

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – Talk 3

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Practicing a Life Where Faith Matters

Jesus' Core Teaching in the Way of Life

The Sermon on the Mount – Talk Three

Practice for the Life of Faith

Living our Faith

We are living in a year when we, as a community, are focusing on *Faith Matters*. That is, we are focusing on learning the faith in terms of knowing what it is that Christians believe about God... We are listening and looking for clues from God about how we live our faith in our daily lives: how God is involved in our lives and just the kind of life we are being called to live as followers of Jesus Christ. Finally, we are thinking about how we can take our faith out into the world. As Jesus hands and feet and heart and “mouth” in the world, we are the ones who are called to live in such a way that others may know the love and grace and goodness and challenge of the Christian life that we are coming to know. For all of us are called in one way or another to live and sometimes to speak in such a way that others can come to know the grace and love of God in their own lives.

If our *Faith Matters*, then we are paying attention to all three aspects of our theme for the year. We are always learning and re-learning what it means to be a Christian at different times in our lives as we grow and experience God and life itself. We are living out the Christian life, trying to strike that balance or intersection of what we believe and think with how we are actually living our lives. And, we are growing in sharing our faith with others within our community, but most importantly out there in the world.

It's always a challenge to live as followers of Jesus, as Christians, but we do not live this life on our own. Nor are we left to our own devices or only trial and error to figure out what being a Christian means. We have the presence and power of God very near to us. We have the Gospels and many of Jesus' words to direct our paths. We have others who have walked this path before us who point the way. We have a community that encourages and emboldens us to walk more closely with Christ and to build up our faith.

We do not have to be perfect, but we do have to trust and turn our lives to the living God and to God's good purposes and gifts for our lives, even when the worldly and religious practices sometimes get in the way.

And here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out the pattern for what following Him is all about. He describes the life that opens the way for God to form us into Jesus' likeness while at the same time showing us who Jesus is and what His character is about. For in the life Jesus calls us to live, we see the life that He was leading and how that formed Him into the person He was and is.

Jesus' teaching has an incredible two-fold purpose in showing us who He is, his character. It reveals how he stayed connected to His Father. It shows how He lived a life of grace, mercy, compassion, love and beauty. It is a character and a person that has been shaped by this particular way of life.

This sermon's teaching also offers us a way of life that opens the way for God to form us into being people like Jesus, in our own unique ways. For as we live into Jesus' core teaching on the life in God, then we, too will be formed up to be persons like Jesus, in our own unique ways.

We will be examining the Sermon on the Mount in four talks. The first talk was on the Character of God's Kingdom. It is a kingdom where God is present and active. It is a kingdom where God is calling individuals and communities just as they are. It is a kingdom where God is calling us live a certain way of life. Talk two focused on how the Sermon on the Mount is a matter of the heart first and foremost. Jesus was much more interested in the intent of God's laws than expecting us to merely follow them. So, Jesus gave several examples to show that God's intent is a matter of the heart and not just our actions. Talk three will describe the practices that allow us to become like Jesus and be formed by God. The final talk will look at the call to abandonment or giving our lives over to God and God's kingdom purposes before and above all other purposes.

Practice for the Life of Faith: Matthew 6:5-24

In this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out specific practices for entering more deeply into the life of faith or the life with God. Many of you hear me say what I see as common sense about spiritual practices and that is this: A deepening spiritual life in God begins with the physical life. Or, the spiritual life follows the physical life. So, if we want to be a person who knows the scripture, we have to physically open our Bibles and read them. If we want to be a person of prayer, we have to take the physical time and pray. If we want to be known as a generous person, we have to physically give ourselves and our gifts away, and so on.

Jesus, here, lays out six (6) practices for living a life of faith and growing in the faith

Prayer

Forgiveness

Fasting

Giving

Self-Examination

Singular Focus on God

Each of these practices require some “doing” on our part. And when we follow these practices, then our hearts will be changed by our doing and by God who will work in us and through us to give us the willingness and the ability. One note of caution, taking on these practices are not ends in themselves. For, like keeping the laws and the intentionality of the laws, it is a matter of the heart. So, for example, if we are praying, just to check the box, we will not be changed. If we fast, just to check off the box, then we will not experience the gift of God’s deeper presence or guidance or power. If we fast, just to lose weight or to try and force some change in our behavior, the results will be limited. Instead, in all of these practices, Jesus is calling us into a deeper relationship with the Lord of all life and love.

The Preparation for Prayer – Matthew 6:5, 6

6: 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.

