

## Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Ash Wednesday Sermon

Isaiah 58:1-12 / 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 / Psalm 51 / Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

*Proclaimed on 14 February 2024 at Bethlehem, Adelaide by Pastor Thomas Pietsch*

### Introduction

Each Ash Wednesday, as we head into Lent, we hear this rich teaching from Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Sometimes I have heard people say that Jesus gives us three things to do – almsgiving, prayer and fasting – but doesn't tell us how to do these things. But that's only partially right. Jesus does not give specific directions, say, of when to fast, and what to fast from, but he does give direction on how to go about your fast. So in this sermon, we will be looking first at how we are to go about our almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and then in the second half we will be looking at the particular practices that Jesus prescribes.

### Do in Secret

Before Jesus mentions any of these three practices, he provides a short introduction, summing them up with the words “practicing your piety”, or “practicing your righteousness” (6:1). Straight up we can note that Jesus is talking to people who are already his disciples, and so have already been made righteous by faith. He is not thus speaking about earning our way into heaven. After all, he is on the way to the cross to open heaven to all believers. Rather, Jesus is here talking about how to live out this life of faith, how to practice the righteousness we've been given, and also how to build up rewards in heaven.

*“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”, says Jesus.*

Jesus' overarching concern, then, is what audience you practice your piety in front of. And he goes on to elaborate with reference to each of the three practices. Let's hear what he has to say about almsgiving.

*“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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-4)*

And Jesus then has a similar word to say about prayer, making sure you close your door, and then fasting, putting oil on your head and washing your face to hide your fasting from others.

How are we to give alms, pray and fast? Secretly. Before an audience of One.

In giving this teaching, Jesus is acknowledging that there are two communities for the actions that we do. There are the people around us, and then there is our heavenly Father. And that when it comes to receiving a reward, you have to choose one of the communities, one audience, either your heavenly Father, or the people around you. You'll only get one of their rewards.

### Which Reward?

And sometimes we can experience this as a difficult call to make. Which reward do I want? Do I want to appear to be a good person to others, thus making my life more pleasant? Or do I want to keep my piety a secret and hope that the reward from God will be better? Humanly speaking, this can be difficult, because

sometimes our acts of piety are hard won. We have to fight against the flesh in order to give to the poor, pray and fast, and it's natural to be quite happy when we have small victories, and want to tell others about our hard work. Think of the parable Jesus tells of the Pharisee, praying in the temple near the tax collector. The Pharisee prays: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:12). The Pharisee sounds like he's worked hard, is proud and even thankful to God for his fasting and almsgiving. But Jesus says that he did not go home justified, because he exalted himself, rather than humbled himself. While the Pharisee isn't explicitly telling others about his piety, he is implicitly measuring himself with the human community. That's where his heart and treasure is, and so that's where his reward will be.

Do we seek reward from the world or from God? As if appealing to this dilemma, Jesus assures us that the reward your heavenly Father gives you will be better:

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:19-21)

Jesus is encouraging you to seek the heavenly reward in part because it is a more secure place for building up treasures, rather than in the fickleness of public opinion.

But he is also warning of the dangers of living a life that is worried about these things. Even if your social capital, your reputation, is kept intact your whole life long, and you're praised by all people, you can live a life with your heart set on earthly treasures, worried about what you can lose, concerned with your earthly years that are here today and gone tomorrow. Such a life can lead you into temptation to even forsake Christ, to turn to the idols of mammon and the self, putting your treasure on earth.

Instead, the kingdom of heaven is a place where peace reigns, a place where your heart and concern can find rest. A life that invests in secret practices of piety, offering hidden spiritual sacrifices to God the Father is a life that puts your treasure in a place that is stable, and that will endure. Jesus isn't telling you this as an abstract rule you must do your best to keep, so much as being a path to freedom, to reward, to joy.

### **"Free to stand apart"**

So that is the "how" of practicing your piety – secretly, behind closed doors offering something beautiful for God, and for God alone. Now let's look at the practices themselves. The angle that I want to highlight tonight can perhaps be illustrated by a story.

When we lived in America, we had an Anglican church in walking distance that we would sometimes attend when we couldn't drive to our regular parish. It was a relatively affluent church, and the priest there once told a story about their most generous giver. No one else knew who this man was, but the priest was aware that this man consistently gave very large amounts to the parish, and one day he asked him why he did it. What motivated him to be so generous with the church?

This parishioner responded: "Well, for me, I'm in a very demanding job. I'm giving everything I've got to my job. I'm trying to hang on in my profession. And I've got this mortgage, and we live in a nice suburb, and I've got private school fees for the children. So basically, when I'm putting something in the plate on Sunday morning it's my own little way of clenching my fist at the world and saying, ok you've got most of me, but by God you don't have all of me. There's at least 10% of me that's free. Free to stand apart. Free to stand apart from that which the world is giving itself to."

It was a somewhat idiosyncratic answer, from a man who seemed a little worn out by his responsibilities. But nevertheless, it struck me that this parishioner was getting at something that is a part of Jesus' teaching tonight.

### **Counter-Cultural Practices**

For it is not just that practicing your piety in secret is counter-cultural, but the practices themselves are something of an antidote to getting swept up in the ways of the world, and earthly treasures.

Much of what we do in our lives is strongly influenced by the society around us. The way we dress, what we eat, how we live, what we do for work, even how we speak, what vocabulary we use, our pronunciation.

And much of this is largely chosen for us. We're not really free to wear togas, or speak Gaelic, or work as an archer. We're not really even free to not own a phone, or to not have electricity and pay the required bills. And then, when you're in a particular line of work, or live in a particular area, there are further expectations on us. Sometimes the whole pattern of your life can be laid out for you, which can seem freeing, but can also be constraining, leading us on an arc to worldliness, mammon and then the grave.

Jesus' teaching provides freedom from this. Like this wealthy parishioner understood, there is freedom in saying no to the worldly practices that we're all swept up into. And instead, giving away our money, praying in secret, and going without food we don't strictly need, all as a kind of clenched-fisted act of defiance against all that is selfish, and would seek to rob us of our joy and our salvation.

### **Christian Identity**

Sometimes we can ask what is it we should do as Christians, now that we have been granted God's Holy Spirit? What are some practical steps I can take in the Christian life? Of course, we all know about love of God and love and neighbour, but those can sound abstract? What does that love look like?

Tonight, Jesus gives you a concrete answer. Like many of his answers, it may not be the one we either expect or want. But here it is. Give alms, pray and fast, and do it all as a beautiful secret between you and God.

May God strengthen you with his Holy Spirit, that you may find freedom and great reward in building up your treasures in heaven this Lent.

*And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*