



The Three Essentials

Read: Matthew 6:1-18

As Lent begins, Jesus clearly outlines the three components of discipleship: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. For him, these are the pillars of the spiritual life. We are not free to disregard them or omit them from our spiritual practices. Our spiritual health is dependent upon living according to the outline Christ supplies. However, we must understand these prescriptions the way that Jesus meant them.

When Jesus talks about prayer he divides it into two categories: private and public. As a private act, prayer is about entering into a real relationship, with a real person: God. From this relationship we are drawn into a faith community. God did not intend our faith to be strictly a private matter. As a public act, prayer makes us part of a worshiping community. That is why concrete involvement with a Church is essential for Christian living.

Almsgiving is not strictly about giving money to the poor. It is about becoming involved in helping the poor find justice. Our relationship with God depends not just on prayer, but on our sincerity when it comes to serving the poor.

Fasting is about finding balance in our lives. It is about disciplining our emotions and bodies so that we are free to enjoy life. It prevents us from becoming ungrateful. Gratitude and joy emerge from balance, not from excess.

Looking at this, we see that Jesus is prescribing four essential pillars for a healthy spiritual life: a) Private prayer and private morality; b) social justice; c) a balanced lifestyle; d) a community to worship with. These four elements constitute the essential, nonnegotiable, of Christian discipleship. By following these steps, we grow in our faith and deepen our relationship with God. That is the ultimate purpose of Lent.