

Sermon for Prayer Sunday

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Matthew 6:5–8 · 1987

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Text: Matthew 6:5–8

Our text is taken from the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the newer and stricter law which Jesus' disciples have to follow. These sharp commandments — “but I say to you” — are set forth here with the organized piety within the Judaism of that time as a negative and dark background. Many scholars hold that the picture of the Pharisees is unjustly dark.

For us, who today try to understand the text, Jesus' word becomes a criticism of ourselves and of our organized piety. The church communions of the present are in fact fairly like the Judaism of that time. Some among us want to renew the life of prayer, and they do not shrink from recommending such outward arrangements as make the prayers visible. One shall not be ashamed to pray, openly and publicly. Others want to tone down the interest in the service. They speak instead of the social acting as the Christian congregation's most important task. The church shall openly step forth on the field of the life of society, both internationally and here at home. Both groups are, so it seems, set right by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Our text today deals with prayer. It shall be hidden, made invisible. It shall take place in the chamber, behind closed doors, Jesus says. It sounds like a rebuke against those who want more public prayers in the service. But the social reformers get, they also, to hear a word about something which shall be hidden: the works. “Give your alms in secret. Do not let the left hand know what the right does,” it stands, just before our text (Matthew 6:3–4). All that which the Jewish piety shows openly, that is three things, alms, prayer, and fasting, all this shall be hidden. It shall be done, but done in the invisible, when no one sees it.

Sharpened to excess is what Jesus says about fasting. When one held a feast in that time, one anointed the head and the hair with oil in order to show: Here we feast, here we make a great show. Now Jesus says: Do precisely so when you fast, do so when you give up, when you offer

something which is costly. Behave as if you held a feast. Hide away that you give up something for others' good. Let no one get to see that you are good. So Jesus says immediately after our text (Matthew 6:16–18).

In this large connection, where everything deals with conscious hiddenness, with deliberate concealment, the text's word about prayer in a closed chamber goes in. We think: if it were at least a prayer chamber, a room for private devotion, a holy room. But the chamber is the store-chamber, the only room in the dwelling-house which had a lock and could be closed, the large pantry, full of the things of the weekday. When I go in there, no one surmises that I have the intention to pray. One only knows what I do, God in heaven, he who "sees in secret."

And now we come to the great street in the text, the sentence in the middle of the text. If you hide the good you do, if you hide away your works, then you receive a reward. It stands so, straight out: ordinary, simple reward for the trouble. "Then your Father, who sees in secret, shall reward you." The translation into Swedish of 1917 had a still more businesslike word: "... your Father, who sees all, shall repay you." You shall get paid. Do not be anxious. The concealed prayer in secret pays.

What is meant by this?

He who speaks is Jesus. He had experience of the effect his words and acts could have among people. He knew much about working that succeeds. And he had also experience of lack of effect, experience of defeat among people — no one listens, no one understands. Of him the Letter to the Hebrews says: "In his life on earth he sent up, with loud cries, earnest prayers to him who could save him from death — and he was heard..." (Hebrews 5:7). What is this hearing of prayer? He prayed so in Gethsemane, but the effect — what did it consist of? He was executed. He was not saved from death. What then does the hearing of the prayer consist of?

The hearing of the prayer consists of something which is greater than privately surviving. No word of Jesus destroys better what this hearing of prayer is. No parable is clearer on this point than the word about the grain of wheat (John 12:24). The grain of wheat is like one wordless prayer when it falls down into the earth. When the dark mold closes about the sown grain of wheat, then the door is shut to the chamber, the store-chamber, where it is prayed the winter long down in the ground. The hearing of the prayer is the harvest, the resurrection, life's victory over death in the form of harvest, this which is greater than privately surviving, only

existing on in the dried-up condition of the protected solitude. So, through harvest, Jesus was heard, in Easter. So every one who prays can be heard, in an unbroken Easter for the whole of mankind, an Easter where grains of wheat die — actually die — and live, in new grains of wheat.

There are more saints than we surmise. Someone sits perhaps now in the pew beside you and does not look at all like a saint. He or she lives namely the life of the grain of wheat, a little earthly and soiled, for so it is with a grain of wheat — the life which is lived for another, perhaps another who besides never says thank. If one lives in trials of that sort, then one gladly spreads a veil of modesties over one's poverty. Humor is the oil I anoint my head with, the oil which hides that I am fasting. Down under this surface of cheerfulness the heart moans. It sighs and moans, in "cries without words." Such cries are prayer.

What the Spirit drives forth in us, Paul says in his wonderful chapter on "the groaning of creation," Romans eight, what the Spirit drives forth in us is just this: cries without words. We heard this read just now. It is the day's epistle text. Laid under the power of bondage, the person prays, in struggle and in longing after freedom. He prays and moans together with the whole creation, the tormented animals and the dying trees. If one has seen swans and ducks struggle at the edge of the shore with the feathers soaked in the poisonous uncleanness which we have let out into their world, then one does not doubt that the creation really groans. And we have part in the plague, we people who torment not only the animals but also one another. And in this prayer lies a suppressed but unconquerable hope, the hope of resurrection, this which the grain of wheat waits for under long winter months.

You who accuse yourself that you have not come to an "ordered life of devotion" — fear not. When you bear your burden, you already pray, with cries without words and with the door shut, just as Jesus has said that it shall be. And when this happens, there is a Father who sees in secret — and who hears your prayer. It can delay before the harvest begins to grow, but one day it happens. It blooms in your desert, and others get also to taste the fruit of your solitary struggle.

Let us pray.

God, give us the patience which holds out in waiting for harvest. Give us certainty of the resurrection so that we do not despair under the power of death. Help us never to cease to cry out our need, with sighing without words. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Translator's notes. He gave this sermon no title. The scan is typed. "He or she" beside you in the pew is his. The person who prays stays he.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·