

“This one thing you must give up!” Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Welcome to our first Lenten service. Let me ask you - is this sad or joyful a time? What do you think? It is kind of quiet time, right? What do we remember during this season of Lent? What is the focus of our meditations?

We remember sufferings of Christ which He endured for us and we also reflect with repentance upon our own sinful nature, which caused these suffering. So is this sad or a joyful a time?

I would say that this is as joyful a time as any time during the year. Why? First, when we think about Christ's suffering – what do we have in mind? Something that is happening right now, or something that already is finished?

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to be among us and to take upon Himself your sins, your weaknesses, your wounds, your death, but now it is done. He has done it. He has accomplished what He was sent to do.

He suffered a lot because of us, He was crucified and died, but then He rouse again. He is risen. He is indeed. He is with the Father, now we are simply waiting for His return in glory, for new heavens and new earth.

When we remember what Jesus did for us, sure, there is a place for quiet meditations, for empathy, but also for joy and gratitude. For there is nothing more that we need to do, Jesus has accomplished everything that had to be done for our salvation, for our reunion with true God.

We don't need to suffer, He did it on our behalf. We don't need to go to the cross, He did it on our behalf. You are here not to contribute to what He did, but to joyfully receive what He has prepared for you.

Now, think about our repentance. Sad or joyful? Joyful, of course, joyful. What is this repentance? When we realize that we are sinners, through and through, and turn to our Lord for forgiveness. We turn to the Lord for forgiveness!

Martin Luther used to say that repentance is such a joyful moment, for in the power of the Holy Spirit we have come to acknowledge the truth and now we are turning away from our old ways, to our new life together with Holy God.

Of course, it is a joyful event. This should be our mindset as we enter the Lent season. Joyful gratitude for what God has done for us and joyful feeling as we are turning away from all the wrongs we have done to this new life with Christ.

Every year we have a certain theme for these Lenten services. This year we have chosen the theme of 'giving something up'. So every week our sermons will focus on something that we could be giving up.

Today I'm scheduled to preach about giving up our good works. Yes, I know it may sound confusing. It sounds confusing to me. When we read our today's readings it is all about doing something. Doing good works. Really good works. Especially as we read Isaiah.

To do good works, or not to do good works, - which of these is it? Let's see if we can find an answer to what exactly do we need to give up. If we look at our today's Gospel reading, Matthew wrote about several things. About giving, about praying, about fasting, about laying up treasures.

Did Jesus condemn any of these practices? Did He say it was wrong to do them? No. Actually He encourage people to do these good works. So what was He against? What should we be giving up?

He was against a wrong motivation. This is where our today's focus will be. Motivation. What is your motivation when you do something? When you do good and pious things, when you do good works serving others, what is your motivation? That is the key question.

What Jesus condemned was this. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.” What does this mean? What is Jesus saying?

There is a very interesting function built into us. Very interesting. That is self-evaluation. Or we can call in conscience. Or the Bible calls it ‘God’s law written on our hearts.’ Everyone has it. Every single person.

What does this function do? It pushes us to evaluate ourselves. Or you can say to judge yourself. What kind of person I am? Am I a good person? Am I a worthy person? Am I somebody or nobody?

Do I match my own criteria for being somebody, for being a worthy person? Do I match criteria of others to be somebody? Do I match criteria of the society to be good and worthy? Do I match God’s criteria?

All people, all of us, we ask these questions. More often unconsciously than consciously. We do this evaluation all the time, and when you do it, what answer would you prefer to receive? You are nobody, good for nothing... you are totally useless...

No, this is not what we want! We really want to be somebody. With dignity, worth, being important and good person at least according to our own criteria. This is what every human being is after.

And this is what Jesus was talking about. This is what He accused us about. That we are too busy to justify ourselves, too focused on ourselves, trying to prove that we are good people, that we are somebody, with dignity and deserving respect.

This is our foundational desire in all stages on our lives. As little children we want to hide our misbehaviour pointing to others: “Not me, that was my brother, or sister... I’m good.” As teenagers we want to fit criteria set by our peers.

