

**Three sermon-ideas for Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent.
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Ash Wednesday is observed as a day of humble repentance, because repentance is the beginning of the journey of remembrance, forgiveness, growth and eventually victory in Christ!

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, the 40 days before Easter Sunday (not counting Sundays) in which the passion and suffering of Jesus are central to our teaching, worship and prayers. Remembering the sacrifice of Jesus culminates on Good Friday. It inspires our repentance during the Lenten journey.

The “ash” of Ash Wednesday reminds us that the wages of sin is death!

We do not grieve because Jesus died, but praise God that he, in his love and compassion for us, gave his only begotten Son to make us his own. But we do grieve because our sins caused his suffering and torment.

Here follows 3 preaching options to use during either an Ash Wednesday service or on the first Sunday during Lent.

(Option 1) Isaiah 58: 1 - 12.

When you cry for help, the Lord will say: Here am I!

When Israel returned to Jerusalem (after their exile) they seem to have believed that they were doing all the right things. Yet they did not see the blessings promised in the law of God for those who keep the periodic fast days and prayer times prescribed in the Torah.

Isaiah 58: 2 - 4: Day after day they seek me (God) out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, and you (God) have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do and expect your voice to be heard on high.

They are confused. They thought that keeping days of commemoration and fasting is enough to please God. *It must have been a shock to hear the prophet's strong reprimand of what they considered to be acts of faith. How could God not be pleased with them?*

The prophet cuts short their claims to godliness by calling for new values and day to day living to accompany their prayers and sacrifices: *to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share what we have with those who have not, to live in peace with family and*

neighbours and to help the afflicted. These are not periodic actions like the official days of fasting and sacrifice. This is consistent godly living that will reform their relationship with other people and with God.

The fasting acceptable to God is a **daily fast from violence, intimidation and abuse, from filthy language and from selfishness and from ungratefulness for God's blessings.**

People that every day walk with God and seek to do his will, shall see God's response to their fasting and prayer. They will have the blessings of guidance, healing, help, protection, provision of their needs and the presence and guidance of God among them.

God's people cannot expect to be blessed if their prayers and their fasts, their worship and their sacrifices *are disconnected from the way they live the rest of everyday lives.* God wants much more than observing the ceremony and customs of worship. No, the Lord invites us *to be his partners in achieving justice, holiness and compassion for all people.* God never stops calling us into his own ministry to the people who need him so much.

And when we live in a partnering relationship with God that results in a restored nation and communities, we have an amazing promise from our Lord: Isaiah 58: 9: **"Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and the Lord will say: Here am I.**

(Option 2) Psalm 51. We cannot repair the consequences of being sinners ourselves.

Psalm 51:1-2 - *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

Psalm 51 is about the consequences of and remedy for our sinfulness, rather than merely the individual sins that lies heavily on our conscience as well.

Psalm 51 describes the totality and the radical nature of our sinfulness.

Verse 3: *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

Sin leaves the sinner liable to judgment and punishment.

Verse 4: *Against you (God), you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.*

Everyone knows that this is true. But what makes the Psalm's inventory of the consequences of sin noteworthy is what comes after these initial general comments.

The Psalmist understands that our sinfulness is much more than a matter of crime and punishment. Instead, he teaches us about the deep-seated and universal nature of our sinfulness that saturates every aspect of human life.

Verse 5: Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me!

He states it clearly that the effects and consequences of our sinfulness are unavoidable through mere human action and initiative. He therefore goes on to spell out these consequences in intimidating detail.

Verse 8: Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Sin, he says, deafens the sinner to the experience of joy and causes physical agony.

Verse 11: Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.

Our sinfulness creates the feelings of being cast out from God's presence, of being rejected and abandoned - even by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 12. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Our sinfulness obstructs the enjoyment of the good news of God's salvation and destroys the willingness to even attempt to follow God's way, thus spreading its own malignant influence across all the boundaries of our lives.

Verses 15 and 16: Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

The Psalmist comes to the conclusion that our sinfulness even prevents the offering of praise and that it perverts our sacrifices for God.

Verse 17: My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

We cannot sacrifice our way out of the consequences of sin, because only a heart that has turned to God in repentance and prayer is an acceptable offering. Only God can deal with our sins.

The deadly consequences of being sinners prevent us from repairing our own lives. Any idea that we can do something by ourselves to patch up the results of our evil nature is foolishness. Psalm 51 reminds me that the purpose of repentance is to beg for God's gracious help to restore our lives and the lives of those we impacted with our evil choices. Only God can do anything about our sin and our weak and evil human nature.

We need Jesus Christ, our only hope and our only redemption.

Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent are blessed times of humble repentance and therefore of healing and receiving help and remedy for our natural spiritual status called: sinner!

(Option 3) Matthew 6:1-21

Hypocrisy destroys my walk with the Lord, but humility before God creates true fellowship with God and results in the inheritance of the treasures of heaven!

Hypocrisy is defined as the motivation to help others and reach out to the needy in society *in order to be seen* by others.

Verses 1, 3 and 4: *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. 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Similarly prayers designed to impress people instead of seeking the presence and fellowship of God expose me as a hypocrite.

Verse 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.*

The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word for an actor. Actors play the character of someone else. Hypocrites do not portray themselves, but a pious character they made up in their minds, with the purpose to gain honour and respect from others.

If you go around talking about your fasting, arrogantly bragging about what you have given up for Lent, you may score brownie points with some (shallow) people, but it will have no impact on your relationship with the Lord!

Verse 17 and 18: *When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so 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.*

There is a reward for giving to the needy, for faithful prayer and fasting. It is a renewed and blessed relationship with our Father in heaven. It is spiritual growth, changed hearts, characters and lives and fruitful living for God - even the inheritance of the treasures of heaven itself.

Hypocrisy kills true and faithful worship and a honest relationship with God. Yet, if we treasure our relationship with the Lord and build up this relationship by disciplined living, praying, giving and fasting, our lives will be transformed. For where our treasures are, there will our hearts also be.

Hypocrisy boils down to materialism. To even try to manipulate others through donations, public worship and communal fasting for the sake of earthly prosperity, honour and admiration of others, is hypocrisy. But it eradicates any possible spiritual blessing we may ever receive from the Lord.

Hypocrisy kills our relationship with God and robs us from the peace, keeping and guidance of the Lord in our lives.

Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent can be such blessed times if our repentance is real, our adding to our lives by giving, prayer and fasting is for the sake of God's glory, his work, his kingdom and the increased intimacy of our walk with the Lord.

*We thank God for the privilege
to share his Word with others on Ash Wednesday,
and throughout the Lenten Season.*