



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
February 11, 2018 Sermon

The Habit of Prayer

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 29:13-16; Mark 7:1-23 (selected verses)

Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 7:1-23 (selected verses)

Our Second Scripture Lesson is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7 beginning with verse 1. Jesus is again in conflict with the Pharisees. The Pharisees observe that Jesus' disciples do not follow the dietary practices prescribed by Moses—they eat without the ceremonial washing of their hands—and they ask him why. Jesus' response may seem harsh (more on this later): he first quotes the Isaiah passage I just read, and then tells the Pharisees that they abandon the commandment of God to hold to the tradition of men. Then Jesus has a few words for the crowd, and then a few more for the disciples.

In all of this, it's worth noting two things: 1. Jesus clearly states how the Pharisees abandon the commandment of God, in essence, they're hypocrites, and 2. Much of the discussion revolves around the question of what really "defiles" a person. . . .

During my high school and early college years, my parents and I had a running disagreement about whether my body needed to be in church. That my spirit, soul, mind, heart—call it what you will—would not be in church I had already made clear to them in the 9th grade when I didn't go through with confirmation. They didn't get nearly as upset as I had secretly hoped. Worse still, they made it clear that, although they respected for my decision, my autonomy, my making up my own mind, my being my own person, my right to self-determination, my freedom of conscience, etc. etc, they nonetheless still required my body to go to church on Sundays. I thought this ridiculous.

"Church is full of hypocrites," I would say to my mom.

"Well, yes, and that's where they belong, in church: it's the best place—maybe the only place—for them to become less hypocritical."

"By the way," my mom would add, "I guess there aren't any hypocrites in any other places—like say, the high school?"

"Well, yeah, I guess there are . . . I mean, the teachers, for sure."

But then I went off to college and majored in philosophy; and *then* I was sure I had found the clinching argument for my body not having to go to church. It wasn't just my preference any more, no, no, no. It was existential authenticity; existential authenticity required—nay, demanded—that my body not go to church. Existential authenticity, mind you.

One time, when I was home between semesters, I knew my mother was going to come in that Sunday morning to wake me up for church. She always did. This time, however, I was ready for her. The night before I had placed a copy of Soren Kierkegaard's, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, on my bedside table. I had put a bookmark on p. 169 and had marked passage on that page.

When my mom came in to get me up, I handed her the book

I rolled over, pretending to go back to sleep. But I could tell—I could feel her reading it. The passage she was reading—I put it on the front of your bulletin—reads as follows:

If someone living in the midst of Christendom enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly—and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol—where then is there more truth? The one prays truly to God although he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.

I could tell—I could feel—her closing the book, about to say something . . . but she must have thought better of it, because she seemed to have re-opened the book and was reading the passage again to herself.

Another minute passed. I was still pretending to be asleep.

“The problem is,” she began slowly, “that *you* are not praying untruly to the true God OR praying truly to an idol—the problem is that *you* are lying in bed, sleeping.” THAA-WUMP! She brought the book down on my backside—not really hard but enough to get my attention. “Now get up and get ready for church.” I got up, got ready, and went to church.

My mother understood existential authenticity.

In saying that, I don't mean to excuse the Pharisees. Jesus is right to condemn them for their hypocrisy. They subvert the faith for lower purposes. They want to use God—and the appearance of godliness—to advance their own agendas, for their own selfish ends. They want to *look* pious and faithful and good for sake of their own image and status and power. But they don't want to *be* pious and faithful and good. So they make a big show of doing all the visible things that the religious law, the law of Moses, requires. But when it comes to the other—more important, but less visible—things, like taking care of the poor, the orphans, the widows, like honoring and taking care of one's parents . . . well, they not only neglect those things themselves, but they tell others to neglect them too—whenever such neglect serves the image, status and power of the Pharisees. And to top it off, they proclaim—loudly, to all who will listen and all who would rather not—they proclaim with much, great self-congratulation—that such neglect is the the pious and faithful and good and godly thing to do.

It's their greed, their lust, their insatiable appetite for image, status, and power—the constant ever-gnawing and ever-growing need for self-aggrandizement—that's what defiles them. That's what Jesus means when he says that it's not what goes into a person that defiles but what comes out.

Jesus is right to condemn the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. And he says that they get their reward. And by the way, don't think of that reward as hellfire and damnation, although maybe that will come later. No, the reward the Pharisees get here and now is that they *do* get *just* what they want: human approval and acclaim. The reward the Pharisees get here and now is image and status and power. What they lose in the process, however, is God. And that is their loss, their most profound loss—both here and now and in the future. “*To what can I compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of unsurpassed value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*” Or: “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't let them be afraid. Peace.*” What the Pharisees lose is God as the one in whom we live and move and have our being, God as our joy, our hope and our peace, God as our true

light and life, the love of God—*that* is their loss.

And precisely because so much is at stake—“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”—precisely because their very souls are at stake, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees with all the passion of the infinite and with infinite compassion—he speaks to them out of love for them. Jesus speaks to them to heal their hypocrisy. The problem is not that what Jesus says is harsh (medicine is rarely easy to take), the problem is that there’s a little bit of Pharisee in all of us, probably more than a little, perhaps a lot more.

