

**Piety Practice**

Ash Wednesday

March 2, 2022

Joel 2: 12-13

<sup>12</sup> Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21

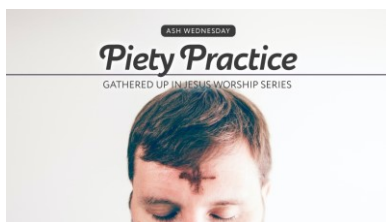
<sup>1</sup> “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup> “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup> “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup> “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your

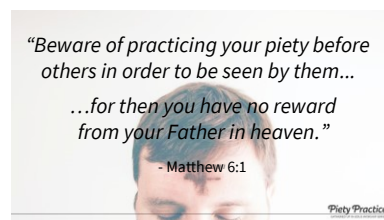
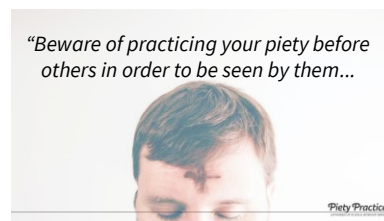
*fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*<sup>19</sup> “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*



Lent is often seen as a time when people give something up – pop, chocolate, Facebook, television, sweets. The idea of giving something up seems to go along with the call to deny ourself and to practice sacrificial living. It fits in well with the experience Jesus had when we began his ministry, spending forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying. The forty-day time frame of Lent, after all, comes from the forty days that Jesus was tested. To give something up would parallel Jesus’ giving up food for these forty days. Fasting and giving up something for Lent are really drawn from the same concept. During a fast, every time hunger gnaws at you, it is a reminder to trust in God, to pray, to lean into the strength that God can provide. During a fast, whenever the normal time for breakfast or lunch or dinner rolls around, one dedicates that time to prayer, study, meditation. Giving up pop, for example, could work the same way. Every time you crave one, pray to God for strength. Every meal or break that you’d normally have a pop, you take a moment to read and meditate on a few passages from the Bible. In these ways you will deepen your relationship with and connection to God. That is a good thing. Yet this holy season of Lent calls us to more than giving something up. As we prepare to dive into that tonight, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Turn with me to Matthew 6 as we begin this time together. In the opening verse we hear a word of warning about how we practice or live out our faith. In verse 6 Jesus says, *“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”* When we are fasting or giving something up for Lent, if we make a show of it, then we are missing the point. If I were to choose to give up coffee for Lent, for example, and I began every Monday staff meeting bemoaning how hard this act of sacrifice is or if I bragged at men’s group about how well I am doing without coffee, then, to use Jesus’ words, *“for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”* By the same token, if I were to lament aloud in men’s group how much time my new Lenten devotional is taking each day, then I am drawing attention to myself in a poor fashion too. Jesus did not take a small audience with him to watch him fast and pray in the wilderness. Our audience should be the same. We should seek to live for an audience of one, living to please God alone.



The action verb here in the first half of this verse is worth reflecting upon as well. Jesus is speaking of “practicing” our faith. This again harkens back to the idea of being works in progress, of being people desiring to become more like Jesus. This season of Lent invites us to go deeply into this process of transformation and growth. Practicing is an active term. Jesus is encouraging us to “do” our faith – to live it out, to practice it.

As Jesus continues in verses 2-6 and 16-18, he speaks of how we practice our works of piety. Jesus says that when we give, we should *“not let your left hand know what your*



*right is doing*” – give without fanfare, give in secret. When we pray, don’t stand and pray out loud. Instead, Jesus instructs us to *“pray to our Father in secret.”*

When we fast, Jesus instructs, don’t cover our faces in ashes so that others notice. He says to wash up and put oil on our faces, again so that it might be only seen by *“your Father who is in secret.”* Jesus is calling us, as his followers, to practice piety or spiritual disciplines not for others benefit or for others to see, but for that audience of one. Christ is calling for humility as we practice our faith. These ideas are reflected in our Old Testament reading from the prophet Joel. Turn with me now to Joel 2, verse 12, as we find reassurance and encouragement in these words and as we are reminded of who and what God is.

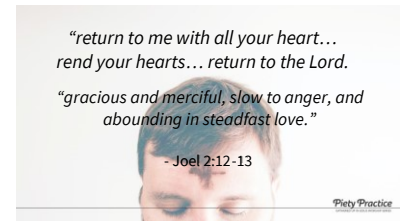
As the book of Joel opens, he laments over the ruin of Israel and calls them back to repentance and prayer, back to a life of piety. Joel reminds them that *“the day of the Lord is coming, it is near.”* The Israelites have strayed from God; they have sinned. They are not walking a holy life. In verses 12 and 13, speaking through Joel, God calls the people to *“return to me with all your heart... rend your hearts... return to the Lord.”* God desires for the people to be faithful, to be fully committed to walking in faith. There is an acknowledgement that this is not an easy process. God tells the people to “rend” their hearts – to literally tear them away from their sinful ways. When I have struggled with a sin, and perhaps when you have, it can be hard to give that sin up, to lay it down at the throne of grace, to admit our failures and to ask for help, to confess and repent.

