

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Wednesday, February 10, 2016
Ash Wednesday**

SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLINES

Matthew 6:1-18

Brothers and sisters, Lent is a time to return to the disciplines of the Christian life which make possible a fruitful and ongoing relationship with the Lord and His people. Among those disciplines are regular reading of Scripture and meditating upon it, faithful participation in the worship life of the church, service to the kingdom both inside the confines of the congregation and in the larger world, silence – so difficult in our day – practiced with the opening of our hearts' ears to God, and so on.

Jesus speaks of three particular disciplines – giving : giving, fasting and prayer – in the Sermon on the Mount and gives three important principles of their practice which apply to the whole range of spiritual disciplines, which apply, in fact, to every aspect of our life with Him. What I'd like for us to do this evening is to take a look at this passage in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 6 and see what those principles are.

The first one is that our practice of the disciplines is not to be seen by others but done in secret. Jesus offers this principle as a guide to spiritual life because in His day, public exhibitions of religiosity were meant to impress people and win favor with them. So men who would engage in alms-giving would walk into the street and they would have followers behind them and they would pull out their money bag and with a flourish and the sound of trumpets, even, lavish upon the object of their giving – this poor, benighted, poverty-stricken wretch – the goodness of their heart that was exemplified by this dollar bill. Truth be told, the amount didn't matter. They could be giving a lot, they could be giving a little, but it was the display that was important because it was the display that told people, "Look how generous I'm being. Am I not big-hearted? Am I not the kind of giver that God wants me to be?"

People would also pray in public, and they would do that once again so that people could see how well they fulfilled the law. So they would stand on the street corners and they would speak at the top of their voices because we all know God, being very old, has a hearing problem and so you have to be extra loud in order to be sure He hears you. The fact that all the people who gather around you to observe this display of piety will also hear you, that's just a bonus.

Those who engaged in fasting, what they would do is they would go out into the streets and they would look terrible. They would look haggard and drawn. They would look tired. Their mouth would droop and they would look like they weren't sure how they were going to get through another day. If people asked what the matter was, they would say, "I'm fasting for the glory of God. Can't you see it on my face?" They would look to win sympathy for this. Now be honest here. Have you done something like that when you've been on a diet? Haven't you? You tell people, "Yeah, I'm trying to lose that

weight and I haven't eaten anything for the last four days except peanuts and Brussel sprouts. That's all I'm eating. That and lukewarm water. That's all I'm consuming." And they say, "Oh, isn't that terrible?" I asked my wife earlier today what she's giving up for Lent and she said her diet. She got a preview of this sermon and she knew that going out with that miserable face that we all associate with diets wasn't going to do it.

If we do that with diets, which is purely an exercise in dropping weight or making ourselves healthier or perhaps even just vanity, how much more impressive would it be if you saw a person doing that who was doing it because it would bring glory to God? And because it would show how conscious I am of my sin and how fervent I am in my repentance and once again, wouldn't people tell me how wonderful it was?

Jesus' message is very different. He tells them instead to go behind closed doors. In verse 3 of Chapter 6 He says, "When you give to the needy do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret." Don't do it so that other people will see it and give you pats on the back for how generous you are. Do it solely for the benefit of the poor, poverty-stricken wretch who needs it and as a way of thanking God for the way that He has blessed you. Not for the brownie points in heaven that will be accumulated, much less the ones that you'll get from the synagogue or from the church for doing it.

What He says about fasting is particularly pointed. He says in verse 17, "When you fast put oil on your head." Oil would be put on your head not as a sign of repentance but of a sign of christening by God or as a sign of extravagance. You'll remember the woman who anointed Jesus' head with oil, despite it being terribly expensive and something that could have been given to the poor and He said what a wonderful thing it was. Well that's the kind of thing that He's talking about. Put oil on your head. Don't make yourself look miserable. Make this a joy. Not only put oil on your head, but wash your face because what men in those days would do is when they were fasting gradually they'd wind up with dirt on their face because part of the process of fasting was to not do anything that might run the risk of taking anything internally. So you wouldn't wash your face and after a while people could tell from your dirty face what it is that you are doing, your dirty face with a miserable look on it. In other words, devote yourself to the Lord who ordained fast, but don't let your appearance announce your fast to the world.

He also says, with regard to prayer, in verse 6, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is on the scene. Then your Father who sees and hears what is done in secret will reward you." Don't stand on the street corners. Don't tell people how wonderful you are by shouting at the top of your lungs about how much you love God and how much you praise God. Instead, go into your own home, go into your own room and close the door and make the conversation about you and Him. Leave the rest of the world out of it because you don't need their pats on the back for your piety and you don't need people telling you how wonderful you are by virtue of the fact that you pray, because the truth of the matter is that whether you are praying, whether you are fasting, whether you are giving, you are not doing a work that God is going to put to your

account as a reason to save you. Or to do anything else for you. So instead, make this what it was intended to be, an act of communication.

One thing to point out here is this: When Jesus uses the expression “behind closed doors” He is not saying don’t ever pray in public. The truth of the matter is, when I was a new Christian – I’d been a Christian for less than a year – I found myself thinking I don’t know how I’m going to be able to go into the ministry and lead a congregation in worship. At that point I’d already experienced the call to ministry. How am I going to be able to do that if I can’t pray in public? And that’s what Jesus seemed to be saying to me here. Don’t ever pray in public. Of course, I’d been to churches and seen people pray in public all the time and I thought why are they just ignoring what Jesus said? I think we need to hear His words “behind closed doors” as not only a literal instruction that is aimed at those who would pray in public for the sake of showing off. What’s really important there is that we need to be clear that the reason He tells them to do that is because the motivation is what is crucial. It is possible to violate what He says in terms of the way that we should pray, whether we do it in public or whether we do it in private. If we spend an hour on our knees and we go out then and tell people that we’ve done that and they tell us, “Well, my goodness, you are quite the prayer warrior!” we’ve done exactly what Jesus told us not to do despite that fact that our praying was done with no one around. It’s not the “closed door” taken literally that’s the crucial thing here. The question is what are we doing and why are we doing it. Are we doing it in order to have communication with God or are we doing it as a show for the public. If it’s the former, He says that will be what God approves of.

