

Sermon for Ash Wednesday: The Spirit of Christian Discipline

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Sermon Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life Not stated (Ash Wednesday)

Matthew 6:1-4 (quoted)

Matthew 6:5-6 (quoted)

Matthew 6:16-18 (quoted)

Matthew 6:20 (quoted)

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (quoted)

Hebrews 12:2 (quoted)

Isaiah 58:1,5-8a (quoted)

Dear friends in Christ, today we gather to mark Ash Wednesday, the beginning of our Lenten journey. This solemn day invites us to reflect on our lives, to repent, and to commit ourselves anew to God through disciplined spiritual practice. Our theme today is the spirit of Christian discipline, drawn from Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18.

These verses from Matthew remind us of the profound connection between our actions and our motives. Jesus teaches us that it is not merely the deeds we do that matter, but the spirit in which we carry them out. In a world that often seeks recognition and reward for good works, Christ calls us to a higher standard.

Christian discipline is not about rigid rules or self-imposed restriction. It is about cultivating an inner spirit that aligns our actions with God's will — our hearts, minds, and souls directed towards God in sincerity and truth. The passages from Matthew set before us three core practices: giving, praying, and fasting. Let us consider each in turn.

Giving: Generosity in Secrecy

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:1-4, KJV)

Jesus cautions us against practising righteousness for the sake of being seen by others — here, in the giving to the needy — and urges us to do so in secret. This teaching challenges us to examine our own motives. Are we generous because we seek approval, or do we give out of love and compassion for others? True discipline in giving means prizing the

well-being of those in need above our own desire for recognition. When we practise secret giving, we cultivate a spirit of humility and compassion, and begin to see the needs of others more clearly, responding without the taint of selfish ambition. The act of giving becomes a true reflection of God's own love flowing through us.

Praying: Intimacy with God

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:5-6, KJV)

Jesus condemns showy prayer meant to impress others, and sets it against the authentic, heartfelt communion with God that takes place in the quiet of one's own room. Prayer is not a performance; it is a relationship. As we discipline ourselves in prayer, we draw closer to God. Authentic prayer fosters a deep intimacy, a longing to align our will with His; it is in these moments of solitude that we may pour out our hearts, confess our shortcomings, and listen for God's guidance. The spirit of Christian discipline in prayer transforms our hearts and minds, and equips us to face the challenges before us.

Fasting: A Humble Heart

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:16-18, KJV)

Jesus teaches that fasting should not be an outward show, but a private discipline aimed at drawing closer to God; it may serve as a tool of humility, reminding us of our dependence on God above all else. When we fast, we relinquish control over our own desires, making space for spiritual reflection and growth. This discipline helps us to focus on our relationship with God rather than our physical appetites, and invites us to become more sensitive to the needs of others. In true Christian fasting, we seek not recognition, but a deepened commitment to God.

As we consider these three — giving, praying, and fasting — we find a common thread: the spirit behind our actions matters greatly to God.

The essence of Christian discipline is rooted in love, humility, and sincerity, and it requires intentionality. In our fast-paced world, it is easy to drift along without purpose or focus. As we enter this Lenten season, let us be intentional in our spiritual practices. What will we choose to give up, or to take on, that draws us closer to God? This is not only a matter of personal piety; it reflects our commitment to growing as disciples, and to being deliberate in our love for God and for our neighbour, reflecting the heart of Christ in all that we do.

Christian discipline is not a solitary journey. We are called to walk alongside one another, encouraging and holding each other accountable. The Church community is a supportive body within which we may share our struggles and our victories. Let us create an environment where weakness is welcomed, and together seek to embody the spirit of discipline as a collective witness to Christ's love — whether through small groups, prayer partners, or service to the community — and lift one another up in our spiritual practice during Lent.

But thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18, KJV)

This promise does not mean that our acts of discipline are transactional; rather, it speaks to God's deep understanding of our hearts.

Let us turn briefly, too, to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, where the Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the athlete to illustrate the importance of discipline in our Christian walk. Paul was writing to a church facing real challenges — moral failure, division, and questions of faith and practice — and throughout his letters he presses the importance of living a life worthy of the Gospel.

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, KJV)

Just as athletes train rigorously to win a prize, so Christians are called to exercise discipline to attain the greater prize of eternal life and a deeper relationship with God. The race of life is no sprint; it is a marathon, requiring endurance, perseverance, and a commitment to the finish line. We are each participants in a journey, with our own unique paths, yet the goal remains the same: to run with purpose, and to seek

the ultimate prize of eternal life in Christ. As we enter Lent, let us ask ourselves: how are we running this race? Are we sprinting out of the gate with enthusiasm, only to grow weary and slow down? Or are we pacing ourselves, building strength and endurance for the challenges ahead?

To run effectively, we must set our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2, KJV)

We might ask ourselves what spiritual goals we should set for this Lenten season. Is it our prayer life, our study of Scripture, our generosity, or our relationships with others? Setting specific goals can help us remain focused and motivated. Paul reminds us, too, of the discipline of self-control — the conscious choices we make about our actions, our thoughts, and our desires. Just as athletes restrict their diet and rise early to train, so we too must exercise self-control in our spiritual lives. During Lent we often consider giving up certain comforts or habits, but this discipline should not simply be deprivation for its own sake; it should cultivate deeper spiritual growth. As we practise self-control, we create space for God to work in our lives.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. (Matthew 6:20, KJV)

Paul draws a distinction between the fleeting honours of this world and the eternal rewards God offers: the athletes of his day received a corruptible crown, but ours is an incorruptible one. Each act of discipline, every moment spent in prayer, and every opportunity to serve others accumulates treasure in Heaven. Consider how your own spiritual practice during Lent might be an investment in this eternal prize, and how you might deepen your relationship with God and reflect His love to those around you. We do not run merely for ourselves; our own discipline may inspire others to draw closer to God.

Finally, we turn to Isaiah:

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. ... Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to

the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily. (Isaiah 58:1, 5-8a, KJV)

Here the Lord calls out hollow displays of piety, and urges His people to understand that true fasting and discipline go beyond mere ritual. Instead, He desires a heartfelt commitment that shows itself in acts of justice, compassion, and genuine care for others. The spirit of Christian discipline challenges us to align our outward expressions of faith with an inner transformation that reflects God's love and mercy. As we begin our Lenten journey, let us heed the call to engage in meaningful acts of service and to seek authentic relationships with God and with others, fostering a spirit of humility and sincerity in all our pursuits. By doing so, we become vessels of His light, breaking the chains of injustice and bringing hope to those in need, and fulfil the true purpose of our spiritual practice.

As we observe Ash Wednesday and set out on our Lenten journey, let us embrace the spirit of Christian discipline as a transforming experience. The practices of giving, praying, and fasting are not mere rituals; they are opportunities to deepen our relationship with God and to reflect His love to others. May we approach this season with intentionality, mindful of our own motives, and striving for authenticity in our actions. Let us support one another within our church community, lifting each other up as we pursue a closer walk with God, and trust in the promise that our Lord sees our hearts and will reward our sincerity. This Lenten season may be a profound time of renewal, shaping us into faithful disciples who live out the spirit of discipline in every aspect of our lives. Let us journey together, seeking transformation, and drawing nearer to Christ.

Amen.