

## Ash Wednesday 2016

### Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <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.”

Dear Congregation:

The purple season is starting!

Our Lenten journey begins. We are invited to meditate on the meaning of our relationship with God making an evaluation of our life in a way to understand in what areas we need to grow.

For this reason, I invite you to focus on the spiritual habits of Jesus that we were meditating, to read the Scriptures and Pray.

Every Tuesday, during our Lenten season I will be sharing meditation on the Lords Prayer.

Today I want to invite you to meditate on your prayer life.

Jesus would often go off to some lonely place to pray, sometimes alone and sometimes with his disciples. Clearly Jesus needed times away from the crowds who clamored for his attention-and he thought his disciples needed to get away from it all from time to time as well.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus needed time to have his attention completely on God, on his relationship with God, Jesus needed time to speak and time to listen, time to rest in the love of the one who sent him into the world. Clearly, Jesus needed the encouragement, the strengthening, the empowerment that comes from encounters with God in deep, intentional times of prayer. If Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Faith. Lenten Journey 40 Days with the Lord's Prayer. P. 20

<sup>2</sup> Idem p. 20

But, not only do we need to pray –many if not most of us want to pray. If we stop for a moment, step aside from the many distractions of our lives, and look deep within, we'll find a longing to connect with God. We look for intimacy with the divine, the holy, God our Father, Christ our Saviour and the Spirit our Counselor and guide.

I think that a good spiritual practice during this Lenten season concerning prayer starts with identifying what are some of the distractions that are now blocking our prayer life.

Many times we want to pray but we are not aware of the elements in our daily life that are blocking our desire to have a more active life of prayer. We need, for this reason, to identify first what are those elements that are impeding us to grow in our connection with God through prayer.

In a very interesting guide to “Practice a Consistent Prayer Life” by Richard E. Dodge,<sup>3</sup> we can read that Prayer is a discipline, much like fasting, meditation, and confession. But in our multitasking, instant-gratification world, how can you focus on and make time for the discipline of prayer?

The author invites us to consider these seven steps to help us develop a more consistent, disciplined prayer life:

- 1. Accept your need to pray**

Consider how much Jesus depended on prayer. Jesus prayed not only to set an example but also to teach us that even the Son of God needed to be connected through prayer to God. It was obvious that unless He had spent time with the Father, He could not be effective in ministry.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/practice-consistent-prayer-life>

## **2. Admit your need to learn**

Even the apostles asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11). Prayer is not a formula or a code, but one heart talking to another, expressing our sincere desire to know the heart of God.

## **3. Align yourself with God**

Jesus knew God's will because He prayed and listened to Him. God lets us know God's will when we spend time with our Father in solitude, whether through prayer, Bible study, worship, or conversation with others who also seek God's will. Prayer is listening as well as speaking, feeling as well as pleading.

## **4. Remember others' needs**

Anytime we feel the pain of another person, our immediate response should be that God has revealed a prayer opportunity. Hearing, feeling, sensing, and seeking the needs of others reflects God's work in and through us. Ask God to help you see others' needs as God sees them and to quicken your heart to stop and pray.

## **5. Adapt to focus on God**

The difference between you and God's greatest prayer warriors is your time and focus. God has given all of us the same amount of time and the same instruction: Seek Him and invest ourselves in prayer for others. Whether we do this or not depends on our willingness and desire.

## **6. Accept God's help**

The Bible tells us that our prayers are not efforts to inform God about needs or concerns. He already knows them. Our prayers help us to acknowledge our trust and dependence on God to handle our prayers, seek God's encouragement and strength, and trust God with the results. God is more interested in our trusting Him completely than He is in whether we fully understand everything.

### **7. Adopt a plan**

Certainly prayer should not be mechanical, but it should be disciplined. In fact, that's one reason why we suggest that prayer is a Christian discipline - we should practice and make prayer a habit. Adding structure, such as having a place, a time, a pattern, or a partner, encourages consistency and growth.

But basically, after following all these steps, remember the most important and fundamental message from Jesus in our Gospel text from Matthew 6, "it highlights the dangers and consequences of unauthentic piety. Public or pretend displays of pious acts merit nothing"<sup>4</sup> according to Jesus we should always pay attention to this directive:

"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."

Our prayer life and our spirituality should be focused on God only.

In each of the directives of today's reading, the theme is the same: when you give to the needy, donate privately; when you pray, pray privately; when you fast, abstain privately; and when you store u treasures, store u treasures of the heart.

The idea is clear, the invitation to cultivate a private piety is related with the intention of the heart. We are talking here about authenticity. “The authenticity of an act of faith, or an act of piety, is determined by the desire and motivation of the one engaged in that act.”<sup>5</sup>

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and calls us to reflection and repentance, invites us to begin our preparation for Good Friday and for Easter. It does all these things by the very use of ashes, which reminds us of our humanity and our sinfulness, that we are dust and to the dust we shall return.

Authenticity starts in this honest recognition that we are dust and our glory is to experience in this dust the power that can heal and recreate our world and our humanity according to the image of the Son of God that is going to the cross to save us.

The visibility of our ashes is not a probe that we are very spiritual, the visibility of the ashes in our foreheads is the probe that we are broken and we need to be saved.

May the Lord guide your prayer life and your search of an authentic experience of the grace of God during this Lenten season.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Idem.p. 22