

**Important Points for Lent**     Ash Wednesday     March 6, 2019     Jl 2:12-18;     2 Cor 5:20—6:2;     **Mt 6:1-6, 16-18**     (We want to make more room for you inside our hearts and minds.)

So boys and girls, big boys and little boys and big girls and little girls, Jesus has three points in today's gospel. The first is that **God is really pleased with good behavior and wants to reward us**, and that is something that some people belittle, they look down on that as if it's childish. But Jesus' belief is that God is our Father and that he desires to reward our good behavior, and in particular three kinds of behavior today. First, what's the first behavior he talked about? **Almsgiving**. What does that mean? **It means giving money for good purposes, giving money away**, giving it to the poor, or giving it to the work of the Church, or giving it to some nonprofit. That's almsgiving, and Jesus praises almsgiving.

The second, what is the second work? **Praying**, you were listening, good. All right, so praying is the second good work. **God wants us to pray because he likes to hear from us**. We don't inform God of anything when we pray, but we offer up our own intentions, wishes, desires, and that exercise itself is pleasing to God. He likes to hear; he likes us to communicate with him, not that we tell him anything he doesn't already know, but it's a very holy and wholesome exercise. And by the way, **we also pray when we thank God, when we praise God**. All that is good for us, actually; **it helps us, but helping ourselves in this case is also pleasing to God**.

Third, what was the third thing? Yes, **fasting**, correct. Now what does that mean? You know? **To give up some food, right. So it's a form of self-control**—it's a form of self-control, which is good. God likes us to control ourselves; he doesn't want us to be pigs. He doesn't want us just to take and get whatever we please, whatever suits us, whatever attracts us—that's not good. **And if you can control eating, you can control everything because you have to eat**—you have to eat. So if you can control that, you have developed great discipline. God is pleased with this.

However that's the second point, the second point is although God is pleased with all this, **we can forfeit the reward that God wants to give us**. How do we forfeit? Let's ask a young person. Does anyone know here—you are young enough: How do we forfeit these rewards God wants to give us? Well by **becoming a hypocrite**, which in this case is not the ordinary English meaning. **It means to broadcast oneself or to praise oneself or to gain attention or gratitude or something**

**for oneself.** It's feeding oneself with, you might say, self-love or something like that. So Jesus said, well if you blow a trumpet—that's an expression, obviously no one actually blows trumpets—but if you brag about how much money you give away, well, then you have lost your reward. Or if you go to pray in such an obvious way that everyone is drawn to look at you so you think they will think that you are holy, well then you don't have a reward. Or if when you fast you so pain your face, then everyone realizes, oh, this person is really suffering, then you have lost your reward. You see the point?

Now the third point, and that's the most important, what is the most important of these three? What was the first one? Almsgiving, that's the first one; that's the most important. **The Fathers of the Church said if you pray all the time and fast all the time and you never give money to the poor or you never give anything away, you might as well forget it.** It's the most important thing. Why? Because the point is that **we let go of who we are so that something richer, better, holier, more Christlike can grow.** And how can we let go of what we are? There's no better way than to **give away our money, because we are very attached to our money.** That is why it is very important to look at almsgiving and generosity and giving money to the work of God; that is very important in the Christian way. It's not why we are saved, but it's an important way of pleasing God.

So we come today **at the beginning of Lent and we say, God, we want to spend the next forty days getting closer to you,** or another way of putting it is we would like you to get closer to us. We want to stop pushing you away. **We want to make more room for you inside our hearts and minds.** That is the meaning of today; that's the meaning of the ashes.