

Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21

<sup>1</sup> "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. <sup>2</sup> "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. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>5</sup> "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. <sup>6</sup> 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...

<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> 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.

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

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5: 20b-6:10

*1 We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God... 1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

Let us pray...

Tonight, as we gather for Ash Wednesday, we begin with our passage from Matthew 6. This passage connects to the first focus of Lent – looking within and making ourselves right with God. The idea of looking within often starts with seeking to identify those habits or practices that we need to let go or purge ourselves of because they separate us from God. Sometimes it is about having the wrong motivation and other times the struggle comes about because our heart is not in the right place. In this passage from Matthew we find a warning about how we practice our 'piety'. Piety is a quality that relates to how we are being religious or reverent towards God. To give you a quick example on piety, the commonly used passage for this subject is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In this parable the religious man stands up and makes sure everyone is

watching before he prays and then he prays really loud - so that all can hear. In his prayer he loudly proclaims how generous of a giver he is, and he boasts about how much better he is – much better than all those common sinners. By contrast the tax collector thinks himself unworthy of even being in God's presence. He stands off in the corner and prays a simple and honest prayer of repentance. Jesus identifies the tax collector as the one that is pleasing to God. His humble and contrite heart is aligned with God's heart.

In our passage today, Jesus has the same general message for us. In the opening verse we are told that when we do things for show, then we have received our reward. As Jesus has observed the faithful, he has noticed that some people clang their money loudly when dropping it into the offering plate and others stand in prominent places, drawing attention to themselves before they pray. They want others to say, "Look at them - look how religious they are". Instead, Jesus advises us to give in secret – so that our left hand does not know what our right hand gives. When praying, Jesus tells us to go into a private room to pray. Close the door and enter into a one-on-one time with just you and God. He is saying, do not practice our faith to please people, but rather to please God.

In verse sixteen Jesus addresses fasting. But it is the same message – do not fast just for others to be impressed with how holy you are. Hear the indirect yet stern warning given the religious leaders: "*Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting*". Like praying, Jesus directs us to fast in a private and personal way. He says to put on oil and to wash the face so that others do not even know we are fasting. Our fasting will then not draw attention to ourselves. We can then focus on God and developing our relationship with God. Then God will see our hearts and will reward us.

The practicing of an honest and sincere and humble faith is what we are being called to by Jesus in Matthew 6. Again, when we pray and worship and maybe even fast – a common practice during Lent – we should not make a big deal of it. When we do these things for others to see, then we

have gotten our reward. The notice and recognition of others is all that we will “get” out of our shallow and hollow and arrogant practice of faith. But when we worship and pray and fast from a place seeking God and God’s glory, then we begin to live into verse 20, as our faithful practices work to “*store up for ourselves treasures in heaven*”.

During the season of Lent some folks have the habit of giving up something. Some people go on a version of a “fast” – abstaining from chocolate or pop or alcohol or other things during these six weeks. On Monday and Tuesday, on Facebook I noticed a few people letting us know that they would be off social media for the next six weeks. These simple posts, I believe, were intended to let us know to communicate with them by other means if we need to get ahold of them. They were not trying to draw attention to themselves. Giving up “something” aligns us with the more traditional practice of fasting. The denying of self is intended to draw us towards God when the hunger or craving or desire rises up within us. That feeling reminds us to pray or to read from the Bible. A fast that builds treasures in heaven should always connect us to God and should work towards developing our relationship with him. Sometimes people also add something in during Lent. They might choose to be a part of a Lenten small group study or to add a Lent-specific devotional book to their daily spiritual practices. This intentional carving out of extra time for God, of course, requires us to give up something, even if it just to give up some sleep.

Whether we are giving up something or adding something in for Lent, we must heed the advice that we heard in Matthew 6. The minute we say something like, “I can’t wait for Lent to get over so that I can have chocolate again” then we have drawn attention to ourselves and to our apparent piety instead of bringing honor to the glory of God. When it becomes about us, we have entered the Pharisee’s domain.

As we turn now to the second passage, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5 and 6, we turn to the second focus of Lent – repentance and forgiveness. Paul begins the passage by encouraging us to “*be reconciled to God*”. We do so by confessing and repenting of our sins. When we do so, we are

becoming *“the righteousness of God”*. Paul also extends the idea of being reconciled to God to the idea of being reconciled to one another. In their ministry they have intentionally avoided being obstacles to others. They have also been models of the faith, enduring many hardships and trials. They have also modeled the good qualities of God so that others may come to know God more. The qualities listed in verses six and seven are these qualities: *“purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech”*. Let me repeat that list and ask you to consider this question as I repeat the list: Are these the qualities others see in you on a regular basis? *“Purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech”*. These are the character traits of God that we should all seek to model for the world.

Paul concludes with a list that contrasts how the faithful are seen by the world versus how the believers are seen by one another and by God. The world sees the early Christians this way: *“impostors... unknown... dying... punished... sorrowful... poor... having nothing”*. By contrast, the Christians trust in God and see themselves as *“true to God... known by God... alive in Christ... rejoicing in the suffering... made rich in heavenly treasures... and possessing all that matters – eternal life”*. As we prepare to enter the season of Lent, may we do so with this list in mind: *“true to God... known by God... alive in Christ... rejoicing in the suffering... made rich in heavenly treasures... and possessing all that matters – eternal life”*. Doing so we will be able to look honestly within; we will see what needs to die inside of ourselves; and, we will know forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another. Emerging from the season of Lent, together we will be prepared to encounter the risen and resurrected Christ on Easter morning. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.