

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 8, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Exodus 7:1-7; 2nd Reading: Romans 5:1-11
Scripture for Message: Matthew 6:5-18 - Sincerity**

“Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” We know that God is always present and sees everything we do – we believe in an all-seeing Creator. Therefore, nothing we do is totally secret, we cannot hide from God. When we bluster and brag about our piety or make grand gestures and statements about our Christianity it is for the world to hear and notice because God already knows.

Who are we trying to impress? What is more important to us, pleasing God or pleasing man? Jesus teaches his disciples to be sincere in what they do, sincere with their prayers, and sincere when they fast. Sincerity, righteousness, and humility before the Lord is what pleases God. “We can bluff a human audience; they can be taken in by our performance. We can fool them into supposing we are genuine in our giving, praying, fasting, when we are only acting. But God is not mocked; we cannot deceive [the Lord].”¹ Ultimately it is the Lord who judges.

Jesus tells his followers, prayer that is unseen to your Father who is unseen is prayer that God will reward. He tells them, “Do not keep babbling like pagans.” You’ve probably heard people who give lengthy prayers with lots of flowery and flattering words, never getting to the point, and saying nothing meaningful. Why use a multitude of fancy words when the Lord already knows your needs and desires? We refer to that type of prayer as “all lips and no mind” because the prayer displays no sincerity – it is just a bunch of words. Jesus teaches his followers to avoid vanity filled repetition or meaningless mechanical utterance in prayer. Sincere personal prayer is a conversation with God, a meaningful communion with the creator who already knows our needs before we can verbalize them.

Jesus may be talking about our private prayers – when we really have those meaningful conversations with God on a more personal level. But I wonder if he also includes public prayer in the reminder to “not keep babbling like pagans.” There are reasons to

¹ Stott, John R. W. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Inter-Varsity Press. 1978. Print. 140

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not heap up empty phrases when we pray in public, first these inflated prayers tend to distract people from the point of the prayer and secondly, those extra words are just needless fillers. Prayer that is filled with overly polite or even somewhat apologetic phrases suggest that we treat God as a stranger rather than a friend or parent. When you pray to “Our Father who art in heaven” it is to the loving God that knows you well and who is not a stranger.

Jesus continues his teaching by sharing a prayer as an example. Jesus does not say this is the only prayer you can use – but this simple prayer is a good example of what he teaches – and a good template to follow for our prayers. It is a model of leanness and brevity; there is not a wasted word in it. Jesus preaches Christian counterculture where we are not concerned with our own name, our own kingdoms, and our own will. Therefore, he teaches us to begin our prayers by recognizing the God we pray to and treat God as holy – hallowed be your name. He teaches us to pray for God's kingdom and God's will to be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” When we say those words, and mean them, we pray that God's kingdom will grow through the Church's witness and through our witness people submit to Jesus' authority.

Jesus teaches to pray for the daily necessities of life, our daily bread. Not just the bread we eat but daily bread as a metaphor for having enough to survive, enough money, enough shelter, enough love, and enough food of course. Praying for this expresses our ultimate dependance on our heavenly Father – one day at a time. We should not neglect bringing our own needs to God in prayer as if they were trivialities beneath God's concern. Bringing our needs to God in prayer signals a trust that God can and will care for us – every day providing enough.

Forgiveness is as indispensable to the life and health of the soul as food is for the body. Jesus next teaches to pray for forgiveness and to forgive as we are forgiven. Forgiveness demands contrition, sincerity, and humility – we cannot be any of that if we believe the wrongs done to us are greater than our own, we must forgive others as we ourselves are forgiven. Jesus teaches that “Our Father” will forgive us IF we forgive others but will not forgive us if we refuse to forgive others. Jesus is not however saying that we earn forgiveness

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by forgiving others, God forgives only the repentant and one of the pieces of evidence of true repentance is a forgiving spirit.

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Jesus adds these last lines but given the fact that God does not lead us to temptation and that the “trials” of life are how we become stronger spiritually, they could be a petition that God will not allow us to be overwhelmed by the trials and temptations of the evil one. We are told that God will be with us, even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, so this could be a reminder of that fact. Jesus knows that “the devil is too strong for us, that we are too weak to stand up to him, but that our heavenly Father will deliver us.”²

These three petitions, daily bread, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from evil, cover all our human needs. Jesus reminds us to rely on God for our needs, material, spiritual, and moral. When you think about it Jesus reminds his followers then and now that we shouldn't look to the world for our rewards. “Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” He makes that statement twice in this section of scripture. The prayer Jesus teaches expresses a dependence on God in all areas of life. A life focused on God and not on our own selves. When we pray with sincere humility, and thoughtfulness our prayers become deeper just as Christian righteousness is greater because it is inward and Christian love is broader because it is inclusive even of enemies. Jesus teaches this is what God wants from us.

Jesus warns his followers to not be as the hypocrites. Not only in prayer but also in our other religious rituals and practices. We don't, in the New Testament, read a lot about fasting, but in this Lenten season fasting is on our minds. Fasting does not seem to be among Jesus' ultimate concern for his disciples, so we don't hear many instances of the disciples fasting. Maybe that is why the practice of fasting in the modern age is not followed. But Jesus does not say here “if you fast” he says “when you fast” which leads one to believe Jesus took for granted that fasting was a part of Christian life. When Jesus talks about hypocrites and how they disfigure their faces to

² IBID p.150

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show others they are fasting – maybe he is thinking of the Pharisees who like to be noticed.

I wonder if we don't read much in the New Testament about fasting because the disciples of Jesus took him seriously and fasted so that only God, who sees what is done in secret, would notice. Sincere fasting is not about drawing attention to yourself; it is an expression of our humbling before God. Right now, we are in the Lenten season, the forty-days of Lent (not including Sundays) are reminders of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting. Lent traditions include fasting of a sort, we give up chocolate or other food items, and some go meatless on Fridays, some will skip meals having an occasional 'hunger-lunch' as a form of fasting or dieting. It is our sincerity in whatever way we participate in Lenten practices that pleases God.

So, let's talk about what this means for the church in modern times. The practices of prayer and fasting that Jesus talks about are authentic – to pray is to seek God and to fast is to discipline oneself expressing humility before God. We, as a church and as individuals, pray regularly and some even fast routinely. The thing Jesus is warning against is hypocrisy – doing these religious activities so that others will see and notice you. Hypocritical religion is perverse and destructive – praying and fasting so that others will hear and notice you is not done to please God it is done to satisfy your own need for attention. Inflating one's own ego is not a practice God rewards.

The mission of the church is to draw people to God, not to us. We must choose our audience carefully – if we prefer human spectators, we will lose our Christian integrity. If we become spectators of our own performances, we are not giving glory to God. Yes, we must continue to work for the kingdom of God and work to bring people into God's family and that means we must present the world with the Good News of Christ, we must show the world what living in the kingdom looks like – that is our purpose. We must, however, do this with sincere humility so that we present an authentic picture of the kingdom and not a picture of ourselves. Only when we are aware of his presence will our giving, praying, and fasting be authentic and rewarded by Our Father in Heaven.