

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Today begins the season of Lent. And Lent is about re-alignment. It's about adjusting our form. It's about shifting our perspectives. We began this season with Matthew's gospel. In this reading, we heard a similar formula given three times that illuminated what this shift in perspective looks like. The formula was: "Whenever you \_\_ (action) \_\_, do not \_\_ (do it like this) \_\_. But when you \_\_ (action) \_\_, do it \_\_ (this way) \_\_." /// So, "Whenever you \_\_ (give alms, pray, or fast) \_\_, do not \_\_ (do it like this) \_\_. But when you \_\_ (give alms, pray, or fast) \_\_, do it \_\_ (this way) \_\_." In summary, you're doing it one way, and Jesus offers a way to do that will bring an abundance of life.

And before we dig into these three examples, Jesus set the stage for how we should interpret it by saying, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." And, before we go too much further, I want to be sure we understand the essence of the word "piety."

The Greek word translated as "piety" here is a word we see throughout Matthew's gospel - namely **δικαιοσύνη** (*di kai o sun ē*).

Throughout Matthew this word is often translated as “righteousness.” It’s a word that is tightly linked to justice, ethics, and following the Scriptures. It carries connotations of giving generously to the poor (what we sometimes refer to as almsgiving) and, by extension, it’s about acts of love.

And Jesus brought up piety, justice, and ethics to help us correct our form. To move us from doing it in a way that is not life-giving for all towards something that brings life for all creation. While doing is important, what the action *does* is equally important. It’s about act *and* impact. It’s about the practice *and* the process.

I’m losing you. It’s too late at night to be doing that. I know. So, let’s look at an unrelated example. Let’s pretend that Jesus a personal trainer. It’s that trainer who reminds you to drop your shoulders when you’re riding on the spin bike, or to straighten your back during a squat, or to keep you back flat with those leg raises. Now, can you spin, squat, or leg raise without those reminders? Sure thing. Will your body be better off, and your time spent more effectively if you’re using good form? You betcha! --- Anyway, back to tonight’s reading from Matthew. Is almsgiving, fasting, and prayer possible with poor form? Sure. However, is it more impactful to you and to God’s vision with a refined form? Heck yeah!

You see, Jesus revealed that far too often our actions are centered on individualism, personal acknowledgments, and ego. Too often, righteousness is about being praised, justice is about being seen, and giving generously is about being acknowledged. We display it in the moments when we virtue signal on social media, or go to church so we can be seen by the pastor or community members. It's wanting our names to be plastered on building projects or to be known as the financier of a program. It's only about the tax break; it's only about making yourself feel good; it's taking religion and making it about what *you* get; it's taking prayer and turning it into *your* magic lamp; it's utilizing fasting only for your health benefits; it's only about.....well, you. It's taking these gifts from God and doing the act without the impact.

And so, Jesus is saying, be careful that you don't make it about you. Rather, strive to continue doing things like praying, almsgiving, and fasting, but do so in ways that align with God's vision. Do it in a way that puts the action and the impact into perspective. Do it to build up treasure in the kingdom of heaven. Or to put that another way, act in alignment with God's vision for a world of justice, peace, and love. And that looks a bit like taking Jesus's formula seriously. Maybe like this:

- Whenever you fast, do not only do it for the health benefits. But when you fast, do it with a mindfulness of how God provides for our needs. OR
- Whenever you give of your time, money, and talents, do not only do it to feel good or get that tax break. But when you give of your time, money, and talents, do it with a mindfulness that God has given you an abundance so that you can share it with others. OR
- whenever you pray, do not do it to communicate your holiness and to shame others. But when you pray, do it with the knowledge that pray is God's gift to transform you into alignment with God's vision.

You see, this passage and the smudge of ash on our foreheads give us a new perspective. It's about confronting our mortality, our ego, and our vulnerabilities. And, it's about the opportunity to partner with God to bring communal, societal, and systemic transformation. It's not about what you can gain from it (although that can happen), but rather, it's about how we all can transformation of the world.

That, my friends, is the gift of the Lenten season. It's the gift that Paul wrote about in the second letter to the church in Corinth. It's a

reconciliation that has been initiated by God. It's a shift that reminds us that it is not about us, but instead, it is about God. It's about a God who desires life for all creation. It's about our God who shows love through the waters of baptism. It's about our God who strengthens us on the journey with bread and wine.

So, friends, join me in this Lenten journey. Walk with me as we realign our values. Listen with me as we adjust our form to bring about God's abundant life. Look with me as we shift our perspective to embrace God's vision for a world overflowing with love, justice, and peace. Amen.