

Let's review.

First Sermon on the Mount Sermon: Concerned itself with the Beatitudes and our call to be poor in spirit in order to obtain the Kingdom of Heaven, realizing that life is all about God, not about ourselves, which allows the Beatitudes to be personal for us.

Second Sermon on the Mount Sermon: calling us to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees and to move beyond fulfilling some law or some rule but being perfect as God is perfect - - being the person we were intended to be: one who loves and accepts and cares for others.

Today, Sermon 3 concerns piety.

One observation about this series and about the Sermon on the Mount: it is neither about me nor about you! We are not the central characters. We are not the main players. We are not number 1. No, the Sermon on the Mount helps us to focus on what and who is important: GOD. God is sovereign. God is majestic. God is all powerful. God is magnificent.

Yet, too often in our churches today - - in the consumer society in which we live - - church is often about providing people with what they think they need:

- a convenient time for worship.
- a beautifully kept nursery for their children.
- activities that fill up the time of children and youth.
- social activities where we meet and greet one another.
- golf tournaments or bowling tournaments or bridge clubs to entertain us when we want.
- food every time we gather
- gymnasiums for youth to have their own place
- fitness programs and mini gyms for members to work out
- and even some mega churches provide cafes for Sunday lunch, ATM machines for one's convenience.

I keep waiting for the day when you can slide your debit card on the back of the pew, enter your PIN number, and make your Sunday offering. Now, none of these conveniences are necessarily bad or wrong. Yet, because we have become so consumer oriented, the consumer, the customer can easily pick up and leave whenever he or she is inconvenienced or not satisfied with the services rendered!

Which brings me, interestingly, to the topic for today: Piety. Being Pious. Being Holy. Practicing one's Piety. What is piety....a term we often do not use...but one that is central to our faith. One's piety is the result of one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is devout reverence for God portrayed through righteousness. It is an outward and intentional religious activity.

Piety in the real sense is our discipline to nurture, maintain, and development our relationship with God and Christ. It is an intentional practice or practices that one does to help the nurturing and growth of

our Christian faith. It is an outward sign of an inward commitment. It is a visible demonstration of a devotion one has in relationship to God. It is about God, it is not about me!

It seems for our passage today that there was an issue about being pious, about the practice of piety, and how one approaches it. To the Jewish person and in the Jewish faith, there were various pietistic practices, but three were central: alms giving, prayer, and fasting. A good Jew would practice all three of these to stay in good graces with God and more importantly to deepen their Jewish faith and relationship with God.

Seems in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus was addressing a problem that had developed. It dealt with the purpose and intention of practicing one's piety. There seems to be an effort about some recognition, some reward, some credit being sought: *"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."* (6:1)

People desired to be seen and recognized by others for their demonstration of their piety...whether their financial gifts, their long winded prayers, or the contorted look they had when fasting. You'll see in all three of these instances the caution that Jesus gave his hearers: *"Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."*

If you only want recognition for your almsgiving, your prayers, or your fasting, you'll get it and it will be over. You'll get your reward...quickly, instantly, finally. Nothing else. It will be done.

So, what is Jesus trying to tell us? What is the message? While he speaks about three pietistic practices, he has a common message and theme:

- (1) Being pious (and we have such a hard time with this word!) is a central part of your Christian faith. The reason it is central is because it is an intentional demonstration of our devotion to God. The fact that this long section is in the Sermon on the Mount about piety is really a judgment on all of us.

What pietistic practices do you follow? What actions do you follow to show your devotion to God and your faith? Sunday morning worship is central for many of us. Sunday School is too much of an option for many of us...if I could require everyone to be in Sunday School, I would. It is a wonderful fellowship and also a great way to strengthen your faith and knowledge. Beyond these clear signs of piety, what do you practice? What do you do on a regular basis? Morning/evening devotions? Tithing your income to the work of the church? Regular time each day for prayer? Have you ever fasted? Attempting to do without in order to commune more closely with God.

Beyond Sunday School and Sunday worship, I would challenge you to determine two additional pietistic practices per week...which means for many of you, there will be three practices to develop as Sunday School is not a practice of many. Two or three additional practices in your personal life or your family life to be in tune or touch with God. Two additional ways in which you pause from the rat race of life, focus, and are grounded in your Lord. What would God have you do to grow closer in your relationship with him?

- (2) Piety is a practice or discipline. Piety is not an idea. Piety is not something we talk about. Piety is something we practice on a regular and routine basis. Notice Jesus in his words in Matthew: *"Beware of practicing your piety before others..."* It is an intentional way of

stopping our regular lives to focus on God. It takes work. It takes discipline. It takes intentionality. It has to be regular.

Which flies in the face of our consumer oriented society where everything is provided for us. Where everything is convenient for us. Where we choose to take or leave, to consume or to throw away. So often as with many of our other priorities, we will always “get around to it.” After Christmas, we are going on a diet or going to work out regularly. We run at it for a bit and it fades away. It is a fad we hope will continue but we are not committed to it.

Piety practice is just that...working at developing those practices as they are not natural for us. It is not natural to tithe 10% of your income; however, that practice sets a standard for us and enables us to put the rest of our life in proper order for we have given away the first 10%! If you are not tithing, begin moving in that direction...most folks give 1-2% of their income to the church. It may surprise you to see what percentage you are giving...determine what it is and every year increase that 1% or more until you reach 10 %. I do that and am aiming at 15-20%...it simplifies life!

Praying regularly except at meal time is not natural for us. For we'll get around to it, but never do. Determine a time and a place in your home where you will physically go to pray. Use that time and that place as an intentional opportunity for prayer and talking with God.

Fasting is not one of our strong suits. Yet, it is a grand opportunity to cleanse ourselves of all the junk we put into our bodies. Attempt it one day...drink fluids...but do not eat from morning until evening...and experience that cleansing effect and that reminder of our total dependency upon God.

Piety requires practice...it is a discipline. This is not about being justified and being saved...that has occurred...this is about developing a closer, more intimate, and personal relationship with God. And it requires WORK. Regularly...steady...scheduled. Being intentional and being devoted to God in our practice as we might grow spiritually and personally.

- (3) Finally, piety practice is personal, not public. As is the theme throughout the Sermon on The Mount, piety practice is not about me - - it is about God. It is about my and our relationship with God. About how we can grow closer, how we can have a regular walk with the Lord, how we can deepen our faith.

People today—including Tuckahoe Presbyterian Church—are spiritually hungry; hungry for substance in their faith. Hungry to deepen their faith. Hungry for faith that is alive, well, and relevant to their daily lives.

Take for instance the new Sunday School class that began today with over 30 involved. Take for instance the Disciple Classes that the church has offered and offers. Take for instance the meaningful worship experiences here.

No gimmicks. No tricks. No games. Faith - - deep and wide - - empowering us to be faithful and closer to our Lord. For it is all about Jesus...not about you and me.

Jesus concludes this section of the Sermon on the Mount with counsel and advice:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In other words, what is most important for you and your life? What is your treasure? How you impress others? What others think of you? What a difference you make? Or the still small voice of God that declares, “well done, good and faithful servant.”

That’s what it is all about. That’s what piety is all about.