Lesson 15 B – Opening Thoughts on Almsgiving, Prayer & Fasting.

Jesus is giving three examples of acts that should be offered in secret in the private lives of Christians in order not to divert glory to God into glory to self:

1. Almsgiving 2. Prayer 3. Fasting

He does not preclude doing these in public but the interior disposition must still be for love of others and not love of self.

Teaching on Almsgiving

Jesus is criticizing the intent of almsgiving ‘the misuse of charity for self-glorification and contrasting the insincerity of the "hypocrite" with the right conduct required of His disciples. His emphasis is on the internal origin of holiness.

Jesus' uses the word "hypocrites". In Greek it refers to "playing a part" in Greek drama. The insincere almsgiver is only "play acting" for an audience and not sincerely giving from the heart.

To accept God's blessing of prosperity and to not use that gift to help the less fortunate is indeed a sin. The rich man was selfish and hardhearted. He did not have a heart of generosity and compassion ‘he failed show mercy.

Teaching on Prayer

Jesus' said "When you pray" referring to the traditional three hours of prayer: Morning Prayer @ 9AM, Noon prayer @ 12PM, and Evening prayer @ 3PM sundown which was faithfully recited by every righteous Old Covenant believer.

The righteous Old Covenant believer was required to pray the "Eighteen Benedictions" at each of the designated prayer times. He was also required to recite the Old Covenant profession of faith four times, twice at Morning prayers, once in Evening prayers and one last time before going to bed. In addition to these prayers a righteous believer was to give thanks to God before, during and after meals. How does your prayer life

These three times correspond to Jesus' hours on the cross from 9AM when He was crucified to 12 noon when the sun disappeared, to 3PM, the last hour of prayer when He gave up His life. The three hours of prayer were determined by the "perpetual sacrifice" of the Tamid lambs around which the entire day's liturgy in the Temple revolved.

Before beginning the Sermon on the Mount "...he departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God." Many times during Jesus’ ministry He found it necessary to withdraw from the crowds and from His disciples to pray in solitude to His Father as He did in His last prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus does not mean to forbid repetitive prayer. He gives His disciples the most often repeated prayer in the history of salvation in the Our Father and in Luke He commands us to repeat it saying "When you pray say:....". Jesus also led public prayer often during His ministry.
Nor can Jesus be referring to the reciting of the rosary. It is only prayer that is self-centered instead of God-centered and the meaningless chanting of pagan worship that Jesus is condemning. His point is that prayer is for God alone and the Christian soul in prayer must be turned to God alone.

When not praying as a faith community, Jesus is recommending that we pray in a confined space to avoid earthly distractions. Whether literally or figuratively, we must be able to pray in a way where one's complete attention can turn to God.

Teaching on Fasting.

We too often think of fasting as only related to how we use food or drink for our human nature instead of the deeper meaning of learning to deny our selfish desires and turn ourselves toward serving God's will. We cannot eliminate the natural and divine positive law imposing mortification and penance on man on account of sin and its consequences.

The Church instructs those who do not abstain from meat on Fridays to do an act of charity or some other form of self-denial in place of a meat sacrifice.

**Fasting is any act of self-denial which produces a charitable benefit toward others.**

It is an ancient practice (predating Christianity) and very widespread (found in virtually every primitive culture). The practice of asceticism in Christianity can be traced from the prophets (especially John the Baptist) to the Apostles (especially St Paul) and is the foundation of Monasticism.

Fasting does limit certain bodily passions in a medical sense, and the periodic deprivation of comforts, and even inflicting minor pain (self-mortification), trains the body and soul in a disciplined path.

Fasting should actually be a way of praying...using your body’s reflexes to remind you to converse with God. We should never fast alone, we fast with Him. And in this way we use suffering as a way to draw closer to Him. More union with Him is achieved in this manner.

