

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
Don't Toot Your Own Horn**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

She was quite an accomplished woman:

- * a member of her local planning commission
- * named Woman of the Year by the local Chamber of Commerce
- * helped organize a major political party in her state and attended the national convention
- * served as local treasurer, legislative chair for the state board, publisher of the newsletter, and state treasurer for the League of Women Voters
- * elected as a ruling elder in her church
- * served as a commissioner to the Presbyterian Church General Assembly, a member of the Conference of Presbyterian Women, was first moderator of the regional Women's Synod, and a member of the Committee on Ministry in her presbytery
- * served as a member of the board of trustees of a PC(USA) seminary, where a prize in her name is awarded annually to a graduate
- * was a world traveler and visited South Africa, England, Scotland, Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, and Nova Scotia; organized an annual trip to London for 29 years; cruised the Mediterranean and rode trains across Australia; and visited Athens and Florence to celebrate her 90th birthday.

She was a member of a congregation Nancy and I served forty years ago and a delightful person. When we first met her as seminary students, she said, "Let me give you some advice. He who tooteth not his own horn, getteth not his horn tooteth!" She tooted her own horn quite a bit — and was not at all shy about it!

I couldn't help but think about her this week when I read Matthew 6:2, where Jesus says (in the New Revised Standard Version), "So whenever you gives alms, do not sound a trumpet before you . . . Don't toot your own horn." Jesus could just as well have continued teaching, "And whenever you pray, don't toot your own horn by standing and praying in the synagogues and at the street corners . . . And when you are praying, don't toot your own horn by heaping up empty phrases as the Gentiles do . . . And whenever you fast, don't toot your own horn by disfiguring your face."

There are two things to notice here in Jesus' teaching:

1. Jesus never says, "Don't give alms . . . don't pray . . . don't fast." On the contrary, Jesus commends those spiritual disciplines as examples of the life of righteousness and our faithful response to what God has done for God's people. Instead, Jesus

teaches “Don’t do it like they do . . . but do it as I tell you.” Jesus focuses on the motivation behind the action and the expected response . . . “they have received their reward; your Father will reward you.”

2. Notice how Jesus says “**whenever** you give alms . . . **whenever** you pray . . . **when** you are praying . . . and **whenever** you fast.” He doesn’t say “**if** you give alms . . . **if** you pray . . . **if** you are praying . . . **if** you fast.” Jesus just assumes his listeners will regularly give alms, pray, and fast as part of their religious practices as they seek to have a right relationship with God. So, in keeping with the spirit of the whole Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that right actions come from right attitudes — toward God and toward others.

Jesus chose three fundamental and very visible spiritual actions to get his point across — putting money in the offering plate, praying, and fasting. It would be easy to call attention to yourself — to toot your own horn — as you practiced any one or all three of these. But those are just three examples of a faithful Jewish life before God. One rabbi identified the four fundamental components of Judaism as: (1) Covenant — being part of relationships that matter, especially the relationship with your Creator; (2) Torah (or Law) — the ongoing conversation about what it means to live into that covenant; (3) Mitzvah (or commandment) — the decisions and actions that express and strengthen being and living in a covenant; and (4) Teshuvah (or atoning) — the hard work of correcting your course when you get off the track of being and living in covenant.¹

Another rabbi writes in his article, “The Pathway to a Daily Jewish Spiritual Practice,” about the importance of such a spiritual practice for all contemporary believers: “Today we too can’t leave Jewish life in the hands of the rabbis, the cantor and educators — the modern priests of our synagogue community. It is up to each Jew to become empowered by these godly commands. . . Just as the sacrifices were offered daily, so let us ponder how we can incorporate a daily Jewish spiritual practice into our lives.” That rabbi then lists such daily spiritual practices as gathering around the table, blessing the food, and being aware of God’s presence; setting aside a time for daily prayer and meditation; charitable giving in the home, office, and community; and studying Torah/God’s Word and working on incorporating what you learn into your daily life. The rabbi concludes, “Finally, we are all responsible for keeping the fire burning. Each of us is like a Levite, empowered by the Divine to bring, to offer, to uplift ourselves to God in our daily lives.”²

