

**Matthew 6:1-6,16-21**

Ash Wednesday + March 6, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
Walking in the Way of Jesus

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

If you are here tonight, I'm guessing you are a Christian. If you are not, please don't leave, but I figure that most folks who turn out for an Ash Wednesday service do so because they are Christians.

If you are a Christian, that means that you follow in the way of Christ – you seek to do what He did, because He did a perfect job of keeping God's Word.

In reading through the Gospels, you often find Jesus surrounded by people who are in need, and a cry of "Lord, have mercy!" rarely fades before another rings out. Jesus has mercy on those who are in need: He heals the sick, He cleanses lepers, He delivers from demons and cures all sorts of people of all sorts of things. He feeds the hungry, provides for the poor. He doesn't cease being merciful.

Perhaps you've never thought of it before, but Jesus never uses His works of charity to build support for Himself: He doesn't ask for anything in return. When He says "Follow Me," to people, it's not because He needs them, but because they need Him: in fact, for quite a bit of the Gospels, He spends His time telling people not to talk about the miracles He performs. He doesn't get tired of all the needy people who keep arriving and begging and making life difficult. He helps because people need help and He is able to help them. You only see the tip of the iceberg, too: He helps far more than you hear of in Scripture. As He lives, He lives to serve. As He dies, He dies to save, for the world is in need of His salvation.

You follow in the footsteps of that Jesus, and that Jesus says to you,

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. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Though you're likewise supposed to be Christ-like to those in need, beware because you're you. No matter how hard you try, you're looking for a payoff when you help the needy: you might be willing to help because it gives you a feeling of satisfaction, because you feel obligated, or because you can say that you've done your part. As you help others, you probably have that hope that someone notices what you're doing and the word gets around at what a swell person you are. On the other hand, there will also be plenty of times when you're not inclined to help the needy because you're in a bad mood, because you feel you've done enough, because you're not sure if you're getting cheated, because helping the needy more gets in the way of your plans for a nap, or because you don't want to feel guilty about the things that you have in comparison. If, for instance and hypothetically, you work at a church near a busy interstate, you do not arrive at work hoping that more people stop by asking for money.

Even if you seek to help the needy out of compassion, that sinful nature still clings and poisons your thoughts to make your charity a selfish thing. That is not the way of Christ. Beware.

In the Gospels, you also find that Jesus prays to His Father quite often, a remarkable thing when they are two persons of the same Godhead. Yet time and time again, Jesus retreats to a remote area and often spends the night praying. What we know of such prayers are remarkable, for they are most

showcased when He prays in Gethsemane, hours before His crucifixion. Even then, He entrusts Himself to His Father without complaint, trusting that His Father will use the coming evil for good. In other words, Jesus prays because He delights that His Father hears, and He trusts that His Father answers well.

You follow in the footsteps of that Jesus, and that Jesus says to you,

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Your motive for praying should be the same as Jesus: you should pray because you delight that God promises to hear, and you trust that He answers well. Too often, that is not the case. Either you don't pray much at all, or else you pray because you've made it into an exercise you have to do to be a good Christian, or else you wait until you're really in trouble and can't figure out how to get yourself out of a jam. (At that point, you're more likely to demand a miracle than pray, "Your will, O Lord, be done.") It is far more natural for you to worry about what is wrong than to entrust it to the Lord, and it is far too easy to give up than to persist in prayer unceasingly. If all that isn't bad enough, you will never find yourself distracted and daydreaming more than when you are trying to pray ... except perhaps during a sermon on a Wednesday evening.

Even when you seek to pray for all the right reasons, your sinful nature still works to make you pray for the wrong reasons. That is not the way of Christ. Beware.

In the Gospels, you find Jesus fasting. He fasts in the wilderness for forty days. He denies Himself any sort of food or luxury or comfort, and He is constantly afflicted by the devil with all sorts of temptations to save Himself, forego the cross and leave you to die in your sin. Jesus doesn't budge: He resists all temptation, remains holy and the perfect sacrifice for your sin. He is not swayed from His mission of redeeming you.

You follow in the footsteps of that Jesus, and that Jesus says to you,

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus assumes that you fast, and it is a salutary exercise to give up something for Lent. It does not earn points toward salvation, of course, but it exposes your weakness and love for little luxuries. Let's say, for instance, that you're pondering giving up some little thing for Lent. You don't want to give up something that would be really tough to resist, like maybe the glass of wine with dinner; and the fact that you think that way already betrays your weakness. You finally settle on chocolate: it won't be easy, but you need to lose a few pounds and so this "fast" could actually do something beneficial rather than just make you unhappy. Even then, you're painfully aware of that half-full jar of sea-salt and dark chocolate covered caramels in the cupboard, and you know that you'll probably fail to keep your pledge unless you get them out of the house by eating the rest of them by midnight last night.

Please understand that, when Jesus is tempted with food after forty days of hunger, there's never a moment where He's inclined to give in. His holiness has Him dedicated to the will of God. The fact that you can be outwitted by a piece of chocolate does not testify well of your fortitude against temptation. That is not the way of Christ. Beware.

In fact, when Jesus says, "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 in heaven," the reason for this is

simple: even in your best attempts, you will demonstrate that you are to be numbered among the hypocrites! So you already have your reward: remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.

"Unfair!" you say. Jesus is the Son of God, holy and sinless. You, on the other hand, are only human. That is precisely the point. Unlike Jesus, you are sinful human flesh.

In fact, it is precisely because you cannot walk in the way of Jesus as you should, that Jesus went His way to the cross. You were the needy one, impoverished of righteousness, so He went to the cross and paid the price. You were the lost one orphaned by sin, so Jesus sacrificed Himself so that you might have a Father in heaven to hear your prayers and answer. You were the one in love with the decaying treasures of this world, so Jesus endured the cross so that you might have treasure in heaven.

You can be angry that it's unfair that you're sinful – and avoid Jesus in your anger, but that is sadly as foolish as being so angry that your leg is broken that you're not going to go to the doctor. Or, remembering that you are dust-bound sinful flesh, you can say what is true – that you are dead in your sin unless Christ makes you alive. That is why you are here, to rejoice in that good confession that there is salvation for sinners.

Where you have need of pardon, Jesus gives you grace upon grace.  
Where you are hungry, He feeds you with Himself, the bread of life.  
Where you were lost, you are now a holy child of God.  
Where you faced an eternity of death and decay, He gives you life and the treasure of heaven.

So now you walk in the way of Jesus – not by your works, but by confessing your sin, receiving forgiveness and remaining joined to Him. Joined to Him, where He walks, you go also: in life, in death and in resurrection.

The Lord does all things well for your redemption; and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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