Sometimes, the best medicine, the best way for our hypocrisy to be healed, for that great gap between what we are on the inside and what we appear to be on the outside—or at least what we know ourselves to be on the inside and what we want to appear to be on the outside—sometimes the best way for our hypocrisy to begin to be healed is to make your body do it, to go through the motions, to pretend to be, to try to be, what we’re supposed to be, what the better part of us wants to be. “Fake it ‘til you make it,” as the saying goes.

Now, I know that same thing could be said of the Pharisees. They too “fake it ‘til they make it. Only for them “making it” means attaining and keeping the image, status and power that they covet which never proves to be enough. But there’s always the hope, the promise that, in their faking it—and in ours—“making it” will begin to take on a new meaning, namely, becoming what God means for us to be.

Take prayer for example. If a pure heart and perfect intentions are required for anyone to pray truly, then, no one (except for one) who has ever walked this earth has ever prayed truly. All the rest of us come to prayer, with more or less divided hearts, distracted minds, short attention-spans, and sometimes grumbling stomachs. All the rest of us come to prayer, at least to some extent, pushing our own agendas and not attending to God’s.

But the whole point is to assume the posture of prayer—make your body do it, make your lips say the words. Fake it ‘til you make it. God will still speak to us in and through prayer, even change our hearts in and through prayer.

No less a figure than the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther not only admitted that his mind wandered in prayer, (sometimes he couldn’t even make it through the first part of the Lord’s Prayer), but also insisted that that was a good thing. Our mind’s apparent wandering in prayer can in fact be God’s way of getting our attention. Luther writes:

If such an abundance of thoughts comes to us while we pray, we ought to stop saying the prayer and make room for such thoughts, listen to them in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit preaches to us here in prayer, and one word of the Holy Spirit’s sermon is far better than a thousand of ours.

The Holy Spirit teaches us in prayer. And that preaching, that teaching, is also a healing, a healing of our divisions, inner and outer, a healing of our hypocrisy. That is the power of God’s Word—to heal us. And one of the ways that God goes about healing us—making us whole—is to speak to us in prayer.

And if you don’t believe me, or if you have your doubts . . . well, give it a try. Lent starts this coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday (yes, Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine’s Day this year, make of it what you will). Lent (warning: official church definition coming) is a 40-day period of prayer, fasting and self-examination in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord at Easter. This year at Westminster, during Lent, we’re focusing on prayer. We’ll have Wednesday and Sunday morning classes (starting on February 21 and 25 respectively) to practice praying. So if you have doubts, make it a habit—

one of the classes is even called, "Turning Prayer Into a Daily Habit." Make it a habit: put yourself—put your body (we are bodily creatures and what we regularly do with our bodies matters, matters greatly both for our bodies and for our souls)—so this Lent put yourself and your body in a position to listen, to learn, and to be healed. Join one of the prayer practice groups. Or pray some other way. Just practice prayer. For the sake of existential authenticity, practice prayer—make it a habit.

My mother understood existential authenticity. She may not have read much Kierkegaard, but she understood existential authenticity.

She understood that if we are going to be made whole (that's the authenticity part) in our very being, and in our whole being (that's the existential part), we need to put our bodies in a position and in a place where God can do that work. And for me, growing up, that place and that position was not (as my mother saw it) lying in bed on Sunday mornings. Now of course: God, being God, can—and does—do that healing work anytime and anywhere for anyone God pleases. That is God's prerogative and God's grace, God being God, after all.

But all the same, we have a part to play, and that part is to make it a habit. Habits (and this will be the topic of one of our Sunday school classes today) go a long way towards making us who we are—for better and for worse. "All of our life, so far as it has definite form," William James wrote, "is nothing but a mass of habits."

Prayer, I think, is what some have called a "keystone habit," that is, a habit which, when we practice and develop it, will enable us to change and develop all our other habits for the better. In fact, I might venture that prayer is the keystone habit of all keystone habits. That's part of the power of prayer, the power that God gives us through prayer.

And that's important because our habits make us who we are, shape our characters, give us our virtues and our vices. Aristotle puts it this way:

We acquire virtues by first having put them into actionwe become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self- control, and courageous by performing acts of courage... In a word, characteristics develop from corresponding activities. For that reason, we must see to it that our activities are of a certain kind, since any variations in them will be reflected in our characteristics. Hence it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference.

Looking back on it now, I think my parents were right to make my body go to church, although even now my 17-year-old self still recoils in disbelief and horror at those words. My parents, God rest their Presbyterian souls, did everything in their power to make sure I grew up with the right habits. How successfully?—I can't say. But it's not too late—for me (although my 17-year-old self snort in disagreement), or for any of us, no matter our age. God says through the prophets: *"Because these people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are still far from me, so I will again do amazing things with these people—I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart."*

This Lent, let us practice the habit of prayer and know the joy, the hope and the peace—the light, the life, and the love—of God.

Amen.