

## **“A Lunar Secret”**

Matthew 6:1-18

*Series: LAUNCH Week 3. Launched to Sacrifice Selflessly*

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Eight years. 400,000 workers. \$24 billion dollars. To a half a billion people watching on earth, the flight of Apollo 11 to the moon seemed effortless, flawless, miraculous, magnificent.

To the people at NASA Command Control, the last minutes before touchdown on the moon were a moment of heart-stopping panic. The computer, overloaded with data, was throwing off warning signals. Charles Duke in Houston told Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to ignore the warnings and go ahead. Then the people watching the monitors on the ground saw the Lunar Module make a bizarre move. Instead of a straight descent to the chosen landing site, it suddenly started moving horizontally. It passed over the designated spot and kept moving. What Command central could not see were the boulders and rocks which made touchdown impossible. Neil Armstrong took the controls to find a smoother landing location. No problem. They trained for this. The real problem was they were running out of fuel. Armstrong knew it. Aldrin knew it. And everyone on the ground at NASA knew it. If they didn't land soon they would have to abort the entire operation. Imagine traveling 238,900 miles, burning up 960 gallons of rocket fuel and, with the whole world watching, running out of gas. Everyone at Command Control held their breath until they heard Neil Armstrong finally say, "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." After a few silent seconds Charles Duke replied: "Roger, Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again. Thanks a lot." They landed with 17 seconds of fuel left.

Years later, Buzz Aldrin would say landing on the moon was not like arriving at Grandma's house. You don't just jump out of the capsule and say, "Here we are!" There were procedures, checklists and a mandatory rest period before the famous first step. But in those hours there was also a lunar secret – something revealed only later. This was a moment filled with meaning and destined for history. It was the culmination of not just a decade of American ingenuity but of all human longing and exploration. Buzz Aldrin felt it should be solemnly marked and commemorated. So he said to the people of the earth,

I'd like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in, whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way.

And then he ate the first meal on the moon. It was not Tang or turkey in a tube. Buzz Aldrin opened a small vial and poured a liquid into a cup. It barely stayed in there due to the low gravity. Then he took out a morsel of bread and quietly celebrated Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Aldrin, a Presbyterian Elder, was given a small communion set and some consecrated bread and wine by his pastor Dean Woodruff.

Why was communion kept a secret? At the time, NASA was dealing with a lawsuit by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the activist who successfully fought to remove prayer from schools. She objected to the reading of Genesis by the crew of Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve. So Buzz Aldrin, with the microphone off, quietly finished the sacrament by reading from a small card:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

In this sermon series called LAUNCH we are learning, through the Sermon on the Mount, how Jesus wants us to launch us into the world to be His disciples. We are to be salt to season the lives of people and light to guide their way. We are to show the love of the Father to all including our enemies and give what we have to those in need. We should never be afraid to express our faith in the face of opposition from someone like Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Yet even Jesus said there are reasons why we might do some of our spiritual exercises in secret.

Chapter 6 of the Sermon on the Mount opens with a warning. Jesus says, Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

Jesus teaches about three specific 'acts of righteousness'- giving, praying and fasting. Nearly all Jews in Jesus day practiced these three spiritual exercises. Even today Jews, Christians and Muslims still do them. Jesus wants us to practice giving, praying and fasting. The astronauts of Apollo 11 practiced and practiced and practiced for their historic launch and landing. That's why, when the critical moment came and the computer was blaring out warnings, Neil Armstrong could calmly and confidently take the controls and make a perfect landing on the moon. That takes practice. Practice helps you learn the right way to do something and the wrong way.

Jesus begins by first teaching us the wrong way to give, pray and fast. He first says to avoid **Putting on a Performance for People**. Jesus says,

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:2)

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:5)

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:16)

These passages are often misunderstood. Some believe Jesus is saying we should never talk about money in public, especially not in worship. Those who feel uncomfortable

