

## **Growing in Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving**

**Fr. Daniel Scheidt**

Hello. My name is Father Daniel Scheidt, and I'm glad to be with you for the beginning of our Lenten journey into growing in prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Let us pray.

### **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, you bid us go to our inner room that we might be with you in secret. We ask you to allow our prayer to heal our relationship with you, our fasting to heal our relationship with ourselves, and our almsgiving to heal our relationship with other people, all to the praise of your glory and the extension of the kingdom where you are Lord, forever and ever. Amen.

### **Finding What Is Infinitely Valuable**

In the gospel that we hear on Ash Wednesday, the Lord bids us go to our inner room where we can be with our Father in secret so that he can give us the gifts of growth in prayer and fasting and almsgiving. And the reason the Lord wants this to be in secret is because it's a kind of treasure hunt in which we're seeking what isn't immediately visible and finding within that what is infinitely valuable. And if we think of a treasure hunt, of course we need a map to find where the treasure is buried, and Christ himself has already given us that map. In fact, we trace it on our very bodies every single day.

When we make the sign of the cross, we ask the Lord to heal our mind. As we touch our head, we ask Him to heal our gut. As we touch our stomach, we ask the Lord to heal our arms, our giving of alms as we move back and forth across our chest. And when we do that, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we're tracing the X that marks the spot, the treasure of our heart in Jesus's heart, and Jesus's heart in our heart.

We're going to be meditating really on how we can fulfill the greatest commandment that Christ gives us. When he's approached on the question, he says that the greatest commandment is of course to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, but then Jesus quickly appends a second commandment to it and considers it as part of the first. He says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And if we notice, Jesus is including within that twofold one commandment the love of God, the love of neighbor, and also the love of ourselves.

When we meditate on a wise saying by Sister Miriam Heidland, we can see that this mystery of prayer, healing our relationship with God, fasting, healing our relationship within ourselves and almsgiving, healing our relationship with others, that is our treasure. And the divine physician gives us this healing.

## Healing Our Relationship With God

So let's take them one by one. First, prayer heals our relationship with God. We go into the inner room, so to speak, because God wants us without the distractions of our attending to all sorts of other things. He wants us alone. And in a world of screens and gadgets in which we're tempted to be scattered all over the place, we can lose ourselves in extensions of our mind that actually become colonizers of our mind, distractions of our mind. We can lose ourselves in what other people are saying or thinking about us perhaps.

Our heavenly Father wants to clear all that away so that we can be with Him and He can be with us. In closing the door on our distractions and excuses, we're opening the door to actually allowing the Lord to look at us, to behold us. Of course, the Lord is omniscient. He sees all things, but we can suffer from the vestiges of the shame of Adam and Eve. No sooner do they attempt to live without God going their own way, seizing the fruit on their own terms, than filled with shame they hide in the shrubs. And when God asks that primordial question to the first couple, "Where are you?" He knows where they are, but He wants by that question to awaken in them a spiritual agency that of its own freedom allows itself to be beheld by God willingly and joyfully. When we pray, we are allowing the Lord to look at us, inviting Him to do that as our eyes seek to look to Him. And the beauty of it is that we regain our childlike faith all over again because when children are engaged in something beautiful or meaningful, they instinctively cry out to mom and dad, look at me! Look at me! Come see what I'm doing!

In prayer, sometimes we can be intimidated that, oh, there's so many distractions and we're thinking of all sorts of other things than God. I propose a little help to our prayer, and if I could show you this little visual, you could take a piece of paper and draw a little black dot right there in the middle of it, and then ask our heavenly Father to look at us as we rest in Him. But let's say we think, oh, we have to go to the grocery store. Well, I've, I've gotten distracted. Well, I just bring that distraction back to God. And then, oh, this person said that about me. Well, I bring that back to God too. And oh my goodness, what am I going to do tomorrow? Well, we don't have to worry about that today. We can bring that back to God.

We could have 10,000 distractions in prayer that seem to lead us away, but when we bring them back again and again and again, what happens? We create a flower to give to our heavenly Father like a little child. Isn't that beautiful? 10,000 distractions, 10,000 potential petals, a single flower with God at the center and us seeking Him in everything, through everything, beyond everything. When it comes to the vocabulary that we need for prayer, I propose that we go to the Psalms at the heart of the Old Testament. They're the 150 prayers that Christ Himself in His humanity prayed. And those psalms actually give us a vocabulary to speak to God, and they also give us a vocabulary to listen to God.

We can speak them in our own voice and we can hear the Lord speaking in His. And as we grow in this vocabulary and we grow in bringing everything to the Lord, we're going to find that the inner room has lots of windows, and the inner room actually opens up into the whole wide world of paradise where Christ has invited us from the very beginning.