*“return to me with all your heart...  
rend your hearts... return to the Lord.”*

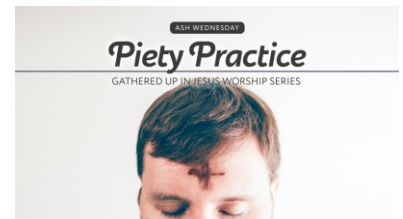


Piety Practice

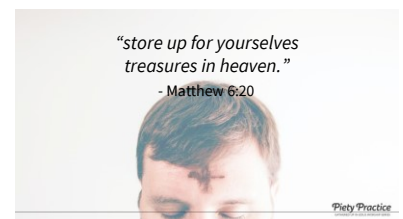
And there is an invitation here in the words of Joel too. It is a reminder also of who God is. God is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* Who wouldn’t want to return to that God, to walk in relationship with that God? Who wouldn’t want to live a life of piety with the God of grace and love walking hand in hand with us? If it were only that easy.



It is not easy because we don’t always do what we’re supposed to do. We do not always do what we’re told to do or even what we should do. We don’t always do what we know is good for us. As followers of Christ, our own lack of obedience sometimes leads to our struggle to walk in his ways. There is another struggle that I sometimes wrestle with. That inner self, that part of me that is of this earth, that part sometimes asks, “What’s in it for me?” In answering this question, let us return again to Matthew 6 to hear Jesus’ response to why we practice our piety. In Jesus’ words we are reminded of why our spiritual disciplines matter.



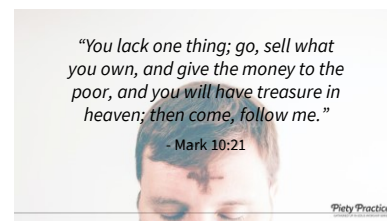
The answer is found in the last three verses of our gospel lesson for today. In the *“rend your hearts”* spirit of Joel, Jesus begins by encouraging us to *“not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.”* As Jesus lived, we are encouraged to live. Do not store up wealth in the bank or possessions in the house or garage or titles on our resumes. Instead, we are implored to *“store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”* Let’s take a little time to unpack what this looks like.



First, let's begin with how we don't do it. We don't do it by trying to keep score or by somehow figuring out if we've done enough or are good enough to get into heaven. There is no cosmic score card for each of our lives. That is the lesson in the parable of the rich young man. He comes to Jesus wanting to know what to do to get into heaven. He tells Jesus that he has kept all the commands. He is a devout and pious young man. He thinks he has been good enough to get in.

But Jesus tells him in Mark 10:21, *"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

Here Jesus tells him to not store up treasures on earth, but instead to give these things away. You might recall the man walked away sad because he loved his wealth. Jesus instructs the man to "go and sell". It is in the giving that treasures in heaven are stored up. It is in the action, in the doing. Treasure in heaven is not something we can hold in our hands; it is something we do with our hands. It is something we offer with our words. It is something that begins deep inside of us and then is shared with others.



To live this way is to live in a way that where we know and share and experience God's blessings every day. It is offering an act of kindness to another. It is in loving those hard to love. It is in choosing mercy instead of anger. It is in clinging to joy in the midst of sorrow. It is deciding to be generous whenever we have opportunity. It is to look within our hearts and to be committed to die to self, to sacrifice for the other, to ever seek to do good in the world.

Our gospel lesson for this day concludes with these words:

*“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* As

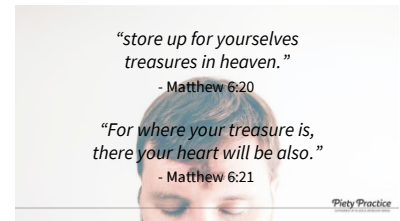
we prepare to enter this holy season of Lent, we begin by

asking where our heart is. Are we committed to walking

with Christ through this season, desiring to become more like him? Are we willing to

look deeply within, to rend our hearts from the things of this world? Or are we dearly

attached to the things of this world?



Jesus began the teaching in Matthew 6 with these words of warning: *“Beware of*

*practicing your piety before others...*” My friends, may we be aware of how and why we

practice our piety this Lenten season. May we be aware of the treasure we seek to

store up because where our treasure is, there we will find our heart. May we be aware

of the call to reflect and transform our lives into the likeness of the one who has the

power to save us all. May we be aware of the voice of the Spirit as it calls us to live an

active and generous faith, reflecting the light and love of Christ out into the world. May

we practice our faith well, leading us to be gathered up in Jesus during this holy

season of Lent. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.