

“Christian Discipline”

If I say “discipline” – what comes to mind? Parents and children might think of a spanking or timeout. An athlete might think of a conditioning regiment. An artist might refer to their work as a discipline. A dictionary definition goes like this: “the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience” (Oxford).

Our Lord says – “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What you treasure, molds your life. Your treasure disciplines you – trains you in certain behaviors – to live in a certain way.

Our disciplines in life reveal our treasures. A sports discipline is meant to lead to a better athlete – a discipline that many willingly engage in. A parent’s discipline is meant to lead to a better child (and eventually, a better adult) – and even though parents know discipline is necessary, it is not easy.

Where your treasure is – the necessary discipline is heartily engaged. For instance, I have a friend who has tailgated for almost every home Husker football game for years – and he is very disciplined. He acquires equipment and supplies, he invites people, has a whole ritual (dare I say liturgy) for set up and take down. He gets up early, and goes home late. Disciplined indeed.

People who treasure getting, or being in shape also have a discipline – a whole routine of juggling schedules, workouts, eating, and sleeping. People who are disciplined artists acquire tools and techniques – ensure creative space and time.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Tonight, we enter into the Season of Lent – a time of renewed emphasis on catechesis and the Christian life – or, the Christian discipline. It’s a focus on what it means to be a child of God. It highlights the twofold shape of the Christian life – living in faith toward God, and in fervent love towards one another.

Our text this evening is a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – which began with the Beatitudes, and “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Throughout this sermon Jesus has been teaching us what it means to be a child of God – instructing us in Christian discipline – blessing us with a Christian life.

This is not for a season, but for all our days as a child of God. In this Lenten Season, the Lord will catechize His children with His Christian discipline. In our midweek services we will be “Singing the Faith” – using Luther's catechetical hymns for the Six Chief Parts of the Christian Faith.

The treasure of the Gospel leads to a faith that bears fruit – to hearts that sing. It's just what the Christian does. He lives in faith and love.

Jesus begins our training this evening with a warning. “Beware” He says. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them ...” Jesus is warning us about practicing righteousness for ourselves, rather than for the sake of our neighbor. Your good works, your acts of love – are for the neighbor – not yourself!

If you are doing good works “in order to be seen by them” – to be rewarded with your neighbor's praise and admiration – “then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” And, if you are serving your neighbor to merit God's favor – “then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Your Father disciplines you – teaching you that your works of love are for the neighbor – not for your standing with God. Your “reward” is not based on your merits, but on God's goodness and grace.

Don't be like the hypocrites when you give to the needy. The hypocrite is “two-faced.” It appears that he is doing this for the sake of the neighbor – but it is actually selfish and self-serving – if he is doing it for himself.

That is an undisciplined life – a confusion of the Christian life. The Law of God leads you to love the neighbor. The Gospel of Christ's forgiveness and eternal life is given to you freely, not by merit, and is received by faith.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to be seen by others.” Like giving to the needy, your prayers are not done for the sake of drawing the attention of others. If you do, then you’ve received your reward – the temporal praise of men – but don’t think that this is pleasing to your Father in heaven.

“Beware,” Jesus says. Has your fellow man benefited from your prayers – or – are you once again trying to earn a reward?

Try this for disciplined Christian prayer. “Go into your room” and pray the Lord’s Prayer with a specific person in mind. Use the Small Catechism – pray the individual petitions and their meanings for your neighbor – for your spouse, or children – for the President of the United States – how about praying for your enemy?

Fasting can take a variety of forms – but in Christian discipline – it is a denial of yourself so that you can look outside yourself to others – to God in faith, and to the neighbor in works of love. How ironic, then, when you fast in order to get others to pay attention to you!

One might fast by denying himself food – so that he can give it to the hungry – all the while, trusting that the Lord will sustain you. Rather than fasting to gain the favor of God or neighbor – you feed the neighbor, and trust that God’s grace is sufficient for you.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What a treasure you have in Christ Jesus – forgiveness, life and salvation. You have been given a new life – here in time, and there in eternity.

Here in time your heart attends to God’s Word – lives in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism – and feasts upon the Body and Blood of Christ in the Supper. This Gospel treasure bears fruit in your life – molds and disciplines your life.

The Gospel treasure sets you free to live as a redeemed child of God, and it strengthens you in service to your fellow man. May God grant you His disciplined life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.