

Who Cares?

We've all had "those" days. I don't even have to explain what I mean when I say it this way. You know. Unfortunately, there are times in life that it feels like nobody cares what you're doing (or trying to do). They don't seem to notice. They don't seem to care. They certainly don't seem to *appreciate* your efforts. Maybe such a dejected feeling happens only rarely; i.e., one of those days. Something that day just hits you wrong. It all stacks up and comes piling down on you, and you find yourself overwhelmed with feelings of "why bother? *What's the point?* *Maybe I should just quit and do something different.*" We've all been there. Maybe it's just a day. Maybe it's a week or a month. Maybe it goes on for much longer than that. Sometimes such feelings can span a whole career. "*I don't get paid enough for this. They don't even care anyway. What's the point?*"

This is where the Israelites were at in Isaiah's time. They were fasting and really tearing themselves up and wearing themselves out, all in the name of trying to please God. The problem was that God wasn't taking notice or praising them for all their *hard work and sacrifice*. "*Hey, God! What's your problem?! Don't you see what we're doing here? Don't you see all the fasting and sacrifice we're doing for you? How's about showing a little appreciation? Don't you even care?*"

It's easy to shake our heads at the Israelites for such ignorant behavior, but as I said at the beginning, even a *brief examination* of the reflection in the mirror reveals the same ugly reality within us. There are times that we do what we do, and we feel *unappreciated and taken for granted*...even by God. There are times that we make *tremendous sacrifices* in the name of faith, and then get nothing in return; not even a pat on the back or a thank you...not even from God.

Admit it: If you could get a little sign from God Himself; *a little divine "atta boy" or "receipt" of sorts* that would let you know that He not only observed your efforts, as futile as they may seem to be, but also *approved of and appreciated them*, it would make the troubles a whole lot easier to bear, wouldn't it? "*Well done, good and faithful servant. Thank you. I really appreciate what you're doing. Thank you. It means a lot to me.*" Such divine acknowledgment and praise would, no doubt, make all the futility and heartache seem more worthwhile. In fact, we'd clamor to get to the head of the line in order to have the honor and privilege of having God praise and thank us. I mean... our left hand shouldn't even know what our right hand is doing, and yet we clamor to get recognized and thanked and praised by our own fellow man. We want our fellow sinners to know. We desperately seek their approval. *How much more would we suck it up and step it up if the thanks, praise, and approval was raining down directly from God in heaven?*

“I don’t get paid enough to put up with this.” Martin Luther argued just the opposite when he alluded to this sort of *hypothetical divine praise phenomenon* in the Large Catechism, saying that if we really understood how God worked through ordinary people like us, we would clamor to serve our neighbor (even the ones we don’t like), *even paying for the privilege* of being able to serve them because we would recognize that we were serving God through them with our humble and obedient works.

It’s so easy to talk about how we understand how God works through our works; how He doesn’t need our works, but our neighbor does; how our works don’t *earn* us salvation, but instead reveal the saving faith inside us that clings to the grace of God and the sure and certain promise of our salvation. *It’s easy to talk about, but it’s quite another thing to actually live out*; to actually recognize how we are humbly and faithfully serving Him in good and God-pleasing service in the lowly, unnoticed, and unappreciated mundane tasks of our everyday lives; to recognize Christ Himself in the mundane (and perhaps even unappreciative) faces of everyday people; the least of our own brothers and sisters.

Now...some of you may be wondering why the subject of the lesson and the subject of the sermon is *fasting*. After all, isn’t that a Lent thing? We’re not in Lent; not yet, at least. You are correct in your assessment of the calendar, but I can assure you that this topic is absolutely fitting and necessary for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany (*and every day, for that matter*). This is where the Lord’s response to the ignorant and arrogant Israelites leads us to a proper understanding. “*God, why don’t you notice what we’re doing; i.e., how we fast? Don’t you care? Don’t you appreciate our fasts for you?*”

And God responds: “*I don’t notice?! Oh...I notice. You fast occasionally, when it’s convenient; when it benefits you, and you oppress and make everyone else miserable in the process. Your fasting consists of quarreling, fighting, and tearing everyone else down in an effort to build yourselves up. You say you humble yourselves in your fasting, but there is NOTHING humble about anything you’re doing. Simply going through the motions of putting on sackcloth and ashes is not fasting by My definition. You’re just putting on a good show for everyone else, but I’m not impressed. You’ve got it all wrong!*”

“*This is the fast I call for: Loose the bonds of wickedness. Undo the bindings of your yoke of sin. Release that which has been imprisoned.*” ***In a word—forgive!*** All that sin that is imprisoning you and binding you and your brothers and sisters up, *loosen it; undo it...forgive it and release it. Let it go.* (Side-note: The Greek word for “forgive” – *aphesis* – is also translated as “undo, release, loosen,” e.g., The Lord’s Prayer – “...*aphesis our sins we forgive those....*”).

