

God Moves... Us to Repentance

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Scripture: Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21

¹ "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever 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 whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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

Let us pray...

In Matthew 6, Jesus offers some tips on how we should and should not do a few things. He advises that when we give to the needy, that we do not make a big show of it. He suggests that we even go so far as to give with one hand without the other even knowing about it. He advises that when we pray we go into a quiet room. He advises that when we fast we wash our face and make ourselves appear healthy so that others do not know we are fasting. Jesus tells us that God knows all we do in secret and will reward us. He is cautioning the religious leaders who like to stand before men when they pray or give. Jesus says they have received their reward, which is just recognition from men. Jesus concludes by summarizing why we should give, pray and fast as he advises – because then we are drawing close to God and we are storing up treasures in heaven.

At first, I thought this an odd reading on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent is traditionally a season of self-examination and reflection and fasting. It is a season where people often give something up or choose to do something 'extra' for others. People may give up things like chocolate or coffee or pop or television or social media. Others may add in a Lenten devotional or small group study or may add in a guided prayer practice. These ideas are reflected by the displays in the side windows and on the back table on the north side of the sanctuary. Please, take a moment and consider the suggestions found there before you leave tonight. Traditionally though, Christians would fast during the season of Lent. They would abstain from food. The meal time becomes extra time in prayer, study, and reflection. The periods of physical hunger remind us of our spiritual hunger for God and lead to more prayer, study, and reflection. These lead to introspection and often to repentance. All together the practice of fasting leads us closer to God and to becoming more like Jesus.

Matthew 6 is a very appropriate scripture for us tonight. Today is a day when many will wear the mark of the ashen cross on the forehead as a reminder of their faith. If the cross on our forehead is simply a mark of religiosity, then we have already received our reward in full too. If it is a personal reminder of the inner transformation that we hope takes place, then it is between us and God, not as a show for the world. If our inner change is leading to greater worship and praise of God and into humble acts of kindness to our fellow man, then we are beginning to store up those treasures in heaven. The idea of storing up almost implies some type of score keeping. We know that it is not about keeping score on a secret scorecard. It is about living as a child of God.

Tonight, as Justin and I imposed ashes, we said, "*Repent and believe the gospel*". In the big scope of things, Lent is a season of giving to God and of sacrifice to remind ourselves of the repentance we must offer. The ashen cross is a mark of ownership – it says that we belong to Christ. Ashes are used to remind us that we are mortal, and that Jesus chose to die for our sins. This is the gospel that we encourage you to remember. As we go through the season of Lent, we hope that our inner light of Christ shines forth. Spiritually, the cross we chose to bear in our heart is a sign of our inward piety. As you depart tonight, we want to give you a little key tag. On one side is a reminder to simply "Believe". Believe that Jesus is your Savior and Lord. This is the gospel. On the other side you will find Psalm 51:10, which states, "*Create in your child a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*" As you see it on your keys each day during Lent, we hope that it is both a prayer that you can lift to God and a reminder of your commitment to holy living during the season of Lent.

As I talked about earlier, Jesus warns us about making a show of our faith. Yes, when we practice our faith out in the world, it must not be showy or draw attention to us. In times of worship, however, it is another matter. To joyfully proclaim the Word, to pray out loud with energy, to exuberantly lift voice in song – these are public displays of faith practiced in a closed setting. It is the purpose for gathering. No one who comes to church is offended when these actions occur. We are gathered to worship as a community. Here it is good to pray and sing and hear the Word proclaimed with passion and excitement.

As Christians, our worship and love of God should also extend outside the walls of the church and beyond the security of our homes. In extending our faith, we must always be genuine and sincere. If we are praying before a meal out in public, it should not be loud and showy. It should be just as it is at home. Reverence and respectful are words that come to mind. Bowing heads and saying a quiet prayer may draw attention from those around you. It is a witness to our faith that exposes others to faith without being offensive or rude. At other times we may notice someone who is struggling or having a bad day. To take the time to notice, to offer understanding and empathy, and to offer to pray for them are great witnesses to our faith. Simply asking if you could pray for them is a great witness to God's love and to your love for all of humanity. Praying before a meal, offering to pray for someone - these are good examples of how we to practice our faith in the world. But the greatest and most impactful way that we witness to our faith is by how we simply live our lives day in and day out. In the ways we treat others, in the ways we conduct ourselves, in the choices we make, and in the words we use – this is our truest witness to who Jesus Christ is in our lives. This is how we let others know who Jesus is.

When He was with the disciples, Jesus asked who people were saying that He was. Jesus knew that the disciples have heard the gossip and the whispers as they have traveled. In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the disciples, "*But what about you? Who do you say I am?*"? Peter gives the answer. Peter responds quickly, saying, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*".

Jesus' question is one that we need to be able to answer as well. As we journey through this Lenten season together, we will seek to better understand our answer to this question. When asked, we all need to be prepared to share just who Jesus is for us. If not, we simply appear to know about who Jesus is instead of really knowing Jesus. So I ask, who do YOU say Jesus is? To those we meet, to those who see Jesus in us, we need to be able to answer this question.

In the last portion of our scripture for tonight we read about storing up treasures. Jesus says, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*". This is so true. If our lives seem focused on gaining wealth or position or status or popularity, then people see us as people of the world. If our lives seem focused on sharing Jesus' love with others and with caring for those in need, then people will see us a child of God. Loving God and others - this is the treasure Jesus encourage us to store up.

Living as a child of God draws us to this same place of love and contentment and trust. Giving it all to God allows us to live in and experience His joy as well. Life is not then about the here and now only, but also about our eternal life. When we see and live as a child of God, we truly begin to store up treasures in heaven because that is where our heart is. This is a treasure nothing on this earth can

destroy or steal. As the things of this world lessen, the things of His kingdom increase. This is part of our Lenten journey. As we look within and seek to become closer to God, the things of this world will fall away. As we repent of our sins and seek to walk a more devout life, the things of God will gain more of a significant place in our lives. As we continue into Lent, may we each walk this day as a child of God, living and trusting in Him alone. Amen.