If we correspond to what is believed to be ‘cool’ we are good, we are somebody, we are worthy people, whatever stupid these criteria might be. As adults we want to match criteria set by the society in which we live.

To be good, to be respected, to be worthy, to be accepted. And how do we achieve it, how do we justify ourselves? By trying to live up to reigning criteria. What Jesus condemned was the attempt to use giving, praying, fasting and any other good works as means to show how good we are.

And it is difficult to judge people because they want to elevate themselves. Who doesn’t want to be considered a good, worthy, respected, valuable person? Who? In your own eyes and in eyes of those around you. Honestly, who doesn’t want it?

We don't live in Jesus time, so we don't pray on corners, we don't sound trumpets, we don't make our faces sad showing how hard we fast, but we have our ways to show others that we are such good and worthy people. And it applies to everyone, to Christians and non-Christians alike.

The problem is, as Jesus shows it, that by trying to justify our existence we don't focus on God, nor on our neighbour, but - on ourselves. We seemingly do things for God, or for neighbours, but ultimately we do them to elevate ourselves in our eyes and in eyes of those whose opinion is important for us.

But how can we do things for God and for neighbour not thinking about ourselves? How? Who then will take care of us? The only solution is - if you already know that you are so loved, so precious, so worthy in someone's eyes, that there is no need for self elevation anymore.

And this is exactly where you are as Christians, as children of God. This is what the Gospel is about. Remember it forever and repeat it to yourself every day, many times, - you are created in the Image and likeness of God.

It means no less than that you are created to be His representative, His steward here on Earth. This is who you are. This is what gives you ultimate value and dignity not only here, but also in God's eyes.

Nothing you do, nothing you achieve, nothing you possess can trump this reality. You are God's representative. You represent Him in your particular situation in life. As ambassadors' importance comes from countries they represent, yours comes from the Triune God whom you represent here and now.

It means that honour and dignity that is due to God is also due to you as His representative. This is how you should think about yourself, this is how others should think about you, and this is how you should think about others.

But even this is not all. You know that everything is as valuable as someone is ready to pay for it. So, how valuable are you? How much would someone give for you? This is the answer.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, He gave up His life for you. He was ready to pay the ultimate price for you. There is no higher price. This is how valuable you are for the Son of God.

When I say 'you' I don't mean humanity in general, but you, each of you. This is what your God wants you to know. Your dignity, your worthiness, your uniqueness is grounded in Him.

Once the Holy Spirit persuades you, that this is how God sees you, how important you are for Him, then you are free. You don't need to justify your existence. You

don't need worry about how to make up your image, how to show yourself to be somebody good and worthy. You are free, for you already have everything.

You are free for you have received God's evaluation instead of your own or that of other people. Then you are truly free to do what God expects you to do, what He has created you to do, - to live for God by living for others, by serving them.

This is what Paul wrote about in Corinthians. Be reconciled with God! Accept this message. This is the day. When you hear these words, know that your value, your dignity and worthiness, your future lays safely in God's hands.

Nothing is going to change it. You don't need to do good works to merit something or to show yourself to be somebody. God's love does it for you. So where does it leave us? Should we give up our good works?

No, by no means. We should give up only wrong motivation, that's all. How can we do it? We can't just change our heart and suddenly focus on our neighbours. It can happen if we listen to what our Lord and Saviour speaks to us.

When you learn about His love to you, then you don't need to elevate yourselves. Know that you are, each of you are infinitely precious in God's eyes. Nothing what you do will add to it. So don't worry about it.

If we need to give something up then it is - *not listening* to the Lord. Let us give up *not listening* to our the Lord! That's all. But when it comes to good works - do good works, do them more than ever... care, give, pray, serve your neighbours as much as you can, so that your Father and Jesus are glorified through you live.

You are free to do it, you are created and redeemed to do it. Your ultimate value rests safely in Christ. And you can rejoice doing good works, for you know that your Father who sees you, will not withhold your reward in due time.

So go in peace, and serve the Lord with joy.

Amen.