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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Ash Wednesday

March 1, 2017

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 find it rather curious that in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, just after the Beatitudes, Jesus preaches, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). And then, in the middle of the same Sermon, Jesus issues a stern warning, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (6:1). So which is it? Are we to do good works that people see? Or are we to give to the needy, pray, and fast in secret so that others do not know what we are doing?

Actually, we do both. Our good works of piety and love will be seen by others. God the Father will be glorified in them. And we do our works of piety and love without any regard whatsoever for being seen or noticed or thanked or applauded by other people.

Our Lord said that people would see our good works and give glory to God the Father in heaven, not us! God alone gets the glory. And then, in today's section from the Sermon on the Mount, our almsgiving, our prayers, and our fastings, are done before an audience of One: the Father in heaven. Here too, God the Father is to receive all glory and honor. In other words, we live by faith and do our good works under the loving care and providential guidance of our Father trusting that we are His beloved children because of Jesus, His Son.

The marvel and glorious wonder of our Lord's teaching is that we are set free from the need to gain approval from others. In life and death, in thought and deed, in body and soul, we seek only the approval of One: God the Father almighty who makes us His own dear children through the grace of the Holy Spirit for the sake of His beloved Son, Jesus. And, wonder of wonders, when the glory and honor and approval of God alone is our desire, our fellow neighbors are all the better served with God's love. Or to put it differently, the more heavenly minded we are, the more earthly good we will do.

The Lenten season helps us remember and keep these things in focus. “On this day, the Church begins a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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.”

We begin this season, reflecting upon the crucified and resurrected Jesus who teaches us what kinds of good works His people should be doing, not only during the six weeks of Lent but regularly and faithfully all the time. God the Father receives all glory, honor, and praise because our good works of charitable giving, prayers, and fastings. And our neighbor is served in love.

The first good work we do is “give to the needy” (vs. 2). We Christians ought not to feel any need to hoard our monetary and material possessions. They are gifts of love given to us by our heavenly Father. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, Jesus taught in the Beatitudes (5:5). What we have freely received in love from the Father, we are free to share and give to anyone in need. No trumpets are sounded when we give. That’s what the hypocrites do, those who seek the glory of man.

Jesus teaches we give to others freely, almost unconsciously, for our left hand does not know what our right hand is doing (6:3). Is our neighbor hungry? We give food. Does he need clothing? We give clothes. Is his car empty of fuel? We buy gas. Does he need love and encouragement? We give support in any number of ways. It’s simply the normal way of doing of things for God’s people. The Father is glorified, our neighbor is served, and we are rewarded by our heavenly Father.

The second good work we do is pray (6:5). But we do not pray as hypocrites who seek the public applause of man. Rather, as children of God declared to be righteous because of Jesus, we seek our Father’s presence in the purity of heart so that we may see God, as Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes (5:8).

The Father declares us to be His own dear children in and through the merits and mediation of His Son, Jesus. Thus we boldly and confidently call upon God believing that He is our true Father and we are His true children. And such simple, confident, powerful prayers not only bring glory to the Father but they serve our neighbors’ good. For do we not pray that God’s name be hallowed, His kingdom come, His will be done, His earthly gifts be given, His heavenly forgiveness bestowed, His

deliverance from evil and temptations be secured not only for us personally but for our neighbors, friends, yea! even the entire world!!!! The Father is glorified for His is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. And we are rewarded by our Father according to His love and grace.

The third good work we do is fast (6:16). But we do not fast as the hypocrites who act sad and gloomy; they have received their reward of transitory earthly praise. “True fasting consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking, and sleeping, but also to your leisure, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body or that you do to provide for it and take care of it” (M. Luther, cited in J.A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, p. 350). Fasting is the purposeful refraining from anything that is, in and of itself, good so that greater devotion can be given to God. And our neighbor be served all the more.

Refraining from chocolate, desserts, alcohol, or a few meals here and there are all worthy things to do. But this isn't fasting unless the time normally committed to eating these things is devoted to more fervent prayer and study of Scripture. And the money saved by not consuming them is given to someone who needs monetary help. The prophet Isaiah (58:6–8) describes most clearly what God-pleasing fasting is, the kind that Jesus encourages us to do:

<sup>6</sup>“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? <sup>8</sup>Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Fasting reminds us that we Christians hunger and thirst for righteousness with the promise that we shall be satisfied, as Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes (5:6). With such fasts, the Father is glorified, our neighbor is served, and our Lord rewards us as He sees fit.

Giving to the needy and praying are the good works we are most familiar with in our day to day lives. Please continue in doing these good works. Fasting, on the other hand, appears to have been largely forgotten. And yet, Jesus takes it for granted that we will fast. I would like to encourage you to undertake the good work of fasting, not only during this Lenten season, but at other times in the year.

None of these good works of almsgiving, prayer, or fasting earn our salvation. Remember, our attention “is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s where our salvation is found. But these good works do reveal where our heart is. Jesus said (6:19–21), “<sup>19</sup>“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, <sup>20</sup>but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The three good works sanctioned by our Lord Jesus uniquely reveal where our treasure is; that is, where our heart is. We give to the need, pray, and fast so that God the Father is glorified and our neighbor is served in love. Our heart is with our heavenly Father. He has claimed us, heart, mind, body, and soul, as His own through the grace of the Holy Spirit by the merits and worthiness of Jesus.

Let you light shine, saints of God. And may your hearts be filled with the treasure of Christ’s gifts unto the Father’s glory, the well-being of your neighbor, and the glorious redemption of your body and soul.

✠ 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.