

Slide #1

WHEN WE'RE ESTRANGED FROM GOD

Matthew 6:16-21

(Ash Wednesday)

Slide #2

Matthew 6:16-21

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Slide #3

It's an old story, but it bears repeating. **(Click)** An armed robber accosted a French priest on a dark, back street in Paris and demanded his wallet. As the priest opened his coat to reach for his wallet, the thief caught sight of his clerical collar, and immediately apologized. "Never mind, Father, I didn't realize you were a priest. I'll be on my way." The priest was relieved, of course, and good-naturedly offered the man a cigar. "No, thank you, Father," the robber said, **(Click)** "I gave up smoking for Lent."
(1)

(Click) One of the hallowed traditions of Lent is to that we give up something during this season of Lent. Usually it means something like **(Click)** chocolate, or beer, or some other alleged vice. This, of course, has opened us to a multitude of lame jokes.

One civic-minded individual said he **(Click)** gave up taxes for Lent. **(Click)** Comedian Stephen Colbert--who, I understand, is a Sunday School teacher at his local Catholic church--joked that he was giving up being Catholic for Lent.

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People laugh at the idea of giving up things for Lent, but the idea, originally, was to share experientially in the sufferings of Christ. **(Click)** Christ gave his life for us, so we ought to give up something to show our devotion to him. **(Click)** However, even under the best of circumstances, this practice has never worked very well. A good illustration of that is **(Click)** the whole Marti Gratis celebration in New Orleans. It is set around giving up butter, lard and fat for Lent. **(Click)** So on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, called Shrove Tuesday, everything that could be cooked with butter, lard or fat, like pancakes, etc., was done so that all the butter, lard and fat would be used up before the beginning Lent. But why did this costume begin? **(Click)** (Here's the rest of

the story) **(Click)** You see the giving up butter, lard and fat, would make people constipated, they felt that in this way they could share in the sufferings of Christ.

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A serious response to this idea of making a sacrifice during Lent has been for many Christians to fast during Lent. Medical experts are divided today on the wisdom of fasting. However, many saints have reported that fasting has brought them closer to God.

(Click) According to John Maxwell, in his book *Partners in Prayer*, fasting played a major role in the Great Awakening that swept both America and England in the 1800s. **(Click)** John Wesley, father of the Methodist movement and his brother Charles and other fellow believers regularly fasted and prayed. John Wesley so believed in this practice that he urged early Methodists to fast and pray every Wednesday and Friday. He felt so strongly about fasting those two days a week that he refused to ordain anyone in Methodism who wouldn't agree to do it.

Maxwell lists several Christian greats for whom fasting was a regular part of their lives: **(Click)** Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, Matthew Henry, Charles Finney, Andrew Murray, and many more. But while many people have benefited spiritually from this practice, **(Click) even a good thing like fasting can be abused.**

Slide #6

In our text today we hear Jesus say, ¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

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Jesus was not saying, "Do not fast." In fact, he appears to be explicitly endorsing the practice of fasting. He even gives directions for how to go about it. **(Click)** He says, "When you fast put oil on your head and wash your face . . ." In other words, fasting is good--**(Click)** but not if it is just an outward show of your Christianity.

I've always appreciated the words of one of the church fathers, **(Click)** Saint John Chrysostom, when it comes to fasting: **(Click)** "Do you fast?" he asked. "Give me proof

of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies.

“Let the hands fast, by being free of violence. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful . . . Let the ear fast . . . by not listening to evil talk and gossip . . . Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. **(Click)** For what good is it if we abstain from different foods, only to bite and chew up our brothers?” That’s hitting the nail squarely on the head. Even a good thing like fasting can be abused.

Slide #8

The central purpose of lent is to bring us back to God. If fasting or making small personal sacrifices brings you closer to God, that’s all good. But it’s important not to lose sight of why we fast or why we make personal sacrifices. **(Click)** St. Paul writes to the church at Corinth, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God . . .”

(Click) The point of Ash Wednesday, indeed the point of the whole season of Lent, is that we shall be reconciled with God, that we who have wandered away from Him might come home. We may indicate our desire for reconciliation by fasting or by making a sacrifice during the Lenten season, but that is peripheral. **(Click)** We are here this night confessing that we need to come back to God.

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To say we need to be reconciled to God, of course, is to confess that all of us to some degree are estranged from God.

There are many members of this congregation who live very close to God. I am in awe of your spiritual commitment. **(Click)** But let’s not kid ourselves. None of us is perfect. We’re all sinners. There are gaps in our lives, emotions that will not heal, resentments that still fester, prejudices that come to the surface under stress.

