

**“The Place of Grace”**

Matthew 6: 16-18

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**Walking with Jesus.** As followers of Jesus, we do not have the advantage to physically speak with Jesus as the disciples did 2,000 years ago. However, Jesus knew how important it is for us to speak with him as a friend that he sent his Holy Spirit for each of us to communicate with, as we walk through life. The obstacle to communication with Jesus is that we easily become distracted with our thoughts and with the noisy society we live in.

The Spiritual practices we have been studying and discussing in Tony Jones’ book, “The Sacred Way”, are tools to help us block out the distraction and be able to listen and hear what Jesus is telling us through the Holy Spirit.

The practices we discussed this week in our study groups were *the Stations of the Cross, Pilgrimage, and Fasting*. In short, the *Stations of the Cross* reminds us of the steps taken by Jesus from the Last Supper to the resurrection. As you walk the stations, the message of what Christ did for you through his suffering and death, helps you linger on this incredible love of God which will never let go of you in life and in death. Today at Oakridge Presbyterian, we celebrate God’s grace through the sacrament of communion – the first station of the Cross! *Pilgrimage* can be defined as ‘a journey of travel to a sacred place’. Christians will take time aside to travel on such a pilgrimage to become closer in relationship to Jesus. This pilgrimage (journey) has the goal of entering that sacred place of grace with Jesus.

In our message for today, I will expand a little more through our scripture on Jesus’ teaching on Fasting. It is understood that physiologically, when one fasts, one is more focused and alert to the task at hand. Prayer and fasting often go together. In fasting, we set earthly pleasures aside to focus on God (we are not just talking about food). Spiritual practices help us to walk with Jesus in our daily lives. In spite of challenges we face in daily life, these practices help us build habits which enable us to be in the place of Grace with Christ regardless of our circumstances. The place of grace is a place of joy.

**How not to do it:** As a Spiritual practice, Jesus and his disciples fasted and prayed. Jesus is teaching in our scripture reading today that this Spiritual practice can be done with the wrong intention and thus not only defeat the purpose, but lead us away from God and the place of Grace in our lives.

**“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward (Matthew 6: 16).”** Many of the Jewish religious teachers of the day believed they were spiritually superior to the people, and reinforced that attitude with their ‘acting’ of how pious they were in fasting.

Humility (not arrogance) brings us closer to the place of grace in relationship with Christ. These religious leaders' reward was superficial recognition from others.

**How to do it:** We all know that it is helpful to learn how to do something by knowing how not to do it.

***“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6: 17-18).”*** It is not so much that God rewards you, but rather that the obstacle of arrogance is cleared, and Christ is free to enter in and fill you with his grace. In their ignorance, these religious leaders could not see or experience the love God had for them.

**What does Jesus mean by reward?** When we see the word reward, we instantly think about receiving something which we have earned or deserved. We cannot earn our salvation or any of the things we experience in life. Our salvation and everything we have from God is a gift – period.

One morning this week, I was leaving the house and two Jehovah's witnesses were walking in front of my house and started speaking with me. They told me who they were and I mentioned that I was a Presbyterian Minister. They thought that was interesting and continued to speak with me. They showed me their little pamphlet. I spoke about grace with them and the fact that there is nothing we can do to earn our love from God. God loves us. We are the ones that inhibit our experience of his presence in our lives. Then I quoted the well-known scripture – from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).”*** After I said it, they then quoted from James 2: 17, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” I responded by saying that it is not good works that earn our acceptance by God. But rather, in grace we are already accepted by God, and our actions are the response to what God has already done!

We get distracted away from the place of grace which is already ours to experience! Consider building the habit of Spiritual practices in your life as a means to help you see past the distractions and clutter to a loving, smiling God who has his arms wide open. Experience God's voice as you walk in communion in that place of grace with Him. Amen.