

Ash Wednesday
St. Matthew 6:16-21
March 5th, 2025
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

Lay Up for Yourselves Treasure in Heaven

In Nomine Iesu!

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

Sermon Text:

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.”

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

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

My dear friends, I am often asked, “Do Lutherans fast?” The short answer is, “Yes, Lutherans fast.” Our Lord + Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel reading for today from the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew, says, “*When* you fast.” He does not say, “*If* you fast.” He stresses this point at another time when He says that the Apostles would fast when the Bridegroom was no longer with them. Our Lord + Jesus Himself fasted, as we will hear on this coming Sunday, Invocavit, when we hear about our Lord’s temptation by the devil in the wilderness, after fasting forty days and nights. So yes, my dear friends, Lutherans fast. However, we do not approach fasting as other church bodies do.

Some church bodies, mostly of the Reformed slant, do not fast at all. They think it unnecessary and “too Catholic.” This is odd given that they are usually trying to mimic the Lord + Jesus. They try to follow His behavior and use it as an example of how they are to live their lives. As is the case in many of their doctrines, they use reason as the source and norm of their doctrines, instead of the very words of the Christ. They are entirely focused on their good works. It is their way to prove that they are Christians. In many cases, these good works are works of their own choosing; works that are easily accomplished so that they can say that they are full of good works. The works that the Lord has told us to do, they ignore, and the works that they make up become for them the main thing. They lay up for themselves treasures that do not last, for our works can never appease the Lord God. They can never measure up to the requirements for a righteousness that avails before the Lord God.

One the other end of the spectrum are the Papists. They require fasting. Whereas the Reformed make a mockery of fasting by forsaking it, the Papists make a mockery of fasting for two reasons. First, they make rules and regulations concerning the fast: when you are to fast, and what form that fast is to take. They say no eating of red meat on Fridays. If this was simply a guideline which to follow, there would be no issue. But because they make it a law, they turn fasting into a mockery, because people are very adept at finding loopholes. This is why in areas with large Roman Catholic populations, all you

can eat fish fries exist. Do not eat this kind of meat, but have all of this other kind does not scream fasting. They make a mockery of fasting by pretending to fast. They say they are fasting, but they are not.

Worse than this is the second reason that they make a mockery of fasting. They make it into a good work by which one pleases the Lord God. They even teach that by doing this one can gain forgiveness of sins. They teach people to lay up for themselves treasures of their own good works. These are treasures that do not last, for again, our good works cannot work the forgiveness of sins for us. Our good works should never be done to earn the Lord's favor, or done by us thinking that by them we are storing up treasures in Heaven. The treasures of Heaven are given as a free gift, for the sake of the works of the Christ. To make fasting into some good work that merits God's grace is making a mockery of fasting. It is not what our Lord means when He tells us to fast.

For Lutherans we make no requirement to fast. We make no rules regarding fasting. We do not forbid fasting, but we do not require it either. It is left up to Christian freedom. For the true purpose of fasting is not to focus on the fast. That is, when we fast our focus should not be on the length of the fast, or what we may be denying ourselves. The purpose of fasting is so that we can focus on an increased amount of studying the Lord God's Word and having the ability to spend more time in prayer to our Triune Lord God. If this is not our focus, then we should probably skip fasting. If one becomes so obsessed with the foods one is not eating that that becomes the main focus, then we should not be fasting. At least not in a spiritual sense. One can certainly subject themselves to a secular fast for all of the secular health benefits that come from fasting: weight loss, the ability to sleep better, and therefore, have more energy and be more alert.

But with a spiritual fast, our focus is not on these things. If our focus is on the external things of the fast, we are not laying up treasures for ourselves in Heaven. Our Lord would have us fast for our benefit. He would draw us closer to Him through the fast, by our increased reading and study of His Word. He would draw us closer to Him through our increase in prayer to Him. This is how we tell whether we are truly fasting or not. Is our focus on earthly things which pass away, or is our focus on heavenly things which can never be taken away from us? This is why Lutherans have always let fasting be free from rules and regulations. For the purpose of the fast is not to focus on the fast, but to focus on our Lord and Savior and what He has done for us. Skipping a meal or two gives us more time to reflect upon what He has done for us. It gives us more time to read from the holy Scriptures what He has done for us by His obedience to the whole will and Law of God, and by His innocent suffering and death. It gives us more time to pray to Him and thank Him for all the gifts that He bestows upon us.

When we fast, if our focus is on the work of the fast, we are no different than the Reformed churches, who deny the fast in exchange for other good works. And we are no different from the Papists who make a mockery of the fast by declaring that by it a good work has been done. When we Lutherans fast our focus should be on the Christ and what He has done for us. If when we fast our focus is on us, then it is on the wrong thing. This is why our Lord in the Gospel pericope talks about those who use fasting as a way to prop themselves up. They put on a sad face and disfigure their countenance; they want people to praise them for their good work. This is why our Lord tells us that fasting should be private; it should be between us and the Lord God alone. Sadly, this has been taken to the extreme among us Lutherans. We are so intent on not telling anyone about our fasting that it has fallen out of disuse among us. We are too intent on hiding our fasting that it never gets talked about, and some even get embarrassed to even bring up the topic, as if we do not fast like the Reformed churches.

If we are telling someone about our fasting to brag, then yes, the Lord's admonition in today's Gospel reading applies to us. There are times, however, when in order to not break the fast, we must inform others of our intentions, so that both of us may avoid awkward situations where someone is offering us something that we said we would be fasting from during the period of fasting we set. We

should not be so strict in our not telling people about our fasting that it gives occasion to uncomfortable situations. Nor should we be so strict in not telling people about our fasting that it becomes a taboo topic. Lutheran do fast. We do not fast as other church bodies fast, however.

We fast not to earn earthly rewards. We do not fast to puff ourselves up by accomplishing a good work. We fast so that we may have more time to spend in God's Word and prayer. By these things we lay up for ourselves treasures in Heaven, for the Scriptures tells us of all that our Lord and Savior + Jesus, the Christ has done for us poor, miserable sinners. And having heard the good news of what He has done for us; we can give Him thanks and praise in prayer for all the wonderful things He has done for us. He has bestowed upon us all the spiritual gifts of Heaven. He has given us the true treasures of Heaven. For in Him alone is forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us not lay up earthly treasures. Let us not lay up the treasures of good works which do not save. Let us lay up treasures in Heaven. Let us turn our focus upon our Lord and Savior. Let us increase our study of the Lord God's Word, and increase the amount of time we spend in prayer to Him. For by these things the Lord grants us increase of wisdom and knowledge. He grants us an increase of faith in Him. These are treasures that will never be corrupted or taken from us. These are treasures that will lead us into our eternal home in Heaven. When we fast, let us lay up these treasures, for by them we are truly blessed. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Almighty God, be pleased to accompany Thy Word with Thy Holy Spirit and grant that Thy Word would increase faith in us; bring into the Way of Truth all such as have erred; turn the hearts of the unrepentant; and for sake of Thy Name grant succor to all heavy hearts and those who are heavy-laden, that they may through the mercy of the Lord + Jesus Christ be relieved and preserved so that they succumb not to the temptation of despair but rather that they gain the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; through the same + Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with the 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!