

## Purity of Intention

What does it take to get to heaven? The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that we need to “strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). The holiness without which no one will see the Lord...

This is the context we need to have in mind when we are listening to the Sermon on the Mount. If we were to strive for holiness on our own, we would not know the path. But the Eternal Word of Truth who is the Way and the Life utters words of wisdom to guide us on our way.

So when our Lord is speaking about prayer, fasting and almsgiving, these are not just practical life suggestions. These are the words of eternal life and holiness.

In our Gospel, God desires that we do all prayer, fasting and almsgiving with a purity of intention. Purity of intention is about doing all of these gifts of prayer, fasting and almsgiving out of self-giving love rather than self love. Self-giving love is radically opposed to self love. Self-giving is focused on the other while self love is focused on the self. There is a certain extent to which we need to have self-care and to love the dignity of our being as children of God. However, this self love becomes distorted when it focuses solely or excessively on itself.

Jesus shows one of the wounds of humanity which yearns for affirmation and so we can tend to look to others for that affirmation. When we pray, fast, and give alms (\*note that Jesus says when not if)...so WHEN we pray, fast and give alms, there is the potential for us to do those pious actions to show to others how pious we are. At the end of the day it becomes an occasion for us to indulge in self love.

I love to play board games. Board games are a great way to bring people together, to have fun and to challenge one's intellect. It can be an occasion for self-giving love. But there are times when one can be tempted to utterly obliterate one's opponent and crush one's enemies. So, what was meant to be a time for self giving love has been usurped to be a time for self love. So playing board games can really be an opportunity for me to be selfish rather than selfless.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving were meant to help us increase in love for God and neighbor but it can be used to do the opposite, it can be distorted to increase our self love, our pride, our ego. Self giving love helps us grow in holiness. That is what characterized the saints. They were known for their heroic virtue of self-giving love. Saints are not celebrated by their distorted love of self. We do not admire mother Teresa and say, "Look how much she loves herself!" rather we say "look how much she loves others!"

For many of us, our purity of intention is not completely swayed toward self love nor is it swayed toward self-giving love. Sometimes we are in the middle where we want to do the right thing, but we have some subtle selfish intentions.

Let us reflect on the reasons WHY we pray, fast and give alms. Is it for the 100% sole reason of self-giving love or is there an impurity mixed within our intention of distorted self love? We must always be aware of what type of love motivates our actions for as St. John of the Cross says: at the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.