

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, which means springtime. It's not spring yet, but it's coming. And we're preparing our hearts for it. Springtime for the Christian begins with the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the grave. Until then it is winter. And during this winter we mourn. We mourn our loss, our loss of holiness to sin, our loss of light to darkness, our loss of love to fear. But in the midst of our mourning we anticipate life, life in abundance, life in the light, life eternal in Christ. Tonight we're going to talk about how we might prepare our hearts this winter for the coming spring time in our Lord Jesus.

PRAYER

READ Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Jesus, said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16 "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Here Jesus addressed the three ancient spiritual disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting. When and how they should and would be practiced was no secret to the people Jesus spoke to. Indeed, many other religious traditions practice the same kinds of spiritual disciplines even today. What made Jesus' message unique was the why, why these activities might be a part of a follower's life.

Jesus said, **“when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”**

Jesus was telling the people that the reason why you give to the needy is because of your relationship with God. Our gifts are only secondarily about our relationship to people. Sounds funny, doesn't it.

But it's the same with our prayers. Just as He did with gifts, he was saying that prayers are first and foremost about our relationship with God, and then they are for others.

Consider Psalm 141:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." God is blessed by our spiritual devotions.

And the same was true with fasting. We fast first and foremost for our relationship with God, and then it's about us.

Have you ever thought about how the things you do in your devotional life reaps benefits first for God and then for you?

The world communicates a different message, that we should boast, brag, and be filled with pride. After all, if you don't blow your own horn someone else will spit in it.

The church follows suit, right? We like to get approval from other people. It's so much fun! The religiosity of the people in Jesus' day was so bad they made a mockery of true spiritual devotion.

I think what true devotion requires is a better handle on our relationship with God. It's easy to forget God, going about my daily life without even giving Him a second thought all day long. But then we go to church, or to Bible study, or to a church potluck, or to a funeral, or we participate in a service project, and we're so excited, we begin to think we're special, and we want some brownie points, as if we were the only one's who ever did anything in the name of God!

But Jesus is teaching us that everything we do, we do in silence behind closed doors, and we do it for God, and then, and only then, the benefits follow.

People benefit from our charitable gifts, but not because we made a big thing out of them. People benefit from our prayers, but not because we prayed with eloquence. And we benefit from fasting, but not because we made a spectacle of ourselves.

What the Lord was talking about was a condition of the heart. Jesus gave us His heart in order to transform our heart. In this passage, then, He is describing what happens outwardly when a person's heart inwardly is right with God. Our charitable gifts we devote to God for the sake of His ministry to other people. Our prayers we lift up before the Lord in obedience to His command to pray, and He receives our petitions with joy! And we fast, giving thanks to God for all of His many gifts.

And that's why we have Lent. In the reading from Joel we heard, "rend your hearts and not your garments." But it's easier to rend our garments! Rending one's heart means repenting for sin. Yeah, I would prefer to rip my clothes to shreds before I repent. But God wants our heart so He can give us His, and He wants us to begin with repentance.

The spiritual devotions of gifts, prayers, and fasting shape a person's heart into a heart devoted to God. That's how Jesus wants us to think about these things. We are undergoing radical heart surgery when we give, pray, and fast for the Lord.

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Friends in Christ, during Lent let us pray to the Lord that He would show us how to devote our hearts to Him through giving, prayer, and fasting.

During Lent let us reflect on the treasures God has already filled our hearts with, treasures of love, joy, and peace.

And during Lent let us share the good news of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of the Lord.
Amen.