

“The Christian’s Lent”

Today we enter into the Season of Lent. First off, let me say that Lent is not a Season prescribed for us in Holy Scripture – rather, it is a season developed by the Church, growing out of the teachings of Holy Scripture.

This period of 40 days reminds us of Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. It is a microcosm of the Christian life – the life of God’s children, the baptized – and so the things often identified with Lent, are just part of our lives.

The Season of Lent (and our whole life) is a time of penitential reflection – a time of alms-giving, prayer and fasting – a time of repentance and forgiveness. In the Church, the six weeks leading up to Easter were a time of catechesis – a period of intense training for those who would be baptized or confirmed at the Easter Vigil.

You see, Christianity is serious – so the Church lays her cards out on the table so that the prospective knows what it means to be a Christian – so they know what they are getting themselves into – so that they would remain steadfast in the true faith unto life everlasting.

In these days of COVID fear – of people being isolated, or purposely staying away from church – when the teachings of the world have drowned out the teachings of the faith – when excuses to NOT live as Christians are readily at hand – we desperately need a Season of Lent.

If we are living in “days like no others” then this Lent should be like no other – a time of intensified catechesis, of repentance, of living by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

And so, we get right into it tonight – listening to the catechesis of Jesus as He teaches us about “practicing [our] righteousness” – and specifically, about giving alms, prayer, and fasting.

Jesus gets serious right off the bat – assuming that you are doing these things! Over and over again He speaks about “your Father in heaven” – which means, you are His child, and so, just like His beloved Son Jesus – you are practicing your righteousness. That’s just what a child of God does!

This practicing of your righteousness includes not only alms, prayer and fasting – but also what Jesus spoke of just prior to our text. Not only are you to “love your neighbor” – but Jesus says, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

This is what it means to be a Christian – it’s just what you do. You see someone in need, and you help them. When you are in trouble, you cry out to God. You pray, praise and give thanks to Him. You live in your baptism, denying yourself and your sinful desires.

Here in our text, Jesus is not so much commanding alms-giving, prayer and fasting – as much as He is warning us against hypocrisy when we practice our righteousness. He knows that the sinful nature hangs around your neck – that the devil and the world are constantly leading you into temptation.

And so He warns 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.”

The hypocrite practices his righteousness on the public stage, in the spotlight, in order to be seen by men. He gives to the needy so that men will see him and honor him. He wants others to talk about how merciful he is – to tell others about the wonderful things he does – talking about how great a Christian he is.

“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.” The hypocrite stands tall in his prayers – speaking loud and long with eloquent words – so that others might hear his prayers and marvel at how much he loves the Lord.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.” When the hypocrite fasts – you know about it. He deprives himself of nourishment and the joys of life – but not for nothing – he wants his reward.

He makes sure his work is not done in vain – that it does not go unnoticed – so that he is praised by others. Hypocrisy perverts Christianity – pretending to be pious, Christ-like – but is, in reality, a worship of self.

Dearly beloved, “your Father in heaven” sees your hypocrisy. In love for you (and for the neighbor who is also harmed by your hypocrisy) He calls you to repentance. You have sinned against God, and failed to love your neighbor. You are dust, and to dust you shall return. Deny yourself – confess your unworthiness as you stand before “your Father in heaven” – so that you shall not die, but live.

I told you Christianity is serious business. So much so, that God’s own Son loves you, prays for you, and provides for all your needs. He sheds His blood to pay the debt of your sin, and gives His life into death so that you may be resurrected from the death of sin to a new life – reconciled to your Father in heaven.

That’s who you are – a child of God – declared righteous in God’s eyes, justified by the blood of Jesus Christ – who now lives in and through you – for your sake, and for the sake of your fellow man. So be who you are, in Christ Jesus!

Love your neighbor – sacrificing yourself to provide for their needs. Give alms, not to be seen by men, but to help those who are in need – who are hungry, lonely, dealing with an unexpected pregnancy, homeless, jobless, mourning, and near death.

Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you – not just Islamic terrorists, but your own family members – not just your boss at work, but the friend who has turned against you. And what do you pray? Take out your Small Catechism – turn to the Lord’s Prayer – and pray these petitions, these meanings – for neighbor and enemy alike.

Fast – deny yourself – say NO to the things you desire – not to show others how great a Christian you are, or for self-improvement – but so that your neighbor might be blessed by your righteousness.

This discipline of setting aside what you desire leads you to rejoice in greater things. Food is necessary, but you are fed with Bread from heaven – and you can give your earthly bread to those who have none. Rest is necessary, but eternity is yours, so you are free to spend some time on those who are struggling to live day to day.

Dearly beloved, this denial of self is serious business indeed. It not only allows you to see the needs of others – but reminds you of your needs. The righteous acts of Jesus Christ attracted not the honor of men – but their mocking and scorn. But your Father in heaven knows your needs – that’s why He sends His Son to atone for all your sin and resurrect you from the dust to new life.

Come and receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ – His Body and Blood – so that you may live in faith towards Him, and be strengthened to live in love towards one another – so that you may be who you are, a child of God, not just this Lenten season, but all your days, even unto life everlasting. Amen.

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