

Joel 2, 1 Corinthians 5-6, Matthew 6
Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Each year, we are encouraged on this night to meditate on our sin and its weight, to repent of it, and to fix our eyes on Christ Jesus in the Lenten season to come and its anticipation of Holy Week now six weeks on the horizon.

To do so – to meditate rightly – requires both doctrine and practice. The doctrine can teach us sin's depravity, its deserved condemnation, our redemption from it through the meritorious suffering and death of Christ Jesus, our new life in Christ that turns away from sin and rejoices in God's holy will. That can and should all be taught, all be proclaimed and spoken of to you – that's all 'doctrine.'

But understanding how that all plays out in practice – and thus mimicking and practicing (not as in 'doing rote lessons', but as a way of life) ...practicing the Christian faith – is just as important, isn't it? In practice, how do I acknowledge sin's depravity and deserved condemnation? How do I confess my salvation in Christ Jesus? How do I live the new life that turns from sin and rejoices in God's holy will? Those are questions not just of doctrine but also of tangible

‘practice.’ So, doctrine and practice go hand-in-hand in the Christian life.

We see that truth in each of the assigned Scripture readings for this evening. The Old Testament reading from Joel certainly teaches the *doctrine* of repentance: “Return to me with all your heart.” And it also teaches the *doctrine* of God’s grace toward sinners: “He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” And it even teaches the *doctrine* of God’s bestowal of His gifts to assure, comfort, and strengthen the penitent: “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?”

That’s all *doctrine*! But, through His prophet, the Lord also teaches us how to *practice* penitence, doesn’t He? He doesn’t leave it to chance that we will know how to practice our repentance, but He gives demonstration, doesn’t He? “Rend your hearts and not your garments,” the LORD says. Repentance is not about an outward show, it’s about turning your heart in contrition, from the ways of Old Adam, to the precious promises and holy will of God.

And such turning of the heart, the LORD teaches us, is not done with hopes of earning God’s favor... how is the practice informed by that reading from Joel? – “Who knows whether He [the LORD] will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing...” Who knows? The penitent *hope* that He will, and they hope with *confidence*,

indeed certainly, because of Christ their righteous intercessor. But they always *revere* the fact that God does not owe us such forgiveness and mercy, for otherwise it would not be forgiveness and mercy, but merit and reward.

Nevertheless, the penitent ought fall before the LORD with confidence, because – in Christ crucified – He *is* gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And so, despite our sins, despite the ugliness of that sinfulness we are too proud to confess before men but may safely confess to the holy God... despite all of that, repentance is practiced boldly: “Call a solemn assembly, gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants.” That’s *practice*, isn’t it? That’s living the Christian life, apart from which practice no one can say he believes the doctrine! “Oh, yes, I’m a Christian; I just choose not to assemble with the solemn assembly.” But that’s the very practice and life *of* the Christian!

Think about how that call of Joel – “call a solemn assembly, gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants” – think about how that rightly describes the life of the Church: Who gathers here tonight (or each Sunday) but *the penitent*? Not the righteous, not the worthy... but those who know they are unrighteous and unworthy. Those who do *not* recognize their need pass by the opportunity to be forgiven. Or, perhaps they know their need but do not trust the

promise (yes, true repentance also includes faith in the promise, doesn't it?).

But those who gather at the altar of God do so because (1) you know your need and (2) you trust the promise. And, you know your need and trust the promise, and so you gather when the Lord calls. You know the weight of your sin and the greater weight of your Savior's merit. You know the good news of your salvation in doctrine, but you also know the Lord applies it to you in realtime. And so, you gather... not proud of your knowledge, but saved by God's grace handed down to you in doctrine and practice.

As some of us just read in our recent Book Club book, Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse spoke of the life of the Church this way:

"There is only one thing we can say: *Kyrie eleison!* [Lord have mercy]. We can only do one thing: we can repent. Here indeed lies one of the greatest mysteries of the church of Jesus Christ... We live only from repentance. Only as we continually repent can we live... only if we first can say nothing other than *Kyrie eleison* – only then can we learn to grasp the mystery of the church of Christ."

How true that is! Every other religion wants to *do something* about their salvation. But the Church knows it can only gather in repentance – offering nothing, but hoping in every promise attached to Christ Jesus. And so, as Joel describes the *practice*, a gathering of all the people in solemn assembly. The congregation, the ministers, the children, even the infants... all sinners, all calling upon the name

of the Lord – Kyrie Eleison – and all depending upon and confident in His mercy.

Does not St Paul describe the same thing in our epistle reading? – speaking both in matters of doctrine and practice! The doctrine is very simple and straightforward: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ... For he says, ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time, behold, now is the day of salvation!”

That’s all doctrine, isn’t it? The Law-and-Gospel proclamation that we who need to be reconciled to God *have* been reconciled to God in Christ Jesus – not our own righteousness, but the righteousness of God. And so, now is the favorable time, now is the day of salvation! That’s all doctrine.

So then, the practice? “Working together with him, then, we (pastors) appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.... [instead], widen your hearts also.”