praying out loud point to these verses to support silent prayer. The same can be said for fasting. Yet Jesus wasn't afraid to talk about money. Many of his parables involved money: the Rich Fool, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin, the Hidden Treasure, the Good Samaritan. Nor did Jesus forbid praying aloud. If He did, then He immediately broke that rule four verses later when He prayed what we call the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus wants us to avoid turning giving, prayer and fasting into a performance. PBS commentator Bill Moyers was once the Press Secretary to President Lyndon Johnson. Before that, Moyers was a Baptist minister. Once Johnson asked him to say grace at a meal in the White House. When Moyers began praying softly, the President interrupted him with "Speak up, Bill!" "Speak up!" Bill Moyers stopped in mid-sentence and without looking up replied steadily, "I wasn't addressing you, Mr. President."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus does not want us to show off. In fact the word He uses - "hypocrite" - literally means an actor, someone who is pretending to be someone he or she is not. The phrase "to be seen by men" describes someone who is making an appearance, performing on stage, standing in the spotlight. If you give, pray or fast to impress people, Jesus says, that's all the reward you'll receive. And fame is a worthless reward. Just ask someone who is an actor in the spotlight: Brad Pitt. He once told Rolling Stone Magazine,

Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that. I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it doesn't help you sleep any better, and you don't wake up any better because of it.<sup>2</sup>

Let's not use giving, prayer or fasting to impress other people. In fact, the worse thing we can do with our lives is to live to please people. Let's follow the example of another famous person who completely avoided the limelight: Neil Armstrong. In one of the rare interviews he gave he told 60 minutes,

We all like to be recognized not for one piece of fireworks but for the ledger of our daily work.

There is only one person to please: our Father in Heaven and He loves us unconditionally. Let's daily live to please Him.

This leads to a second problem to avoid: **Passing Up an Appointment with God.** Jesus continues,

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<sup>1</sup> From Don Oberdorfer, Washington Post in Reader's Digest, April, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Rolling Stone (10-28-99).

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:3-4)

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6).

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:17-18)

I know we are supposed to “pray continually” (I Thessalonians 5:17). Many of you tell me you even pray while you are driving. Considering the aggressive drivers around here, I completely understand. I just don’t recommend you do that with your eyes closed. I’m sure there are a lot of people on the roads using God’s name – not all of them are prayers.

Giving, praying and fasting are a lifestyle. Yet they only become a way of life when we make time for them and practice them. Humans are full of good intentions. We intend to give, we intend to pray, some of us even intend to fast. But then life gets in the way and the urgent demands of each day crowd out what’s truly important. We need help to turn our good intentions into good actions. That’s why we have stewardship campaigns – they focus our attention on making a decision about giving. That’s why we send out daily email devotionals on the Gospel of Matthew. They focus our attention on making a time to read God’s Word and pray. That’s why I asked you to fast and pray for Steve Yi and many people did. It focused our attention to lift him up.

Plan out your giving, praying and fasting. This is why we ask people to make a pledge to God’s work at Woodside. A commitment helps you to plan it into your life so it becomes a regular practice. This is why you hear me preach repeatedly about making time in your schedule for Bible reading and prayer, for worship in a large group and study in a small group. These plans help you make these a regular practice in your life. This is why I periodically ask you to fast and why our teens fast for 30 hours each year. These appointments with God turn good intentions into a lifestyle of good actions.

Nothing can compare to a specific, focused, daily appointment alone with the King of the Universe. It takes time, planning, commitment and discipline to do what Jesus teaches. I know it’s hard to find a room that is private, secluded and distraction free. But it is worth it. Why is a daily quiet time with God so essential? I am married. I am married when I am at work, in the car, at the grocery store. I am married even when I am not with my wife. A couple can be married, be in the same house, yet never be with each other. Healthy relationships require one-on-one, face-to-face time for communication. This is especially true of your relationship with God. You are with the Lord all the time. Yet there is no substitute for time alone with Jesus. When people ask me why their spiritual life feels flat, my first question is: how is your quiet time? Are you making the time to be alone with Him?

That leads to the third thing to avoid: **Pushing Our Agenda on God.** At the end of each of these three spiritual practices Jesus says,

Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:4,6, 18)

So that's why give, pray, and fast: so we can get rewards from God? A person might assume, 'if I just give more to God, pray more to God and fast more for God then He will fulfill my wishes, do my will and follow my agenda.' I'm sure you've heard some way out applications of this by preachers. There is a whole theology called, "Name it and Claim it" which states that if you are following God's Word, if you are a child of the King then, as a King's kid you should be able to name and claim whatever reward you want from a larger house to a luxury car to a 3D LCD TV. In many cases we use giving, prayer and fasting for selfish reasons – to push God to give us what we want. But what if your guaranteed reward doesn't come in the mail? Then, these preachers say, it's your fault. You didn't have enough faith. Keep trying harder. And when this doesn't happen, many ask, "Do giving, prayer and fasting work?"

