

PARISH LENTEN MISSION - DAY #3 - TALK ON STEWARDSHIP

Last Ash Wednesday and every Ash Wednesday the Gospel during Mass calls our attention to the three activities suggested for the season. They are of course the call to fast, pray, and give alms. There are always suggestions on the many ways we can pray. There are many daily prayer and meditations books and pamphlets

available. The Stations of the Cross are prayed in just about every parish as a special Lenten prayer. Daily Mass and Communion are always encouraged as a means of special Lenten devotions.

The rules of Lenten fasting are vastly different now compared to what they used to be prior to Vatican II. Adults were required to fast everyday during Lent in prior days compared to the laxity of fasting now. In our own day we are required to fast on just two days during Lent; Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Even though the Church only requires fasting on those specific days, we are encouraged to fast every day as our own spiritual exercise. The rules of fasting are always specifically spelled out in our parish bulletins. All adults and teens between the ages of 14 and 59 are required to fast to the measurement of eating two small meals a day plus the main meal which should not exceed the combined amount of the smaller meals, etc.

As explicit as the opportunities, instructions and suggestions are concerning fasting and prayer, almost nothing is said about the matter of almsgiving. It's left up to each of us individually how we are to exercise this third leg of Lenten activities. Years ago, we used to have something called the "Rice Bowl" where families were given small cardboard carton containers in which they were to place the money saved from the cost of the food not eaten during the Lenten fast. At the end of Lent the small boxes, usually containing a small number of coins, were collected and the proceeds given to charity. However, we don't even do that anymore.

And so, the giving of alms is left to each one of us. In times gone by there were many opportunities to fulfill this requirement. Having no social welfare programs or any other organized means of caring for the needy, there was no other way than begging for those who were unable to care for themselves. They would sit outside of the city gates, or outside of the gates to the temple and beg for alms. No longer will we find people sitting outside of the city gates or outside of the doors of our Churches.

Today there are many other ways to give alms to those in need. There are countless organizations who are constantly soliciting funds to carry out their works. Some are indeed doing works of charity, while others not so much. Hardly a week goes by when we do not receive many letters in the mail seeking our support for one thing or another. Obviously, we cannot respond to them all – but we can respond to some. Everyone should have one or more favorite charities that deserve our support.

Almsgiving is one of the oldest and most beautiful expressions of Christian love. Giving to those in need is a concrete sign of compassion and mercy. The very word *alms* is rooted in a Greek term meaning pity or mercy. To give alms is to let God's compassion flow through us toward someone who is struggling. Proverbs teach us "Whoever is kind to the needy honors God." Almsgiving is not simply generosity – it is honoring God by caring for others.

When we give alms, we loosen the grip of selfishness. We begin to better understand that we are not the center of the universe and we grow in compassion for others. We become more like Christ in imitating his generosity in his love and care for others. The Scripture consistently promises that those who care for the poor will themselves be blessed – not necessarily with wealth, but with God's favor, joy and closeness. Alms giving becomes a path of spiritual transformation which develops into the spirituality of stewardship.

When a lot of people hear the word "stewardship" they might think, "Oh no, here comes another fund raiser." It's so much more than that! Stewardship is not just another fund raiser; it's a whole new way of life, an entire new sense of spirituality that can draw us ever closer to God. Stewardship is a whole-life-orientation rooted in the conviction that everything belongs to God and everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God. This includes our lives, relationships, talents, time, faith, and material resources. The 24th Psalm tells us, "The earth is the Lord's and all it holds." Stewardship then is not about giving something away – it's living faithfully with what was never ours to begin with.

