

Power in Living



Sermons Based on the Gospel
Lessons for the Lent and
Easter Seasons



Derl Keefer

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Cycle B Sermons for Lent and Easter

Derl Keefer

CSS Publishing Company
Lima, Ohio

POWER IN LIVING

FIRST EDITION

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pending

For more information about CSS Publishing Company resources, visit our website at www.csspub.com, email us at csr@csspub.com, or call (800) 241-4056.

e-book:

ISBN-13: 978-0-7880-3156-4

ISBN-10: 0-7880-3156-2

ISBN-13: 978-0-7880-3155-7

ISBN-10: 0-7880-3155-4

PRINTED IN USA

Certain individuals appear in your life at significant moments. One professor significantly influenced my personal development during college. His biblical teaching in a classroom setting along with life lessons and practical thinking impacted me throughout all my life. He was an author and teacher as well as a college administrator over the years. Although he is in his nineties, he has continued writing devotionals that are broadcast through the internet to numerous former students and friends. His personal encouragement has significantly influenced my writing, transforming it over the years.

Thank you, Dr. Tom Barnard.

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Introduction

In my book, *Let's Get Committed* (CSS Publishing), I quoted Jerry Vines (*Power in the Pulpit*) who suggested, "the call to preach is more than just preaching (speaking). The call to preach is also a call to prepare. God gives those he calls the necessary gifts to preach, and he expects them to prepare as much as possible. The past 66 years of preaching I have attempted to follow that thought.

These Lenten sermons come from some of my lifetime experiences tied tightly with the normal avenues a preacher takes for preparation through commentaries, Bible Studies, on-line Biblical apps, life illustrations, and more. They also come with prayer. A sermon only becomes a message to the person in the pew if the Holy Spirit is involved. Use these sermons as resources as you glean ideas that are Holy Spirit led!

As Paul encouraged Timothy, let me encourage you with his words, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage — with great patience and careful instructions" (2 Timothy 4:2 NIV).

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Preparing For The Treasures Of God

¹“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Prayer

⁵“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Fasting

¹⁶“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to

your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Treasures in Heaven

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The excitement in my dad’s voice and demeanor spoke volumes to me as a child of five. It was a smoldering hot day in Kansas City, Missouri, but that didn’t matter. My father had heard on the radio that there was a contest...a treasure hunt that the radio station was sponsoring. Along with his best friend they entered the “hunt.” The kids and wives got to go along to help find the hundred-dollar prize. That was two weeks’ wages in 1953! Clues were given at each location, and the job of the contestants was to think where the next location would be until the final spot. We raced around the area for hours trying to discover the treasure. We didn’t win, but it made memories for me in adulthood.

We are in a treasure hunt of sorts at this season of Lent. The preparation for a period of intense spiritual focus prior to Holy Week and the celebration of Easter begins today as Ash Wednesday.

Many pastors around the globe will be offering a service where they will be placing the sign of the cross from ashes for their parishioners to wear on their foreheads. It is a symbol of sorrow and penitence. Other congregations have no ritualistic practice. They may even have a negative reaction toward such a practice. As one pastor observed, it is the attitude, not ashes, that really matters. This Ash Wednesday is essential in preparing for the Lenten season.

C. Welton Gaddy observed that everything we believe is at stake in the crucifixion and resurrection events of Jesus’ life.

He wrote, "What we believe about the power of God, about the relationship between good and evil, about the resilience of truth, and about the reality of redemption. We dare not amble into worship on Easter morning or during the week preceding it unprepared for the fullest...kind of spiritual expression possible."¹

Being prepared for this holy treasure hunt is essential!

The passages for today offer treasured thoughts on what to think about and act upon.

GIVING: The Treasure Test. Matthew 6:1-4

I never liked tests in school. I would study and attempt to memorize the facts or figures that the teacher wanted the class to learn. When test day came, I would always be nervous and try to recall those facts I had learned. I did well on some tests and miserably on the others.

Jesus comes along and tells us that there is a test on our attitudes. He asks what really motivates our lifestyle? Is giving to those in need coming from a heart of compassion, a heartbeat of love, a righteousness that is in harmony with God's love for the needy? Or is our service to others filled with ulterior motives...praise of others or a selfish benefit? Do we want accolades from others or from God?

Myron Augsburger, in the Communicator's Commentary, asked the question of motive challenges of contemporary Christian giving. Are we into charity work for the one-upsmanship, the competition for the biggest charity or that God blesses those who give with material bonanzas or with health and healing, and more? Are we looking for personal praise and advantages so that we are looked upon as one with majestic greatness exceeding any others?

Giving provides a way of testing our love for God and our neighbors.