(Click) In a sense we are like snowflakes. Snowflakes are so beautiful and white and look so pure, **(Click)** but what happens to this beautiful white snow as it melts? It turns dirty. Why? Because every snowflake has a tiny piece of dirt at its core. And so do we. **(Click)** That is why Ash Wednesday and Lent are so important for us--they help

us deal with those tiny particles of dirt that keeps us from perfectly reflecting Christ's image.

It may not be fashionable or politically correct to use **(Click)** the word sin. To many it is archaic. Still, it is the central fact of human nature. No matter who we are, no matter how hard we try, we have not arrived at perfection. **(Click)** We are full of Sin.

Slide #10

Do you remember the children's little nursery rhyme, "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; All the king's horses, and all the king's men, Couldn't put Humpty together again." That little song is a truism for our lives. **(Click)** We are broken people and the only hope we have of being put back together again is for God to touch our lives. We can't put ourselves back together again, **(Click)** but Jesus can. Jesus fixes broken people

There was a young man in Wisconsin named John. John was kind of scary. He was in his early twenties and was very active in Mixed Martial Arts. He liked to fight.

One day his family went to a church event, a community picnic, held by a church in his community. The pastor of that church talked with John and invited him to church. John didn't seem very interested.

Some time went by, and one day John showed up at church, accompanied by his 3-year-old son. And something happened to John in that church . . . something quite beautiful. The word of God took root and grew in John's heart. He went to church some more. He took some instructional classes. Finally, he even joined the church!

One Sunday John walked into church late--really late--almost at sermon time. After the service his pastor asked him why he was so late. John said he got up that morning and his car would not start. He tried to fix it but he couldn't. So John got out his 10-speed bike, bundled up his kid, and peddled 5 miles in freezing Wisconsin temperatures because nothing was going to stop him from being in worship. (2)

I've seen that happen in people's lives. John had something missing in his life. He could not put himself back together again. **(Click)** But Jesus could and did. John is not perfect, but he is growing. He is growing in the same way that you and I hope to grow this evening as we submit ourselves to the ashes and ask God to more completely fill our lives.

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Of course, if we are reconciled with God we shall more easily be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation with our neighbor always goes with reconciliation with God.

(Click) Anthony Robinson in his book *What's Theology Got To Do With It?* tells a story about the **(Click)** Palestinian Christian minister by the name of Elias Chacour. It is said that Chacour was tired of presiding at the sacrament of Holy Communion in his congregation. **(Click)** The reason was that he knew that many of his parishioners hated each other. Some had not talked with one another in years, even decades, and bore grudges dating back to the previous generation. So on Sunday, Pastor Chacour locked the doors to the church. **(Click)** Then he told the congregation that he had no intention of presiding at the service and sacrament or of unlocking the doors until those at odds with one another confessed their sins, offered forgiveness, and made peace.

What followed, after a stunned silence, was nothing short of remarkable. A policeman got to his feet, confessed his misdeeds and asked forgiveness. Others followed. **(Click)** When the Lord's Supper was finally celebrated, it was no longer a mockery. It was a sacrament in which members of the congregation recognized one another as the body of Christ. (3)

Slide #12

In just a little while, we too will be celebrating the Lord's Supper. How will you be approaching the Lord's Table? **(Click)** Loving Jesus means loving those I commune with, because we are all the Body of Christ in this place.

As ashes have already been applied to your forehead, I would have cautioned you against making a show of those ashes. I would warn you, as Jesus did, not to make a show of your religion. **(Click)** Our world hungers for authentic Christian devotion. **(Click)** If you wear those ashes home tonight, do not snap at your family. **(Click)** If you stop at a fast-food facility on the way home, do not be impatient with the server. Show genuine Christian love and goodwill in action. **(Click)** Be reconciled to God. Be reconciled with your neighbor. When we have the ashes on our heads, it is not a sign that we think ourselves better than others. Exactly the opposite. We are sinners dependent upon God's grace. Fast in the way that Saint John Chrysostom recommended. **(Click)** Fast by your good works. Amen.

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1. <http://www.boydspc.org/sermons/20070304Philippians3,17-4,1.pdf>
 2. Pastor Phil Huebner, <http://ctkpalmcoast.wordpress.com/2010/01/24/sermon-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10/>.
 3. Cited by Rev. Alice M.C. Ling, <http://www.fpc-ucc.org/sermons/2007/03/second-sunday-in-lent.html>.