

ASH WEDNESDAY DEVOTIONAL

We focus our lives at the beginning of the season of Lent by fasting and prayer. Lent is a 40-day time for realigning our daily choices to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Lent allows for repentance, release, and renewal. In Matthew's gospel sermon on the mount connects fasting with deepening relationships in community of faith. The scripture text is Matthew 6:16-18 (fuller reading is verses 1-6, 16-21) NRSVue.

"And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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."

The teachings on giving alms for display, praying to be seen, and fasting to appear holy run counter to God's way, reflecting self-promotion and concern for reputation—values common in both Roman times and today. According to Jesus, genuine faith should advance people's wellbeing and honor God.

Fasting was a common practice then. For the crowds and disciples there were many fast days. The obligatory fast is associated with the Day of Atonement with specific requirements of everyone (Leviticus 16:29-31). There were fast days to confront impending national disasters, personal fast days, and fasting that is connected with peoples struggles. Fasting shared the pain in solidarity with others. Lamenting or participating in acts of mourning using sackcloth and ashes are examples.

In Matthew, fasting for Jesus is linked to relationships—prayer goes hand in hand with acting justly toward our neighbors, as referenced in Isaiah 58:5-9. Jesus teaches that serving God begins by letting God's grace flow through the community. When we fast and pray, we enable God's blessings to reach both people we know and those we don't. Fasting benefits not only our physical and emotional well-being but also strengthens our capacity to serve and testify for God. Ultimately, spiritual practices are relational and aim to honor God.

Action: How will you choose to focus your time to listen to God through fasting?

Prayer: Lord, teach again how to stop, listen, and change directions to life and healing out of the motivation of love. Transform my heart to be near to yours towards your saving grace. Amen.