

The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached
The Sermon on the Mount Series (Part VI)
“The Great Religion Show”

Liturgical Date: Ash Wednesday

Primary Text: St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 (verses 19-21 are part of the lectionary reading, but not used for this sermon)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for tonight, Ash Wednesday, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 6. Our sermon series “The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached: The Sermon on the Mount” continues this evening with the sixth installment. The title of the sermon is “The Great Religion Show”.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages! Step right up and come see the show!” You hear these words ring out at a local street festival that you are attending. You glance over your shoulder and head back toward the sound of the man’s voice. A man dressed in an outfit that looks like a circus ringmaster is standing there, top hat and all. You notice that he is in front of a booth set up by a local church. The man continues with his loud and enthusiastic voice. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Pastor Pious and I am going to introduce you to some fine members from our congregation, The First Self-Righteous Church. (a Ray Stevens reference for anyone who gets it) First up, in our great show for you today is this fine gentlemen, Mr. Hugh Giveaway. This guy is rich, but oh so generous. Did you know that he has given away thousands of dollars to the poor? Perhaps some of you lucky people today may even get some of his money if you are willing to go on camera and testify to how generous he has been to you today. We will show the video on our big screen at church Sunday.”

Pastor Pious continues, “Next up for your wonder and awe today is this seasoned saint, Mrs. Penny Praylong. You will be awed at her prayer skills. Her prayers are the most well-spoken that you have ever heard and she can pray for hours. Give her a prayer request, go right ahead-don’t be shy. You can be sure that God will hear and answer a prayer for you when she prays it because her prayers are so eloquent and long!” And not to be outdone, I have one more special guest from our church in our show for today. I give you, without further ado, Mr. Nomar Noshing! Just look at him. Doesn’t he look hungry? Look how skinny he is! He fasts all of the time. You must recognize how holy he is. You can dangle one of those delicious corndogs from the stand over there in front of his face, and he will resist eating it. Yes, come to the show. Come visit our church. Look at how good, holy and pious we are!”

How would you react to such a spectacle? I am guessing not too positively. It’s just a little over the top. It seems a little too focused on the people doing these things, rather than on God. And we heard in our Gospel text for today that this is essentially what some people were doing in First Century Israel. With likely a little less dramatic showmanship, but the same spirit in that they were attracting attention to themselves for the spiritual disciplines that they practiced.

This past Sunday, we concluded the sermons on the first of the three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount. In Chapter 5, there was a heavy focus on the essence, the true meaning of the Law. Jesus painted a much different picture than what many people thought it meant to keep the law, aiming at the heart rather than only outward actions. As we move into Chapter 6, the theme is on true righteousness. And once again, what people saw as righteousness was often off base. While not specifically naming them, it is clear that Jesus words that we

heard tonight were aimed right the Pharisees and religious leaders. They were seen as the “holy people” and they went about their religious practices in ways that everyone could see just how “pious” they were.

These verses from St. Matthew 6 have for centuries been part of the readings traditionally used for Ash Wednesday. And of course, Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Lent is a more penitent and somber season in the Church as we prepare for Easter. And during Lent these three spiritual practices of discipline have traditionally been a big part of this season: alms giving to the poor, prayer, and the one that still gets a pretty big focus today: fasting. During Lent is right and proper for us to spend extra time focusing on our sin. However, in doing this we are not to do extra spiritual disciplines in order that we could somehow think that we can in anyway atone for them by what we would do. Rather, as we focus on our sinfulness before a holy God, this should turn our focus to Him. We reflect on what God has done to save us, how God has extended such mercy and grace toward us wicked sinners. If we take on certain practices in order to look better in front of other people, then we are going about it all wrong. Even the ashes that we now have on our foreheads can be misused. Rightly understood, when you received the ashes this evening it a humble reminder that God has created us from dust and that to dust we shall return. There is nothing in ourselves that is worthy of God’s forgiveness. But as the sign of the cross they are made in reminds us that God loves us and Jesus went to the cross to die for our sins. Wrongly understood, you would want to rush out of this Sanctuary tonight and get into a public place so that people would know that you went to Church today and that you are so great of a person!

It is vital to understand, as it always is, exactly what Jesus is teaching here. He is not teaching that any of the practices that He addresses in the text are bad. In fact, giving generously to others, praying, and fasting have all been normative practices of God's people in both the Old and New Testament. While we Lutherans do not require fasting during Lent like Rome does, we certainly believe that a fast can be useful spiritual practice in Lent and other times of the year if it is undertaken voluntarily and with the right motivation. No, Jesus is not saying that any of these practices are bad, but that they must be practiced correctly. Luther said, *"They ruined it by smearing filth all over it."* Jesus is not even saying that none of them can't ever be done in public, but if we make a big deal out of them in front of others as if to say, "Look at me. Look how great and holy I am", then we sin. We may get some acclaim from other people if we do that, but we should not expect any reward from God as we are just being self-righteous hypocrites. Christ's idea here is that the good works shall be seen and speak for themselves, but that the doer of those works should be kept entirely in the background (Kretzmann).