In beginning Jesus’ teaching on prayer, Jesus makes a subtle invitation – “When you pray”. Jesus assumes that as His follower we will enter into a life of prayer with God. “When you pray” suggests that all of us will pray so that we may have fellowship with God; pray so that God may grace us with God’s presence; pray to let us know God’s great love for us; pray so that God may guide us and allow us to know God’s will for our lives and for the life of the world. It is a simple expectation that leads to a life that is really life. Through prayer and time with God we come to enjoy God. God, in turn, empowers us to live our lives most fully and for God’s purposes. Prayer brings one of the sweetest gifts of the Christian life as we are drawn into direct fellowship with God.

Prayer is an act of relationship between us and God, as individuals. It is not for earthly rewards or for others to acknowledge. It is an act or way of life that is between us and God alone. And while we pray in public and pray together, this personal act of piety is one that Jesus practiced on a daily basis. Jesus daily spends time alone with God. It is the pattern that marks His life every day: time with God followed by ministry and teaching in the world. Several times, Jesus’ followers go looking for Him and can’t find Him because He is with His Father. In John’s Gospel, Jesus shares that nothing He does or teaches is apart from what the Father has directed Him to say or do. That kind of life can only come from the deepest of connections with God.

Jesus is teaching here about prayer as the relationship builder, as the way to open the way for God to come to our lives. And, like the manna that was given to the Hebrews in their wilderness wanderings that is good only for that day and not something that will carry over to another day, Jesus is calling us to a daily time with God. Jesus is calling us to regular prayer for that fellowship and renewal that comes in prayer, whether we notice it or not.

One of the beautiful aspects of this teaching on prayer is that Jesus gives us some steps to take to prepare us for time with God. “Go into your room and shut the door and pray” is a direction to us for finding a place of prayer in our homes or in our lives, a regular place. Like coming to church and sitting in the same pew Sunday by Sunday where we have been nourished by God, finding a

spot or a couple of spots to say your daily prayers will do two things. First, it will give you a sense of confidence that since God has come to you in that space before, God will come to you again. Second, that place will become “holy” as the presence of the Holy blesses you with His presence. Think about where you might have a little “room” especially for prayer. I have a chair in my office that I usually sit in when I am giving counseling or spending time with someone in need or who is struggling. One of my prayer places is to sit opposite where I usually sit and imagine that Jesus is there with me.

The other direction Jesus gives is a time. We can and do pray to God at all times and in all kinds of places, but the direction here suggests not only some length of time with God, but a specific time. When are you at your best on a regular day? That’s when you might consider spending time with God. As I say, we can and do pray anytime, but making a specific and regular time of prayer will give us a sense of confidence that God will make God’s-self known to us because we have experienced God at that time before. We would do well to pick at time when we are fresh or at a time in the day when we are at our best. My long-time friend, John Ohmer, has a three cup of coffee time each morning. One cup is to wake up. The second cup is to get up to speed of the day. The third cup is enjoyed in the presence of God and God’s all-encompassing love.

In addition to sitting in the chair or couch opposite “my chair”, I like to imagine my prayer as sitting with a best friend. Sometimes I talk. Sometimes I listen. Sometimes, we just sit there together. Or, when my mind is swirling with the concerns of the day, I imagine I’m sitting on a dock with Jesus next to me. As the ideas come to my head that distract me from God, I push them down the river. They always come back, but it’s a god emptying exercise for me.

Don’t force your prayer or expect to realize the presence or the conversation with God immediately. Of course, God can do whatever God wants to do, but be gentle with yourself, especially if this is a first effort or if you’ve been away from regular prayer for any length of time. Waiting on the Lord is a common command in the psalms and it’s good advice for us because even in the waiting, we are being formed up for a closer relationship with God. God always comes.

And remember, the God of all creation is also the God who is interested in your life and my life and in the life of every living thing. God will draw near to us, “rewarding” us with His presence and answering our prayers in the way that fits God’s plan or will; as way to reveal God’s glory and goodness to us; and as a way to conform us to be more and more like Jesus.

No Need to Babble – Matthew 6:7, 8

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.

You can’t have a conversation with God or anyone if you’re talking the whole time. Any good conversation involves talking, listening, thinking, reacting, being quiet and it is the same with prayer. When we are praying, we do not need to fill up the time with our words. And if you find that you’re having a lot of thoughts and words that start circling or filling up your mind, get out some paper and write them down so you can find some clarity and stop the swirl in your mind.

It's sort of like a data dump that allows room for God to enter in because now there's space. Writing our prayer thoughts down or saying them out loud makes them real and sometimes opens the way for what we want to really pray to God about.

