

TREASURES ON EARTH AND TREASURES IN HEAVEN
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Ash Wednesday; February 14, 2024

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is how Jesus concludes His teaching on Christian almsgiving, praying, and fasting. Almsgiving is caring for the poor and needy. Prayer is a discipline Christians should practice every day. Fasting, that is, temporarily abstaining from what our bodies need to live, is a discipline of self-denial, resisting our fleshly appetites in order to train our bodies and minds to serve God and our neighbors in need.

Jesus practiced almsgiving, praying, and fasting. This weekend, the First Sunday in Lent, we will hear about how Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness while tempted by the devil as He started His ministry of saving sinners.

Because we are Lutherans, we are always quick to reject any suggestion that something we do could save ourselves. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Good works by us contribute nothing toward our salvation. Yet, Jesus assumes that almsgiving, praying, and fasting will be our Christian disciplines. Jesus practiced the disciplines and so should we. If they don't contribute toward us being saved, what purpose do they play in our Christian lives?

Faith in God is something spiritual that is lived out in our physical bodies. If Jesus came in the flesh of man, body and soul, to save us in body and soul, then the life we live right now will begin to look like what life will be like for us when Jesus raises us from the dead in our bodies and reunites us with our eternal souls. The main difference between then and now is that, when we are raised from the dead, there will be no more sin in us. Right now, our bodies and souls are sinful and death laden. It's a struggle to live by faith.

That is why we need to train and discipline our bodies and minds to recognize that the world's ways are not God's ways, and then resist the world's ways. We must discipline and train ourselves to climb out of the sinful ruts we have gotten ourselves into. Every year when Lent begins, Christians are invited to hit the "reset button" in their lives.

I think that most of us have experienced something like this: we have an electronic device – a computer or smartphone – that stops working properly. What did we do differently than before it stopped working right? Nothing! One moment it works, the next it's all messed up. What happened? Who knows? Very frustrating!

When we fail to figure out what's wrong and nothing we try fixes it, we might have to call "tech support" dreading listening to an automated list of options, none of which applies to our problem, and being put on hold, sometimes for hours, to speak to a human being, hoping that our call doesn't get terminated while on hold and have to start all over again. And, finally, when someone picks up the call and we try to explain what doesn't work properly, we are asked, "Have you turned off [whatever electronics device is that doesn't work] and restarted it?" No." And we're told, "Do that, and tell me what happens." We turn it off and restart it and it is back to working properly. Why?

Lent is supposed to function for Christians like a "restart" and "restore" to original function. However we got to where we are, which is all messed up in sin and not working proper, God wants us to begin over through contrition and repentance. We "power off" by contrition in sorrow for our sins, dying to sin daily in the baptismal life, and we "power up" again through repentance by faith in God and the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus' sake.

The Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, praying, and fasting are Christians functioning the way God wants us to. This quote summarizes it nicely. "Each of these disciplines assists in turning the penitent Christian away from himself, outside of himself, and toward God (in faith) and toward the neighbor (in love). So do we journey with our Lord through the wilderness toward the land of paradise" (*LSB Companion to the Services*, CPH 2022, Pg 231).

Martin Luther described sin as us being “curved in on ourselves.” Being curved in on ourselves means that we cannot be focused outward on God in faith or our neighbors in love. Jesus concluded our Gospel Reading today by identifying the issue: what our hearts are set on. We need to ask ourselves: “What do I treasure most highly in life?” When we discover what that is, we find out who or what our god is. Whatever it is that we treasure in our hearts is our god. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**”

What are the two options for treasures? **Treasures on earth** and **treasures in heaven**. How do these treasures compare? Treasures on earth are things that can be eaten by moths and destroyed by rust, valuable things on earth that thieves are interested in stealing. Treasures in heaven cannot be lost or stolen by anything in this world because they are godly things. When Jesus says, “**in heaven**,” that is a reference to God in heaven.

Treasures on earth are things created by God and given to us by Him that will not come with us after we die and are raised from the dead. Treasures in heaven are God’s gifts to us right now in this life that will last forever, that won’t be lost when we die, but will remain with us when we are raised from the dead. If our hearts are set on earthly treasures, things that will pass away with us, we are worshiping those things as our gods. If our hearts are set on heavenly treasures, the things of God that last forever, we are worshiping the God who gives us those things now and forever.

What are examples treasures on earth? Health, wealth and financial security, family, friends, popularity, status in the community, power over others, hobbies, things that entertain us, anything that feeds our fleshly appetites. What are treasures in heaven? God, faith in God, and all the stuff we confessed in the Apostles’ Creed, especially the 3rd Article: “the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

Ask yourself these questions: “If only I had (fill in the blank) I would be happy.” Or, “If I lost or had to give up (fill in the blank) I could not be content.” Those are your treasures.

How do the disciplines of almsgiving, praying, and fasting help penitent sinners stop setting their hearts on earthly treasures but on heavenly treasures? Let's look at the disciplines.

Fasting, not eating for a while and getting hungry, reminds us that, if we don't eat, we will die. We are reminded of the sin of Adam and Eve who should have fasted from eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but wanted to satisfy their fleshly appetites and brought death, not just to themselves, but to all of us. At the imposition of ashes we heard, **“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”** Our sin will lead to our deaths. The forty days of Lent remind us of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness, His self-denial and resisting the devil's temptations. His self-discipline enabled Him to go the cross sinless to save us sinners. Fasting and hungry for food that cannot keep us alive forever, we are reminded of the heavenly food and drink that gives us the righteousness of faith in Jesus that lasts forever. We turn from being curved in on ourselves in selfishness and sin outward toward God in faith.

Faith realizes our need for God and leads to praying to God. Prayer is a great treasure that God has given us to use right now and will continue forever in the age to come. Our Lenten prayers should focus not so much on our earthly treasures, but on God and how He gives us heavenly treasures that cannot be lost to moth or rust and cannot be stolen by thieves. This prayer should be for God to open our eyes to see beyond ourselves the needs of others.

Fasting also helps us do this. Self-denial of our fleshly appetites reminds us that there are others besides ourselves who are hungry and in physical need. God wants our faith in Him, but our neighbors need our love for them that satisfies their needs through our self-denial. Christians fasting and being hungry for a while is about the hunger of others who need our help. As we resist satisfying all our fleshly appetites, the earthly treasures we could have used for ourselves, but did not, are now available to take care of the needs of others.

As we begin Lent again, we reset and restart by repenting the sins of laying up earthly treasures instead of heavenly treasures, and we give thanks that God treasures us in His heart. God treasures us now on earth so we can be His eternally in heaven. Amen.