

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY  
Ash Wednesday  
February 10, 2016  
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.

I think Lent is the most misunderstood season of the church year. People in general think it's about giving up some trifling item or relatively insignificant activity. Some think of it as one, 6 week-long killjoy. We liturgical Christians get confused too about Lent's purpose in our lives. What we do in Lent is really what we do at any and every point in the year: live out our Christian lives in repentance and faith. Or to borrow from the Lord Jesus, Lent and every other time of the year is one of "practicing our righteousness" (vs. 1)

Notice the assumption that Jesus is making: 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. In thought, word and deed, Christians are called to practice the righteousness given to them as a gift from their heavenly Father through the gospel.

Today's liturgy reminded us that "From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope." Practicing our righteousness is about life and hope centered in Jesus.

But Jesus cautions us that we must practice our righteousness in a God pleasing way. The practice must be done only for God's eyes and for the benefit of others. No audiences please. News releases and press conferences have no place in the practice of our righteousness. 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.

The 40 days of Lent are an intensive 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.

Jesus speaks of three disciplines in which we practice. They are giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. We begin with our giving.

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 satisfy his own thirst for attention and recognition. The needy are helped. But it isn't an act of righteousness before God. So we give in love for God's glory and our neighbor's need.

Lent reminds us that we are people of 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 and the benefit of people.

Once again, Jesus cautions us that our practice of prayer should be done anonymously for the benefit of our neighbor and for God's glory. 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).

And we receive encouragement in our prayers from the promise that Jesus prays for us even now as He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. In faith, hope, and love, we join with our Lord Jesus as we pray.

Finally, Lent reminds us that we are people who practice the righteous discipline of fasting. Of the three expressions of Christian piety, 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 their righteousness by refraining from food, drink and other forms of physical pleasure for the purpose of drawing closer to God, His Word and the needs of others. Fasting teaches us to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. And Jesus says, that hungering and thirsting will be satisfied with His righteousness given freely by grace.

One last thing we must consider in our practice of righteousness. Who are the ones we are to give to, and pray and fast for? It's the neighbor who's struggling, the family member who's suffering, the neighborhood children from broken homes, the stranger who shows up at your door, the foreigner enduring the ravages of humanity's foolish and sinful actions. The opportunities to serve your neighbor are boundless. Sometimes

it means giving money. But more often than not it means giving of your time, your emotions, your very life.

The secret to practicing your righteousness is the gospel promise the Lord Jesus died to forgive us all our sins and to set us free from the need to save ourselves. Because Jesus did everything to secure our eternal life, we are able 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. What more could we want or desire than to have the love and praise of God Himself. And that we have already 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.