And notice that in relation to making this point, Jesus once again employs the good preaching practice of repeating phrases to emphasize His point. He contrasts those doing these things for show by saying, *"they have their reward"* meaning the only reward they get is pats on the back from people. And then when he speaks of those who do these things without a big public show He says, *"thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."* You see the world goes one of two ways, as Luther preached on this text, *"Either it tries to be a devil with its wicked works, or it tries to be God Himself with its good works."* Neither of these ways lead to anything that is pleasing God.

First up are alms, giving to the poor. Again, Jesus is not saying that being generous in your giving is bad. Showing mercy to those in need is a fine thing. God spoke through the prophet Hosea and said, *“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”* In Israel at the time, this is how those in need—including the disabled—survived, by people giving them alms. There was no type of “safety net” provided by governments for those in need. We see Jesus interact with and speak of beggars at several points in His ministry. In giving the poor, Jesus said it should not be done in a self-exalting way. Our Lord gives two illustrations of this. In verse 2 He say, *“do not sound a trumpet before thee”*. This is a like saying, “don’t toot your own horn” today. Then in verse 3 Jesus preaches, *“But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.”* This is yet another phrase from the Sermon on the Mount that people still use in conversation today. You don’t make a public spectacle of your charitable giving in order to get accolades and approval from others, nor do you even do it just to make yourself feel better where you can pat yourself on the back and think, “I am such a good person.”

How can we “check ourselves” to ensure that our giving to the needy and charitable causes is not self-serving? Here are just a few questions to ask yourself. Will we stop giving to someone or an organization if we don’t think they are thanking us enough? Is our giving with strings attached with unreasonable conditions put on it or with the requirement that we get a plaque or something named after us? Is our giving done with the motivation of making someone thus reliant on us so they have to do what we want them to do? And ultimately, Is our giving a means of serving God or based on what others think of us?

Next up, in verses 5-6 Jesus turn His attention to the wrong ways and motivations to pray. You will notice that verses 7-15 are “missing” from our Gospel text for today. In those verses, Jesus teaches the right way to pray. This coming Sunday, we will examine that more. But for this evening, as Lent begins, we focus on what Jesus says about those that would make a “great religious show” out of prayer. Once again, we see that those self-righteous Pharisees always seem to have their hour of prayer in the most public places. They were known for long, eloquent, and repetitive prayers. But their prayers are condemned by Jesus.

Note here that Jesus is not forbidding all prayer that is offered in a standing position nor even all public prayer. There are times when public prayers can be right and proper. Of course, we pray together in front of others in church. At some functions like a banquet or ceremony like a graduation, a public prayer may be offered. Jesus is speaking against the practice of praying to get the approval of others. Ultimately, prayer is an intimate talk with God. This is why Jesus says, *“when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.”* This type of personal prayer to God simply out of a desire to speak to Him is pleasing to God, where no length or eloquence of prayer given in public to build ourselves up will ever please Him.

Finally, we come to verses 16-18 where Jesus addresses a spiritual practice that most people associate very closely with the season of Lent today: fasting. Not to “beat a dead horse” but we see again Jesus is speaking with the assumption that His people will practice fasting just like they will practice almsgiving and prayer, but that they must not do it in the manner of these hypocrites and their travelling “great religion show.” Fasting was a very

important and common practice in Judaism. Fasting was undertaken as a spiritual discipline, an aid to prayer, and a form of self-punishment for sin. There were commanded times of fasting, but the Pharisees took it to another level with generally Mondays and Thursdays being fasting days for them. And they wanted everyone to know just how much they were suffering in their fast. Luther also spoke of such improper fasting by the Roman Churches of his time, *“If you put all this fasting together on one pile, it would not be worth one heller (penny).”* And, of course, when people fast and let everyone know about it, they often find loopholes. Again, from Luther preaching on this text, *“They call it fasting if you abstain from eating meat; but meanwhile you may eat the finest fish with the most expensive sauces and spices and the strongest wine.”*

During this Lenten season, I would encourage you to fast as a spiritual discipline. It is also not a bad idea to give more to the needy and pray more. However, I do not command you to fast. Nor will I ask you stand up before the congregation and tell how great your fast is going. Because to do so would rob your fast of its benefit. Look what Jesus says in verse 16 about those who fast for show. They had a sad and dour look on their faces and “disfigure their faces” meaning they don’t even groom properly. This is because they want all to see just how holy they are in their religion, how much they are suffering and denying themselves. But Jesus says in verse 17 that when His people are to fast that they should look “normal”. We are to be washed and groomed and not look sad.

This is because while especially fasting and giving away money may be somewhat painful, we don’t do it to suffer for our sins. This is because Jesus Christ has already done so. In contrast, we fast and serve in joy and triumph. This is the ultimate posture of the Christian life. Yes, we can reflect on what Jesus has

gone through for us in our spiritual disciples. But it is always in joy and triumph because we know that Jesus has won the battle. He has taken on sin, death, and the devil and won. The proud, showy, and self-righteous do not receive the gifts of God. But the “poor in spirit” will enter the kingdom of heaven as God the Holy Spirit has delivered to us the fruits, the rewards, of that victory: forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation.

Amen.