

Grading Our Prayers
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
8/8/04
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

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Most of us like to think of the worship service as weekly retreat from the world. It is a time for us to be reassured and affirmed. It is a time for us to celebrate the fact that God will forgive us because, after all, he's in the forgiving business. All we have to do is dress up in our Sunday finest each week, say the prayers, sing the songs, endure the sermon and we're good to go for another week.

But, that's not what the Bible tells us. According to the prophet Isaiah, bad worship is worse than no worship at all. More than that, if we worship badly we run the risk of making God mad.

Did you hear the anger in our lesson for today? God told these leaders that they had apparently gotten their worship training at Sodom and Gomorrah University. This was definitely an "F" school when it came to religion, and you'll remember that the judgment on their failure was much greater than just firing a few teachers.

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So the failure of those who led God's people was significant. Like Sodom and Gomorrah they were in great danger. But, what had they failed to do? Why was God so mad?

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF WORSHIP

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Isaiah 1:17 (NRSV)

According to the prophet, this was the most important act of worship. What we do in the community throughout the week is far more important than anything we may say or do on Sunday morning. Indeed, all our prayers and all our preaching are meaningless unless we, as the prophet put it, "learn to do good."

LEARNING TO DO GOOD

I thought that was an interesting way to put it. We need to "learn" to do good. Some people think that doing good is an obvious and easy process. In some cases perhaps this is true. But, quite often this is not true.

In most cases, doing good requires that we struggle to understand the will of God. It requires that we think about all sides of a problem and try to understand the ramifications of what we do, especially when it comes to those in our society who are most vulnerable.

Sometimes people can quote Scripture and pray fancy prayers, but their actions place them squarely against the will of God. In that case prayers don't help. They just make things worse.

An example from history might help us see how this works. As the slaves picked cotton in the master's fields on a Sunday morning, they overheard the master and his family and friends in church.

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Talking the talk is not necessarily the same as walking the walk. What was obvious to the slaves was not so obvious to those who benefited from the institution of slavery.

I've read some of the southern theologians who wrote during the Civil War (the most prominent of whom were Presbyterian, by the way). It amazes me how people of great piety and theological sophistication could be so blind when it came to issues of justice. And yet, I wonder sometimes,

"Is it possible that we are just as blind in many ways? Could our pious prayers be heard by some as just a way to justify ourselves before God instead of doing what faith requires today?"

WORK FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Remember those bumper stickers that said,
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A minister friend had a bumper sticker that read, "If you love Jesus, work for peace and justice. Any fool can honk."

If any of you ever finds that bumper sticker, I want one. I want to remind others, and I want to remind myself that there is more to being a disciple of Jesus Christ than just honking!

Somewhere along the line we have to do something to promote peace and justice. Otherwise our worship is in vain. Once again the dynamic translation of Eugene Peterson really brings home the point of this passage. He translated verses 13 and 14,

"Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more!

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The only prayer that receives an "A" grade from the Lord is the prayer that begins with confession. The prophet tells God's people in effect, "Clean up your act. That's the only way God is going to hear your prayer." (See Isaiah 1:16)

Notice that cleaning up our act is not something we can do on our own. It is God who begins and completes the process. And it is always a struggle.

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TWO KINDS OF PRAYER

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In that regard, a wise minister once told me that a good way to pray is to use Scripture as the basis for our prayer. The use of Scripture in prayer is way to keep us from merely elevating our wants to a divine level. And using Scripture in prayer helps us think about how our story connects with the Eternal Story.

How can I get my ways in line with God's ways?

Today's lesson reminds us of a theme that runs throughout Scripture, that God's ways are always on the side of justice, compassion and mercy. If our prayers are to receive an "A" grade from God, those themes must be prominent in our prayers and in our lives.

BLOODY HANDS

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That refers to more than the sacrifices of the ancient Jews. I think that praying with "blood on our hands" refers to an attitude of anger and fear toward others, a rage that is so thick that it prevents us from seeing God.

It can be anger and fear toward people of another faith, like fundamentalist Muslims for example. In this political season, it can be anger and fear toward Democrats or Republicans. It can be anger and fear toward loved ones who have hurt us terribly.

But, no matter what we are fearful and angry about God calls us back into community. God tells us,

"Let's work it out. Let's argue together. Don't destroy yourselves with hate. Don't live and die by the sword. Though your sins be like scarlet they can be as white as snow."

In other words, prayer always has a horizontal dimension as well as a vertical dimension. Our prayers are directed toward God, but God in turn sends us into the world to do His will. God engages us in the constant struggle for understanding and forgiveness.

Like the religious leaders of old, our hands are always bloody. There is always some reason for us to struggle with the will and command of God. There is always some evil in our lives and that seeks to take away the joy of God's salvation and forgiveness.

THE NAIL SCARRED HANDS

We who are Christians need to remember another pair of bloody hands. They belonged to Jesus. His hands were pierced as He was crucified.

He took upon himself the violence of a people who rejected God's ways. He was God's own Son, the Messiah for whom they had long waited.

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Jesus did not meet that rage with even more anger. He died with forgiveness on His lips and was raised to show that the story is never over when it comes to God.

We might cut ourselves off from God, but God through Christ continues to seek us out.

THE STRUGGLE TO BE CLEAN

There is a story of young disciple in India who left home and traveled in search of a spiritual master whom he at last found sitting in prayer beside a river.

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