

Ash Wednesday

Text: Matthew 6:1-21 (NIV)

¹“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. ²“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. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁵“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. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹“This, then, is how you should pray: “‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ ¹⁴For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. ¹⁶“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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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. ¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Theme: “Lent - a Time of Mercy, Prayer, and Fasting”

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church speak of three lenten disciplines, which Jesus speaks of in our text: alms, prayer, and fasting. People in those churches are required to practice these three disciplines during the season of Lent. It is not optional. On the other hand in our Lutheran Churches, the emphasis is often on repentance and the cross of Christ. During this time of year we remember our unworthiness before God, but especially God’s great love in Christ. But can we as Lutherans also practice these three lenten disciplines?

I. It is possible that they can be practiced in an ungodly way.

Jesus says, “*Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.*” In the New Testament era, the pharisee often did these things in ways that would be seen by other people. When they gave their gifts at the temple, they did it where others would see the large amounts that they gave. Think of the story of the Widow’s Mite. The people cheered when people put in large gifts. When they prayed, it was also done where everyone could see. Think of Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee stood in a part of the temple where everyone could see and hear him praying. Finally, the pharisees would fast twice a week, and they

let everyone know it when they were fasting. Jesus calls them “hypocrites.” Hypocrite” was the Greek word for actor. If we follow these disciplines of alms, prayer, and fasting to be praised by other people, they are an abomination to God. He says, “*They have received their reward in full.*” In each case Jesus says that these things should be done in secret and humbly. Our own left hand should barely notice what our right hand is doing.

II. But it is possible to practice each of them in a godly way.

A. Alms.

Literally, the word is “works of mercy.” Mercy is love for those who cannot help themselves. We don’t have any examples of times when Jesus gave money to those who were in need, but He helped them in a much better way. When people cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!” He healed them. He was merciful to all kinds to people with many different ailments. He freed them from their condition.

As Christians He calls us to share His mercy with our world. Our Lord has blessed us with money. In Luke 16 Jesus tells us to put that unrighteous mammon to work as we make friends by using it to help those in need. There are many good charities which need our help. Some of them from our own church which come to mind are Bethesda which supports people with Developmental Disabilities or A Place of Refuge which supports women in crisis pregnancies.

But there are also other ways that we can help people. There are people whom we personally know who need our help. As a congregation, we have been blessed to be able to help several new people who are coming to our shores. In the past two weeks, Pastor Gui has greeted a couple of new families from the Congo, who arrived here. We have been able to give them some assistance from a grant, which we received from LCMS Human Care. In addition Pastor Gui has been able to find them all a job within a week of coming to this country. As Christians it is our desire to share God’s mercy with those who are in need.

B. Prayer.

The Gospels are full of times when Jesus wanted to get away to pray. In Luke’s Gospel when the disciples watched Jesus pray, they asked Him how to pray, and then He gave them the Lord’s Prayer, which we also have in this chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. We think of how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before He was arrested or how He was constantly in prayer on the cross, until His life ended with the prayer, “*Father into Your hands I commit my spirit.*”

It is important for us as Christians to be constantly in prayer with our Heavenly Father. We call on Him in the day of trouble. We pray for our daily bread, and especially for our spiritual needs, such as the forgiveness of our sins. We also consider all that the Lord has done for us, and we praise and thank Him for all of His blessings in our lives. Prayer is a special blessing that God gives to us as Christians. In Jesus’ name, we have direct access to the Almighty God, whom we are privileged to call, our Father in heaven.

C. Fasting.

Jesus does not say that fasting is bad in itself in our text. He says to the contrary, “*When you fast...*” Jesus Himself fasted when He was tempted in the wilderness. His fasting reminded Him that we do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. In Acts 13:2 it was while the congregation in Antioch was worshiping and fasting that God told them to consecrate Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. On their 1st missionary journey Paul and Barnabas ordained pastors with prayer and fasting. (Acts 14:23)

In a world in which stresses instant gratification and tells us that we need to have it all, self-denial is not a bad thing. Fasting reminds us that we do not live on bread alone, and the riches of this world will all fade away, but that the Word of God abide forever. It is a good idea to give up something for Lent. It can also be helpful to fast occasionally at other times, such as when we receive the Lord’s Supper. In the Small Catechism Luther writes, “**Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared, who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."**

–That puts it in a nutshell...

III. These disciplines are good when they remind us where our treasure is.

Mercy that we show to other people comes out of a heart that is thankful for God’s mercy to us. Our prayers are like Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that God’s will is done in our lives and through our lives. Our fasting reminds us of the riches that we have in Christ. When these disciplines focus us in that way instead of making us feel proud of the sacrifices that we are making for God, they are beneficial. Where are our hearts – on the treasures of this world, which includes the praise of other people or on the grace and mercy that God has shown to us in our Savior Jesus Christ? He is the Lamb of God who bore all of our sins on the cross. He has saved us from our sins, made us into God’s dear children, and is now preparing a place for us in glory.

Even for us as Lutherans lent can be a time of mercy, prayer, and fasting, when these disciplines help to focus our eyes on Christ. May God guide us through this season, that our hearts will be focus on the greatest of treasures, which come through faith in Christ.

Amen.

*Pastor Don Hougard
Benediction Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, WI
March 5, 2014*