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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The passage from Matthew we've just heard again on this Ash Wednesday is particularly appropriate for the beginning of Lent because it encourages us to *engage in acts of righteousness* and to *keep our focus on matters of the spirit*.

In a sense, we have to put aside the notions of *Ash Wednesday* and *Lent* themselves when we read this gospel lesson, because these terms come from a period long after the New Testament was written. Rather, we should think of the thrust of the teaching here as being applicable to *our overall lives*.

So, what can we take away from another reading of this passage from Matthew? First, what is meant by the term "righteousness" is that a *moral dimension* should characterize our focus and state of mind at all times. What we say and think and do should embody a **proper motivation**. For example, when we pray, we need to recall that the whole purpose of prayer is *communicating with God and experiencing his presence in our lives*. Thus, if what we do is meant to advance our *own* interests, to gain attention for *ourselves*, to attract the observation of *others* rather than God, then we fail the moral test.

In some ways, what is being taught here can't be translated comfortably into a 21st century setting because habits have changed so dramatically. For example, modern fund-raising incorporates a philosophy of charitable giving which places considerable emphasis on publicizing the names of individual donors. Similarly, the charitable deduction which is sanctioned by the IRS because Congress wants to encourage philanthropy, was unknown in antiquity. Without these devices, raising funds becomes more difficult. Obviously, these practices can attract the attention of others or simply reduce one's tax obligation. In either case, the focus has shifted away from the reason for making the gift in the first place. One could also argue, however, that whatever encourages philanthropy for worthy causes is a useful thing in itself and should not be downplayed. All the same, it bears repeating: *what God cares about* is different from what human beings see as important.

And God is simply *not interested* in our petty self-promotion. He favors the cause of the poor, of course, but any advantage *we gain* from our charitable acts actually works against his agenda. To the extent that we focus on self-promotion, we diminish the gift in God's eyes.

Likewise, some might conclude from the comments here about praying in front of others that *public prayer itself* is being discouraged. That is not the case. If it were, we could rightly hesitate to say grace at meals in public, and this cannot be the intent of the teaching. No. The point is that *private prayer done in public* for the purpose of *gaining attention for oneself* is actively condemned, not prayer itself.

It is somewhat problematic to apply the lesson about fasting to our own time, because we have separated spiritual from bodily practices in the modern world. This was not true in the first century. If you humbled yourself through abstaining from eating it was viewed in Jesus' time as a very *natural* religious

act flowing from daily practice. Also, dietary laws which were actively followed at that time helped individual believers sustain faith because they provided an ongoing and tangible focus on spiritual priorities. In our time, fasting is no longer a common religious activity, and dietary laws play a decreasing role in most people's lives, even though temporary and purposeful fasting is used from time to time for the purpose of raising funds to alleviate hunger. And certainly this brings attention to the person doing the fasting, but -- again -- **the overall point is to be clear in one's intent when doing any of these things: praying, fasting, or almsgiving.**

It is, in fact, interesting to see that the practices Jesus focuses on here are those one could easily have observed in his lifetime -- that is, individual acts of piety that were widely commended in that era. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount tells us how indebted Jesus was to Jewish thinking and Hebrew scripture for his topics and the content of his teaching. You may recall that I made a similar point on Sunday.

In order to see how all of this relates to Ash Wednesday and Lent, we should bear in mind the general thrust of Jesus' teaching here. When what we are practicing is distorted or flawed in any way, when it is not truthful or authentic, it becomes a "false godliness." When what we are doing demonstrates that *we are not really the person we want both God and others to see in ourselves*, this is what Jesus condemns.

And this brings us to the common practice of viewing the ashes on our foreheads as marks of religious achievement -- rather like those stickers we wanted our teachers to award us in nursery school. Truthfully, this amounts to "peddling Lenten spirituality" like some kind of cheap trinket. Jesus would have said of this practice: "You already have your reward. Don't expect one from God." Which is another way of saying, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

In the end, God blesses genuine service and worship. God treasures authenticity. God wants us to be honest. What the ashes imposed on Ash Wednesday really signal is our willingness to diminish our own interests in order to elevate those of God. In a sense, what we are saying with the mark of the cross on Ash Wednesday is that we are part of a great tradition extending back over thousands of years, but we need to be clear about what that tradition is. So, let us recall first of all the *shema* which would have been at the heart of the faith of Jesus and his disciples: "Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one." We can also profitably recall what Jesus said about the commandments themselves: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...(and) you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Bearing in mind the fundamental teaching of Jesus, may you be blessed with a holy Lent.

Amen.