

Ordering Your Private World.

In 1985 Gordon MacDonald wrote a book called "Ordering Your Private World." I've pinched the title of the book for the title of this message. The book begins with this;

"Memo to the Disorganized: If my private world is in order, it will be because I am convinced that the inner world of the spiritual must govern the outer world of activity." Early in the book he recounts a conversation he had with a Christian man he met at a soccer match where his son was playing. The conversation went like this;

"Tell me how you are doing spiritually?"

"Oh, I'm OK I guess. I wish I could say I was growing or feeling closer to God. But the truth is, I'm sort of standing still".

"Are you taking time to order your inner life?"

"When does a guy get time to order his inner life? I've got work piled up to last me the rest of the year. I'm out every night this week. My wife is after me to take a week's vacation. The house needs painting. So there's not much time to think about ordering the inner life, as you put it."

Then he paused for a moment and asked, "What is the inner life anyway?"

Our Public World

Each of us has a public world. My public world is what you are seeing now. My public world is when you see me at work. My public world is when you see me chilled out in front of the TV at home. Even my very closest friends only see my public world. The people I am closest to are my wife and my kids and grandchildren, but they still only see my public world. Life teaches us to manage our public world in every dimension. I was at a medical room recently waiting for my appointment and listened to the receptionist taking phone calls from clients. She was very professional. But then she had to ring the boss at home, and her whole manner changed. She was chatty, familiar, and much more what I took to be her natural self. Our success, popularity, wealth, beauty and our image is all judged on how well we have managed our public world.

Our Private World.

But each of us also has a private world. It's who we are when no one else is looking. It's the inner world that only God sees. For many people have a public world that looks wonderful on the outside, but their private world is a place of inner turmoil, disorganization, and confusion. What God wants for our private world is a place where we can connect with him. A place with space for solitude and reflection. A place for worship and confession. A place where we pray to God, and listen to Him. A place where we slow down and be still. An intimate place where we connect with God.

When Jesus taught what we call the Sermon on the Mount he identified three areas of religious practice that were common amongst Jews of his day. Giving to the poor and needy. Prayer. And fasting. Every good Jew was expected to practice these things. Jesus addressed an issue that was common in his day, and is common in our day, especially amongst religious people. The issue was this. People were putting a lot of thought and energy into making their public religious world look good. They were more concerned about what other people thought of them than what God thought of them. Here's what Jesus said about giving to the needy.

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:2-4 NIV)

Jesus is very blunt. He says that when we give to the needy to promote ourselves, we are hypocrites. A hypocrite is a person who believes their own publicity. They have convinced themselves that their behavior is coming from the best of motives, and secretly, they are pretty proud of themselves. What the hypocrite wants most of all is the applause of those watching. The word hypocrite actually comes from a Greek word meaning an actor. What makes it all worthwhile for an actor is to get a standing ovation from those who are watching. And Jesus says that if that's what you want, you will get it from people who are watching, but you won't get it from God. If your private world isn't in order, and your motivation isn't right when you give, there will be no reward from God. Then he goes on to talk about prayer.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:5-8 NIV)

The people Jesus is addressing here are the religious people who gather to pray together, but don't pray as individuals. So let me ask you a hard question that I have asked myself. Does your private prayer life line up with your public prayer life? I find this scripture so challenging. This scripture is not just for you, it's for me too. Fortunately for us, Jesus teaches us how we should pray:

“This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:9-15 NIV)

This same public world – private world contrast is coming out again in the theme of forgiveness. If we won't forgive, God the Father won't forgive us. God isn't so much interested in the fine words we say or the image we project in our public world. It's what is going on in our private world that matters to him. Jesus illustrates the same point by talking about fasting.

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:16 -18 NIV)

God expects that we will give to the needy, that we will pray, and that we will fast. Verse 2 says “When you give to the needy.” Not if, but when. Verse 5 – “When you pray.” Verse 16 – “When you fast.” We can do all the outward stuff and people will be impressed, but it doesn't impress God if our private world is not in order. What is behind all this teaching of Jesus? He's saying that publically we can make it sound as if we know God as Father, but our private world clearly shows that we don't. All of this teaching from Jesus is built on the assumption that we want to know God as Father, and it's out of this intimate relationship to him that we do these acts of righteousness. We give to the poor because God loves the poor and we want to do what pleases God. We pray because prayer is the expression of our intimate relationship with God the Father. We fast because fasting is intended to draw us closer to him.

Our Overloaded Public World.

Now here is the problem. Our public world is filled with demands on our time, our loyalties, our money, and our energy. Our public world screams for our attention and our action. More meetings. More learning experiences. More relationships. More facebook. More busyness. We load so much into our public world, that our private world, which is the foundation for our public world, can't bear the weight. Because our private world doesn't shout so loudly, it gets neglected. The longer we neglect our private world, the more shambolic it becomes. When we continue to ignore our private world, our public world collapses. Here is another quote from Gordon MacDonald's book;

"If my private world is in order, it will be because I make a daily choice to monitor it's state of orderliness."

"Ordering Your Private World" was written in 1985. In the 1980s, there were so many flashy, money-loving TV evangelists who were being exposed as adulterers. Gordon MacDonald was one of the shining lights. He wrote several best-selling books. He lectured throughout the country. He was pastor of a large evangelical church in Lexington, Mass., until he left to become head of World Vision. He then became president of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, one of the nation's largest collegiate missionary organizations. It was while he was president of Inter Varsity Fellowship that Gordon MacDonald neglected his private world, and he was exposed as an adulterer. Overnight he lost his job, his standing in the Christian community, and his reputation. But Gordon MacDonald confessed his sin, asked for forgiveness and went through a long period of accountability and restoration. Today Gordon and Gail MacDonald talk to Pastors and church leaders about ordering your private world from a deeply painful experience. When President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky was exposed, it was Gordon MacDonald who was invited to the White House to become Pastor to the President. After all this happened Gordon MacDonald said "I am a broken-world person because a few years ago I betrayed the covenants of my marriage. I know what it is like to live with a secret, and I know what it is like to live once again in the light."

No matter how disorganised, or how broken your private world is, God wants an intimate relationship with you. You can begin to put your private world in order today. Jesus said, ***"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."***

Visuals

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