




Building Spiritual Muscles the Secret Way

“And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, And said, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God”
(Acts 10:30-31).

Scripture teaches three spiritual disciplines that should be done in secret. God rewards these openly. The Jews routinely practiced these disciplines.

-  Praying
-  Fasting
-  Giving

Cornelius was a Gentile—not a Jew. He had a heart for God and desired to please Him. He was faithful in all three above areas of discipline, specifically mentioned in Acts 10:30-31. And he got God’s attention.

**“And he said unto him,
Thy prayers and thine alms are come
up for a memorial before God”
(Acts 10:4).**

The motives of many religious people of the day, especially the Pharisees, were not as pure as Cornelius’s. Jesus devoted much of Matthew 6 to teaching on the correct motives behind spiritual disciplines.

Erwin W. Lutzer in *Your Eternal Reward* explains, “Christ taught that it is possible to succeed in the eyes of men and fail in the eyes of God. If we serve to be seen of men, we will be rewarded by them. . . . We will not

be rewarded twice. . . . We are rewarded by the person whose praise we seek.”

Our attitude determines whether we succeed or fail. When we pray, fast, and/or give for public show rather than to please God, we have a problem. When we practice a spiritual discipline to please people, we receive a reward—the praises of people, and it has no eternal value. It makes us look spiritual. It does not necessarily mean we are. Looks can be deceiving. John Stott said, “Deeply ingrained in our fallen nature is this thirst for the praise of men.” Let’s face it, he is correct. We like to be noticed, appreciated, and complimented. It is part of human nature, our fallen nature. However, our spiritual nature desires to give all glory to God.

In His teaching Jesus targeted the Pharisees, who were often motivated by hypocrisy. They put on an act like in a drama or theatrical production. The word “hypocrite” is taken from the word that refers to “stage players.” It is “appearing to be what the person is not; putting on the appearance of being religious to get the applause of men.” (*Barnes’ Commentary*)

Tom Hovestol in *Seeing Ourselves in the Pharisees Extreme Righteousness* writes, “The religious show is practiced all the time, every day, in every part of the world. The big productions take place on Friday among Muslims, Saturdays among Jews, and Sunday among Christians.” This quote is taken from an interesting chapter aptly entitled, “When a Private Relationship Becomes a Public Show.”

Praying

“And prayed to God alway” (Acts 10:2).

“Thy prayer is heard” (Acts 10:31).

“When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:5-7).

My value to God in public is determined by what I am in private.

The Pharisees knew how to pray. Jesus did not condemn prayer. He condemned standing on the street corner to make a public spectacle. He did not criticize praying in a public place. He did recommend finding a solitary place to talk to God. This is especially difficult in a culture where most live in one-room houses. Many Jewish houses had a place of private devotion. The roofs were normally flat and made an excellent place to pray. Peter was praying on the roof when Cornelius's messengers arrived. Often a small room was designed and was commonly referred to as the “Upper Room.” It was a place set apart to get alone with God. What do you do when you do not have an “Upper Room” or “Prayer Closet”? Jesus encountered the same problem. Why not try a garden, mountain, beach, forest, or any place where you can get alone with your Maker? Jesus is more concerned with the attitude than with the place.

Jesus did not condemn praying for long periods of time (unless it was for show). The

Gospels reveal that He spent all night in prayer several times. He does not require fanciful words (designed to impress the listeners).

Fasting

“Four days ago I was fasting until this hour” (Acts 10:31).

“When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:16-18).

Giving

“Which gave much alms to the people” (Acts 10:2).

“And thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God” (Acts 10:31).

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:1-4).




Jesus does not tell us not to give in front of others, but never to give to be seen of them. When we do something for the right motive and in the right attitude, it will not matter whether it is public or private. Not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing, means give as secretly as possible.

Begin, Others Will Follow

During World War 1, General Douglas MacArthur was a thirty-eight-year-old brigadier general and a brand new brigade commander in France. He went forward and waited in the trenches with the battalion that was going to lead the way in a major attack.

He called the battalion commander. "Major," he said, "when the signal comes to go over the top, I want you to go first, before your men." He paused and then continued, "If you do this, the battalion will follow." He then promised, "You will earn the distinguished cross, and I'll see that you get it." He took off his own prized medal and pinned it to the major's chest. When the command was given, the major was the first to climb over the top. He charged out in front of the troops, and they followed him.

It has often been said that:

-  Everything rises and falls on leadership.
-  Followers cannot rise any higher than their leadership.
-  A leader that leads precedes. (He goes first.)

An effective leader sets the example for his followers. We must lead the way in prayer,

fasting, and giving, not to make a show, but to set an example for our followers.

Musicians say that the hardest part of practicing is taking the instrument out of the case. To begin is to be half done! Let us begin to build spiritual muscles through spiritual disciplines. The New Testament likens our involvement in the Christian life to that of a farmer, fisherman, boxer, athlete (runner), and a soldier (to name a few). Each of these positions required hard work, discipline, exercise, and daily participation. Like any other discipline, prayer, fasting, and giving are not easy. When exercised, they produce spiritual muscles.

"Spend your time and energy in the exercise of keeping spiritually fit. Bodily exercise is all right, but spiritual exercise is much more important and is a tonic for all you do. So exercise yourself spiritually, and practice being a better Christian because that will help you not only now in this life, but in the next life too"
(1 Timothy 4:7-9 TLB).

Study Questions

1. What three spiritual disciplines should be done in secret?

2. How many spiritual disciplines did Cornelius practice?

3. What reward will we receive for practicing spiritual disciplines to get the attention of other people?

4. Why do we like the praises of men?

5. The word "hypocrite" refers to?

6. Did Jesus condemn praying in public? Explain.

7. Describe what "Upper Room" commonly means.

8. Did Jesus condemn praying for long periods of time? Explain.

9. Did Jesus condemn giving in front of others? Explain.

10. What is meant by not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing?

11. Why should leaders set an example in exercising spiritual disciplines?

12. How does one of the quotes in this lesson describe our worth to God?
