

Lesson #9: A Sincere Life

We all know the importance of the basic disciplines for a healthy body: diet, sleep, and exercise. If we eat right, exercise regularly, and get adequate sleep, we are maximizing our body's health, strength, and productivity. What is true physically is true spiritually. There are spiritual disciplines that keep our souls healthy, strong, and productive. Jesus turns his attention to three important spiritual disciplines we need to practice for our spiritual health: giving to those in need, praying, and fasting. He tells how to practice them so they actually benefit our souls.

The General Principle: Be sincere in the practice of spiritual disciplines.

"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."

Matthew 6:1

- "Practice your righteousness" was an expression used to that referred to engaging in practices expected of those who follow the true God.
- "Be careful" means to keep your guard up; to pay attention to something. Hypocrisy creeps in subtly and suddenly.
- We should expect a payoff for practicing spiritual disciplines, but this will only happen when they are done with the right motives.

Be sincere in your giving.

2 "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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." —Matthew 6:2-4

Hypocritical giving

- Is given ostentatiously
- Is performed to get honor and praise.

- Results in no blessing from God.

Sincere giving

- Is done quietly.
- Is motivated by a desire to honor God.
- Is rewarded by God.

Jesus is addressing a special kind of giving called “almsgiving”. These are donations beyond tithes and offering that are given as acts of mercy to help alleviate the suffering of needy people. Jesus expects His followers to practice such generosity.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. — 1 Timothy 6:18

God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. — Acts 4:33-35

Be sincere in your praying.

5 “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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 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. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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.” —Matthew 6:5-8

Prayer is the name given to talking with God. Prayer helps connect us to God, put us on the same wavelength as God, and moves God to act. The religious leaders had corrupted the understanding and practice of prayer in Jesus’ day in the following ways:

1. Prayer was ritualized. Various prayers were memorized and recited on the appropriate occasions.
2. Prayer was rigid. You stopped to pray 3 times each day - at 9am, noon, and 3pm - no matter where you were or what you were doing.
3. Prayer was extended. Religious leaders would pray long prayers in public settings, believing these were more likely to be heard. (Mark 12:40)
4. Prayer was repetitious. The same prayers with the same words were uttered over and over again.
5. Prayer was ostentatious. Became a verbal performance to impress the people listening on how knowledgeable and spiritual one was.

Hypocritical prayer

- Is done to impress people.
- Is done to awaken God.
- Is not rewarded by God.

Sincere prayer

- Is done privately.
- Is done simply.
- Is rewarded by God.

Be sincere in your fasting.

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others 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.” —Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting is intentionally going without food for spiritual purposes. The Scriptures reveal that fasting was practiced by God’s people on the following occasions.

1. Penitence over sin. Nehemiah 9:1-2; Jonah 3; Daniel 9:12, 10:2; Acts 9:19
2. Dependence for future mercy. 2 Chronicles 20; Esther 4:16; Ezra 8:12; Acts 13:1-3
3. Focus on spending time in prayer. Daniel 9:3; Acts 14:23
4. Strengthen self-discipline over one’s body. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
5. Share with the underprivileged. Isaiah 58:3, 6-9

Hypocritical fasting

- Is turned into a show.
- Is done to impress.

Sincere fasting

- Is done for the right reasons.
- Is done quietly.
- Is rewarded by God.

Reflect

- ♦ Describe your giving life, your prayer life, and your fasting life. How might the practice of these disciplines be improved? What will be your plan?

Do

- ♦ Give to one needy person this week.
- ♦ Spend 1 hour secluded in prayer.
- ♦ Fast for a day. Spend the time you would be eating praying, serving, or reading the Bible.