

Ash Wednesday  
Matthew 6:1-18

I've recited this quote from Luther before and I will probably repeat it every Ash Wednesday because it is so good. It is worthy of reflection every year, if not more often. Here it is:

"The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore everyone must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian."<sup>1</sup>

We die alone. Whether you die in an empty room or surrounded by your loved ones, you die alone. No one dies in your place.

You are a sinner. Death shows that you are a sinner. You will pass through death into judgment. (Heb 9:27) Judgment before a holy and righteous Judge.

In other words, this is serious stuff.

Lent is a season we think more carefully about our death and the role of our sin in it. We don't meditate upon our sin to revel in it or to become despondent from it. We meditate upon it so that we do not become complacent in sin and so that we understand the gravity of our sin.

The man or woman who commits first-degree murder is either sentenced to a lifetime in jail or condemned to the death penalty. We understand that murder is especially egregious and impose the appropriate punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, "Invocabit" sermons, AE, pg70

The man or woman that commits the smallest sin you can think of before God is sentenced to an eternity in hell. Not one lifetime of punishment, but an infinite number of lifetimes.

Before our fellow men, there is a degree of sin. We rightly punish accidental death differently than first-degree murder. Before God, there is no degree of sin. All sin. Every singly sin is worthy of eternal damnation.

That is indeed serious stuff and is worthy of your meditation.

Not how your neighbor's sin impacts your neighbor. But how your sin impacts you personally.

That's why Lent traditionally is a time for almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. It's not that you cannot participate in these practices at other times of the church year, but we especially practice these gifts from God during the time of serious contemplation of our mortality.

I hope you notice I called these practices gifts from God. Let's look at these gifts in reverse order.

A fast, in the basic definition of the word, means to abstain from eating for a period of time ranging from one day to forty days. God ordered a one day fast to go along with the day of atonement in the Old Testament which is called Yom Kippur. Moses and Jesus completed forty-day fasts.

But there are other types of fasts. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah did a type of fast when they refused to eat the king's meat which was sacrificed to idols and refused to drink his wine.

There are individual and corporate fasts. King David did a voluntary fast when his first son was condemned to death because of David's sin. The King of Nineveh decreed a city wide fast when confronted by the Word of God from the prophet Jonah.

Many times, fasting was accompanied by repentance. King David and Nineveh were repentant. Sometimes fasting is not accompanied by repentance. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days of fasting so that He could be tempted by Satan when He was weak. Moses fasted forty days because He was receiving the Word of God from God in person.

The Apostle's didn't fast because the Bridegroom Jesus was in their midst. Jesus said, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." (Lk 5:35) Early Christians fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. (*Didache*.8)

Even though Luther had abused himself with improper use of fasting, he still recommended it. He says in the catechism that "Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training." Shamefully, we throw out that sentence and focus only on the part that says, "[he] is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Jesus certainly expects you to fast. The phrase "when you fast" carries the expectation that you will fast. (Mt 6:16)

But it is true that fasting, like any expectation of God, can be easily abused.

Legalists perform fasts to obtain merit before God or to boast in their flesh. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Coptic churches are certainly guilty of this. But so are individuals. Plain and simple, this is works righteousness.

Pietists and other such enthusiasts fast to obtain some kind of so-called mountaintop experience or some kind of personal encounter with God. Plain and simple, this is mysticism where you look for God in your heart, emotions, or experiences.

Magicians and heretics fast to get something from God. They think they have the formula to entice God to act on their behalf. It's a quid pro quo kind of god. This describes Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyers who are both heretics. Plain and simple, this is idolatry.

Antinomians ignore God's expectation for us to fast. They are like the liberals who choose what part of God's Word they like and ignore the rest. Plain and simple, this is again idolatry.

The abuse of a thing does not mean that thing itself isn't good.

Historically, God's people fast.

As always must be cautioned, fasting is not typically practiced by the very young, pregnant, and infirm.

You can certainly fast individually. Lent is a great time to fast, but there are many other times you can fast. Let's say you have a big decision to make about where to move now that the kids and grandkids are out of state. A time of fasting and prayer is certainly helpful before you make such an important decision.

We can certainly fast as a church. The LCMS and your pastors do not prescribe periods of fasting. We don't want to repeat the mistakes of the Roman Catholic church. But there may be times Grace fasts together. For example, I might get hit by a bus forcing you to call another pastor. Not that I want this to happen, mind you. But a fast by willing and able members of Grace before you vote on who to call can certainly be helpful.

You may also choose to not do a full fast, but fast from electronic media or alcohol for a time. These can be helpful as well.

I encourage you to consider fasting in some way this Lent. If you do, I pray that it teaches you the depravity of your old man, your dependence on God, and the joy of mortifying your flesh which is what our catechism calls drowning the old Adam.

Fasting is usually not alone but is accompanied by prayer and almsgiving. It's interesting and, I believe, purposeful that Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting one right after the other. They seem to always be related and that's a good thing.

