

## Sermon: Ash Wednesday Message

2/17/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When Jesus preached today's Gospel lesson, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were three pillars of the Jewish faith. There had long been the belief that by doing these things Jews could gain merit with God. That's why the Hebrew word for almsgiving, *tzedakah*, is the same word for righteousness. Jews believed that they could gain favor with God by giving more to the poor and downtrodden, and for those who believed in life after death, that they could earn their salvation as well. But not everyone was doing these things for the right reasons.

The point that Jesus was seeking to impress upon the crowd was not that his followers should no longer give alms, pray, or fast. If that had been the case, Christians across the world would not be practicing these spiritual disciplines over the next forty days. Rather, he preached today's message because he wanted to challenge his followers, both those gathered there and us worshipping here, to remember who we are and to whom we belong. If we practice these spiritual disciplines so that others will praise us, we will get our reward. We will be praised by others and revel in their praise. But we will not be righteous, because righteousness is a gift from God which requires a change of heart. The reason why we have been called to give alms, pray, and fast is because they are ways in which we can and should demonstrate our love of God and our neighbor. Such love is absent when all we think about is how they can benefit us.

Now, I doubt that any of us have ever sounded a trumpet before giving alms or disfigured our faces when fasting. At one point or another, though, we have all been tempted to show others just how righteous we are, and have sometimes given in. That is why Jesus not only commanded us to resist such temptations; he also taught us how. Whether you are giving alms, praying, or

fasting, we hear Jesus say, do it in secret. Make certain that God and God alone can see you when you are saying and doing these things. For when you do so, there is only one person who can and will reward you, God.

Any other year, the irony would be thick. After all, this is Ash Wednesday, the day on which millions of Christians traditionally have ashes put on their foreheads and wear them out for all to see. The ashes we wear are a testament to our faith and our desire to be reconciled with God, or at least they are meant to be. But this year, far fewer of us will be wearing ashes and those of us that do will not be spending much time around other people. Instead, most of us will be at home wearing our ashes in secret, doing as Jesus said, but not necessarily as he intended.

Whether we wear our ashes out or in secret, in order for them to mean something, they must be accompanied by a change of heart. Our wearing them must be a reminder that everything we are and have is a gift from God; that apart from God, all these things are nothing more than a pile of ashes that will one day be swept away. That's why we're gathered here today. So that we might humble ourselves before God, ask forgiveness for our sins, and give thanks for all the gifts which God has given us. Gifts like God's Son, whose life, death, and resurrection are the foundation of our faith, and this entire Lenten season. Amen.