

AS IF

Working hard or hardly working? I'm sure you've all heard this phrase at one time or another. Just a harmless remark meant to be funny, except it becomes less funny each time. It's kind of like hearing that pastors only work one hour a week. I had an employer in Kentucky who would come into the office and ask either "How you doing?" or "Working hard or hardly working?" Now I know he was just joking, but he was an intimidating guy and I admit, I was a little afraid of him. Although I was no slacker, my fear of judgment kept me on alert.

In Isaiah's words we hear the Old Testament version of "working hard or hardly working?" The people of God were not conducting themselves like no one was watching, but that was just the problem. They were doing things to prove their devotion to God because they **were** being watched by others. They were fasting for their own sake, not for God's. The object of fasting was to bring glory to God, to purify the one fasting to open them up to a deeper experience of God. They were using it to draw God's attention to them so He and others could see their piety.

It obviously worked. God noticed. But He also took them to task for their inappropriate religious practices. He sent Isaiah to tell them where they had gone wrong, acting **as if** they were a nation that practiced righteousness. There's another popular expression we use today – "as if" – a way of saying we wouldn't be caught dead doing whatever someone has suggested. "Me, retire to Florida? As if!"

And so this was God's way of saying He knew the people really weren't doing what they pretended to do. When the subject is worship, it's best not to be found pretending. The same could be said for proper prayer and good deeds. Jesus cautioned against giving for the sake of being noticed by others and praying so as to garner attention from others and fasting with a sad and grumpy expression for the same reason.

There's nothing about the practice of religion or spiritual disciplines that should ever be aimed at making us look good. Anything we do with the intention of pleasing God should be done for only that purpose alone, and to enhance our relationship with the persons of the Trinity. Take tonight, for example; we will be wearing these ashes on our foreheads when we leave here. It may seem to the uninformed that we are attempting to show off our piety, or maybe that we forgot to wash our faces.

However, we are not wearing our own initials on our faces. We don't have the number of our favorite quarterback drawn on our foreheads. We are sporting the replica of the instrument of death where our Savior died. These ashes point to no one else but Him.

Let's go back to Isaiah for an answer to the question, "How are we to conduct our lives with integrity and honor God?" Jesus said let our light shine before others so that our Father in Heaven may be glorified. So which is it, private or public? Again, it's not the place; it's the purpose. To quote from a Jewish study bible, "Real humility toward God would engender a desire for justice for the weak, compassion toward the downtrodden, and charity toward the poor. Then fasting would involve a willingness to give up one's own things rather than the hope to acquire salvation."¹

The result of a true righteousness is that God hears and responds, but the prophecy here in Isaiah was conditional. Only when their behavior was genuine would they find favor with God. He pulled no punches and expected nothing less than total devotion from them. After all, He was the one who

¹ Berlin, Adele and Brettler, Marc Zvi, editors, *The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation*, pg. 899

chose them, to rescue them, to spare them and prosper them. What else could we offer to God as His chosen ones who have been rescued and spared and saved from sin and death?

On a night such as this, we are in no better position to honor God with our lives. Here we are somber, yet hopeful. We are expectant, yet mindful. In the quiet of this service we have come to the brink of another Lenten season. These weeks are meant to test our faith, to encourage it to grow, but they cannot be used as just a period of gloom and doom counting down to Easter when life becomes festive again.

One author writes, “How are we spending ourselves? That is the essential question related to all this. The spending of oneself is not measured in terms of hours and days. It is measured in terms of energy invested. The people in our text, as religious as they were, were in reality spending themselves on themselves. All their time and energy went into making a living for themselves and their families – promoting themselves – advancing themselves – entertaining themselves – enjoying themselves.

God said once they were taking care of the needs of others then he would be quick to take care of their prayer requests. They would call and the Lord would answer, “Here I am!” Their healing will quickly appear. The Lord will guide them. The Lord would satisfy their needs. They would be called ‘repairers’ and ‘restorers’. They and we need to see the connection between our actions and God’s commands and promises.²

I’m going to end with a story of a man who knew the commands of God and kept them, if not in a way most people would imagine. “There was a rich Jew who never gave alms to the poor or contributed to charitable causes. People in his small village never called him by name. They simply referred to him as The Miser. One day, a beggar came to the door of The Miser. “Where do you come from?” The Miser asked.

“I live in the village,” answered the beggar. “Nonsense” cried the Miser. “Everyone in this village knows that I do not support beggars.” In that same village, there lived a poor shoemaker. He was a most generous man who responded to every person in need and every charitable cause that was brought to his attention. No one was ever turned away empty-handed from his door.

One day The Miser died. The village leaders decided to bury him on the edge of the cemetery. No one mourned his passing. No one followed the funeral procession to the place of burial. As the days passed, the rabbi heard disturbing news regarding the shoemaker. “He no longer gives alms to the beggars,” complained one man. “He has refused every charity that has approached him,” declared another.

“Has anyone asked about his change?” inquired the rabbi? “Yes,” replied the first man. “He says that he no longer has money to give away.” Soon the rabbi called on the shoemaker. “Why have you suddenly ceased giving money to worthy causes?”

Slowly the shoemaker began to speak. “Many years ago, the man who called The Miser came to me with a huge sum of money and asked me to distribute it to beggars and charities. He made me promise that I would not reveal the source of the money until after he died. Once every month he would visit me secretly and give me additional money to distribute. I became known as a great benefactor even though I never spent a penny of my own money. I am surprised that no one questioned me earlier.

² <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/acting-good-or-good-actions-judith-hand-sermon-on-hypocrisy-182913.asp>

How could anyone who earned the wages of a shoemaker give away as much money as I have all these years?"

The rabbi called all the villagers together and told them the story. "The Miser has lived by the Scriptures, keeping his charity a secret," the rabbi told them. Then they all walked to the grave of The Miser and prayed. Before the rabbi died, he asked to be buried near the fence, next to the grave of the man known as The Miser."³

Let us pray: May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another, and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.

We are encouraged to give up something bad for Lent this year. In a moment as you come for communion you are invited to receive a reminder of that resolution. On one side of this card you are asked to write what you would like to give up for these seven weeks; not a food or a vice, but a particular stumbling block in your walk with God and with others. This may be a habit, an attitude, or perhaps the lack of something such as empathy or concern. Whatever it is, you alone will be responsible for monitoring your progress.

Because life is about finding balance, on the other side of the card you are asked to write a positive trait you will practice in place of the negative one. This will not be easy, at first, of course, because change is not automatic or overnight. But I am willing to bet that by Easter morning you will come with a renewed sense of gratitude toward Christ for the time you have invested in making one distinct change in yourself.

³ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_dont_show_off_your_faith.htm