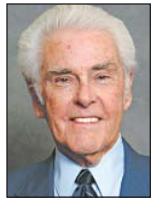


# Transformed in my worship

Up to this time in our lesson series we have discussed human relationships, but now we begin our relationship to God. We must



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consider what God wants from us based upon our new relationship to God through Christ.

Some people say religion is a private matter, and they keep any hint of faith from public view. Others may make a very public display of their religiosity, especially if it benefits them politically or in their business dealings. It is common for some to derive a sense of good standing or self-righteousness from publicly practicing their religion but may miss the practice of the spiritual disciplines set forth in Jesus' teachings.

This lesson presents three approaches to worship that can challenge our worship experiences.

**Give to help others and not to call attention to yourself (Matthew 6:1-4).** The King James Version translated this instruction as not taking your alms before men. The word "alms" may puzzle us but in the Old Testament it refers to the practice of charitable giving, especially to the poor. Such almsgiving became a very important belief and practice within Judaism.

The New Testament regards alms as an expression of a righteous life. Thus the Holman Christian Standard translates verse 1: "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of people to be seen of them." By the first century, righteousness and alms were synonymous. Jesus criticized giving alms to gain public attention, but he expected his followers to continue to support the poor with their gifts.

When we exam the financial gifts that have made ministry possible

across the world, we are grateful for the wealthy who have contributed millions of dollars to help establish such ministries.

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has received marvelous support for the construction of a new chapel that makes worship more wonderful for students, faculty and guests. The money was not given to brag about self but to fulfill God's purpose for worship.

**Prayer as an expression of authentic worship (Matthew 6:5-8).** A.M. Hunter helps us understand what Jesus was rejecting in the Jewish prayer life of the times. "The pious Jew, like the Moslem today, had set times of prayer (9 a.m., noon and 3 p.m.); and just as the Moslem, when the muezzin is heard... gets down on his knees, wherever he chances to be, so the Jew would halt in the street and engage in prayer" (A Pattern for Life, p. 62).

This practice contributed to hypocritical public prayer when persons watching him observed the prayer.

So Jesus said, "When 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." Also, "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words."

In our church recently we had a guest preacher who gave particular attention to Jesus leaving his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to go alone for prayer with the Father. A strong New Testament emphasis is on silence with God rather than besieging God with our requests. (*Next week's lesson will discuss the Lord's Prayer, which does include petitions to the Father.*)

What kind of babbling did Jesus have in mind for the Gentiles? They had many gods and had to be sure to include all of them in their praying

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in order to have answers from them. The Christian is to pray with humble sincerity, knowing that God promises to hear him.

**Deny yourself without making a show of it (Matthew 6:16-18).** Contemporary Christian practice does not disfigure the face when fulfilling a vow of fasting, and Jesus condemned such practice even in his time of ministry, since "He would have added that a lowly spirit does not necessarily mean a long face" (Hunter, p. 75).

The hypocrites that Jesus rebukes were prone to cover their faces with some type of discoloration so that others would know that they were fasting. Our concern is more that we practice self-discipline in handing food if we are attempting to show our desire to honor God with fasting of some kind.

Reward is promised for almsgiving, prayer and fasting done in secret. The promised reward is itself both a blessing and a peril. Genuine service carries its reward, but the reward is proportionate to one's freedom from the seeking of reward. The general motivation to serve God humbly results in the receiving of God's blessing on the believer.

As hymnwriter Albert F. Bayly expressed it, "Lord, whose love through humble service bore the weight of human need, who upon the cross forsaken, offered mercy's perfect deed: we, your servants, bring the worship not of voice alone, but heart, consecrating to your purpose every gift that you impart" ("Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service").

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