Another way to start into a time of prayer and not fill it up with empty phrases or thoughts is to write down all that you are grateful for. I have found that gratitude is the doorway that unlocks the presence of God in our lives. When we rejoice or give thanks or count our blessings, we begin to see how God has acted in our lives in the past and might find some clues for the focus of our prayers.

And it's not about getting the words just right, as though there's some magic involved. I have a close clergy friend who is so wedded to using the prayers in our Prayer Book that he tries not to pray extemporaneously. Those are beautiful prayers, but they're not magic. "Thanks" is a good prayer. "Help" is a good prayer. "I'm sorry, forgive me" is a good prayer. "Show me what you want to show me" is a good prayer. The life of prayer is not in getting it just right, but in the intention of our prayers and our hearts. And when we practice prayer on a daily basis, then God will come to us and we will experience God's presence and grace daily.

Finally, don't be looking for a specific way for God to answer your prayers. Some people hear God's voice, but I haven't yet. I have, though, felt God's urgings; had a thought that was clearly not from my own head; felt a feeling of warmth and lightness; and experienced an ease of my spirit and heart. I have heard God's voice through the words of others, in the scripture, in a hymn or song, in quiet. God will answer our prayers and draw close to us when we make the time and when we have the space.

The Lord's Prayer – Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ *"Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come.*

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

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

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

So Jesus gives us His prayer from as a way to get us started and change our hearts to His heart. This is the prayer that all Christians pray in their own language and vernacular. I think sometimes that this is one of the ways that God binds us together as Christians around the world and through all time. The Lord's Prayer is also a guide for who God is and how God wants us to live our lives.

Jesus offers us this prayer in His Sermon on the Mount at the center of all the teachings, highlighting its importance and the gifts that are ours when we pray. In Luke 11:1 and following,

Jesus disciples, who have been experiencing Jesus' teachings and miracles after He has spent time in prayer, ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It's one of the only things they ask Jesus directly to teach them about the spiritual life. And Jesus offers His prayer to them.

Our Father

Jesus reveals God as the loving parent in naming God, Father. God is not like any earthly father or parent we know, but far surpasses that. Father or Daddy or *Abba* is how Jesus addresses God in His prayers and so can we, for Jesus is highlighting not only God as being like the greatest parent anyone could have, But Jesus is also reminding us that we are God's children. All of us are God's children. It's not "my Father", but our Father. God is the God of all and we are sisters and brothers of every person because God is our Father. This view of everyone fits closely with Jesus' teaching on the two greatest commandments because fully loving this God who is intimately involved in our lives, like a great parent, and because fully loving our neighbors as ourselves is the goal of all families among the children. We can trust in God and know the love of God. We can also reach out in love to everyone, because we are God's family.

In heaven (Who art in heaven)

God is above us and not in the sense of the three tiered universe of the ancients who thought of heaven as above, the earth in the middle and either "the deep" or hell below. God is above us because God is perfect love. God is perfect relationship (The Holy Trinity). God can create with a word. God can forgive all our sins and forget them. God can break the fear and hold of death. God can be with everyone and is in everyone.

So, heaven is not some place away from us, but a reminder that God is above us. Remember that Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is among you and in you now, not just in some by and by in the future. Heaven is there too, but heaven is also here. So, when we pray to our Father in heaven, we are reminded that God is 'above us' by God's nature and compared to ours and that we are asking God to bring heaven into our lives right now, the heaven of God's kingdom of grace and love and mercy and peace.

Hallowed be your name (Hallowed be thy name)

Jesus is inviting us to put God before and above all other things, interests, people, self. God alone is to be honored. Anything and anyone else takes a secondary place in our hearts, which when we know or experience God even a little, becomes so very obvious to us because God's love and presence are so incredible.

Hallowed be your name is also a call to us to live in such a way that we are honoring God. Swinging back to the call to be salt and light, Jesus is reinforcing our call to live in such a way that our good works and good lives point to God and bring glory to God. We ask for God's name to be hallowed or honored so that we can go out into the world proclaiming the goodness of God,

God's honor, God's majesty and mighty works in our lives and in the life of the world. We honor God by how we are actually living our lives.

