

The Life of Jesus
Sermon 9: Teaching on the Mountain
“Are you a hypocrite?”

Passages: Galatians 6:12-15
 Matthew 6:1-18

Lent started last Wednesday.

Up until that day, many Christians around the world had been deliberating over a very difficult question: *“What should I give up for Lent?”* (For those who don’t know, it is a fairly ancient Christian tradition to give up something for Lent, the 40 days which lead up to Easter.) And so, many people debated with themselves: *“Maybe I should give up candy for Lent. Or maybe I should fast one day a week. I could try giving up coffee. Or chocolate! A little abstinence will do me some good. I might even lose a bit of weight.”*

Just last month, Stephen Smith (from the twitter site ‘OpenBible.info’) published a list of the top 10 items that people were planning to give up this year for Lent based on the number of tweets it received:

Rank	What	Number of Tweets
1.	chocolate	1,143
2.	alcohol	681
3.	twitter	645
4.	social networking	501
5.	swearing	364
6.	school	357
7.	sweets	333
8.	soda	280

9.	Coffee	257
10.	fast food	253

(One person even tweeted that, this year, he was giving up plans on becoming the pope!)

Have you given up something for Lent? If so, why? Is it just another challenge to your own self-discipline, like deciding to run a half-marathon or join a gym? Or, do you see it as something more? Do you see it as a *spiritual discipline*; a unique opportunity to grow closer to Jesus?

Today, we turn to **Matthew 6**; a passage in which Jesus talks about three spiritual disciplines: **almsgiving, prayer and fasting**.

(Let's pray before we study it.)

This passage can be divided into three sections. First, Jesus talks about **almsgiving**. Second, Jesus talks about **prayer**. Thirdly, Jesus talks about **fasting**. Is there a reason for this order? Is Jesus laying out these spiritual disciplines according to their importance? I actually believe so! As I understand it, Jesus is listing these disciplines in *the order of importance given to them by Jewish culture and tradition*! You see, it was the practice of these three disciplines which held Jewish society together. They were *corporate* disciplines, aimed at producing very practical, healthy, *social* outcomes.

Let's go through them.

Almsgiving. (The 'Tzedakah') For the Jews of Jesus' day, almsgiving took top priority in terms of spiritual disciplines. Why? To start with, the Law required that you give away 10% of your income to the poor. And so, every day, whether you saw a poor person on the street, or they came to your door, or they camped in your fields, you were required to help them. This was your spiritual duty. But there's more to it than that! Through giving alms, the nation

of Israel was strengthened! Not only were you helping someone, but if you ever fell on hard times, you were confident that others would take care of you! That's why it was top on the priority list of Jewish spiritual disciplines. This *daily* discipline of *almsgiving* **provided an incredible degree of social cohesion**. Everyone was engaged together in doing their part for the good of the nation.

While almsgiving was *daily*, the second spiritual discipline, **prayer**, was done at *weekly* intervals, or on special holy days. That's why it's second on the list. You see, the Jews of Jesus day came to understand prayer in a corporate and liturgical sense. Each Sabbath Day, they would go to the local synagogue and pray with the people of their community (men up front, women and children out the back), led by a Rabbi. In fact, there would be *four designated times* for prayer each Sabbath. (For those fortunate enough to get to Jerusalem for a feast day, they would go to the Temple 5 times on that special day to pray.) The point is, *prayer* followed *almsgiving* in importance because, **in terms of building community**, it was only a *weekly* activity (or something done on holy days).

The third spiritual discipline that Jesus mentions is **fasting**. He places it third in the list because, as a general rule, *Jews would only fast six times per year*. These designated days of fasting were considered 'Days of mourning'. One key day of fasting was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the people would mourn over their sins. On the other five days of fasting, God's people would mourn over the former horrors of their exile and the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in the 6th century BC. And that's why fasting was third on Jesus' list of the spiritual disciplines. Although these 6 days of fasting had an important role in binding God's people together, it was an infrequent practice.

Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting...in that order of importance!

Now, before we begin to explore what Jesus had to say about these three spiritual disciplines, it's important that we take a moment to remember **where** He is and **to whom** He is talking. Remember? Jesus is on a mountainside, somewhere near the town of Capernaum in far-northern Galilee. Sitting in

front of Him is newly gathered group of recruits, mostly men, who have followed Jesus out to this mountainside to hear Him unveil His *political manifesto*—His radical plans to free Israel from Roman domination and ill-treatment.

But, what has Jesus told them so far? He has told them that, even now as Rome rules over them, they are “*blessed*”. Even now, as they suffer under the hand of oppression and injustice, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world; they are the new Jerusalem, a city on a hill which cannot be hidden!

Furthermore, Jesus has told them that He has not come to abolish the Law of Moses, but to fulfil it and, thus, make it possible for them (His followers) to also fulfil it. In Him, they will be righteous even as He is righteous. In Him, they will be holy even as He is holy. In Him, they will be a new people of peace and divine love as, by the Holy Spirit, He renews their hearts with compassion for their Roman persecutors.

Don’t forget: **What Jesus is essentially declaring in the Sermon on the Mount is that He has come to rebuild the true Israel from scratch!** And even though these new recruits are facing of trials and pain, Jesus is reminding them that *He will transform them* into the Israel that God had always wanted—a people who won’t be simply going through the motions of corporate ritual and nationalistic traditions while their hearts are filled with anger, hatred, greed and animosity. Instead, he is going to raise up a people who, at a deep personal level, have a longing to know God and to live in such a deep and personal relationship with Him that, from that grace-filled vertical relationship will flow grace-filled horizontal relationships with others.