God continues: “You want to truly fast from food? Don’t give up your bread and go hungry **simply for the sake of giving up your bread and going hungry**. Give your bread away. You’re not using it, right? That’s a true and faithful fast. Give your bread to someone who needs it more than you. Yes, you’ll be hungry, but have faith—I have your daily bread covered. You can properly fast by giving up some of your precious space in your home. Sacrifice a little privacy by welcoming the homeless into your home. Try fasting from the constant desire to be noticed and praised by others. Try fasting from trying to clothe yourself with the latest and best. All you’re doing is foolishly trying to hide your sinfulness under **fancy-looking soiled rags**, no different than Adam and Eve did with their leaves. You can properly fast in this area by spending that money and effort on clothing those who are naked and without. Yes, you can go without the latest fashion/technological accessory, and instead clothe someone who has nothing.”

“When you truly understand all this, that’s when the Light from on High will break through and shine in your life. That’s when **healing and deliverance and righteousness** will truly spring up all around you and be manifested/witnessed everywhere in your life, going **before** you in all your daily endeavors, and walking **tail-end Charlie** for you, serving as rear guard so nothing can sneak up on you. When you understand what **truly gracious faithfulness** is, you will see that I am always with you and you have nothing to fear—**ever**. Until then...you’re just selfishly serving yourselves. You’re spinning your wheels, and neither one of us are going to be happy with what’s going on or how it will end.”

Ouch! **How many of you feel convicted right now?** I know I do. I know God nailed me dead-to-rights with His reality of what true faithful fasting and God-pleasing humility and truly selfless service really consists of and looks like in **everyday** life; not just in Lent, but every day.

And before you try to justify yourself with the whole, “*nobody can do all this,*” **remember that God Himself truly and perfectly practices what He preaches.** He leads by example. He undoes and loosens and forgives us our sins, not because we’ve earned His grace and forgiveness, but because Jesus Christ earned our forgiveness. By ourselves, we can earn nothing of God’s grace and favor. This is why Christ did it for us. “*Forgive as you’ve been forgiven; love as you’ve been loved... in Christ.*”

In terms of fasting, **Christ truly fasted for us in every respect.** By utterly emptying Himself out to the point of death on a criminal’s cross; to the point of enduring all of His Father’s justice and wrath for our sin, Jesus made it so that we can be **utterly filled up and overflowing with the Father’s love.** The Bread of Life gave up everything in order to feed and nourish us with His bread of life, something which He will do again in just a few minutes. The King of Heaven gave up all that majesty and made Himself utterly forsaken and homeless all so that we

would have a **heavenly mansion** with many rooms in our Father's kingdom. He became naked and beaten and completely stripped of all **decency, dignity, and pride** so that we could be clothed in His righteousness; a white robe made that has been washed and made perfect in His blood. And why did He do it? Because He wanted people to praise Him? He doesn't **need** our praises! Jesus isn't an insecure, pride-ridden, glory-hound like us! He did it all out of love; love for His Father and love for us undeserving sinners. It's as simple as that.

And as for us and our daily lives and dealings with our fellow man, this is how God works. This is how He continues to work to make His Light and Life manifest to a world buried in the darkness of sin and despair. He works **through** you. He shines **through** you. He gives the salt of Law and Gospel, which kills and preserves, through you. You are His "salt shaker." You are His lantern, the light of Christ shining forth through/from you. It's not easy though, is it? **No one ever said it would be.** Jesus Himself said that we are to take up our crosses and follow Him. Faithfully bearing a cross in this fallen and sinful world is incredibly difficult. Clinging to your justification—your free gift of salvation by God's grace alone because of Christ alone, which is yours through faith alone—is incredibly difficult, **especially** when life gets tough. *Sometimes trying to be a good/faithful Christian doesn't seem like it's worth it. Sometimes it seems like nobody cares or notices...even God. Why bother with all the effort? What's the point? Why try?*

Why? Here's your answer. Look here. Look to the cross of Jesus Christ. Here's your blessed and eternal reality. No one can ever take this from you. May this blessed Good News of your salvation enlighten your hearts and minds, and bring about the truly God-pleasing thoughts, words, and deeds of one who has been **fed, nourished, and clothed** by the One who fasted and became nothing for us and our salvation.

With this in mind and properly centered up in the focus of faith, **may all your days and all that you do, whatever it is**, be done not out of a Pharisaical compulsion that covets the praises of sinful men or, worse yet, hopes to be saved because you earned enough merit badges, but instead in humble, thankful response to the profound joy of knowing and trusting that because of Jesus, God Himself calls you great in the kingdom of heaven. May this Good News be your joy, your peace, and your motivation, now and always.

AMEN