Stewardship is the opposite of entitlement. It is a posture of a heart that says, "Everything I have is gift, and every gift is given for a purpose. Jesus reframes stewardship as discipleship. He never used the word stewardship but he embodies it everywhere. In the parable of the talents, he teaches that gifts are meant to be invested, not buried. In the feeding of the five thousand, he shows that generosity multiplies. In the widow's mite, he reveals that God measures the heart, and not the amount. In his own life, he demonstrates that the greatest gift is the offering of oneself. For Jesus, stewardship is not a financial matter – it is a discipleship matter. It is the daily choice of how we use our time, our abilities, our resources, and our hearts in the service of God's kingdom. Stewardship is not driven by guilt or obligation. It is driven by gratitude – the recognition that God has already given us more than we could ever repay.

When we embrace stewardship spirituality, we begin to understand our identity differently. We are grateful disciples, not self-made individuals. We are caretakers – not owners. We are collaborators with God – not passive recipients. We are called to generosity – not possessiveness. Stewardship spirituality cultivates: gratitude of God's daily blessings; generosity toward God and neighbor; service rooted in love; simplicity and freedom from possessiveness; responsibility for creation and community, and a joy in giving and belonging.

Most stewardship programs concentrate on the three areas of Time, Talent, and Treasure. The first two speak for themselves. We've all been given time and talents and giving some of those gifts back to God is something we can all manage to some degree or other. The stewardship of our treasure is something that we may have some problem working out. What should be the measure of our returning to God a portion of what he has given to us.

In my own life I experience a radical change in my relationship with God when I was in my late thirties. Being raised in, and coming out of, a blue-collar environment, and after serving ten years in the Air Force, I managed to work my way to middle management in a Fortune 500 Corporation. At the time I was married with three children and gladly became a workaholic, always looking forward to the next raise and/or promotion. I rationalized that I was doing it all for the good of my family. I was living the American Dream, climbing the ladder of success, and being able to afford a nice home on the water and having a boat and a camper. The picture of success, or so it seemed. But there was something missing in my life – and the something missing turned out to be a relationship with God.

After experiencing a profound conversion and putting God first in my life, I had to change my priorities. I had a hunger for Scripture and read through the New Testament a number of times. I came to the conclusion that I had to do something about giving back to God. I once saw a sign in a churchyard that said, "Give to God what is right – not what you have left over." I became convicted that I had to begin tithing – the Biblical tithe – ten percent off the top. It wasn't an easy thing to start and it did require a leap of faith. But once I began, I never looked back.

Tithing is one of Scripture's most daring invitations. In Malachi 3:10 God says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Test me in this and see if I don't open the floodgates of heaven and pour down blessings upon you without measure." Tithing is not a transaction. It's a way of placing our trust in God's care, aligning our hearts with his generosity, and participating in his work.

Tithing opens our eyes to God's presence and helps us to better recognize the hand of the Lord in our lives. When we give the first portion back to God, we begin to see the world differently. Blessings that once seemed ordinary become signs of God's faithfulness. When we give the first ten percent back to God, we find that the other ninety percent will go much further than we ever expected.

Tithing strengthens our trust in God's provision. The promise made in the book of Malachi is not a guarantee of wealth, but rather a pledge of God's faithful care. The blessings of God come in many different ways, and in God's own time. Tithing loosens our fear and deepens our trust.

Tithing cultivates spiritual freedom by breaking the grip of possessiveness and selfishness. It reminds us that everything we have is God's gift, and that generosity is the natural posture of a disciple. When we give, we become more like the One who gives all.

Tithing brings a quiet joy that comes from giving freely. It is the joy of knowing we are part of something larger than ourselves – the joy of trusting God with our lives – and the joy of seeing blessings unfold in unexpected ways. This joy is one of the most profound blessings of tithing – an interior freedom that no circumstance can take away.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells us, "Give and it will be given to you – full measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over – will it be poured into the fold of your garment. For the measure you measure with – will be measured back to you."

On Ash Wednesday we are told to "Repent, and believe the Gospel." This Lent, as we engage in prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms – believe fully in the Gospel – and not just believe in it – but live it – and this Lent could mark a major turning point in your life.