

Pastor Kenneth Mars
Christ the King Lutheran Church – Cody, WY
Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023
Text: Matthew 6:1–6; 16–21

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

We use the word “practice” in a number of different ways. Athletes, musicians, artists, and so forth spend thousands of hours honing and developing their skills. They practice a great deal without people watching so that when the time comes to perform their arts, they can do so with great success. A somewhat different use of the word is associated with doctors, dentists, and other people in medical arts who set up their medical practices. People go see them to enhance their health and vitality because their professional skills have been developed by much study, repetition, and careful supervision. Those professionals practice their medicine on their patients for their good. What these different uses of the word practice have in common is that the deeds done are accomplished through long, arduous study, and much, much repetition.

In the Sermon on the Mount, today’s text, Jesus says His people will practice their righteousness. He speaks of it as a matter of fact. His Church will practice righteousness in His name until the end of the age.

A Christian practice of righteousness is somewhat different than what I’ve just described. To begin with, the righteousness we practice is not something we work up or achieve on our own merits and strength. Our righteousness is given to us by our heavenly Father by His grace through the redemptive work of His Son. It’s our righteousness as Jesus says in vs. 1. But it was given to us by the Father through the Spirit. Our Christian lives can rightly be called the practice of God’s righteousness in our lives.

Another difference is that we don't practice our righteous actions for the sake of being seen by others. No applause or fanfare. No monuments or permanent memorials. We practice our righteousness before an audience of one: our Father in heaven.

Lent is our season of intensified practice. Our righteous acts are done before the face of our heavenly Father and for the good of our neighbor who receives the benefit for our righteous deeds. God sees our righteousness. Our neighbor receives the benefit. And we practicing Christians sit in the background rejoicing that our neighbor was helped in their time of need while God receives all the praise. *Soli Deo Gloria* is the phrase so often used to describe our attitude. To God alone be all glory, honor, and praise.

As Christians, our goal is to please our heavenly Father. To live before Him in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness forever. For us, all things are done in Christ's name and for His glory because we are always living in the very presence of God. He sees all that we do. His approval is our goal and desire.

The 40 days of Lent are an intensive, purposeful time of practice so that our life of righteousness throughout the rest of the year is more effective, more anonymous, and more glorious for our heavenly Father.

The Lord Jesus, however, did not leave us to our own devices when it comes to practicing our righteousness. In today's text from Matthew 6, He speaks of three disciplines we practice. They are giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. We begin with our practice of giving. In this text, Jesus isn't speaking about the offerings we give in Sunday worship services though there is some overlap. Rather, Jesus is teaching us about the tangible, concrete ways we help our neighbor in need. In days gone by, we called it almsgiving, that is, giving of our time, money, and resources to help our neighbor, stranger, or even our enemies in the midst of their need.

When we give, it must be done with no fanfare, no public applause. Sound no trumpet says Jesus (vs. 2). Giving to the poor for the praise of man isn't an act of love but a deed of selfishness. The one giving to the needy for the applause of others is simply using the poor to secure attention and recognition. The needy are helped. That is true. But it isn't an act of righteousness before God. When we Christians give, we do so in love, for God's glory, and to fulfill our neighbor's need.

The second act of righteousness that we practice is prayer. Prayer is an exercise of faith, hope, and love. True Biblical prayer is primarily characterized by an outward looking focus. In other words, prayer is most concerned about God's glory, the benefit of other people, and our own physical and spiritual needs. His Word guides and directs our prayers. And the Holy Spirit enlivens them as we practice this form of righteousness.

Jesus cautions us here too. Our practice of prayer should be done anonymously for the benefit of our neighbor, for God's glory, and so that we can grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. This was, after all, the way Jesus lived out His life and it was the way He prayed. Jesus promises us that our Father sees and hears in secret and will reward us graciously (vs. 6).

Here we must make an important distinction. Our practice of prayer must include both public prayers and private prayers. In today's text Jesus speaks about praying in private. "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (vs. 6). In many ways, this is private conversation between a Father and His redeemed child. Day by day, we pray to our heavenly Father with boldness and confidence in our homes and in other private ways which ought not to receive public attention. Jesus Himself would often do this as the gospels record.

But the Scriptures also command us to gather together as the body of Christ to pray, even as we do tonight. I Timothy 2 is a great place to read about the Church gathered publicly in prayer. We are to practice both aspects of prayer: private and public. What is common to both is that we don't pray in order to

receive the applause and praise of man. We pray for God's glory and the good of our neighbor.

Finally, Jesus teaches us that we are people who practice the righteous discipline of fasting. Of the three expressions of Christian righteousness, fasting is the most underutilized and the least understood. Fasting reminds us that we do not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Christians practice righteous fasting by refraining from food, drink, and other forms of physical pleasure for the purpose of drawing closer to God through prayer and study of His Word. And so that they can help their neighbor in need. Fasting teaches us to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. And Jesus says that hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied with His righteousness given freely by grace.

Here too we practice fasting without public notice. No gloomy faces, says Jesus in vs. 16. Instead, we go about our day as if everything were as normal as any other day. We work, take care of family and friends, say our prayers, study God's Word, and give alms to those in need. But that physical deprivation reminds us we hunger for a greater righteousness, a righteousness we are already practicing.

The secret to practicing your righteousness is the gospel promise the Lord Jesus died to forgive us all our sins. His holy, precious blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Because of what Christ Jesus has done for us, we are set free from the need to save or exalt ourselves. Because Jesus did everything to secure our eternal life, we are free to love our neighbor for the sake of our neighbor. The praise and recognition of men isn't needed. God the Father has showered upon you His eternal, divine love and favor through His Son Jesus. All the attention we Christians really seek is the heavenly Father's smiling face and the final, heavenly benediction, "Well done, good and faithful servant." What more could we want or desire than to have the love and praise of God Himself. And that we have already promised to us by grace alone through Christ alone.

So go out in this Lenten season and practice your righteous acts of giving, praying, and fasting for the glory of God alone for the benefit of your neighbor alone.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.