

TREASURE

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 6, verses 1 through 6 and 16 through 21.

The part we're skipping over is the Lord's Prayer. The focus for today is the parts around it, but I want you to notice that the Lord's Prayer fits in as part of what we'll be talking about. As we read, look for patterns. Pay special attention to anything Jesus repeats.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 6, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ "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."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a good text to get Lent started. Lent is a season of repentance. We look ahead to the crucifixion of Jesus. And we consider the reason for his crucifixion. That would be our own sin. We are not the way we are supposed to be, and we don't act the way we should. So we need repentance. We need our hearts to be turned away from ourselves and toward Christ.

This passage teaches us repentance by reorienting our hearts. If we listen to this passage, it will lead us away from trusting our own righteousness. It will lead us away from the vain treasures of this world. And it will lead us to the treasures of heaven.

Jesus says, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them”** (6:1). Notice that Jesus does not say, “Beware of practicing your righteousness,” but, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.”** Practice righteousness, just not to be seen. Nobody likes a hypocrite. We look at them and say, “Oh, they think they’re so great.” So we might be tempted to take Jesus’ warnings against hypocrisy as an excuse to look down upon hypocrites. It’s kind of ironic. We identify another person as a hypocrite, and then we feel morally superior to them. That’s not so far from hypocrisy.

And we might use it as an excuse to just not do anything. You might see someone give a donation so they can have their name on something. Or they might go pray long prayers in public so everyone can hear their piety. Or they might post on Facebook about their fast or what they’re giving up for Lent. And we might think, *Oh, what a hypocrite*. Meanwhile, we might not do anything. We might not donate anything, we might not pray, and we might not fast. We identify a hypocrite, so we feel justified in our nothingness, but at least the hypocrite did something.

Jesus does not say, “Beware of practicing your righteousness.” He does not say, “Beware of giving.” He does not say, “Beware of praying.” He does not say, “Beware of fasting.” Instead, he assumes we will do these things. So he says, **“When you give ...”** (6:3), **“When you pray ...”** (6:7), and **“When you fast ...”** (6:16). He assumes that we will do these things, so he strongly implies that we should. But the purpose of these things is not to be seen.

The purpose of giving to the needy is to help the needy. The purpose of prayer—well, there are several purposes of prayer. One is to help the people we are praying for. Another is to receive help from God for ourselves. Another is to reorient our wills to desire the things God desires. And the purpose of fasting is to discipline our wills to deny ourselves the things we crave. This will help us resist temptation. And it will remind us that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So it teaches us to look to him, especially in his Word, for the nourishment that will carry us into eternal life.

So giving, prayer, and fasting are all good. The problem with the hypocrite is that he only wants to be seen. So Jesus says three times, **“Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward”** (6:2, 5, 16). With each of these three things—giving, prayer, and fasting—Jesus says, **“They have received their reward.”** Now what is their reward? They were seen by others. That’s what they wanted out of their giving, prayer, and fasting. They wanted to be seen by others, and they have been. They got what they wanted. But the implication is that they receive no reward from our Father in heaven. So Jesus instructs his disciples to do all of these things in secret. And three times, once with each of these things, he says, **“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you”** (6:4, 6, 18).

This is the tragic thing about the sin of hypocrisy: the hypocrite does not receive the gifts God desires to give to him. The great problem with hypocrites is that their hearts are set on the treasures of this world, and they’re not looking to our Father for his gracious gifts. So when we identify hypocrites, we are very easily tempted to despise them and say, “At least I’m not like him.” This is also hypocrisy. Instead, we should mourn, because this is a person who has closed their heart to the gifts of our Father.

And, of course, we should consider the possibility that we might be the hypocrite. Why do you give? Why do you pray? Why do you fast? If you don't do these things, you should start. Or why do you do any of the good things you do? Is it to be seen by others? That's hypocrisy.

Or do we do these things in order to feel good about ourselves? We might like the feeling of giving, because it makes us feel like we are good people. This isn't much different than giving in order to be seen by others. It's a matter of pride. Or if prayer and fasting makes you feel more righteous, that's pride. Don't stop doing these things, but pray that your Father would reorient your heart. And use these disciplines for the purpose God intends them.

First, give to the needy. Why? Well, because they need it. That part is pretty obvious. But it's also good for our hearts. And pray. Why? Because it benefits the people we pray for, and it reorients our hearts to desire the things God desires. And fast. Why? Because it teaches us to deny ourselves and to look to our Father for all we need.

So as we begin this season of Lent, consider how you might practice these three disciplines. Jesus does not say, "Beware of practicing your righteousness," but, "**Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.**" We should practice righteousness. So think about how you might do these things during the season of Lent. And then, when Lent is over, keep doing them. It's not like Lent is a season where we put these things so we don't have to do them the rest of the year. But it is a yearly reminder that these things are part of how we practice our righteousness. That is, the righteousness God gives you through faith in Jesus Christ should manifest itself in these ways. So these things should be part of our Christian life. Lent is a season of self-denial. And it reminds us that the Christian life is one of self-denial.

Lent is also a season of repentance. We consider the journey that Jesus took to the cross. So we kind of walk with him on that journey. We know how it ends, with Jesus' death and resurrection. And we remember that Jesus also knew how it would end. When he began his ministry, he knew how it would go, how it would end, and how it would then bloom into the resurrection life that no one imagined. And we remember that he marched to the cross because of our sin. So we confess our sins, and we believe the promise of God that our sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus' innocent sufferings and death. That's what repentance is. It's contrition and faith. We confess our sins, and we receive forgiveness. It's not turning from sin to good works, because that would just be trust in ourselves, and that's the opposite of faith. But it's turning from sin, including our reliance on our own good works, and it's turning to Christ in faith. We trust that his sacrifice is sufficient for our sins. There is nothing we can do, absolutely nothing, in order to earn God's favor. But the Father is gracious to us for the sake of his Son's sacrifice for us.