1 Sharilyn A Figueroa, Compiler and Editor, The Minister's Annual Manual 1995-96 (South St. Paul, MN: Logos Productions, 1995), p. 277.

The story is told that the highly influential Baptist minister Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) and his wife, Susannah would sell eggs their chickens laid; but they sold them and refused to give them away, even to relatives. The Spurgeons' reputation took a severe hit because many people thought they were greedy and selfish. Charles and Susannah accepted the criticism without defending themselves. Years later, after Susannah's death the full story was revealed. The couple had been giving all the proceeds to two widows. Someone wrote, "Because the Spurgeons were unwilling to let their left hand know what their right hand was doing (Matthew 6:3) they endured the attacks in silence."

As we care about others unconditionally, we begin to understand kingdom living and human compassion. That becomes the treasure test of giving!

As Christians our comprehension of stewardship is gratitude to God for trusting us to manage His wealth of time, money, gifts and abilities. We cannot be like the passengers of the steamer, *The Lady Elgin* in 1860. It was rammed by a vessel called *Augusta*, in the waters of Lake Michigan. She foundered seven miles off the coast of Illinois and began breaking apart. Passengers began chopping off doors and pieces of the deck or finding whatever they could that would float. Fortunately, the September waters of the Lake were at their warmest. Hundreds survived and floated on their life-saving floaters.

At daybreak, the students of Northwestern University's life-saving squad gathered on the shore and began to rescue the frightened people. Edward W. Spencer was one of those students' life-saving squad. He swam out seventeen times and returned each time with a survivor. He was exhausted and delirious after his final rescue. He was taken back to the university where he lay ill for months. He revived and moved to California where he lived to be 81. In the obituary, it was revealed that over the sixty plus years not one of the seventeen people ever contacted him to say thank you or show any gratitude.²

2 Stan Toler, *Give to Live* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), p.24-25

What are you doing to show your gratitude to God for all that he has given you? I would like to think that it is demonstrated by helping others as a volunteer at a homeless shelter, giving time to places that want fair treatment and wages for those in third world countries, being a part of the Mercy Hospital Ships, mentoring school children, helping at a nursing home, anywhere possible...in the name of Jesus!

Giving is one part of the treasure. A second part is prayer.

PRAYER: The Personal Part of the Treasure. Matthew 6:5-6

The Westminster Catechism defines prayer as an offering of our desires to God, for things agreeable to his divine will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

Have we grasped that when we pray, we are talking with the God of the universes? The creator God who has put life together and sustains life and gives life to abundance? Prayer is not a monologue, but a two-way conversation between me, a finite individual, and God, the infinite being. As we read the scriptures, we are struck with the understanding that it is God who often initiates conversation (Genesis 3:8, 6:13-22, Exodus 3, Joshua 6:18, 1 Samuel 3:11, Job 40:1, John 10:27, Acts 9:5-6, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and more).

Here is an acrostic on what it means to pray.

P - PRAISE. Synonyms for praise include approval, admiration, celebration, exhalation, glory and much more for what God has done on our behalf.

I read the story online in Sermons.com that appeared in *Our Daily Bread* about a brash 21-year-old John Wesley when he attended Oxford University. He came from a Christian home and was gifted with a keen mind and many abilities. The problem was at that time of his early life he could be a bit snobbish and sarcastic. Then one night something happened that changed his outlook.

While speaking to a porter, he discovered that the man only had one coat and lived in impoverished circumstances. Yet, the man was unusually happy, filled with gratitude to God

almighty. The immature Wesley thoughtlessly and sarcastically asked, "What else do you thank God for?" The man replied to Wesley in a meekness that caught John off guard. The porter said, "I thank him that he has given me life and being, a heart to love him, and above all a constant desire to serve him!" Wesley was deeply moved and realized that this man knew the meaning of honest praise.

Fast forward 67 years to when Wesley was on his death bed surrounded by friends. They understood that he had learned a lesson of praising God in every circumstance. In his weakened state and almost inaudible voice he began singing the hymn, "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath."

How much praise in prayer do we give to God?

R - REPENTANCE. Obviously, there is no one humanly perfect. There is much we need to ask for God's gracious forgiveness when it comes to trespasses and sins. The acknowledgment as we pray draws us closer to our loving God. There can be no arrogance...no attitude of superiority as we approach God. As we look at the cross of Jesus we are humbled beyond any sense of arrogance. We bow in humble adoration and ask for his mercy and forgiveness.

A - ADORATION. We might ask the difference between praise and adoration. Praise is about external gifts that God has given to us in life. Adoration is that very strong inner feeling of love and worship.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, is said to have defined worship and adoration as the "quickenning of the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God."

