*DAILY DEVOTIONAL*

April 10 - 15

“When you give . . . pray . . . fast”

**Monday, April 10 Matthew 6:1-4**

*“When you give to the needy”*

  Jesus showed that right things can be done with wrong motives. He used three basic examples to make his point and in doing so selected the three most important demonstrations of religious devotion in Judaism: almsgiving, prayer (in verses 5-8), and fasting (in verses 16-18). In each instance Jesus condemned service with ulterior motives such as the praise of men and other selfish benefits. Christian service is for the sake of righteousness, that is, to become more like Christ. If our aim is to gain the world’s rewards, we can no doubt win or receive them, but in doing so we miss the eternal reward of Christlikeness.

 “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” implies a secrecy about deeds of generosity. The expression means that we are to avoid all scheming or planning for our own advantage. One does not give with strings attached. One gives in complete trust that the gift, given for the praise of God, will be honored by God and will lead to the blessing of a good conscience and peace with God.

*When I give, Lord, may it not be for my glory but for yours. Amen.*

**Tuesday, April 11 2 Corinthians 9:7-9**

*“God loves a cheerful giver”*

  The New Testament does not teach a doctrine of tithing (i.e., the mandatory giving of ten percent of one’s income). Nor does Paul define what constitutes giving generously. He does not even provide a target number or general guidelines. The only rule is to give freely and generously as an expression of our continuing trust in God’s grace. Paul simply assumes that believers will give all they can to meet as many needs as they can in order to glorify God as much as they can.

 At the same time, while giving must be done freely, it is not optional. To speak about our need to give is to emphasize that we are God’s people through whom God is glorified. The Corinthians’ participation in giving was not “for the church,” but evidence that they *were* the church. When we give we are doing as God does. When we give cheerfully, rejoicing in the benefit that others will receive because of our gift, we are giving in the same way God does. To give as God gives reflects a heart that is becoming like his.

*Bless the gifts I give, Lord, that they may be a blessing to others. Amen.*

**Wednesday, April 12 Matthew 6:5-8**

 *“When you pray”*

 Prayer is opening one’s life to God. It is inviting him to act in our lives. Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance to do something that we are asking of him; it is overcoming our reluctance to accept his will for our lives. Prayer moves the hand of God by asking him to do in our lives what he has been wanting to do all along. God does not impose his will upon us. Instead, he functions in our lives in accordance with the degree of freedom we surrender to him. It is in this sense that prayer is personal; I am inviting God to reveal his will to me that I may live according to it.

 There are, of course, many misuses of prayer. Jesus mentions several in this passage by which prayer is used to draw the notice and praise of others. Such prayers have their reward, such as it is. This does not mean that all public prayer is wrong. Rather it is the motive for prayer that needs to be examined, a motive that can more easily be self-centered in public than in the privacy of “your own room.”

*My prayers, Lord, seek you and your will for me. Amen.*

*DAILY DEVOTIONAL*

April 10 - 15

“When you give . . . pray . . . fast”

**Thursday, April 13 Mark 12:38-40**

*“For a show they make lengthy prayers”*

  Jesus has some tough things to say about the religious leaders of his day. First, he chastens them for their desire to wear distinguished dress – they like to parade about in long robes. What precisely these long robes looked like is not as important as why they wore them: to set themselves apart from others and to augment their authority. Jesus’ authority is connected to his teaching and his person as the Son of God; theirs is connected to their clothing, which expresses pride that hungers for honors and distinction. Their hunger for honors and distinction is also seen in the way in which they pray. Their prayers, while addressed to God, are spoken to win accolades from fellow humans.

 Their longing for prestige is coupled with a calloused disregard for the poor. Those who are revered by others mistake it as a license to prey on the weak and vulnerable. They may know the commands of God, but they do not fulfill them. They love recognition more than they love God, and they trample on those who are already crushed.

*Lord, may my prayers never be opportunities for showing off. Amen.*

**Friday, April 14 Matthew 6:16-18**

*“When you fast”*

 Fasting was a part of Jewish religious behavior. Jesus’ teaching shows that it must not become a mere ritual, but be used as a voluntary time of meditation, of drawing near to God. Fasting as an exercise is to deprive one’s self of normal and pleasant aspects of life for the sake of personal spiritual enrichment. The most obvious form of fasting is dieting, but other kinds of abstinence serve the same purpose such as refraining from reading the newspaper before reading God’s Word at the beginning of the day.

 Whatever the form may be, Jesus’ emphasis is to avoid a ritual practice undertaken for merit in the eyes of others. We are also to beware of using it as a sign of superior spirituality, seeing ourselves as better than those who don’t follow our particular practice. And we should never assume that fasting, any more than giving to the needy or the practice of prayer, is a way of impressing God or of somehow persuading God to answer a request. Fasting has its own values for the person fasting and they are not found in impressing people or God.

*May my spiritual practices be for your honor, Lord, not for mine. Amen.*

**Saturday, April 15 Mark 2:18-20**

*“How is it that your disciples are not fasting”*

 According to biblical Law, the Jews were required to fast only one time a year, on the Day of Atonement. Pharisees, however, overextended the Law until they demanded that the people fast two days a week. To publicize the ritual, they whitened their faces and shred their robes as proof of their penance. Fasting as godly repentance had lost its meaning in their desire to be praised by others for their “piety,” and their religion had lost its gratitude for it neglected the joy of God’s forgiveness.

 Jesus turns the criticism of his disciples’ neglect of Pharisaical fasting rituals into an opportunity to announce that joy is a quality of the Kingdom of God. All spiritual practice, be it fasting, giving, praying, or any other way of giving praise to God, results in joy. What is being lived out in the life of the believer is the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the presence of Christ in our lives brings joy. This does not mean fasting is wrong; rather, when fasting practices the presence of Christ, it is always right for it produces his joy.

*You are with me, Lord, and that gives me joy. Amen.*