Your kingdom come (Thy kingdom come)

Jesus calls us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth now and not just in heaven one day. We pray with Jesus for God's kingdom of love, justice, mercy, community, and forgiveness to come now, in our lives today. God's kingdom comes where everyone has enough. Everyone is valued. Everyone knows God and is living for God's purposes. We pray for us and for everyone to live in and for God's kingdom's values and that we may become the spiritual-physical instruments to partner with God to help change this broken world that is here now.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven)

Following Jesus, turning our lives over to God and God's way of love is at the heart of this part of Jesus' prayer. And like the previous phrase, this part of the prayer reinforces the longing and our part in inviting God's will to be done in our lives and in the life of the world as it is in heaven. C. S. Lewis once wrote something along the lines that, "It is since Christians have ceased thinking about heaven and the quality of that life, that we have become so ineffective in living and sharing the Christian life. Aim at heaven," Lewis writes, "and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

We are praying to set aside our own wills so that we may know or get some glimpse of God's will and live by it. We pray this in the hope and expectation that God will answer this humble prayer and guide us along heavenly pathways that will enable us to experience God's presence and live by God's vision.

Give us this day our daily bread

Jesus is helping us to acknowledge that all that we are and all that we have come to us as gifts from God, even the very basics of life. I often joke that in our particular culture, some of us may be asking what kind of bread – whole wheat, whole grain, rye, cinnamon raisin; but this misses the point. Jesus wants us to be grateful for anything we have, even a lowly piece of bread. Acknowledging that everything comes from God and that God provides everything allows us to know that we have enough and to not become distracted by that very human desire to have more than enough or to take more and leave others less.

And like Jesus' response to the Tempter in the wilderness who tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread as a sign of His Son ship. Remember Jesus' response, "we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." There is another kind of bread Jesus is directing us to ask for, the bread of God's presence and power. The bread we break that reminds us of our communion with God in all things and in all moments. The bread that empowers us to be followers of Christ and to live in such a way that we and others know that we are following. The bread that we can share with others that they might be fed physically and spiritually as well..

And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors

(Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against)

Recognition of our sinfulness is one of the ways that God can come into our lives. We recognize how we have fallen short of who God created us to be and we recognize how we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, so that we may remain humble. We admit our debts or sins or trespasses so that we become opened to God's grace and mercy. St. John writes, "If we say we have no sin then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We know our sins and it doesn't help to hide them or pretend that they are not real. In fact, not confessing the reality of our lives is a sure way for us to move far from God. But like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, when we come to ourselves and return to our heavenly Father, we will know God's forgiveness and be changed.

And if we can be forgiven, we can forgive others. If we have known God's mercy, then others can know mercy from us. Remember the story of the wicked slave who was forgiven a great amount and then was unwilling to forgive a fellow slave a small amount. What happened to the wicked slave is what happens and will happen to us. We will be cast far from the love and presence of God.

And for those of us who have sinned or have struggled to forgive the sins of others, it's a gift that God answers our prayer when we ask. There are times in all of our lives where we feel that we are unforgivable and even more times when we will not forgive others. God can empower us to forgive ourselves and to forgive others. So we pray that God does in fact give us that understanding and ability to forgive.

And do not bring us to the time of trial (Lead us not into temptation)

This is a "funny" phrase because it reflects some deep seated fear in us that God is whimsical in terms of how God leads us through life. I say "funny" because I think Jesus knows that we do have a little or a lot of fear that God may take us, lead us, guide to a place where we might fail or be overwhelmed. The truth is otherwise. God is always loving and will never leave us to face our perils or struggles alone, much less lead us into them.

Jesus prays this prayer because He knows that we have struggles and temptations in life and by asking God to keep us from times of trial, we are opening the way for the Spirit to be with us and to empower us to overcome. Jesus knows temptation and that we are tempted. He also knows and reveals the clarifying, strengthening moments they can be.

But rescue us from the evil one (But deliver us from evil)

Jesus signals that we are engaged in a battle against all forms of evil – evil in ourselves; evil in others; evil in the institutions that form our society; and a force, not equal to God, that comes to tempt us to be less than the children of God that we are called to be. In our Baptismal liturgy, we ask "Do you renounce Satan and all spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?" We respond, I renounce them, but that can be hard to do on our own. And so we pray.

The requirement of being forgiving Matthew 6:14, 15

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus' call for us to forgive as one of the means to open the way for God in our lives and to build a community of love. When we forgive, God promises to forgive us. Forgiveness is so foundational in God's kingdom that Jesus states that we will not be forgiven unless we forgive others. It's not a free pass according to Jesus. We are commanded to forgive and when we don't, we know in our own heart's experience that we can become consumed by our unforgiveness and live apart from one another and from God.

Concerning Fasting Matthew 6:16-18

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, ¹⁸ 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.

