

Giving Up or Taking Up?

Text: Matthew 6:16-21

Hymn: [Enter Hymn here](#)

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus does not say, "Beware of practicing righteousness." He assumes that you will be practicing righteousness. The question is whom you do it for and where you seek your reward. The season of Lent, as even non-Christians know, is a time of giving up things. A time when you make sacrifices, when you stop drinking coffee or alcohol or eating cheese or having sugar or other such things. Some people fast in earnest and reduce the number of meals they eat. There was even a monastery in Germany at one time where they gave up eating altogether for forty days. They stayed alive by brewing a particularly stout beer instead. That counted as their fasting.

Lent is a time of giving things up. And in reaction to that sometimes Christians say it's not so much what you *give up* but what you *take up*. It's not so much about not doing something but adding something. More time to pray. More time to read the Scriptures. More time to serve your neighbors.

To which Jesus implicitly says, "Why choose? Why not do both?" In our Gospel reading today, we hear of three spiritual practices and exercises which Jesus assumes his disciples will engage in, and He wants to focus their minds on what the purpose is. Giving to the needy, praying, and fasting.

But not in order to be seen by others. Not in order to gain the praise of other people. Not so that you can go on Facebook and proclaim what it is that you have done or given up or, if you are of the older media type, have it written up in the local

things more than God. Therefore, two simultaneous things are being worked in us by God's Holy Spirit through the Word that we have heard—the detaching of our affections from a false love of the world on the one hand (that's the giving up part) and the turning of our gaze and our affections to God and his kingdom (the taking up part).

When we give to the needy, when we serve our neighbors in works of mercy and love, we are putting into practice that which we confess, which is that our heavenly Father will care for us and that we are his children. He loves all, so who are we to disagree? He cares for all, so who are we to be anything other than that? And when we learn freely to give to the needy, to serve those in need around us, to put the interests of others before our own, we find that we are growing more and more into the likeness of Christ, whose very ministry was all about serving those who were in need, you and me, who need more than soup and bread or a roof over our heads, but rescue from death itself, eternal death.

And when we pray, we put into practice that which we confess, which is that all good things come from our heavenly Father, that he cares for us and that our lives are in his hand. So, when we pray, we commend ourselves to His care. And all the things that are in our lives and in our minds and in the world around us we commend to him, because we trust in Him, because He has given us His Son.

And when we fast, we confess that which we know to be true, that man does not live by bread alone and that however we care for our bodies, keep them fed and nourished and clothed and sheltered, stay away from illness as much as we can, take our medication, that all of that is ultimately futile. That though our life in all its richness is a gift from God, it is not the ultimate gift. It is only a penultimate gift. The ultimate gift

goods left for others in need and more time for God and his Word and prayer. Not in order to *win a prize* but in order to *have a treasure*.

God rewards those who seek his mercy. He rewards them with forgiveness. He rewards them with eternal life. He is good and He is merciful. So let us enter anew into a life of discipleship, that is, of following our Lord Jesus Christ in firm trust, asking God to fill us with the power of his Holy Spirit, to strengthen our faith, to give us renewed hope, and to fill us with His love. He will surely do it. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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