

*Let us pray.*

*Create in us clean hearts, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us. Amen.*

Beware of practicing your piety before others!

Practice your faith in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Sometimes we focus on the part of this passage where it says “*in secret.*”

This works with our lives.

It is uncomfortable to talk to others about our faith.

It can be scary even to think about discussing deep and important matters, like God, with other people.

Faith is so personal. Opening up our prayer life or our spiritual practices to others leaves us vulnerable. It’s a risk.

And so often, we choose to avoid that risk. We do things in secret, so that we never have to talk to anyone else about faith.

You might protest, “but I talk about my faith all the time!”

Do you? Or do you talk about your church?

Do you talk about Sunday worship, or the knitters, or the school nutrition program, or fellowship time, or the youth programs, or vacation Bible school?

And once you’re done talking about all the activities of church, do you actually talk about your *faith*?

Do you invite a stranger to pray with you?

Do you ask them about their relationship with Jesus?

For most people in traditional Protestant denominations, the answer is a resounding “no.”

We might be good at talking about *church*.

But we are rarely good at talking about our *faith*.

We focus too much on practicing our piety in secret.

Yes, our Father who sees in secret will reward us.

But no one else will see our faith, and so we will miss opportunities to introduce Jesus to other people.

When we interpret this Gospel passage as an emphasis on secrecy, we interpret it incorrectly.

Jesus is *not* saying that we should never share our faith with others.

Jesus is saying, instead, that we shouldn’t use our faith as a status symbol to try to get ourselves ahead in life.

Jesus was talking to people who *liked* to show off in front of others.

They liked to pray long prayers and brag about their generosity, and they took pride in their pious actions.

Showing off their faithfulness was a way for them to gain respect, and that was the only reason why they did it. They didn't pray in order to talk to God, they prayed to show off for one another.

Perhaps you've known people like this.

You know that song, "anything you can do, I can do better?"

For some people, faith practices seem like a game of,

*Anything you can pray, I can pray better.*

*I can pray anything better than you!*

That's not what prayer was meant to be.

Practicing our faith isn't about earning public recognition, and it certainly isn't about earning God's favor.

We know that's not the way it works.

There's nothing we can do to *earn* God's grace.

But our faith practices do help us grow in relationship with God.

And when we have a close relationship with God, it's OK to share about it with other people.

Without bragging, about it, we can tell others how much our faith means to us, and invite them also to be in relationship with the divine.

Most of us don't talk about our faith, and there are very good reasons for this.

We are uncomfortable with the image of Christianity that is portrayed in the media these days.

We have been scarred by past relationships with unhealthy faith communities.

We don't like the politicization of religion.

Christians have told us that we are not good enough, so we have started to wonder whether or not God thinks we are good enough.

So we protect ourselves.

We follow Jesus, but we do it quietly.

We practice our faith in secret.

Most of us are in absolutely no danger of practicing our piety before others.

For those of us who focus too much on the “secret” part of today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus has a different teaching for us.

“Don’t be like the hypocrites.”

Whenever you pray, or give, or engage in spiritual practices, do not be like the hypocrites.

The hypocrites are those who say one thing and do another.

Hypocrites give to the poor, but only because doing so makes them look good in front of other people.

But you – when you give to the poor – do it because God has given you compassion for your fellow human beings. Give to the poor because Jesus wants you to.

Give to the poor because you can’t bear to see a sister or brother suffering.

Hypocrites pray, but only because they think they’re going to get something for themselves in return.

But you – when you pray – do it because it’s a way to communicate with God. Spend time in prayer, *listening*, as well as asking.

Pray to give thanks for what you have received, not just to get something that you want.

Hypocrites fast, and serve on church committees, and go to Ash Wednesday worship services... but only because the people around them expect them to, and their reputation suffers if they don’t.

But you – when you start a spiritual practice – let it change your life.

Let it influence your behaviors.

Let it deepen your faith.

My grandmother was one of the most faithful people I have ever known. She had a deep relationship with God and was active in her church. She saw needs in the world and met them – helped people in nursing homes, assisted the less fortunate, and just generally showed love to everyone she met.

I am sure that my grandmother had a deep personal piety.

But I don’t know much about that.

I mostly know how my grandmother influenced the people around her, including her children and her friends.

When asked why she didn’t wear Christian symbols on her clothes or jewelry, to proclaim her faith to the world, my grandmother had a wonderful answer.

People should be able to tell that I’m Christian from my actions.

If my actions aren't communicating my faith to others, then I have no business wearing other Christian symbols to advertise my religion.

Beware of practicing your piety *before others*.

But *do* be sure you practice it.

And then, don't be afraid to share your faith with those around you. Don't brag about it – but go ahead and let it be known. Let your actions reflect your faith. Tell people what you believe.

Show it to them, through your actions.

Fasting, praying, giving to those in need – all of these can be meaningful and important things.

And they are good faith practices.

As are things like singing in choir, reading the Bible, attending weekly worship, and doing countless other things that feed our spiritual lives.

Don't be like the hypocrites.

But do practice your faith.

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, a time to grow closer to God in preparation for the most meaningful celebrations of the church year.

In Lent we have the opportunity to change ourselves.

We have messed up.

We have been hypocritical.

But we know better.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus shows us a more faithful way.

And over the next 40 days, we are invited to change our ways, to return to God, and to lay up our treasures in heaven.

We get a second chance.

Let's use that chance to reach out to our neighbor – to share our faith. Let's practice our piety in secret and practice our faith in public.

God has promised to forgive us for those times when we've been self-centered or hypocritical. That's the good news. So let's respond to that by turning our lives to God and trying to do better in the future.

And our heavenly Father will reward us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.