It's a difficult question. And maybe the problem is with the question. Giving, prayer and fasting are not machines that we use when they work and discard when they don't. We do these three not because they gives us results, but a relationship with God. That would be like forming a friendship, getting married or raising children only to achieve the proper results. A woman took her husband to the doctor. After giving the man a thorough check-up, the doctor said to the wife, "I don't like the looks of him." She replied, "I don't like the looks of him either, Doc, but he's always been good to the children, so I keep him." True relationships are based on love not results. Giving, prayer and fasting give us a relationship with God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached a radical, some said blasphemous, idea. He called God "His Father," and then He taught us to do the same in prayer (Matthew 6:6,9). We do not appreciate what an earth-shaking, life-changing gift this is. In the Old Testament, people trembled in fear before the Righteous and Holy God. To stand in His presence meant instant annihilation. But when the Son of God appeared, He opened the door for us to have an intimate, loving, personal relationship with His Father. Jesus said giving, prayer, and fasting are the way we nurture that relationship. He even says His Father will reward you. What is the reward? The reward is the relationship with your Heavenly Father - a loving, healing, soul-strengthening relationship.

The primary purpose of giving, prayer and fasting is not to change God or to change our circumstances (although that happens sometimes), but to change you and me. A little boy was sent to his room for being bad. A short time later he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did and I said a prayer." "That's fine," said his mom, "if you ask God to make you good, He will help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you put up with me." We try to change the circumstances around us through prayer. The primary purpose of giving, prayer and fasting from God's point of view, is to change us. The astronauts of Apollo 11 made it to the moon because they aligned themselves with its gravitational pull. They did

not think, for one moment, that they were pulling the moon towards themselves. Giving, prayer and fasting do not so much convince God to do our agenda as it draws us closer to God so that we can follow His way. That's why, at the center of these verses is the prayer which says, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Giving, prayer and fasting align our lives with the gravitational pull of God's Kingdom. We pray, tell God our requests and then submit to His will.

I know for the last few months and especially this last week many of you are wondering "Does prayer work?" At first we all celebrated that the surgeon was able to remove 99% of the tumor in Steve Yi's neck. We may have even felt it was the triumphant result of so many praying and fasting – God's reward for our faithfulness. Yet our celebration quickly turned to sorrow on Tuesday when we heard that the 1% of the tumor, which could not be removed, contains active cancer cells. Now we are overwhelmed with questions and chief among them may be, "Do prayer and fasting work?"

I sat with Steve and Gloria on Tuesday. We cried together. We held each other. It was heartbreaking to know the doctors have reached the limit of what they can do. There are no illusions about what is ahead. But I am humbled in their presence. For in Steve and Gloria there is still hope...hope in the God who still performs miracles, hope in the Lord who is stronger than death, hope in the Savior who has overcome the grave and who has opened the door to eternal life. In response to the news Gloria wrote,

We have no other choice but to be still and know that God is truly God and only he can heal Steve and no one else. Will you continue to pray for another miracle? Specifically that the cancer will die through the radiance of Christ. Amen.

Keep praying, keep fasting, keep giving and God will reward you by giving you Himself.

What kind of reward is a relationship with God? On this day, October 14<sup>th</sup>, twenty-eight years ago my wife Lisa and I offered up our first born, our son Peter into the arms of our pastor. He took him, blessed him and baptized him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Our deepest prayer then and always is not that he would be rich, famous or powerful, not that his path would always be easy and that he would always get his way, but that he would always have a relationship with the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. That is the only reward that lasts. That is the only reward that matters.

Today, October 14<sup>th</sup>, 28 years later, my son Peter and his wife Jacqueline lift their son Benjamin Carl into my arms so I may take him, bless him and baptize him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. On the occasion of his baptism I looked for a passage from Scripture that would be special for him. I found it in Deuteronomy 33:12. Moses is about to die. As he says his final farewell to the 12 Tribes of Israel he pronounces a special blessing over each one. This is what Moses says over the Tribe of Benjamin.

About Benjamin Moses said: “Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders.” (Deuteronomy 33:12)

I do not pray that Ben will be rich, famous or powerful. I do not pray that his path will always be easy and that he will always get his way. I do pray that he will always have a relationship with Jesus, that the Lord will shield him all day long, and that Ben will always rest secure between the shoulders of the Lord, in the arms of Almighty God.

That is my prayer for Steve and Gloria and Ella.

That is my prayer for you.