So that’s the first aspect of this. The first principle is that our disciplines are to be done in secret. The second is that they’re to be carried out simply, without ostentation. Once again, the purpose of showy religiosity is to impress people and we are not to parade that in front of them, parade our faithfulness or parade our piety in front of them. The trumpet blast that would be sounded when someone was giving alms was entirely a way of calling attention to one’s self. When we pray and do so with a great deal of flowery language and with constant repetition, we’re doing that either to impress people or because we agree with the pagans thinking that if we simply repeat ourselves enough, over and over again, then God will have to give us what we want. It’s true Jesus tells us to be persistent in prayer, but that’s not the same thing as repeating the same thing over and over and over again in order to carry out a magical incantation that will automatically get us what we want from God.

Fasting, by the same token, is not to be done with this expression on your face that Maryanne has referred to as the “courage Camille” face. The face that says woe is me, things are so terrible, sympathize with me because of what I’m undergoing. Instead, what we do is to be simple, to the point, direct, childlike. If I was going to give alms, Richard and I might go into the Fellowship Hall. There’s no one there right now. And I’d go by him and I’d hand that off and none of you would see what I was doing. There are a hundred different ways of doing that. One can help a person without making a show of it by going to them in purpose or by mailing a check or by bringing food to them or by going to the local grocery and tell them that there’s someone you need them to

deliver some groceries to and pay them to do that and never even see the person. Lots of different ways to do that. But the point is to be simple. Do not let your left hand know what the right hand is doing. Do it in secret. Do it behind closed doors. Don't do it on the street corners.

Third and final principle: We're to engage in the disciplines of the Christian life solely for the sake of drawing closer to God. That's not to say that there will not be other effects as well. For instance, when we give generously to those who are in need, obviously those to whom we give are also going to be assisted through that. But the interesting thing is that three times when Jesus mentions each discipline He says that your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. Now does He mean what some prosperity preachers mean, for instance? That if I give Richard a dollar it's because I'm expecting that God will give me back a hundred. That would be quite an investment scheme if it actually worked that way, wouldn't it? There would probably be a lot more dollar bills handed out and not just to the poverty-stricken wretches, but just to anybody who asks for them. Because God will give back to me if I give to others. It's not a question of what's going to come to us even though Jesus uses the word "reward." That's because God has no interest in our good deeds done for the sake of what we will get for them. If I actually gave to Richard a dollar and then turned to God and said, "\$100, please. You said it. Jesus said you'll get a hundredfold back," that's what the prosperity preachers tell us when they misinterpret Jesus' words. God will not respond to that in any way, shape or form. As a matter of fact, He will probably count that against us. Instead, when we give, when we fast, when we pray, or when we do any of the other disciplines of the Christian life, when we do them solely for Him in order to know Him better, in order to love Him better, in order to receive His grace and forgiveness, in order to experience His mercy, in order to hear Him when He speaks, and in order to speak to Him and tell Him what is on our heart and mind, that will result in a far, far greater reward. As the old hymn puts it, it will result in a "closer walk with Thee," a closer walk with God, because that's the reward. The deepened relationship is the reward, not anything else that we can think of besides that. That is the reward that's received by us when we carry out the disciplines solely for Him.

The best evidence of this is to be found immediately following this discussion, in verses 19 and 20. Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I feel sorry for people who think that what Jesus said is that if they give a dollar they will get a hundred back, by donating their used Volkswagen Beetle they'll get a Mercedes back, by opening their home to a missionary, their three-bedroom house to a missionary, they'll wind up with a McMansion. This sounds funny, but there are people who think this way and they think this way in part because there are people who preach this way. It is one of the saddest things about the church in America that there is actually an audience for people saying things like that. And countless people who buy into it. I feel sorry for them. Because Jesus makes clear where their heart really is when that's how they approach the disciplines of the spiritual life. That's where their heart is when they approach their

discipleship, if that's indeed what it is. As they think that they're following God, they do it in order to lay up treasure here and in the process they have missed the greatest of all rewards, the reward of a closer and eternal relationship with our Father who is in heaven, through Jesus Christ.

We are not just called to pray or to give, to fast or to worship or to read Scripture, etc. We're not just called to do those things. We're called to do so in a way that places God at the center of all of it. Lent, then, is a time for rededication. Rededication to disciplines that in your life or in mine might have fallen by the wayside. Disciplines that may be engaged in mechanically or without thought as to why they're being done or how. Rededication to disciplines done not for the sake of what we might receive for them, but done simply in order to tell God, "I want to spend my life for You and with You."

That being the case, I would ask you to hear this invitation to the observance of the disciplines of Lent.

Brother and sisters, Christians have always observed great devotion in the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection. It became the custom of the church to prepare for Easter by a season of penitence, fasting, and prayer. This season of forty days provided time in which converts to the faith were prepared for baptism into the body of Christ. It was also the time when persons who had committed serious sins and had been separated from the community of faith were reconciled by repentance and forgiveness and were restored to the fellowship of the church. The whole congregation is thus reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew the faith of our baptism.

I invite you, then, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, by penitence, by prayer, by fasting, by alms-giving, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God. To make a right beginning and as a mark of our discipleship and a mark of our mortality, let us now kneel before our Creator and our Redeemer and pray.