Prayer, in a lot of ways, is our lifeblood. The Gospels always talk about Jesus going alone by Himself to pray to His Father in heaven. This is so important to Jesus that He even gives us the words to pray:

Our Father...

We are going to look at this prayer in depth during our Lenten Wednesdays. We'll look at prayer briefly tonight.

In the Large Catechism, Luther teaches us to pray for three reasons. The first reason we are to pray is that God commands us to pray in the second commandment. This isn't some arbitrary command of God, but it's the way that He made us. We're made to have communication with our Creator. The second reason we are to pray is that God promises to listen to us! Imagine that. The Creator of the universe and everything in it delights to listen to you no matter how trivial your prayer is! The third reason we are to pray is that we have a pressing need. We are beset by the devil, the world, and our own flesh who want to draw us away from God.

We sin when we neglect our prayers and become consumed with feeding our passions.

We sin when we neglect the Lord's Prayer itself. We act as if our words are better than the ones given to us by our very Lord and Savior!

We sin in prayer like in fasting if we have the attitude of any of the sins with fasting which we've already heard. We can utter vain repetitions that Jesus condemns. Or we can seek mountaintop experiences or personal encounters where Jesus does not promise to be. Or we can treat Jesus like some divine vending machine. Or we can simply ignore our prayers.

Again, the abuse of a thing doesn't mean that the thing itself isn't good.

Fasting and prayer are usually accompanied with almsgiving, or what Jesus calls "practicing your righteousness." (v. 1)

It is a lie from the pit of hell that you don't need anyone else or that anyone else doesn't need you.

If COVID has taught us anything, it's taught us that it's not good to be alone and isolated.

God made us to be part of a community. The community of Family. The community of Grace. The community of Rialto and surrounding cities.

In these communities, we support others and, in turn, are supported by others.

We pray for daily bread every day. God uses godly vocations and almsgiving as the way He provides daily bread for all people, even all evil people, as we say in the fourth petition. It is a pleasure to be involved in this enterprise.

We are physical creatures. We have physical needs. We have need of food, clothing, and shelter.

But some of you are gluttonous. You eat too much and chase after rich food daily.

But some of you are hoarders. You buy too much and chase after material wealth even though we can't take it with us.

But some of you are workaholics. You work too much and neglect family and friends.

But some of you are pleasure seekers. You seek after experiences no matter what it costs.

But some of you are lazy. You seek diversion after diversion instead of serving in your God given vocations.

I think a lot of us don't realize how affluent we are in this country and give little thought to others suffering around the world. I know I struggle with this and I'm sure you do too.

Almsgiving is a way to help others and share in their burdens. I think this is a good way to think of prayer as well. We share another's burdens when we pray for them and intercede to our Father in heaven for them.

Sometimes it doesn't hurt us to give alms. Other times we must tighten our belts when we give alms. Either way, we have the joy of knowing that we are partners with God in His enterprise of caring for His creation.

We can sin against almsgiving just as we can against fasting and prayer.

We can ignore it or expect quid pro quo from God and expect that it brings us merit.

Again, the abuse of a thing does not mean that thing in itself is bad.

These gifts from God help us to meditate upon sin and our death.

We meditate upon it so that we do not become complacent in sin and so that we understand the gravity of our sin.

We know that our sin is the reason our Savior was crucified. We understand that it is not something that God winks at or overlooks. He paid for it Himself upon the cross.

So, you strive to keep the law.

You know that you can't keep it perfectly. No one can this side of glory. But you strive to keep it, knowing that God will bless your feeble efforts. He blesses you for His namesake and not because you merit that blessing. He blesses you because you are His dear child. And since you are His dear child, you try to live up to the name He has placed upon you. And when you fail, God lavishly pours out grace upon you to cover your sin.

And when you see how feeble your attempts are to keep God's perfect law, you don't despair. You know that your sin is paid for in full. You know that God looks upon you as His child because He has baptized you and not because you're worthy. You understand that Jesus' work on the cross is finished. There's nothing you owe God because of your sin.

Your sin is paid for.

This makes you free.

Free to fast and pray and give alms.

You don't fast and pray and give alms to gain merit or something from God, but because you are free to do so and serve your neighbor in love!

Free to have joy. Not just happiness, which is fleeting, but true joy.

You don't have joy because you're feeding your passions, but you have true joy because you know that you have a loving Father in heaven who cares for you in good times and bad. In rich times and poor times. In fasting times and feasting times.

"The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another."

But death is not the end.

For you, dear Christian, death is merely a doorway to eternal life.

You may face death alone. But you're not alone. Jesus has already faced death and defeated it. Jesus gives you His Word and Sacraments so that you don't despair when death stares you in the face. Jesus gives you His Word and Sacraments so that you know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that He is with you and, more importantly, for you. Even in death.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is YOUR death.

In Jesus' name. Amen.