Like prayer, Jesus assumes that we will fast. Fasting is such a regular part of the religious life in ancient religions and in the Judaism of Jesus' day that Jesus can open this section of the sermon with the word, "When", expecting that we do and we will. We see fasting today during the season of Lent, on *Yom Kippur*, during Ramadan and individuals fast from all sorts of things and practices as a way to improve their lives (See the diet and self-help sections of your bookstore or favorite online place to see how much we know we need to change our lives and give up something to go in a healthier direction). We know deep down that we have become attached to too many things and that the too many things keep us from God and from living a thoughtful life.

But like public prayer, Jesus invites us to fast as part of our relationship with God and not so we can gain notoriety or kudos from others. It is not a matter for public display, but a matter of the heart.

There are many fasts we can take and the season of Lent encourages us to fast from what is keeping us from God and keeping us from being our best selves. With a food fast, say once a week, try what many people call a "holy fast". Eat something in the morning and then don't eat all day until the evening. Drink water. The hunger you will feel is an opportunity to turn to God or to use the time that we normally use to quench our hunger to pray, study, be quiet in God's presence. Start small. Be gentle with yourself, but do fast.

And fasting from certain behaviors like cursing, dismissing people, wasting your time on your cell phone reading the news or looking at posts is a helpful spiritual practice. Again, start small. Be gentle with yourself. Look around at your life and see what activities are godly and what are not. Invite God to help you discern and then fast from them.

Concerning Treasures Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth

nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Me, my, mine is embedded deeply in so many of our lives. “Mine” gives us a sense of security about our worlds and the more we have, the more secure we feel. Or is it that the more we have the more we want and the less secure we feel about our lives? Studies about giving to churches show that people who are at the lower end of the earnings and wealth scales are much more likely to tithe to their church than people who have more wealth and more opportunity to add to their wealth. Ouch!

We so easily forget that what we have: our education, our successes, the things of this life did not come to us on our own. We didn’t do anything completely by ourselves. Who we are and what we have are the result of so many factors: God creating us; families raising us; living in America; our schools and education; some breaks in life; and by the willingness inside us to put in the work. We do not obtain or have our treasures on our own.

I once went to an awards dinner for a very deserving business executive. The room was filled with his family, mentors, co-workers, people who had helped him along the way, but he didn’t mention any of them. His speech was about me, my, mine. He told us he had risen to this height on his own. It was sad at so many levels, but especially as I looked at the table where his aging parents, his wife, and their three grown children sat, with their heads down and staring in disbelief and disappointment at their plates.

We instead are stewards of all that we are and all that we have. It does not belong to us and we did not earn it. Our lives are pure gift and the more we acknowledge that, the more we will come into contact with the GIVER of these gifts. So Jesus invites us to turn our attention more and more to the GIVER of life and to focus our life’s work and attention, not on acquiring earthly things, but on things heavenly, especially here on earth.

The Sound Eye Matthew 6:22, 23

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

The sound eye or the eye that is a lamp is a matter of looking at your life for what it is. It’s about an honesty about who we are and whose we are and how we’re actually living our lives and inviting God more and more deeply into our lives. The eye that is a light unveils the goodness of God. The eye that is unhealthy, selfish, self-centered, turned from God to self is the eye that brings darkness.

So, like the business person in the previous story, when we only look at ourselves, we are blind to the gifts that have come to us. But when we look at the gifts, we are lit up by the goodness and love that surround us on every side. What we pay attention to, in other words is what we become – sort of like Jesus teaching about adultery and lust. When we pay attention to the light, we see light. When we pay attention and give into the shadows of life, then that is who we become.

Serving Two Masters Matthew 6:24

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Now, you're meddling Jesus, I can hear my grandfather laugh. It's one thing to call us to a holy life, but let's keep money and wealth out of this, thank you very much. Well, Jesus is not meddling, but building on his teachings about treasure. We know in our own lives that giving away our wealth is one of the greatest challenges for Jesus' followers. We need it, after all. We earned it. It's ours and we're not sure there's more of it coming our way, forgetting of course, that what we have came to us as gifts from the GIVER in the first place.

Jesus is also making a call to the singular focus in life that is required to be His follower. Wealth in and of itself is not evil or bad by nature, but the hold it can take on our lives can be evil and keep us from becoming better followers. The singular focus in life on God is the only way we can fully enter into God's kingdom and be followers of Jesus. Jesus is stating the obvious in this proverb because no one can serve two masters equally. We have to choose God over wealth or any other part of life. That's a challenge and, thankfully, we do not have to face that challenge alone.

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Lent 2022