Y - YIELDING. It is simply to acknowledge that we cannot have our own way, but rather having his way in our hearts and in our actions!

As a pastor in the evangelical tradition during a public invitation, I would have the congregation sing, "I Surrender All."

Judson Van DeVenter wrote the words that were published in 1896 but are still relevant today.

All to Jesus I surrender;
All to him I freely give.
I will ever love and trust him.
In his presence daily live.
All to Jesus I surrender.
Make me, Savior, wholly thine.
Let me feel the Holy Spirit,
Truly know that thou art mine.
All to Jesus I surrender;
Lord, I give myself to thee
Fill me with thy love and power;
Let thy blessings fall on me.
Chorus: I surrender all. I surrender all.
All to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.
("I Surrender All" in the public domain)

The personal part of the treasure is prayer. You don't have to be perfect to pray. Just start a conversation with God now. Or maybe he is already trying to converse with you today. Stop and listen to him!

Giving is one part of the Treasure. Prayer is the second part of this treasure bundle. A third part of the Treasure is fasting.

FASTING: The self-discipline of the treasure. Matthew 6:16-18.

Growing up in my denominational setting the General Church's Missionary Society asked its members to fast one meal a week on Fridays. My mother and I observed the request as much as possible. We understood the objective of fasting was to draw closer to God as we focused on him and discovered his will for our lives. We weren't trying to "force" God into answering our prayers or coerce him to answer our request as we deemed right. We really wanted his will in our lives to be accomplished.

Our denomination suggested this practice to its members to help give a plan of action so that we would remember to

fast. However, they went on to say that anytime was appropriate. It is to be a voluntary act on our behalf to draw closer to God, regardless the day.

Jesus describes fasting not as a ritualist practice for others to observe how “religious” we are, but to fast for our own spirituality...our growth in God’s kingdom understanding.

Myron Augsburger wrote in “The Communicator’s Commentary” that William Barclay noted five values in fasting that would demonstrate the benefits and practice of fasting.

1. The value of self-discipline
2. The release from slavery to habit
3. The preservation of the ability to do without things
4. The positive value for health
5. The enhancement of our appreciation of things

The religious teachers wanted people to know when they were fasting by resorting to what Dr. Floyd Filson called “ugly-fying cosmetics.” Jesus wanted his followers to appear normal and happy.

Macrina Wiederkehr writes, “Fasting... reminds me...that if I am not fed, I will die...Standing before God hungry. I suddenly know who I am... one who is poor, called to be rich in a way that the world does not understand... one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God...who is hungry, called to taste all the goodness that can be mine in Christ.” (Preachingtoday.com).

Heaven: The goal of the treasure. Matthew 6:19-21

Jesus dealt with the idea of the importance of our goals in this section of the scriptures. He answered the question of rewards by speaking directly of treasures in heaven. What are those treasures that we need to store up in heaven where moths and rust cannot destroy? Often, we think that the priority of our goal is to acquire wealth, land, fashion, reputation, honor, and privilege. Jesus turned the worldly concept on its head for

his idea is righteousness, character, godliness, holiness, kindness, and love, to name a few.

Jesus never indicated that things were unimportant. We all need money to purchase necessary items, somewhere to live, clothes to wear, but they are not the all-important goal in life. The treasures we seek are where all of life leads. William Barclay wrote in his commentary, "This world is not the end of life, it is a stage on the way; and therefore, a man should never lose his heart to this world and to the things of this world, for his eyes ought to be forever fixed on the goal beyond."

Are we so caught up in one-upsmanship, keeping up with the Joneses, styles, or the bigger the better philosophy? Or are we caught up in the true goal of the heavenly?

Ash Wednesday reminds us that the cross is coming. The pain, agony, and the ugliness of the situation is in the near future for Jesus. With hindsight we know what happens. The death of the human Jesus will be followed by the resurrection and the resurrection by the ascension. He will be taken to glory...heaven. But not until all of God's plan is unfolded. Jesus understood what it meant to have a heavenly goal. Do we?

ACTION PLAN POSSIBILITIES:

- Donate to a homeless shelter.
- Buy the next person in line at the coffee shop a cup of coffee.
- Cut your neighbor's lawn or remove snow from their drive.
- Make cookies and take to your local police department or fire department and tell them thanks for all they do.
- Double your giving amount at church for one week.
- Text three people a day for a week giving words of encouragement.
- Volunteer to be in the music program at church.
- Begin writing a prayer journal for a month.
- Pray for your pastor every day.

- Fast one meal a week and give the amount it would cost to missions.
 - Write down the spiritual goal for life and live it out!
- Amen.