## Healing Our Relationship With Ourselves

When it comes to the Lord healing our relationship with ourselves, He uses fasting in a very particular way that can sound strange and counterintuitive. Jesus speaks of anointing our head and washing our face when we fast. He wants us to feel in those actions refreshment. And sometimes we're tempted to think of fasting as dieting, where we do it with the scope of losing weight. Dieting is not fasting. Or sometimes we are tempted to think of fasting as deprivation, where we starve ourselves to regain control. Deprivation is actually not fasting.

Or sometimes we're tempted in our worst moments to think of fasting as despair, where we have a certain self-hatred or neglect of ourselves, where we just lose all of our appetite. Despair is not fasting. Fasting by contrast is the calmed focusing of what we eat or drink based on the essentials of what our mission requires, which when you think about it, gives a certain amount of flexibility. Rather than focusing on what I'm going to give up, what I'm going to do without, we examine the essentials of our mission and then we ask, what is the minimum amount of food and drink and other creature comforts that are necessary for accomplishing the essentials of our mission? So perhaps our mission would require fruits and vegetables and some nuts and maybe a little protein and some good amounts of water.

Well, we can do that. We can align what we're putting in ourselves with what our mission requires. So if one's mission is to be a mother with small children, well, that's going to require a different ingestion of food. If we're an older person that needs to take certain meals to keep our blood sugar levels stable, well, then our mission requires a different combination of food and drink. If we're a young person, we need to focus actually on paying even more attention to, well, if my mission is to be a student, what ingestion of created things is going to serve that? And before we know it, there's this purification going on that really is experienced as a refreshment, because when we overindulge in food and drink, we get sluggish, or we get anxious.

We get sluggish because our body has received more than it needs and wants to go into hibernation. Or our body gets anxious because the pleasures of the potato chips or the candy bars have diminishing returns and we need more and more of them to simulate the same effects. When we fast from those non-necessary foods, or for example, when we go for longer stretches of time without alcohol or tobacco, what we're doing is we're allowing the body to restabilize, to become calm again. And the first few days can be rather challenging, but then we get to a point where there's a new normal and we realized that, oh my, I feel more myself and I strangely have more energy. This isn't simply so that we can be more productive human beings, more efficient cogs in the machine, but actually so that we can feel in our own body the power of the Lord's goodness, because He created our bodies in the first place to thrive. He took on our flesh in the incarnation so that He could hunger and thirst as we hunger and thirst, and He focused on the essential so that we could too.

Good fasting is actually the training of the body for even greater things, because if we don't, our body will seek to train us to do its bidding. Like a dog that is fed too many table scraps, the dog whines at the foot of the table until it's fed again and again and again. Our bodies are not meant to be whining animals. Our bodies are meant for intimacy with God Himself. Which brings us to the final healing, the almsgiving, healing our relationship with other people. The Book of Genesis tells us, "It's not good for the man to be alone."

## Healing Our Relationship With Others

So when we allow our giving and receiving of gifts to be a blessing from other people, for other people, this movement of almsgiving is restoring in us this love of neighbor and this love of communion with each other. Jesus speaks of almsgiving as not letting your right hand know what your left is doing, which means that almsgiving involves a certain self-effacement, a certain self forgetfulness. Because when both of our hands are engaged in getting what we want all the time, they're not in the gesture of receiving from other people what they want to give and sharing with other people what we need to give.

So some tips for almsgiving. One, Lent is an ideal time for spring cleaning, for looking at all of our material possessions and just asking the simple question, of each thing, is this necessary for my mission in life right now? If it is, we keep it. If it's not, we give it away. We make a gift of it. And this isn't simply clearing out our garbage. We can put the garbage in the garden. We can put it where it needs to go. We don't give away simply our castoffs. But when we look at what we actually value, the things that other people would benefit from more, the things we don't need for ourselves, those become gifts. Those become ways that we can encounter other people in love.

Also, Lent is a good time to identify those people in our life who would most benefit from the gift of our time or our creativity. We can give alms in just giving somebody a phone call or in writing them a note or in going to visit them. And when we do that, we're showing them that life is more than just an exchange of things. Our life is actually meant to be an exchange of persons. Our very selves can be the alms that we give for those in need. And then of course, we can focus on giving the first portion of our financial resources or the things that we're given. So if we're given a gift, we can give something else away so that we maintain a steady amount of things.

We might even consider Fridays, Fridays of Lent, but Fridays throughout the year as a privileged day to give alms. Sometimes saving the things we least enjoy doing for Friday can be really helpful, uniting them to the cross of Christ. It allows us to make the giving easier because we're doing it as a sharing in Christ's own giving when it hurts. I hope Sister Miriam Heidland's words have been helpful. And so to sum it up, we pray.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for this time that we've spent in the inner room, healing our relationship with our Father in prayer. Thank you for the healing that you work in ourselves, in our graced fasting. And thank you for the healing that you give in our sharing of alms with our neighbor. To you belong the kingdom, the power and the glory. You who are Lord, forever and ever.