

Saved from Shallow Religion **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, Luke 21:1-4, Isaiah 58:1-2**

Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn (for all stand in condemnation), but to save His people from God's wrath and eternal punishment, and because of His sacrifice, love, and acceptance through faith in Him, we can let go of all the sin and shame that seek to enslave us.

John 3:17 - *God did not send his Son to condemn the world but to save the world through Him.*

John 8:36 - *So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Lent is a time for us to assess ourselves and adjust. It's a time for us to recalibrate to God's way of living and loving through repentance and reflection.

Jesus did not come merely to set us free from the *consequences* of our sins (i.e., offer forgiveness only). He came to set us free from the *power* of sin.

Jesus also came to save us from shallow religion--high on words and high on rules but low on the inner transformation of our heart and mind. Jesus wants us to step into a life of courage and self-giving love that will heal both ourselves and those around us. Shallow religion will never be courageous or self-giving. It will always be self-serving and based in fear.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus mentions three different spiritual practices: giving, praying, and fasting. Jesus says right away that it's possible to do these practices in a way that's empty and shallow, with no reward from our Father in heaven. If we're going to spend time giving, praying, and fasting, don't we want to do them in ways that are transformational?

The practices of giving, praying, and fasting are core routines for all Christ followers. When done properly, in the right spirit and with the right expectations, they will have a tremendous impact in our relationship with God and our relationships with those around us.

Doing spiritual exercises and checking them off our to-do list is not the goal here. That quickly becomes legalism, and we do them for the wrong reasons. That's what shallow religion looks like!

How can we move forward in repentance and reflection, seeking to recalibrate our lives to God's way of living and loving, by incorporating giving, praying, and fasting in such a way that isn't legalistic or empty? *By agreeing that the goal of our practices of giving, praying, and fasting is to grow in sacrificial, self-giving love for others.*

We grow in self-giving love because God's core is love (1 John 4:8). The top two commandments Jesus gave us (Luke 10:27) were to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as yourself.

When self-giving love is our goal, it brings focus and clarity to our time with the Lord. It helps us avoid the goal of a "warm fuzzy" that goes away twenty minutes after we say amen or shut our Bibles. We interact with people all the time in our lives which means we have hundreds, if not thousands, of chances to put self-giving love into practice. If we're going to grow in anything over the next 40 days, let's grow in sacrificial, self-giving love.

Giving

Jesus says, "*So when you give to the needy...*" (6:2). Notice Jesus doesn't say "if" you give to the needy, but "when" you give to the needy. The understanding here is that anyone who is a

Christ-follower, *anyone who is becoming Christlike*, being transformed into the image of Christ, will be a giver. Givers give. Givers give whatever they have to share and strengthen others. Giving isn't limited to money, but it includes money.

Why is giving important to God? Because God himself is a giver: John 3:16; Luke 12:32; Luke 11:13.

If you have an abundance of something, God has given you something that someone else needs. Your job is to channel it where it's needed.

Abundance...what is this? It is tricky to define and apply. Luke 21:1-4

What an awesome privilege it is for God to have given you something that He trusts you to channel it to where it's needed most!

Luke 6:3-4 - *Jesus is saying the best way to be a giver is to be someone who gives in secret.*

There is nothing wrong with receiving positive feedback and affirmation from other people for our giving, but...

Jesus wants to bring us to a place where we are fully secure doing things for others *in secret*, knowing our only reward comes from God. He wants our inner core is so solid that we can do good things without needing public recognition or validation.

Giving in secret also puts a slow death to our ego, to our pride. When we give selfishly for recognition or approval, the reward is that our ego is stoked. When we give secretly, however, our ego has no fuel to burn, and our hearts and minds will increase in self-giving love for others.

If we give in secret without recognition, what's the reward? Growing in self-giving love is its own reward! And if we give to those in need, THEY receive the reward of receiving from God THROUGH YOU. That's an amazing reward for everyone!

Prayer

Luke 6:5-6 – Give yourself to prayer this Lenten season.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when we come to God in prayer:

1. You are praying to your loving Father, not to a judge.
2. Share with him your cares and concerns. Share whatever is on your heart and mind. When you share with Him, you are saying to Him, "I trust You."
3. Listen. What does God have to say to you? Remember, he is a loving Father, not a judge.

He will speak to you as a loving Father. How do we know this? *Because Jesus did not come to condemn you but to save you!*

Fasting

Luke 6:16 - What is fasting? Fasting is abstaining from something for a period of time, or to put it another way, it is letting go! Fasting is a way to reset and recalibrate our lives back to God's way of living and loving.

What do you need to let go? What is something that's causing you to be the average version of yourself? Or maybe something that's causing you to be the below-average version of yourself?

The goal of fasting and letting go is to break addictions, impulses, compulsions that harm us.

Letting go of these things gives us more time and space to connect with God and/or offer ourselves in self-giving love to other people.

Isaiah 58:6-7 - True fasting, God says in Isaiah, is offering ourselves in self-giving love to those around us! To the oppressed, to the hungry, to the wanderer, to the naked, and even to our own flesh and blood —our family. What do you need to let go of this Lenten season?