

Trail Guide -- Week of February 3, 2020

Fasting, prayer and giving to the poor have long been the three pillars of Jewish piety. Jesus addresses each, in turn, in Matthew, chapter 6, to teach the true meaning of piety to his followers. Yes, these were and are practices for the entire faith community. But *how* they were practiced depended on the individual. Thus, Jesus speaks to us individually as he teaches his disciples the essence of authentic piety. Michael Card writes that Jesus' instruction is simple and focused: these observances are personal and private, and should be done in secret – in contrast to those who parade or publicize their piety. Note: “in secret” doesn't mean secretive, so as to negate shared accountability. For example, the story of the widow who gives her last two coins as an alms offering, did so in a public way with spectators (Jesus and his disciples). She, however, did not make a show of it. When Lent begins in a couple of weeks we'll be inviting one another to take on these three practices – Three Pillars in Judaism – for our Lenten disciplines. Prayer. Fasting. Alms-giving. Let's see what we can learn about each of these from scripture over the next couple of weeks.

Mon, 2/3 **Matthew 6:2, 5, 16** – The key word in each of these verses is “when”. Not “if”. When you give alms. When you pray. When you fast. Notice what Jesus has to say about how we practice these, as well.

Tues, 2/4 **Judges 20:26** – This entire story highlights a very dark and disturbing chapter in Israel's history. In the midst of conflict, as one side in this civil war seeks guidance, they come together for a day of fasting and prayer. Aside from the context of this story which you can read for yourself, we find here an early example of the Jewish people combining the practices of prayer and of fasting in a time of uncertainty over which course of action to take, fasting and prayer enable us to seek God' direction.

Wed, 2/5 **2 Chronicles 20:1-4** – In a time of national crisis, the king, Jehoshaphat called for national fasting and prayer. In the midst of those gathered in the courts of the Temple to pray, Jehoshaphat led the prayer meeting. The people had gathered to seek God's help and deliverance.

Thurs, 2/6 **Ezra 8:21** – Ezra, who was leading the exiles in their return to Jerusalem from Babylon, proclaims a time for prayer and fasting. Their fasting and praying was an expression of their humility before God as they sought God's help and protection.

Fri, 2/7 **Isaiah 58:1-7** – This passage introduces a radically new element to the spiritual practice of fasting. Namely, our spiritual practices must result in action that lifts oppression, repents of wickedness, shares resources with those in need, and cares for the least of these as though they are family.

Sat, 2/8 **Isaiah 58:8-12** – Isaiah highlights the blessing and gracious response of God to God' people when fasting results in just and righteous action.