

June 15 – Father's Day Good Gifts

Matthew 7:9-11

To help out our music team I try to select the scriptures and themes for my sermons for at least a couple months ahead of time. When I, in April, was doing this I had a great idea. I would share, on Mother's Day about some of the great mothers of the Bible as I lifted up their faith as an example to follow. Then, my plan was to do the same when it came to Father's Day. Sounds good, right? Then I started examining the fathers in the Bible. It was a pretty depressing search full of infidelity, unconcern for children, violence and chauvinism. Not exactly traits that I would want to lift up. Now I am not saying that there are not great men of faith in the Bible. There are many, such as Abraham, and Moses and David. But if you look at their actions as fathers, they come up short.

Jesus liked to use the image of father when talking about God. This must, in some way, reflect his relationship to his own earthly father, Joseph. We can assume then that Joseph was a good and positive role model, but we know very little about him. In fact, after Jesus turns twelve and stays behind at the temple when the family heads for home and we hear that Joseph and Mary seek for him, nothing more is ever mentioned about Joseph. So today I want to focus on the Sermon on the Mount. The verses I read are part of that dialogue found in Matthew 5 and 6. Jesus uses the image of God as father often in this extended passage to challenge us as to how we should live our lives of faith. Today, let us see what he is telling us as we strive to follow his teachings as we honor our fathers.

In the beginning we have what can seem to be contradictory advice. First: You are called salt and light so that people will see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven. (5:15) But he then follows this with: Be faithful as an offering to God not to impress others, then your father who sees in secret will reward you (6:4, 6:6, 6:18). This reminder that God sees the heart -- not what the world sees -- is repeated three times with three different admonitions of faithfulness concerning almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. When I first read these two ideas together, I wanted to say you can't do both. But then as I reflected I realize that when Jesus is talking about us being salt

and light so that God is honored he is talking about living faithfully and unapologetically in our faith. When we let people know that we go to church, that we cannot do something because Sunday worship takes precedence, when we work together as a faith community to do good, this is being salt and light. There is no emphasis on us as an individual but instead it is seeing us as part of the larger body of Christ being faithful in the world. The command, to do things in private instead of for the applause of the crowd, is directed to our personal acts of faith. What we give to the church should be because we believe God has laid it on our hearts to share this of God's resources that we are privileged to control. I am always very clear that everything we have is ultimately a gift from God so I never say we give out of what we have, we give out of what God has blessed us with. Every pastor has those who give sacrificially but quietly. Depending upon their circumstances the amount may be small or great but sacrificial. Others give noisily implying great amounts and sacrifice and often, on those rare occasions where for one reason or another I have learned what they are giving, the amount is quite small. Some pray faithfully daily and this is a great source of strength to them, and those who know of this ministry often find strength as well as we learn that they are praying for us. There is the rare individual who seemingly prays for the sound of his or her voice or always wants to pray at public gatherings so all will see how religious they are. As to fasting, I don't hear much about that particular spiritual discipline so if you are doing it, you are doing it in silence!! Unapologetic faithful living honors God. Private devout spiritual disciplines are blessed by God. Both kinds of actions are things we should strive for as a way of honoring God whom Jesus called our heavenly father.

The next passage is: Love those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven (5:45). This is always a hard one for us to hear. How can we love one who is tormenting us? If we are thinking about love in the terms of warm affection, the answer is we cannot have those feelings towards those inflicting angst on us. But, if we think of love in its broader sense as shown in the Bible which incorporates ideas such as respect, not holding anger, praying for others, then we can see, if not an easy way, at least a way forward. Remember we are talking about following the example of God as heavenly father. When fathers are at their best they are kind and

loving towards their children, even when the child might cause them pain. They are willing to forgive and to hold that child in prayer. So society's idea of "don't get mad, get even" is not acceptable. We are to find ways to be respectful towards those who persecute us but I would also say that we need to do as much as we can to keep that person from continuing to hurt us. These words of Jesus are not meant to enshrine victimhood. But they are a reminder of how we are to treat our tormentors, especially when we have no power to change the situation in hopes that our kindness and respect in and of itself may make a difference.

Be generous as God your father is generous (6:11). This is the scripture that I lifted up today. We celebrate how God blesses us in so many ways. There was a recent Upper Room devotion that talked about how difficult it was for a person when the power was shut off to their apartment so some needed repairs could be made. All of a sudden they were aware of all the things that required electricity. They could not cook, watch TV, be on the computer and such. There was applause and thanks when the power was turned back on. Then they thought about all the blessings of God that they receive each day and how it is like electricity, taken for granted, unless that blessing, like good health, is no longer present. So the challenge is to give thanks. God is generous and we are to be generous as well in our praise, our thanks and what we can give of our resources.

Do the will of your Father in heaven (6:21) is the final injunction that Jesus gives in these two chapters in Matthew where he uses the example of Father to challenge us to faithful living. We know what God expects from us and yet we, like children, often try to figure out how much we can get away with. We want to be faithful but we also don't want to try as much as we ought. Doing God's will purposefully and continually each day is our challenge.

Since it is Father's day, let me share an example from my past. When I was about six my father, who was a pastor, was serving a church that had two services. During the early service there was also Sunday School. My mom taught a class and so I had figured out that I was pretty much free of parental interference during that hour and so had begun to act out. The teacher talked to my father and I had a challenging conversation with him where I was reminded of how a person was supposed to behave

in church. I let it go in one ear and out the other because what could he do? He was upstairs, mom had a class, I would sit quietly during the second service and do my father's will then, when it was convenient. Well, dad heard of my lack of change in behavior and so he talked to the lay leader and asked him to cover the opening prayer. One Sunday he slipped out of the first service during the opening hymn and positioned himself outside of my classroom. He could see in but I could not see him. Just then the teacher was trying to get us all to sit down for a story. I shouted no and jumped up on the table and began to run the length of it scattering papers. I just reached the end when the door opened and there was my father. Imagine my surprise. He said not a word but I could see the deep disappointment. He just motioned me to follow. He took me upstairs and I got to sit on the little pew right behind him for the rest of that service where all the church could see me and then sit through the second service with my mother and siblings. For the next month I warmed that little pew. I begged to be allowed to go back to Sunday School and be with my friends. My father said that Sunday School was for those who behaved. Finally after a month as we were going to church he asked me if I thought I was ready to be in Sunday School. I was elated and from then on for that entire year I was a model student doing what I thought Dad would want me to do. The teacher also said I sat where I could keep an eye on the door expecting it to open without warning at any time.

So on this Father's Day, celebrate the best that comes from men who have taught us about faith about responsibility. Give thanks for them and listen to Jesus' words. As we strive to live by them we will honor God as well as our fathers in faith.