

ASH WEDNESDAY

ASH WEDNESDAY IS A DAY OF REPENTANCE AND MARKS THE BEGINNING OF LENT.

According to the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus spent forty days fasting in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry, during which he endured temptation by Satan. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of this forty-day liturgical period where we practice the disciplines of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter.

Ashes were used in ancient times, according to the Bible, to express mourning. Dusting oneself with ashes and tearing their clothes was the penitent's way of expressing sorrow for sins and faults. A biblical example of expressing one's penitence is found in Job 42:3–6. We do not use ashes or tear clothes in modern times but we do wear black as a sign of mourning so we have created black Ash Wednesday bracelets for you to wear as a reminder throughout this season of Lent of our need to love God and repent of our sins.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Why do we choose to do spiritual disciplines? The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting and prayer. Rather, it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed.

In **1 Corinthians 9:24–27 (NLT)** Paul says,

“Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing.

I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.”

Just as Paul was instructing the Corinthian church, we are disciplining ourselves to run the race of faith by participating in outward actions that benefit our inward spiritual life.

FASTING AND PRAYER

The two disciplines we focus on for Lent are fasting and prayer.

It is the discipline of prayer that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Sincere honest prayer is life creating and life changing. To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.

All who have walked with God have viewed prayer as the main business of their lives. The words of the gospel of Mark,

“And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed,”

stand as a commentary on the life-style of Jesus (**Mark 1:35**).

The fast helps us be committed to and focus our prayers.

During our time today identify something in your life that you need to repent of and pray and reflect on that. A simple prayer could be, "God, please help identify sin in my life that I need to repent of." Then identify something to fast from that would help you to remember daily your commitment to preparing yourself spiritually for Easter. This can be a fast of a specific food or drink, your favorite online social media (facebook, daily news) television, etc... anything that you will feel daily. The black bracelets will also help as a daily reminder throughout Lent. Remember, if you break your fast early, don't worry. Just start again the next day.

Jesus speaks to the purpose and motive behind fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18 (NLT)

"And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you."

Do not fast to lose weight or show off to others. If our fasting is not unto God, we have failed in our spiritual preparation. Physical benefits, success in prayer or personal spiritual insights must never replace God as the center of our fasting. John Wesley declares, "First, let [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven..." That is the only way we will be saved from loving the blessing more than the Blessor.

CANDLES

Finally we have also provided candles so that you may choose one to light. Once you've spent time reflecting, please go to one of the tables with candles, strike a match and light a candle for yourself. The candle represents Christ, the light of the world who is your light and your guide. It is also a reminder that as you take time to pursue your friendship with Christ in prayer and fasting, you are a source of hope and life to those around you.

John 8:12 (NLT)

"Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, 'I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.'"