

Ash Wednesday
St. Matthew 6:16-21
February 17th, 2021
Sts. Peter and Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

Where Your Treasure Is

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

We beseech Thee, O Lord, by the mystery of our Savior's fasting and temptation, to arm us with the same mind that was in Him toward all evil and sin; and give us grace to keep our bodies in such holy discipline that our minds may be always ready to resist Satan and obey the motions of Thy Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one true God, world without end. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Lord + Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount recorded in the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew instructs us on what is the purpose of fasting. The purpose of fasting is summed up in the last verse of today's Gospel pericope: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In other words, our treasure is what our heart desires. Our Lord is getting at faith. In what does your heart trust? On what do you rely? Where is your treasure? In whatever our heart places its trust, that is our treasure. Well, what does that have to do with fasting? Does our Lord + Jesus mean we should make fasting our treasure? By no means! What our Lord is getting at is that a person will use all means necessary to not only obtain his treasure, but he will also use all means necessary to keep and maintain that treasure.

If your treasure is in things that rust and mold, or that are destroyed by moths and worms, or can be taken from you by thieves and robbers, then you are placing your faith in the wrong thing. These things can be taken from you or destroyed. Earthly things will always let you down. Your money will be spent. Your loved ones will die. Your job will end. Your children will reject the things that you taught them. If we look to these things to bring us joy and happiness, they may for a time, but they will all eventually let us down. Therefore, our Lord + Jesus tells us not to place our trust and faith in such things that will be destroyed or taken from us.

Too many people spend their lives in pursuit of happiness from these things. And when they are taken from them, they are left with only sadness and misery. Our strivings and work should not be to obtain these things that will be taken from us. Instead, we should use all means necessary to obtain treasure that cannot be destroyed or taken from us. This treasure is not found in the possessions and treasures of this world. This treasure is found only in Church. It is found only in the Word of God and the Sacraments. Only through the means of grace do we have a treasure that will last forever. For the Church grants us the greatest treasure we could ever possibly have: the forgiveness of our sins. And where there is forgiveness, there are also eternal life and salvation.

How does fasting help us obtain this? The purpose of fasting is not just to give up something to see if you can actually give it up for a time. I knew a pastor once who would only joke that he was giving up watermelon for Lent. The joke was that watermelon was in short supply, so he was not really giving

up anything for Lent. And among Lutherans this false notion of fasting has prevailed. This idea of giving up something for Lent to show that you can give it up for a time and learn to be without it. But this is not the true purpose of fasting. Fasting is intended to be a weapon in our arsenal to draw us closer to the Lord. The purpose giving up something—of skipping a meal or two—is to provide us time for further and more in-depth study of the Word of God. You replace the activity you gave up to spend more time in study of God's Word and prayer. This is why giving up chocolate, or sunbathing, or watermelon, or swimming, or whatever other item or activity one gives up during Lent, is missing the point.

Fasting is all about giving you more time to spend in God's Word; to be alone with the Lord God and listen to Him and learn from Him. This is why our Lord + Jesus tells us that when we fast—when, not if—we should not make a show of it. Our fasting is not to impress other people. Our fasting is to spend time with the Lord. This is why we do no longer observe the imposition of ashes. It stands in direct contrast to the reading from St. Matthew. People walk around with an ashen cross on their heads and, at best, think it is giving some sort of testimony about who they are—that they are a Christian, or, at worst, they think that by walking around with an ashen cross they are performing some sort of good work for which they should be praised. They certainly have the treasure of their heart.

But Christianity is not about impressing people with how good of a person you are; how good of a Christian you are. If that is the treasure that your heart desires, this too will let you down. For, sin your sin will rear its ugly head. If you are not publicly shamed by the world, the guilt that gnaws at you will shame you into despair. The ugliness of your sin will reveal what is truly in your heart and what sort of a person you truly are.

This is why our Lord + Jesus counsels us today to go into our closets—our secret places—and spend time with Him. For if we spend time working on our knowledge of the Lord God, He will reward us. He will reward us with knowledge of Him. He will increase our faith and trust in Him. If we spend time with our Lord learning His Commandments and how we do not keep them, He will teach us to trust in Him Who has fulfilled them all perfectly. Through His work on us by the Holy Ghost He will draw us all closer to Him, and teach us to live according to His Commandments. Even more, He will teach us that when we break them, He is the One Who paid the penalty of our sins on the tree of the holy cross.

The salvation found in the Lord + Jesus is the one, true treasure which we should use all means necessary to obtain. The good news is that this salvation is a free gift. He has already purchased and won this gift for us. We need only to forsake all other false treasures and cling to Him alone through faith. He is the treasure our hearts should desire. He is the only treasure that cannot be destroyed or taken away from us. Forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation are ours as a free gift given to us by Him. Purchased and won for us by His innocent suffering and death on the tree of the holy cross.

But the devil, the world and our flesh do war against us constantly to get us to give up this treasure and seek other false treasures. This is why we should at all times take every opportunity to strengthen our weapons. Fasting is one way to sharpen our weapons, for it gives us the opportunity to spend time with the Lord God and His Word and learn from Him and hear from Him all that He has done for us and continues to do for us. Fasting is never done just for the sake of fasting, but it is always connected to studying God's Word, just as prayer goes hand in hand with the Word of God. God speaks through His holy Word and we answer back in prayer with His holy Word.

After we have spent time on correcting our own sinfulness, and spent time on improving our own knowledge and understanding of the Word of God, and when we do not worry about what other people are thinking about us as we are doing it, then our Lord God will use us to be a light in this dark world. It is enough work for us to concentrate on ourselves and focus on our own treasure. The Lord God will use us as He sees fit to be a witness to other's in the world. But this should not be our focus. Our focus should not be on how we can improve other people, until we have improved ourselves. This is why in

the penitential season of Lent many opportunities are presented to us to spend time with our Lord God in His Word and participate in His blessed Sacraments. He gives all of this for our benefit. He has given us our treasure—our heart's desire.

Therefore, my dear friends, when you fast remember that you do so in order to place your full attention on the one, true treasure that moths cannot eat up, that rust cannot destroy, and that thieves cannot break in and steal. Your treasure is the Lord + Jesus and the salvation found in Him alone on account of His perfect obedience to the Law of God which you could not keep, and on account of His innocent suffering and death on the tree of the holy cross to pay for your sins. Take the Word of God to your secret place, and spend time with just you and Him, and learn from Him all that He desires to teach you. And He will reward you with increased faith in Him, and show you that you truly do possess the only treasure necessary to give you joy and happiness not only in this world, but eternally in the life of the world to come. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Almighty and Everlasting God, Who for the sake of the bitter suffering and death of Thy dear Son dost again, during the present Lenten season, graciously and earnestly offer to us forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation: we beseech Thee, give us Thy Holy Spirit, that we may not presumptuously or lightly set at naught the offer of Thy grace and mercy, but follow Thy gracious invitation with joyful obedience, and by holiness of living give Thee continual thanks and praise; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!