

THE WAY OF THE CROSS:

Fasting without Frowning

A Sermon Preached by

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21ⁱ “Be careful not to practice your righteousnessⁱⁱ in front of people, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you will certainly receive no pay from your Father who is in heaven.

² Whenever, then, you give to charity, don’t blow a trumpet in front of you, as the actorsⁱⁱⁱ do in the synagogues and in the streets to be glorified by people. I tell you the truth: they have received their pay. ³ But when you give to charity, your left hand shouldn’t know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your charity is in secret,^{iv} and your Father, seeing in secret,^v will repay you.

⁵ And when you pray, don’t be like the actors^{vi} who love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the street corners to show off^{vii} to people. I tell you the truth: they have received their pay.

⁶ But when you pray, go into your secret^{viii} room and shut your door; pray to your Father who is in secret,^{ix} and your Father seeing in secret^x will repay you.

¹⁶ And, whenever you fast, don’t be like the sad-faced actors,^{xi} for they disguise^{xii} their faces to show off^{xiii} as people fasting. I tell you the truth: they have received their pay. ¹⁷ But when you’re fasting, shampoo your hair^{xiv} and wash your face,¹⁸ so that you don’t show off^{xv} your fasting to people, but to your Father in secret; and your Father seeing in secret will repay you.

¹⁹ Don’t store up your treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy,^{xvi} and where thieves tunnel in and steal. ²⁰ Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves neither tunnel in nor steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, your heart will be there too.”

Just a few years ago, the *New York Times* reported on a new, hip trend: fasting. The report said that people were spending up to \$3,484 per week to stay at a spa and not eat. Some say it’s a spiritual thing. They say it’s “detoxing the mind, body, and spirit.” Others do it for vanity, for weight loss, or image. One nutritional consultant offers women a chance to fast over a four-day weekend. The weekend includes trips to a very fashionable department store. The consultant says it’s to “remind them what it’s all for.”^{xvii}

In our gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus reminds us what our praying and fasting is “all for” (pardon the grammar). Why do we pray? Why do we fast? What’s it all for? Is it so we look holy? Is it so we look righteous? Is it so people will know what great people we are? Is it so others will know how much we love God?

We’ve all done it, this practicing our righteousness in front of other people. We like to be rewarded when we do something good. It makes us feel good and appreciated. How about praying in public? When we pray in a public restaurant or bow our heads at a football game, is it so those around us will see how Christian we are? Are we shaking our fists at our culture for not letting us pray in school? How many of us have said, “Oooh, that brownie looks good! I would love to have one, but I gave up chocolate for Lent” or “I can’t wait ‘till Easter gets here so I can smoke again. What was I thinking?”

I bet most, if not all, of us have practiced our righteousness in public. When I read Jesus' words in Matthew, I get a little confused. I mean, just a chapter earlier, he said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." Then he says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works..."^{xviii} What does Jesus mean by that?

The answer is in the very next phrase. "...so that they may see your good works *and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" When we give, when we pray, and when we fast, who gets the glory? God. It's not about how generous we are. It's about how generous God is to us. It's not about how holy we are. It's about how holy God is. It's not about how much willpower we have. It's about getting in line with God's will in our lives. That's what all this praying and fasting is for: God's glory.

Jesus said it's a matter of the heart. Is your heart set on this world or on God? He said, "Don't store up your treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves tunnel in and steal. Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves neither tunnel in nor steal. For where your treasure is, your heart will be there too." Tonight, Jesus asks us, "What's your heart set on, your image, your stuff, your social status, your security? Where is your treasure? Will it last?"

Tony Campolo, the Christian pastor and speaker, tells about a church a lot like ours. Every year, they celebrate their graduating seniors. One year, after the students spoke, the preacher got up to preach. He started his sermon in a shocking way. He said, "Young people, you may not think you're going to die, but you are. One of these days, they'll take you to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt on your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad." Campolo says, "We may not like to acknowledge it, but someday, every one of us will have to face the 'potato salad promise,' that we all will die."^{xix}

We say that at every grave, don't we? "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Tonight, many of our neighbors know that far better than we. Homes turned to matchsticks. Death and destruction. Treasure turned to ashes.

For at least 1400 years, Christians have gathered forty days before Easter to remember that nothing lasts but God's grace. We come tonight to confess to God that our hearts have been set on the wrong things. Tonight begins forty days of giving more to others for God's glory. Tonight begins forty days of spending time in prayer with the One with whom we will spend eternity. Tonight begins forty days of taking less for ourselves and giving more to others, not so people will see how good we are, but how good God is. Let us begin by confessing our sin to God in silence. Let us pray.

Personal Confession (in silence)

Absolution

The Almighty and Merciful God, source of our salvation in Christ, who desired not the death of a sinner but rather that we turn from wickedness and live; accept our repentance, forgive our sins, and restore us by the Holy Spirit to newness of life.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Lord have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Prayer Response UMH #402

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart (in my heart).

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart (in my heart).

In my heart (in my heart), in my heart (in my heart).

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart (in my heart).

The Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ: The early Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration, there should be a 40 day season of spiritual preparation. During this season, converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins and had separated themselves from the community of faith were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to participation in the life of the Church. In this way, the whole congregation was reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating of God's Holy Word. To make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

The Thanksgiving Over the Ashes

The Lord be with you,

And also with you.

Let us pray – Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth; grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence,, so we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.
Amen.

The Imposition of Ashes

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Or “Repent , and believe in the gospel.”

ⁱ Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Or *justice*.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Literally, *play-actors*, Greek: *hypokrites* (hypocrites, pretenders, dissemblers).
- ^{iv} Greek: *krypto*, as in “encrypted.”
- ^v Greek: *krypto*, as in “encrypted.”
- ^{vi} Literally, *play-actors*, Greek: *hypokrites* (hypocrites, pretenders, dissemblers).
- ^{vii} Literally, *shine*.
- ^{viii} Or *innermost, hidden*.
- ^{ix} Greek: *krypto*, as in “encrypted.”
- ^x Greek: *krypto*, as in “encrypted.”
- ^{xi} Literally, *play-actors*, Greek: *hypokrites* (hypocrites, pretenders, dissemblers).
- ^{xii} Or *destroy, render invisible or unrecognizable, disfigure*; c.f. 6:19.
- ^{xiii} Literally, *shine*.
- ^{xiv} Literally, *anoint your head*.
- ^{xv} Literally, *shine*.
- ^{xvi} Or *disguise, render invisible or unrecognizable, disfigure*; c.f. 6:16.
- ^{xvii} Peter Larson, “Fashionable Fasting,” the PRISM E-pistle (9-3-03).
- ^{xviii} Matthew 5:14-16 (NRSV).
- ^{xix} www.esermons.com.