And during Lent, especially on Ash Wednesday, we remember that we are dying. You are dying. Do you know that? I think you do, at least mentally. As a matter of fact, we look at the world around us, and we see that every living thing, and every living person, eventually dies. Now we might push this to the back of our minds. It's something we know, but we don't want to think about it. Don't push it to the back of your minds. You don't have to do that. Pushing it to the back of our minds will not protect us from it. But something else will.

So let's deal with death. You are dying. And the cause of this is sin. God placed a tree in the Garden of Eden called "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil." He told man not to eat from it, and that if he eats from it, he will die. But man ate (Gen. 2:16; 3:1-7, 19). Sin came into the world, and through sin, death. So death has now spread to all of us (Rom. 5:12). "The wages of

sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). So what does that mean? Does it mean that death is the punishment for sin? Yes, sort of, but it’s more nuanced than that. It’s not like God was just so ticked off at Adam and Eve that he decided to kill us all. That’s not it. God did not strike Adam and Eve dead that day. It’s more like death is the natural consequence of sin, so it took a while. Death is still a punishment. Don’t totally dismiss that idea. There are places in the Bible where God just strikes people dead for their sin. And God does intend for us to die. That’s why he kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden. Otherwise they could have eaten from the tree of life and lived forever (Gen. 3:22). But they would have lived forever with sin, and that’s not good. So death is more like the natural consequence of sin. When the man and the woman disobeyed God, they broke the perfect order of the universe. Their hearts ceased to function the way they are supposed to, and the effects rippled throughout the physical universe. So now nature does not function the way it was originally designed to. It sort of does. We still see God’s design. For a while, things function rightly, until they don’t. Our bodies break down, and we die.

This is a more holistic view of sin. It’s too narrow to think of sin as merely the bad things we do. Sin also includes our state of just not being the way we are supposed to be. This affects both body and soul, and this is why we die. So when we confess our sins, we first confess “that we are by nature sinful and unclean.” That’s original sin, the fact that we are not right. Then we confess “that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.” That’s it’s actual sin, the fact that we do not do the right things. These are the two aspects of sin, and both are the reason we die, but especially the first. We die because the original sin broke the perfect order of the universe.

So you are dying. Part of Ash Wednesday is the yearly reminder that we were made from dust. God took the dust of the earth, formed it into Adam, and breathed life into him (Gen. 2:7). Then, after man sinned, God said,

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
For you are dust,
and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

Every ache and pain from youth to old age is a reminder that we are dying. Every frustration and every disappointment is a reminder that this world is not right. We came from dust, and we are returning to dust. But that is not the end of the story. My favorite part of the funeral liturgy is at the burial service. It’s when we put dirt on the coffin and say, “Out of dust you were taken, to the dust you shall return, and from the dust you shall rise again.” We have freedom to acknowledge that we are dying, because Jesus has provided a means of escape through his cross.

Instead of death being the end, we have treasure in heaven. Jesus says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” (6:19). This world is passing away, and with it, our bodies. But Jesus says, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:20-21). There, with our bodies raised again, we will live forever without corruption or sin.

So we talked about these three disciplines of giving, prayer, and fasting. With each of these things, Jesus instructs us to do them in secret. And he says three times, “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Now what does that mean? How will God reward us?

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We think or hope that with giving, our Father will reward us by giving us more than we give away, like if I give a hundred dollars to something, I'll get two hundred back in some other way. Maybe, but probably not. When we give to the needy, that helps the needy person. But it also helps us by teaching us to not trust in the treasures of this world. It's an act of self-denial. It's an act of faith saying, "I don't need those dollars, because I have treasure in heaven." Your Father rewards you by reorienting your heart to look away from a false god and to look to him.

Or with prayer, maybe we think the reward is that God will give us whatever we ask for, thereby satisfying the desires of our heart. Maybe, but probably not if our prayers are selfish. Prayer is good for the people we pray for. And it is good for us, because it reorients our hearts to desire the same things as our Father in heaven. We skipped over this part in the reading, but we should notice that this is where Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. So when he teaches them about prayer, it's not, "Pray for whatever you want." That would be an invitation to selfishness. Now, it's okay to pray for things that we think are good. It's more than okay. We should do that. But we should not pray to satisfy our selfish desires. Instead, we should especially pray for those things that Jesus teaches us to pray for. That's what the Lord's Prayer does for us. The reward is that God reorients our hearts to look away from our false gods and to look to him for the things he desires to give to us.

Or maybe we think there is some earthly reward to fasting. And I don't know. Maybe it's good for your health. Maybe it's not. Ask your doctor. But the spiritual reward is in the self-denial. We look at food and say, "I don't need that." I mean, not right now, and not for my eternal benefit. The reward is that God reorients our hearts to look away from the things of this world, even good things, like food, and to look to him for the food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27). Jesus gives you this food in his Word and in his body and blood in Holy Communion.

So we look to our Father in heaven, and we see our treasure there. Your treasure is Jesus. He was crucified for your sins. He was raised for your justification. He will raise your mortal and decaying bodies from the grave. He will transform you after his perfect image. And you will share in his glory for all eternity. Look away from the vain treasures of this world, for you have treasure in heaven. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.