**By: Rev. Daniel Headrick**

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**LESSON 22: The teachings of Jesus:**

**Doing the right thing for the right reason.**

Let’s imagine a person who likes to talk about how good a Christian they are. Every time you see them they make a big show about how they are really close to God. Or when you see them they are always talking about how they’re better than other people because they helps people more than anyone.

People who talk more about themselves than about other people may think really highly…of themselves. Jesus had this sort of person in mind when he taught this part of the Sermon on the Mount.

In this lesson, we’ll learn about the attitude we should have when we pray and do nice things for others. First, let’s read the passage, which is from Matthew 6:1-4.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

*Explaining the passage*: Jesus says that we should beware of “practicing your piety.” *Piety* is a word for being or acting religious, so why would Jesus say to beware about this? What Jesus meant was that we should *beware* that when we talk about or show our religious nature, that we don’t do it *just* to be noticed by other people.

Back to our imaginary person. Imagine that every time they prayed or gave a homeless person some money they immediately wanted to tell as many people as possible. It may be that what they are really wanting is for other people to think of them as good people, rather than to do God’s will. This is the danger of “practicing your piety” just so others will see you.

God cares about why we do things. If we are doing nice things just so people will notice us and think we are great, then we aren’t really doing them because we love God or the other person. We are doing these things out of our own self-love alone. Our motivation (or, reason for doing things) should be to please God, to love God, and to love neighbor.

Next, Jesus gives us some real examples of how we should give charity. *Alms* is an old timey word for giving money or other stuff to people in need. So, when you give people stuff, Jesus says, don’t “sound a trumpet.” Do you know what that means?

Sounding a trumpet in Jesus’ time was literally a person who blew a trumpet horn, which got everybody’s attention, so that every eye would be fixed on them. Then, they make a big show of giving money to a poor person. Now, why would a person do that?

You already know the answer! It’s because they are more interested in being seen by others for doing something religious, rather than actually helping another person out and doing God’s will.

Again and again, we see that what Jesus really cares about is what is in our heart. We can talk all day about how great we are, how religious we are…but if our heart is not directed towards God and neighbor with love, then our heart is not in the right place.

Exercise:

You are walking down the street with your parents and a person approaches you for money. (In the real world, your parents would take care of this—but one day you may be the only one to make the decision). You give them a couple of dollars.

According to Jesus’ teaching, you should

1. Immediately get on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and show a video of you giving the person the money and talk about great you are.
2. Call the Atlanta Journal Constitution and ask them to run a full-page ad about how great a Christian you are.
3. Don’t brag about what you did, but instead thank God for the opportunity you had to love your neighbor.

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**LESSON 23: How to Pray**

Prayer is talking to God. It’s that simple.

So many people I meet feel uncomfortable praying. *I don’t know how to do it*, they say. Or perhaps they’ve heard another person give a prayer with a bunch of hard to understand words, and they think *I can’t pray until I learn to speak better*.

*Nonsense*, says Jesus! Jesus had a lot to say about prayer, and in this lesson we’ll begin to learn about prayer through the words of Jesus.

Many people may go through most of their lives without really talking to God.

I think that’s sad because prayer is talking to God, and God loves us and wants to be our friend. Imagine you have a best friend. You go around telling everybody you meet about your best friend. But then you never actually talk to your “best” friend. It’s hard to work on your friendship if you never talk, right?

The thing with God is that even if we go a really long time without talking to God, God will always be there when we do talk. God will always listen to us. But the more we talk, the easier it will be to go to God when we really need to. If we don’t have any practice talking, it makes it harder when it is time to talk.

It’s ok if you don’t know what to say. It’s ok if you have never prayed before. The best time to start praying is now!

Here’s what Jesus says first about how *not* to pray in Matthew 6:7-8:

What does it mean to “heap up empty phrases”? An empty phrase comes from a place where you don’t care or have little passion. You might be just trying to fill up space with words. Or if you hear about 15 seconds worth of words but the prayer is not really saying *anything*, it’s a sign that empty phrases are being heaped up.

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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Rather than worrying about an example of what this sounds like, let’s get back to our basic teaching from Jesus. Jesus cared most about what is in your heart. So even if your words may stumble, even if your mouth may mumble, if your heart is in the right place that’s all that matters.

What Jesus is really saying here is that praying is not about who can say the *most* words. Some people thought that God heard their prayer “because of their many words.” But the number of your words doesn’t make a bit of difference to God…why? Because God already knows what’s on your heart.

We might think that if we just say enough words that surely God will listen to us. But, God will listen to us even if we say just one word like *Jesus!* or even if we say *zero* words because we feel overwhelmed.

So, how *not* to pray? Don’t heap up words just because you think God will only listen to you if you say lots and lots and lots of words.

Prayer is actually so much easier than we might think. Just say what’s on your heart and in your head. Talk to God about how you are sad, happy, angry, or bored. Talk to God when you had a bad day. Talk to God when you had a good day. Talk to God when you wake up. Talk to God when you go to sleep. Talk to God when you are on the way to school.

There are no *rules* to prayer…and it’s like anything else in life which is important, practice it and it will start to feel natural.

So, this week let’s try something new with prayer. Before you go to bed each night, just talk to God. You don’t have to close your eyes, but if that helps you concentrate, then go for it. Just say what’s on your mind. Tell God what you are excited about, worried about, happy about, sad about. Ask God to be with you. And then, think of somebody else or some group of people who are in need of something. Pray for them.

If you are already praying like this before bedtime, then try this. Take one minute in the morning before you go to school or start your day and think about the previous day. What made you feel close to God? What made you feel far away from God? What do you wish didn’t happen? What were you glad happened? Thank God for the previous day and ask God to be with you this day.