. Just being real. It's being the same person at home that you are at church that you are at the grocery and behind the wheel. It's being the same in secret as you are in front of the world.

We have seen personal integrity blown apart in recent days. In the last few months, we've seen the integrity of people of all sorts of political and moral persuasions severely questioned. Bill Cosby. Tough one for me. Brian Williams of NBC News. Hillary Clinton and the email scandal. I could go on and on. In each of these stories, people used their supposed integrity as a shield and a cover, sometimes simply to make themselves look better, sometimes to hide evidence of wrongdoing, sometimes to take advantage of people in horrible ways.

Integrity means more than having good moral principles. I don't doubt that these folks believe in good moral principles. Some of them actually taught good moral principles. They just failed to live them out themselves. And there's the rub of real integrity. It goes beyond thinking good things or believing good things. It's acting upon them in a way that's genuine.

The Pharisees who made a big show of giving and praying and fasting thought it was good to pray and give and fast. They had moral principles. But their lives proved their principles were just on the surface. No one could have seen and heard all that Jesus did preached and conspired to murder Him if they were people of true integrity, who prayed and fasted and gave genuinely as part of their deep and abiding relationship with God.

We have to re-think integrity because none of us has total integrity. We are inconsistent. Part of dealing with a sin nature is that we have two minds – we desire to follow Christ, but we are hindered by those old ways and pleasures that keep luring us back. But we can become people of integrity. We can be the same in public and private. Matthew, Mark, Luke, Romans, and 1 Corinthians state that God will reveal all the hidden secrets of men. If nothing will remain secret, then we should live lives that are open for public display now...not for the praise of others, but so that we are consistent, honoring God with every part of our lives.

That moves us into our second and last take-home today: *let's re-think spiritual disciplines as the way to integrity*. Believing in good ethics doesn't make us people of integrity. Neither does going through the motions of religion. Even wanting to be a person of integrity doesn't make it happen. We heard from the prophet Jeremiah tonight, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We are so easily deceived about ourselves that we can miss when our integrity has broken down. We tell ourselves we're good people when we're really a moral mess! We can't make ourselves people of integrity simply by desire. How can it happen?

Integrity is a result of God's work in our lives, working amidst our brokenness to bring wholeness to us. We are still broken, but we are not what we once were. We are shattered pots, but God is forging the pieces back together stronger than before; we are not complete, but we aren't just a mess of shards on the floor either because God is at work.

The chief way we can follow God into integrity is through spiritual disciplines. In tonight's passage, it's easy to focus on being a hypocrite versus being genuine. But if that's all we focus on, we fail to miss something vital: the word "when." Jesus doesn't say *if* you pray, *if* you fast, *if* you give. He says *when* you pray, *when* you fast, *when* you give. These aren't options. These are realities for Christians. If they aren't a regular part of who we are, we're not even as far along as the Pharisees. At least they made an effort!

Friends, for our lives to have integrity, we must be in regular conversation and communication with God. Coming to church and worshipping without having some daily thought to God and spending time with Him during the week doesn't have integrity. To say you believe in Jesus and have faith in Him means that you talk to Him, that you give up things to be in greater communion with Him, both things you give away and things you set aside for a time.

There's no legalism involved. I don't tell you that you must spend an hour in your Bible or in prayer daily. Nobody's checking on what you fasted or how much you fasted or how much you gave to the church last year (except maybe the tax man). But they all reflect your faith. Giving might be time as much as money. Fasting in this era might be Facebook and phone instead of food. But integrity comes when the pieces of life begin to fit back together; the public and private "you" reflect each other. That comes as we become more disciplined in our lives with God.

God knows what's on your heart and mine. He knows what's real and what's an act. The good news is this: if it's been an act for you, it doesn't have to go on that way. All it takes is getting real with yourself and God and asking Him to forgive you for faking it. That's the first step towards integrity. And if you are making progress, if your public and private life are the same, if you connect with God for the joy of being His daughter or His son, if you like spending time with Him, then give thanks for the work God is doing in you and continue in those great habits more and more.

May He work His way into each of our hearts so deeply and richly that we would want to be people of integrity, not out to be regarded as pious people by the world but growing in His love, grace, and truth patiently and secretly with Him every day.