And that’s why Jesus takes this well-known list of Israel’s top three spiritual disciplines—**almsgiving, prayer and fasting** (taking them in the order of social priority accepted by most Jews), **but giving to each one a far deeper importance and value than most Jews would have ever imagined**. To put it simply, Jesus takes what would have only been considered as **corporate disciplines** and turns them into **personal disciplines**. He takes the spiritual

disciplines that were always done *in public* (done with others around), and encourages that, from now on, they be done *in private*...in secret!

Why this shift? Well, what you need to remember is that these three ancient spiritual disciplines of **almsgiving, prayer and fasting** were all given to Israel to promote **two** dimensions of spirituality:

- the horizontal dimension—of loving your neighbour as yourself. **Almsgiving, prayer and fasting** were meant to bring social cohesion and corporate consciousness to Israel, encouraging generosity and love.
- the vertical dimension—of loving God with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength. **Almsgiving, prayer and fasting** were also meant to draw people into a deeper walk with God! *Giving alms* would result in praising God for the overflow of bounty He had provided for you to share with others! In public *prayer*, you were meant to turn your heart to God with personal gratitude for the faith community in which you were blessed to be a member. By public *fasting*, you were meant to become personally aware of the destructive power of sin and the need to mourn for the world and for yourself in personal repentance.

Sadly, however, Jesus could see that (1) not only had the vertical dimension of these spiritual disciplines been totally forgotten...but (2) the horizontal dimension had become totally compromised and tarnished by evil and selfish hearts. That's why Jesus uses the 'h' word—**hypocrite!** A hypocrite is someone who does something on the outside without any true belief on the inside. In both the horizontal (relationship with others) and the vertical (relationship with God) dimensions, people were saying one thing and doing another. As a result, these relationships were hollow and empty because the person put the priority on themselves! This disease of hypocrisy was contaminating Israel!

As I said earlier, **it was always Jesus' clear intention to turn this group** (sitting at His feet) **into the new Israel!** How was He going to do it? By reviving, in them, *the true, two-dimensional spiritual life that God always meant for Israel to experience*...thus, eliminating **hypocrisy!** And that is what this passage is about!

Notice the pattern. As Jesus goes through each of the three disciplines, He repeats the same pattern:

- First, He warns them: ***“Do not be like the hypocrites who (give alms/pray/fast) to be seen by others (ie. with corrupted motives). They have already received their reward.”***
- Second, He instructs in a new way: ***“But when you (give alms/pray/fast) do it in secret...And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you!”***

The key word here is ***“reward”***. What do you think Jesus has in mind when He talks about ***rewards***? Basically, He’s talking about “reaping what you’ve sowed”! You see, the reward to those who, in this world, have manipulated and manufactured relationships based on false pretences and hypocrisy have already begun to receive what they’ve sowed—they’re getting their reward—which is ***shallow relationships***! But those of us who seek to enter the the ***flow of grace*** coming from God (vertical relationship) will find deeper relationships as God’s grace flows out to others. This is the ***reward Jesus calls us towards—the reward*** of intimacy...with God and with others.

Hence, Jesus says to His new disciples, ***“Be part of the change!” “Be part of the revolution of grace!”***. How? By engaging in the 2-dimensional flow of grace!

1. ***Be secretly generous!*** (*“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”*) Every day, share the bounty of what you have received from God with the poor and the needy. And as you do that, this ***discipline of giving*** will lead you into deepening relationships on both the vertical and horizontal dimensions...relationships based in thankfulness to God and His grace!
2. ***Be secretly prayerful!*** Join in the conversation of heaven, but not only on the Sabbath Day, when you’re with fellow believers. Instead, pray every day! Pray and intercede for each other; bless and lift up each other every day of the week! Unite in prayer, standing firm against the evil one, and with one voice declaring, ***“Our Father in Heaven...”***. As you do, this ***discipline of prayer*** will lead you into increasingly rewarding relationships on both the vertical and horizontal dimensions...relationships based in God’s grace!

3. **Be secretly mournful!** (This is what Lent is all about!) As God opens your eyes to all the evil effects of the fall, scattered all around us like the burned out buildings of war, weep and mourn for our on-going 'exile'. We are still outside the Promised Land and our Bridegroom (Jesus) has gone away for now! It's in that attitude that we fast! **But...** do it always with hope! ***"Wash your face; anoint your head with oil!"*** For the fact is that our exile is already coming to an End. Jesus has begun the reconstruction of this world. We can already anticipate the coming down from heaven of the New Jerusalem and the New Temple whose light will never go out! The Bridegroom will soon return for His bride, the church! The horizontal and vertical dimensions of perfected relational glory are getting closer!

This is the revolution of Jesus—a quiet revolution of the heart based in the patient hope of eternity!

As I said at the beginning of this talk, the one question that so many Christians ask this time of year is, *"What should I give up for Lent?"* But you know what? **It's the wrong question!** Why? Because the focus is all on me- *"What must I give up?"* (Indeed, this is exactly the focus that will lead us into hypocrisy!) The question we should be asking at this time of year is not on us... *"What should I give up for Lent?"*, but rather on Jesus! *"How can I better enter the flow of God's grace in Christ?"* *"How can I better discover the rich reward of relationships that God has in store for those who follow His Son?"*

The answer to that question is found in those three ancient spiritual disciplines of ***Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting!*** For Jesus isn't telling us what to *give up*, but rather, what to *jump into!* *"Be generous!"* *"Be prayerful!"* *"Be mournful!"* Why? Because, by practicing these 3 disciplines, **you will see Jesus better**, and you will align yourselves with Him, ***"the generous One"***, ***"the prayerful One"***, ***"the mournful One!"*** By joining in the flow of God's love as it goes out to all and fills every relationship with God's love...we've begun to see our reward!

Let's pray!