DISCIPLINING DESIRES

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023
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Jesus said to his disciples, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them." And some years later his disciples established a practice of gathering together on this holy day to mark themselves with ashes, so everyone could see them practicing their righteousness. Perhaps it was a strange decision by the church to begin this season with its emphasis on practices of giving alms, praying, and fasting with such a public marking of ourselves, while reading this Gospel passage. Afterall, Jesus's teaching in the Gospel lesson from Matthew 6 seems to challenge, if not outright contradict, this practice. Yet perhaps the opportunity for growth in grace and in life with Jesus comes in the tension we feel between a public marking on this day and the invitation into practices that conform us with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps it is in this tension that we may remember or even experience for the first time what it is like to live not for our own glory but for God's.

We've entered this passage from Matthew in the middle of what is arguably Jesus's most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. He has already instructed his disciples about where to look to see true blessing and about how they are to let their light shine, so others might see their good works and give glory to God. Now his sermon has taken a turn to focus on the opposite side of good work practices. Jesus knows the temptation of doing good for the sake of one's own glory. In his 40-day fast in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to perform good works for his glory. Now in his sermon, he's giving practical examples of righteous acts easily done for the wrong reason and for the wrong audience. Surprisingly, Jesus doesn't condemn the idea that his disciples would seek a reward for doing good works. He simply teaches us to seek the right reward that comes from having only one audience in mind—the audience of One, our Father in heaven.

Jesus gives three examples: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Each of these was a common practice in Jesus's Jewish piety. They were the kinds of righteousness that God's people had been practicing and had been encouraged to practice throughout the ages. So Jesus highlights these ordinary, individual ways of pursuing what is right and good. He also challenges those who follow him to guard these practices against the temptation of seeking to store up treasures that eventually waste away or are taken by another. Jesus shows that these earthly treasures need not simply be material or even grand. These treasures can be as simple as the praise of others for our generosity, the honor that comes from being seen as deeply spiritual or religious, and the attention given to those who are obviously fasting. The practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are surely good and right ways of living out righteousness, but if our intention in doing them is for our own honor or glory then we've missed the point.

What is instructive for us during this season of Lent, and why the church has for so long encouraged almsgiving, prayer, and fasting to be staples of our Lenten disciplines, is that with the right intention these practices have the impact of shaping us and our desires. The grace-enabled

disciplining of our desires through practices empowers us to live the lines of the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come" and "thy will be done."

Let's take the practice of giving alms. Our world feeds us a steady diet of needing more: more clothes, more shoes, more experiences, more hobbies, more collections, more of anything that can be sold to you. I often tell my wife that I don't like to go shopping because stores are so good at making me want more and convincing me to buy it. The overwhelming message we are sold is the pursuit of happiness is best accomplished by purchasing more, regardless of what it is you're purchasing. Giving your money away is inherently detrimental to this pursuit of purchasing more. And giving your money to those whose necessities are not being met shakes us awake from the consumeristic dream we are so often sold. Practicing the discipline of almsgiving, especially during Lent, helps to reshape our desires according to the economy of God's mercy rather than the economy of pursuing more. Perhaps Christ is inviting you in this Lenten season to a deeper practice of giving that you may be formed more fully in God's will and way for God's glory.

Let's consider the practice of prayer. Jesus warns his disciples about the kinds of prayer that bring attention to oneself. He cautions about the kind of religiosity that is about the show—a performance for others to watch in order to know how truly pious and spiritual a person is. As someone whose job is to pray in public, this is a warning I take seriously. Jesus's calling to create spaces of connection with God outside of the public eye challenges any who are prone to have their best relationship with God when others are watching. Prayer that moves into the deep recesses of our lives, into the places we go to escape the world around us, gives God access to reshaping even our most intimate and personal desires. By practicing regular rhythms of prayer during Lent, we open ourselves to God speaking to those places in our lives that are too painful or too proud to be public. Perhaps Christ is inviting you in this Lenten season to a more expansive practice of prayer that you may be formed more fully in God's will and way for God's glory.

Let's consider the practice of fasting. Fasting at its most basic level is giving up something for a time. Most often fasting has pertained specifically to food, but it does not need to be limited to that. While fasting food has a variety of purposes—from the weight loss craze of intermittent fasting to the social pressure created by the fasting of hunger strikes—fasting in a religious context has spiritual ends in mind. (If you want some thoughtful reflection on fasting, I encourage you to watch the Congregation's Adult Forum led by Mark Shaw this past Sunday.) Again, Jesus warns his disciples that fasting to draw attention to oneself is not the kind of fasting that practices righteousness. As good as fasting might be for raising awareness about a social issue or helping someone be healthier, these are not the ends that Jesus has in mind for his disciples as we fast. Like giving alms, fasting has a way of disciplining our desires. Whether our fasts are from food generally or in particular (like not eating chocolate) or from social media or from binge watching Netflix or any other thing, in our fasting we acknowledge that no need and no desire is as great as our need for God and our desire for God's ways. Fasting reminds us and forms in us the truth that no hunger, whether physical or emotional or spiritual, is as great as our hunger for God. Perhaps Christ is inviting you in this Lenten season to a particular practice of fasting that you may be formed more fully in God's will and way for God's glory.

Jesus concludes this section of his sermon talking about treasures and hearts. And perhaps that is an easy way for us to focus our journey of Lent. Our hearts follow our treasure. What we value, what we prize, what we seek as a reward, what we lift up, these are our treasures. And our passions, our desires, our will, our motivation, our imaginations—all those things are connected to the biblical understanding of our hearts—follow these treasures. Lent reminds us that all these treasures are to have their end in God's will, and God's purposes, and God's ways. The practices of Lent help shape us, so our treasures and our hearts find their home in God.

Today we are marked by a cross made of ashes that reminds us of our own mortality, our own humanity, our own sin and death. It is not a mark for our own glory or symbolizing our own righteousness. Rather it is a mark in the shape of a cross, reminding us of the one who fully and in every way lived the prayer "thy kingdom come, and thy will be done." It is a mark in the shape of a cross, reminding us of the glory of God revealed on Jesus's cross. So beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, and come receive the mark of your mortality and the Father's glory. Amen.