In fact, so that nothing can cloud your judgment and close your hearts to the primary importance of this call to repent and take heart in the gospel, what does Paul say is the practice of the pastors? – “We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.” In other words, Paul says, ‘the messengers must suffer and endure everything, must rid themselves of any

temptation to add to or subtract from the Gospel. Yes, we pastors have our practice of the doctrine, too. And our practice is to get out of the way, to not turn the gospel into a cult of pastoral personality, and to just make sure you hear the Law and Gospel of God, that you may not receive the grace of God in vain.

And then, when the Word is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered, cling to it all. Imbibe in it all; drink deeply and richly. In fact, “widen your hearts” to it, Paul says. Or, shall we say, immerse your whole life in it, bathe in it, swim in it, never see or live daily life outside of it. For, you live in the day of salvation, you live in a favorable time... so receive this good news of Christ crucified for sinners, and be reconciled to God.

Of course, such doctrine practiced in the faith sometimes needs to be taught rather bluntly, lest Old Adam teach us to misuse it to our own glory or licentiousness. So, when we turn to our Gospel Reading, what do we hear, but Jesus teaching the doctrine *through* a focus on the practice.

Christ highlights three practices of the Christian life that flow from, carry, and depend upon right doctrine. First, that the Christian pray. As a matter of doctrine, these daily prayers (as we learn in the Small Catechism) practice “faith in God.” But if they are practiced to be seen and heard by men, then we are no longer praying to and depending upon God’s approval, but man’s. No, prayer is the daily practice of those who depend upon God; thus, the one who prays

because he actually trusts God's willingness to hear will not need the approval (or even the presence) of men, for he knows he has the approval of God in Christ Jesus. So, Jesus says, "pray in secret, and the one who hears in secret will reward you in secret." Oh yes, how great if we all prayed with an audience like Elijah, who unveiled to the prophets of Baal (through fire from heaven) the secret God. But, what God allowed once as the exception proves the norm. Faith is content, even if the whole world mocks us for calling out to God. So be content praying in secret, without being praised by men; such is the practice of the right doctrine that hopes in the Christ who ascended back into invisibility.

In addition to a prayer life, the Christian life is practiced (Jesus says in our text) in that the Christian care for his neighbor. As a matter of doctrine, we might recognize the giving of alms as a form of that which is taught in the Small Catechism's Table of Duties as "love of neighbor." If the Table of Duties is always about couplets – pastor/people... government/citizen... husband/wife – then what of the couplet of rich/poor? We who have daily bread give to those who need it, especially among the beloved of God, simply because God has promised it to them... even if through us. To give for our sake, for how good we feel about it, or even because we think it will curry favor with God, is poor practice following from poor doctrine. Rather, we help the needy (again, especially among the household of faith) for *their* sake, not for *our* sake. Are not the needy of the

faithful (and that doesn't have to mean financially needy; what of physically needy, emotionally needy, situationally needy?), are not their bodies temples of the Holy Spirit? Have not all needy also been purchased by the blood of Christ? Then, with faith in Him, to honor him, to live the practice of right doctrine in Christ Jesus, love your neighbor ("beloved, let us love another")... the second great commandment like unto the first: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind."

Third in our text, Jesus gives us to practice our doctrine by fasting... or, more generically, we must recognize it thus, that the Christian deny himself and discipline the sinful nature. When the question routinely comes as to whether the Christian ought fast, we ought recognize Old Adam's hesitation to be disciplined at all, to be denied his "rights" by New Adam at all. How wrapped up we can become in whether we should fast from that which is good, when we don't even want to refrain from that which is evil! In fact, fasting means refraining even from that which is good daily bread! All the more should we not discipline Old Adam and deny ourselves from that which is wicked and fleshly! Thus, daily Christian life exercises itself by refraining from that which is godly (fasting) that it might be strengthened to refrain from that which is ungodly (temptation).

Now all of this right doctrine and practice is taught us on this Ash Wednesday, when we thought we were simply coming to repent. And, of course, that is a necessary result of this dwelling on

doctrine and practice, isn't it? – that we see of ourselves: we must repent. A recognition that our practice is flawed even when our doctrine is right... and sometimes an admission that even our individual life's doctrine has been more influenced by the world's lies than by the Church's handing down of the Faith.

Thus, we are driven to repentance on this Ash Wednesday and during this Lenten season. Not that we may be seen by men, nor even that we may be seen by God! But, we are driven to repentance that we may *in practice* rightly depend upon God's doctrine – free forgiveness in Christ crucified, that in this day of salvation we may call an assembly and receive the blessing of God for which the Lord has gathered His people.

Yes, there's great *comfort* in this Christian life that lives by Christ's own word: "Repent and believe the gospel." Truly, there's comfort in repentance tonight – a whole-life admission that trying to earn God's favor is a façade, living your life with a worry of how you are seen by men is an empty pursuit. Your whole life depends upon God being gracious. That *could* be reason for despair; but in Christ Jesus, it's comfort, it's hope, it's reason to run in repentance before the altar of God this night and to know that your sins are there and then forgiven before God in heaven.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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