

**“The Hiddenness Of The Devout Life”**

*Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a-- Matthew 6:16-18*

Late in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., on the first day of Lent Pope Gregory the Great sprinkled ashes from burnt palm leaves on the heads of the clergy and laity while repeating the words, “Remember that thou art dust, and wilt to dust return.”

This was the first official observance of Ash Wednesday. Pope Gregory wanted to remind the illiterate people of his day in a graphic manner that the greatest achievements or good works that a person might accomplish are only ashes in the sight of God.

The observance of Ash Wednesday, as developed by Pope Gregory removed religion from the realm of abstract theology and placed it in the everyday experience of the common people at a time when books were scarce and the best way to teach was through pictures, symbols, and plays.

However, in the Reformed Churches there was a strong reaction against the observance of Ash Wednesday, Lent, and all un-Biblical festivals including Christmas.

For example, in looking through Calvin’s, Institutes I could find no reference at all to Ash Wednesday and only three paragraphs of negative comments on Lent.

I turned to the works of Ulrich Zwingli, the teacher of Calvin, and the only thing I could find was the interesting comment that “at dinner during Lent, 1522, Christopher Froschauer and others ate sausage meat..” This is particularly interesting because sausage meat was forbidden by the Roman Church during the Lenten fast.

Zwingli, who was present, and most likely encouraged the whole thing, approved the eating of the sausage, but declined to eat any of it himself, probably for fear of getting into trouble.

One of the reasons why the Reformers refused to observe the Lenten fast was that the observance of Ash Wednesday had degenerated into a ritual that initiated a period of time when religion was supposed to be taken seriously...for about six weeks.

They believed, however, that Christianity is to be at the center of our lives all through the year. For those of us in the Reformed tradition everyday is an Ash Wednesday when we confess our sins...the new life contained in every moment points us to the new life that came into the world that first Christmas...and the wonder of the unexpected and incredible points us to the incredibility and wonder of the first Easter.

All of this background leads us to ask the question: Why does one perform religious acts of devotion such as the abstinence of some foods during the Lenten season, or more generally, any act of devotion such as prayer, Bible reading, or attendance at worship service?

Are public displays of private religious exercise a proper way to bear witness to others of your faith? Or is it a way to twist God's arm into giving us what we want? Or is it to be done to atone for our past sins?

To all of these Jesus and the prophets offer a resounding, "No!"

In our Old Testament lesson we read that that the People of Judah were demanding that God pay attention to their religious devotions.

They say, "Why have we fasted and thou seest it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and thou takest no knowledge of it." (Isaiah 58:3)

God himself admits that his people "seek me daily and delight to know my way...they delight to draw near to God." (Isaiah 58:2)

But God answers their prayers by telling them, “Is it such a fast that I have chosen a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sack-cloth and ashes under him?” (Isaiah 58:5)

No, this is not the kind of fast he has chosen for us. Rather, he says, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To lose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou not hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” (i.e., your own relatives who are in need).

Here, in Isaiah, we see that some came to think that a devout life would automatically gain a man a hearing from God. Against this the prophets declared that without right conduct religious devotions were in vain.

In the New Testament we are told that Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights struggling with the tempter at the beginning of his public ministry. However, he did that alone and in the wilderness for Jesus never made attempts to impress people with the devoutness of his life.

To the contrary, it seems that Jesus was unconcerned when he and his disciples were criticized for not fasting as the disciples of John the Baptist did.

He say, “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon;’ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’” (Matthew 11:18-19)

Unfortunately Christians soon forgot the example of Christ. The extra-Biblical literature of the early Christians show that they placed a much greater emphasis on fasting than did Christ and soon the practice fell into misuse. It became an observance that marked the ‘spiritual’ Christian from the ‘worldly’ Christian in a way that Christ never intended.

In fact, several references to fasting found in the King James Version of the Bible are notably absent from later translations because the earliest Greek manuscripts make no reference to the word.

This points to the fact that Christianity at a very early stage in its history tended toward an otherworldly ascetism and spiritualism for the ironic reason that it allowed itself to be influenced by the highly spiritualistic and otherworldly mystery religions and distorted the teaching of Christ and the prophets.

This tendency is still present within the church...the tendency to believe that prayer, Bible reading, or the abstinence from certain foods or pleasures during Lent is more spiritual and Christian than obedience to the word of God spoken through Isaiah to “loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free...”

It was this tendency that was one of the factors leading to the Reformation. And it is a constant reminder for us to measure our faith against the scripture and not against popular and beloved, but nevertheless, unbiblical traditions.

Isaiah reminds us that religious devotions are not an end in themselves. They are a means whereby God makes us aware of what he wants us to do in the world. To seek God's fellowship and will in our Lenten observance, or in prayer and Bible study without obeying his will is a dad affront to our Father and God. If we love him we will want to both seek and obey his will.

However, the discipline of prayer and meditation, of the study of scripture and the Lenten custom of abstinence from certain foods and habits is good and necessary for the Christian who is serious about his faith.

Jesus merely warns us that the exercise of these disciplines is private thing between you and God and become hypocritical when attention is drawn to ourselves.

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Jesus' principle was this when it came to the exercise of religious devotions. Forget yourself altogether. Don't disfigure your face to look humble, neither put a smile on it merely to give the appearance of being happy. Rather anoint your head and wash your face just like you do every morning...i.e., be yourself, and forget what other people think. It is this interest in the opinions of other people that is so wrong. We don't have to impress other people with our devoutness. Don't worry about the impression you're making. The devout life is a hidden life to be seen only by God as we seek his will, with the intention of doing it. And he who sees in secret will reward us with himself.