

When you pray, not if (*Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Ash Wednesday*)

Mainline Christians have often distorted this passage from Matthew.

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Many mainline Christians have distorted this passage from Matthew to suggest that we should avoid outward expressions of faith in Jesus. This misreading is rather convenient, given the rampant allergies we have to anything remotely evangelistic.

To be fair, many of us have been hurt, or at least turned off, by Christians engaging in strongarm tactics. Many years ago, I had a specific idea for a new church plant in my neighborhood. I felt strongly called to the congregation where I was currently serving, but the idea wouldn't quite let me go, so I attended a retreat designed to help people discern whether they had the gifts for what was then called new church development. The answer? Not so much. In the followup conversation, a member of the retreat team affirmed my many strengths for ministry but said I wasn't the kind of person to "grab someone on the street and talk them into Jesus."

I quipped, "That may be the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me."

Rejoinders aside, Jesus' instructions here are not actually intended to squelch our evangelistic pursuits—he did, after all, issue the Great Commission as his parting salvo. Instead, this passage seeks to discourage us from shows of hypocritical piety.

As important as the particularities of these instructions are, we may miss the heart of the matter: that Jesus fully expects us to engage in these spiritual disciplines. It's easy for me to get busy puzzling over prayer closets and disfigured faces and forget the fact that he doesn't say *if* you pray or fast or give alms; he says *when*.

And it's the *when* that gets me every time. In just a few moments, Jesus' sermon will turn to those who tend to the speck in a neighbor's eye while disregarding the log in their own. When I see a Facebook friend's "too blessed to be stressed" post, I roll my eyes when I should be tending my own all-too-anemic prayer life. I need to mind my own spiritual business. Sad to say, business isn't exactly booming.

Whenever I read these words from Jesus, or his other teachings on prayer, I remember a prayer retreat with a spiritual director in Georgia. I can still see her, tucking one leg underneath her as she rocks on the porch swing. As she smiles, her face is alive with crinkles of joy and age. Her improbable words still sink into my soul.

The woman, a Dominican sister who ran the retreat center, was a devotee of centering prayer, which is a deep, silent time of contemplation and listening for God. Practitioners recommend 20 minutes, twice a day. It's serious stuff.

I remember her words. "There is a movement underway as more and more people learn about and practice centering prayer. The interest is growing. And we believe that if enough people take part in it, the whole world will change. We believe this

kind of prayer can change the world.”

I believe; help my unbelief. I desperately want her words to be true. I long to believe that millions of people at prayer, listening daily for God, can change things—that a polarized people will cease their warring ways, that generosity will prevail in a world that’s often stingy and small. But my faith is weak sometimes.

But maybe Jesus knew that even a quiet prayer in one’s closet could be subversive, that his followers didn’t need to be flashy in order to change things. Maybe Jesus knew that the transformation of individual hearts would transform the world.

Maybe if people of faith really did all pray in our closets, the world would shift on its spiritual axis. At the very least, maybe my own world would.