



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

## “From Ashes to Resurrection: The Lenten Path of Spiritual Renewal”

Scripture Lessons: *Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.  
on February 14, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church  
in Charleston, South Carolina. (Ash Wednesday)*

### **Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18**

#### **Concerning Almsgiving**

<sup>6</sup> “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>[a]</sup>

#### **Concerning Prayer**

<sup>5</sup> “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>[b]</sup>

#### **Concerning Fasting**

<sup>16</sup> “And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>[a]</sup>

### **From Ashes to Resurrection: The Lenten Path of Spiritual Renewal**

Our son, Will, is a Freshman at Clemson University, majoring in Performing Arts, and that really is a perfect fit for him because, for as long as I can remember, Will has displayed a sincere interest in film and directing and acting ... and now he’s learning the craft.

His first college play is coming up next month. He’s been cast in the production of “Little Women.” Will’s job is to embody become the character, John Brooks, a tutor to a young man who lived next door to the March family / the little women, and, as fate would have it, John eventually falls in love with the oldest March daughter, whose name is Meg.

Now, for Will to successfully act – for him to play the part of John Brooks – he will need to convince the audience that he is, in fact, that fictional character, and to do that, he will need to take on John's traits – his movements, his interests, his great loves! Basically, Will is going to have to pretend convincingly that he is someone other than who he really is.

And when that happens on the stage of the Brooks Center at Clemson University, we call it acting. We call Will an actor. But what would we call such a person in the life of the church? What would we call a person who pretends to be someone they are not?

For our purposes this evening, what would we call someone who outwardly denounces sin? Who plays the part of a holy and indignant soul but who really isn't that way at all on the inside? Many of us would call that person a "hypocrite."

Now, before we take a closer look at some of tonight's Grammy-winning performances that come to us from Matthew's Gospel, I think it is important to offer a brief word of clarity, a defense of the church as it were. I mean, what other organization makes you acknowledge the sin in your own heart before you join? When we join a Rotary Club or a Garden Club or a Junior League ... do they ask us if we are sinners?

The church, however -- and each in its own way -- does ask that question. We are expected to regret our sin / to renounce it; indeed, we are asked to unite with Christ's Church never with a perfect heart, but rather with a humble and contrite heart.

Hypocrisy would be for us to act / to put on a show ... as if to say, "We don't sin" ... and then go out and do it. We go out and do it alright, but we never proclaim to be without sin!

That's one of the reasons the season of Lent begins with ashes! You see, it is not just a matter of affirming the frailty of life and hearing again those sobering words from Genesis 3:9: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Ash Wednesday is also a matter of expressing who we are – weak and fallen – but that is not all we are. To be certain, Lent is also about helping us to grow and learn and become the kind of resurrection people that God would have us to be.

Not surprisingly, the season itself has evolved over time and has come to be associated with the 40 days between now until Easter. When we look back, we can look back and see how the Biblical taproot for Lent includes such 40-day periods of time for people like Moses and Elijah and Jesus ... periods of prayer and fasting, through which some of God's greatest revelations have come.

And so we expect Lent to be revelatory for us as well. We expect God to present new things to us. We invest ourselves in this season. We practice repentance. We resolve to do things differently. We participate in worship. We're sometimes about the business of certain penitential practices.

The joke goes like this: A bartender noticed that every evening, without fail, one of his patrons would come in and order three beers. After several weeks of noticing this pattern, the bartender asked the man why he always ordered three. The man responded, "I have two brothers who have moved away to different countries. We promised each other that we would always order an extra two beers whenever we drank as a way of keeping up the family bond." Well, several weeks later, and upon noticing that the man had only ordered two beers, the bartender kindly said, "Please accept my condolences upon the passing of your one of your brothers. You know, the two beers and all ..."

The man replied, "You'll be happy to hear that my two brothers are alive and well. It's just that I, myself, have decided to give up drinking for Lent."

Such penitential practices – though hopefully done with far greater sincerity – remain a significant part of this season of renewal. And that word "sincerity" is important because I think that's what Jesus was getting at in our reading this evening from Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus talks about giving to the poor, about prayer and fasting ... and this giving to the poor, for example back then it could be accomplished by giving to someone on the street ... it could be given to the synagogue, and they would get it to those in need.

Let's say we gave to someone on the street, they would see us, right? You can't hide that ... so it is not necessarily a matter of anonymity, but something else ...

What Jesus is looking at is the spirit behind our gift. He wants to ensure that we give for the right reasons. Not for applause or glory or reputation. Not to blow the trumpet and say, "Look at me!"

To sum up, it goes back to that notion of being a hypocrite, of playing a role, the role of giver. Let's say – a cast member of the righteous, when our motivations may actually be far from it.

Prayer, is much the same way ... God knows our prayers. We can do them in the dark, in isolation ... and miracle is, darkness is as light to God. What's more, there is nowhere we can be where God is not.

Think of it this way – if people see us and say, "Well done!" "Great prayer!" And if our desire was to solicit that kind of response – if that's the reward we seek, Jesus effectively says, "There you go. You got your reward." (PAUSE)

Why does Jesus tell us to give in secret, and to pray in secret? Is he saying not to give publicly? Is he saying that we should refrain from saying grace before a meal when we are in a restaurant?

When I read these words from Jesus, what I hear him saying is this: don't pretend to be someone you're not / don't present motivations of mine and pretend that they are motivations of yours.

In other words, we should never give so as to prioritize our giving. We shouldn't pray so as to prioritize our praying. We should give and pray and fast in order to prioritize God! (PAUSE)

So how do we do this practically speaking? Well, I'm thinking about tonight's imposition of ashes. And I'll use myself as an example. If ashes on my forehead serve to remind me of my mortality and stir my spirit to know that ours is also a victory over death. So having ashes placed on my forehead may be very a good practice. If, however, ashes become for me a matter of looking the part ... of presenting a piety whose chief aim is to let others know that I've been to church, then maybe ashes are not well suited for me.

In the end, God calls us to be authentic ... calls us to do things not for the sake of doing them but to do them for the sake of Christ – that all that we have and all we are would be offered not for the praise of men, but for the glory of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.