**Over-emphasis of the flesh and de-emphasis of the spirit is a grave mistake.** We do not get closer to God by living as materialists whose lives are spent seeking pleasure, comfort and ease, while our immortal soul, which will live on into eternity, is starved.

Since the flesh is weak, it is easy to fall into sin; therefore the body must be forced to subject itself to the spirit. The flesh must be subdued in order that the intellect and the will are able to rule over it more easily.

Please discuss among yourselves how Jesus’ teaching on PRAYER, FASTING AND ALMSGIVING relates to the Stewardship of our Gifts of TIME, TALENT AND TREASURE.
PRAYER

Jesus stresses seeking an interior prayer desire to please God rather than exterior actions gaining the attention and approval of men.

Jesus emphasizes the necessity for private prayer alone with God and again notice he says “When you pray” not “if you pray”. He is not ruling out public prayer. Jesus prayed both alone and with his apostles and disciples.

Throughout His ministry Jesus taught His disciples:

1. Prayer offered to God should come from a humble heart whether offered in private prayer or while praying with others and He gave us the assurance “if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.
2. Prayer should come from the depth of one's heart rather than only from the lips: “do not babble like the pagans”.
3. In our prayers we should make our petitions trusting not in our needs but in God's goodness: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”
4. We should be direct and persistent in our prayers: Ask-Seek-Knock.
5. Prayer must be made with faith, in the name of Jesus, and asking only for what is good:

"Let us not forget to visit our Prisoner [Jesus in the Holy Eucharist], if only for a minute; this will be pleasing to Jesus. St Maximilian Kolbe. Prayer is made more perfect when we are in the presence of Jesus, especially at Mass or in adoration.

Fasting, Self-Denial, Mortification can all lead to Spiritual growth

Fasting can be any act of self-denial which produces a charitable act toward others.

Let us deny ourselves out of love. Let us show God we love him above all else. Let us engage in acts of voluntary self-denial, training our body, nourishing our spirit that, in prayer, we may begin to truly see the value and riches of giving ourselves entirely over to God. It is about cultivating a love for Love.

Another element of self-denial is self-sacrifice; there can be no true denial of self apart from sacrifice. Our sacrifices which show God we cherish him as the greatest and highest Good - those sacrifices will merit us a heavenly treasure.

But self-denial is much more than denying us physical pleasure. It demands that we discipline ourselves such that our every thought and deed, down to the minutest detail, conforms to the standards of faithful discipleship. Self-mortification is another vital aspect of following Christ. This means that we gradually seek to defeat every vice within us, under all circumstances. We must even be willing to die, at any time, for our Christian identity.
We must constantly struggle to overcome our nature. It's a minute-by-minute challenge, constantly confronting us. As one grows closer to God, the true interior motivation perhaps hidden from self previously is revealed to the self in quite a clear way.

**ALMSGIVING**

The giving of alms is not an option for the Christian. Jesus says "When you give alms" not "if you give." If you act in secret, your heavenly Father will reward you with a much greater blessing than mere temporal acknowledgement and praise.

Showing **mercy** includes the giving of **alms**. It has always been a teaching that to give alms to the needy greatly pleases God. Mercy as an act of atonement endears the offered to God and atones for sin.

One critical aspect of **self-denial** is **almsgiving**. It is certain that our Master notices when we deny ourselves of some convenience or entertainment and instead give those funds we would have otherwise used for our own pleasure to the poor.

**Gifts Given for Stewardship + Gift of Grace + Obedience → Discipleship**

The best use of our gift of **Time** is time spent with God. **Prayer** is any time we spend in God's presence or time spent offering up our joys, sorrows and sacrifices to serve others for his honor and glory.

The best use of our gift of **Talent** is when we **Fast** from using the talent to serve ourselves and use the gift to serve others.

The best use of our gift of **Treasure** is when we give **Alms** in love to those who are in need of our help.

**GO MAD**

Go out and make a difference by being a good steward of your gifts and a faithful disciple of Christ's teachings.