Since our Christian faith has its roots deep in the soil of the Jewish faith, it should come as no surprise that traditional and fundamental Christian spiritual disciplines reflect those that Jesus taught. As we have been reminded the last several Sundays, the order and motivation of our spiritual disciplines is important. Just as the commandments are meant to show us how to live a life of grateful obedience to God for what God has already done for us, so Christian spiritual practices are meant to nurture our right relationship with God. As one person has put it, “Practices such as reading Scripture and praying are important — not because they prove how spiritual we are — but because God can use them to lead us into life.”³

Here is a list of twelve ancient, traditional, fundamental, and completely contemporary spiritual disciplines that God can and does use to lead us into life. As I share them, imagine hearing Jesus say “whenever you do this, don’t toot your own horn . . .”: meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.⁴

The other day Nancy and I were talking with a woman from Wilmington who was visiting in our house. When Nancy told her we are both ministers, she asked, “Do you practice your ministry here in Wallace?” The way she phrased the question really struck me. I knew what she meant — “Are you ministers here in Wallace?” — but I should have told her, “Yes, I have to practice my ministry every day, because I fall short every day and because it’s how God can lead me into life!”

The New Revised Standard Version of Matthew 6:1 reads, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Jesus might have said, “Beware of being pious before others in order to be seen by them . . .” “Pious” is an interesting word — it’s what is called a “contronym,” a word with two meanings that happen to be the opposite of each other. Positively, “pious” can mean “devoutly religious, marked by or showing reverence for God and devotion to divine worship.” Unfortunately, “pious” is often more associated with negative meanings such as making a hypocritical display of virtue, marked by conspicuous religiosity, or marked by sham or hypocrisy.”

Maybe Jesus intentionally used this “contronym” to teach us how to live in a right relationship with God. He developed a rhythm in these words: “Whenever you do this, don’t do that . . . whenever you do this, do that . . .” The spiritual practices lead us to a “pious” life in the best sense of the word, showing reverence to God and guard us against striving for a “pious” life in which we toot our own horn.

The great Reformer Martin Luther said, “The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” Luther’s observation reminded me of a story from President Jimmy Carter’s book *Living Faith* about a visit he and Mrs. Carter had with an Amish bishop in Indiana. President Carter notes that “the Amish religion is based on the New Testament, with an emphasis on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.” The bishop explained to them that when the community gathers for worship, the leader for the day who would preach is chosen by lot or by last-minute consensus. When the President asked the bishop, “How can people prepare for a sermon if they don’t know when they will be called?” the bishop modestly replied, “We always have to be ready.”

Then President Carter writes, “A few months later, there was a story in my Sunday school lesson text about a group of Christian laymen involved in missionary work who descended on a small village near an Amish settlement. As is often the habit of eager amateurs seeking a possible convert, they confronted an Amish farmer and asked him, ‘Brother, are you a Christian?’ The farmer thought for a moment and then said, ‘Wait just a few minutes.’ He wrote down a list of names on a tablet and handed it to the lay evangelist. ‘Here is a list of people who know me best. Please ask them if I am a Christian.’”⁵

And Jesus said, “**When** you practice your Christian faith . . . **when**, not **if** . . . don’t toot your own horn.” We all need to practice our piety — in the best and most positive sense of the word — because we all fall short each day but, more important than that, that’s how God can and will lead us into the life of God’s kingdom.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, in your goodness you pour out on your people all that they need, and satisfy those who persist in prayer. Make us bold in asking, thankful in receiving, tireless in seeking, and joyful in finding, that we may always proclaim your coming kingdom and do your will on earth as in heaven. Amen.

NOTES

¹Rabbi Brian Field, “The Four Fundamentals of Jewish Spirituality,” in *Judaism Your Way*, October 26, 2016, at www.judaismyourway.org.

²Rabbi Warren G. Stone, “The Pathway to a Daily Jewish Spiritual Practice: Tzav, Leviticus 6:1 - 8:36,” at www.reformjudaism.org.

³John Ortberg quoted in “Spiritual Disciplines: A Practical Strategy,” at www.renovare.org.

⁴“Spiritual Disciplines: A Practical Strategy,” at www.renovare.org.

⁵Jimmy Carter, *Living Faith* (New York: Times Books/Random House, Inc., 1996), p. 240.