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FASTING AND FEASTING ON ASH WEDNESDAY
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Ash Wednesday; February 18, 2026

Have you ever been struck by the irony of Lutherans offering special suppers during Lent? Lent is the traditional time for Christian fasting. Jesus talks fasting; Lutherans talk feasting. Jesus teaches self-denial; Lutherans provide an opportunity to not have to skip a meal in our busy lives. “Don’t have time to get home from work or school to prepare a meal before the Lenten midweek services? You won’t miss a meal if you come for the Lenten supper.”

Growing up Lutheran, I was vaguely aware that fasting was something Roman Catholics did. Lutherans made fun of Catholics for having to fast during Lent and gloated while eating hamburgers or, better yet, steak on Fridays. I knew that Jesus fasted 40 days while being tempted by the devil, but that was something He did to save us, not something we had to do. My world was turned upside down when I began to take seriously what Jesus taught Christians to do in the Sermon on the Mount: “**When you fast...**” not, “IF” you fast. Jesus taught, “**When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.**” Jesus assumes that Christians will practice fasting.

The Church, centuries before there were Lutherans, chose our section of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew six to be read at the beginning of Lent. God’s Word sets the agenda for Christian living, and this teaching sets the agenda for the season of Lent. **When you give to the needy... When you pray... When you fast.** Jesus lays before the Church His program for living the righteous life before Him and for the sake of others.

What do giving to the needy, praying, and fasting have in common? They are other-directed. Giving alms is directed to filling the needs of others. Prayer is directed toward God; the prayer of the Church is not supposed to be about only me, myself, and I. Jesus taught us to pray, “**Our** (plural) **Father...**” and say petitions for the needs of all. But how is fasting other-directed, since it is to be done before God and not to get the sympathy or attention of others? One benefit of fasting, denying ourselves something we usually want and get, is that there is an excess from our fasting that is available to fill the needs of others. Having more than we need, we are free to give to those in need.

These three Lenten disciplines of alms-giving, praying, and fasting are also other-directed in the sense that they were all done first by Jesus. God provides daily bread for everyone, not just Christians. Jesus prays for us and our needs; Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer to pray. Jesus, indeed, fasted 40 days in the desert to overcome the devil. While fasting, Jesus accomplished what no sinner has been able to do since Adam and Eve caved to their cravings by putting their desires first instead of denying themselves and doing what God had warned would kill them.

God in Christ gave all He had to take care of us. Jesus prayed to His Father that His will be done, not Jesus' own, even though it meant His suffering and death on the cross. Jesus had no sin to discipline His body against yet fasted, not only the days in the desert, but the day of His suffering and death on the cross for us. All God's righteous acts in Christ – giving alms, praying, and fasting – were other-directed for us and for our salvation. As we begin Lent today with Ash Wednesday, it is first and foremost about Jesus and what He has done for us, and then about God calling on us to do it for others.

This is not to say that giving to the needy, praying, and fasting is only about others and not also ourselves. All of us, no matter how rich or poor we are in worldly terms, have needs. All of us pray to God for the things we need. All of us will find ourselves hungry and thirsty without trying to achieve that by fasting. All of us need God.

Denying that we need God and His help shows a lack of faith. Keeping in mind that faith is a matter of trust in the other to take care of us; faith looks to God first for what we need because we trust that God is the giver of all that we need. If we don't think we need God's help, we are not Christians. If we think we can manage our own lives by ourselves and not rely on God for everything, we have no faith. If our slogan is, "If it's going to be, it's up to me," God has no place in our hearts or lives. It is a matter of us **laying up treasures on earth**. If God is not our treasure, our hearts will be set on something else. **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."**

Giving alms, praying, and fasting cannot save us, but they do remind us that we need saving. This is where these Lenten disciples can be helpful for faith. When we recognized the needs of others and do something to fill their need, we are reminded that this is how God cares for them through us, and how God is caring for us through them. When we pray for the needs of others, those needs are often the same ones we have. If we need this, then others sure do as well. Praying to God for what we need, we give thanks for the daily bread He gives to us so we can supply daily bread to others in need. When we fast, that is, intentional self-denial and delayed gratification for the sake of putting the needs of others before our own, we trust that God will still take care of our needs.

On the other hand, if we won't give to the needy but care only for ourselves, if we don't pray for others, if we don't discipline our bodies but feed every desire and avoid ever feeling hungry, then our faith is in those things as our true treasures, not God. What Jesus taught is then true, whether we admit it or not. He warns us: **“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.”**

One way we practice this righteousness before God on Ash Wednesday is when our fasting and feasting come together. I'm not talking about the Lenten Supper before the Service, but the Lord's Supper in the Service. Whether or not we ate the meal before church – and that meal was prepared not only as a service to us, but the funds raised by it also provide for the needs of others – we came to church needing what only God can provide. We will pray to God for our daily bread. We will come to Supper hungry and thirsty for righteousness that only God can provide, and we will go away satisfied.

And when we fast, we can give what was unconsumed to someone else who needs it to satisfy his or her hunger. When we pray, we will recognize that others have needs, not just ourselves. When we give to the needy, we will give thanks that what we have given came from God first so we can practice our righteousness before Him, but for the good of others. Jesus says: **When you give to the needy... When you pray... When you fast... treasure is yours in heaven.** Amen.