



Ash Wednesday-February 17, 2021  
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## “Beware of Your Piety”

-Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

*How do these words hit your ears? **For I tell you.** Who spoke these words? Maybe if you think Moses spoke these words, you might think you are off the hook as you heard this past Sunday Moses disappeared from sight on the Mount of Transfiguration. With Moses and his commandments out of view, maybe you think you have a chance of entering the kingdom of heaven on the merits of **your righteousness**. However, your righteousness can't just come close to that of the scribes and Pharisees, it must **exceed** it. Then, there is the question, who is measuring the righteousness? If we are the judge, we have a pretty good chance of placing ourselves above others. On Ash Wednesday, it becomes clear that you and I are not off the hook and it was not Moses who spoke these words. It was Jesus. Jesus who also said, “Do you think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish.”*

*Not only did Jesus speak these words, but he spoke them during the same sermon where he preached these words you just heard that Matthew recorded from his Sermon on the Mount. There is no question in this sermon from Jesus that does not let you off the hook regarding the commandments as preaches about the fifth commandment not only concerns killing your neighbor, but you break this commandment when you are simply angry toward your neighbor. Jesus preaches that breaking the sixth commandment happens simply by looking at a woman with a lustful eye. Jesus preaches about the second and eighth commandment that you cannot swear against God or anyone else. Jesus preaches in this sermon that if someone asks you to go a mile, you must go twice as far as you were asked. Moses said that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. If you have good neighbors, you have a chance of obeying this commandment of Moses. Jesus however preaches in this sermon that you are to love your neighbor but, you must also love your enemy.*

*After hearing this part of Jesus' sermon on the mount, depending on **your righteousness** to get you into the kingdom of heaven, you know you have a problem. And that's just the first part of Jesus' sermon. Then Jesus preaches in the words you just heard, “Beware of practicing your piety before others.” Jesus warns against the impression you will give others when they see you care for the poor, when you pray, and when you fast. It seems that Jesus leaves us between a rock and a hard place. Our righteousness is not only a problem when we fail to keep the commandments, but our righteousness can also be a problem for others when the religious things we do are perceived as hypocritical.*

*Jesus said, don't be like the hypocrites who like to be seen when they are doing good things such as giving to the poor, or praying, or fasting. Of course, Jesus didn't say not to do these things. We are to care for those in need and to pray constantly. But Jesus instructed those listening to do these things in secret so others don't*

*know you are doing them. Jesus said when you do them, do them so that even you yourself are unaware of what you are doing. Jesus said, "When you give alms, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing."*

*What Jesus warned against in this sermon over 2000 years ago is a valid warning for us today. One of the most frequent responses of why people do not want to be a part of an organized religious group is their perception is that it is just a gathering of people who think they are better than anyone else or they aren't good enough to even be a part of such a group. The perception is that churches are places to hear from Moses so that you can improve your level of righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees and by this you can gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven.*

*On this Ash Wednesday, on the Eve of 40 days through the Lenten Season, you are once again invited to receive a cross of ashes on your forehead. This is not a symbol of your righteousness or an outward expression for others to see. These ashes are a reminder of what the Lord said to Adam when he doubted God's word in the garden of Eden. You are dust and to dust you shall return. Because of your sin, you will die.*

*Benjamin Franklin was correct about the two certainties of this life. Death and taxes. Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent remind you of one of these, the certainty of death. This is where the law of Moses leaves you. But remember, Moses was removed from the scene on the mount of Transfiguration and the only one remaining was Jesus. Jesus who said, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

*How can you and I who stand guilty of the law do enough to become righteous? We can't, but Jesus has fulfilled all of the law for you. This good news was proclaimed by Paul in the second lesson that you heard tonight when he said, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." It is in this promise we receive the righteousness that will exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. It is in this promise that death is not the last word, but eternal life. God sent his son, Jesus Christ who knew no sin to the cross with our sins and in exchange we receive his righteousness which indeed exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and there is no obstacle left in our way for our salvation.*

*This past year has taught us a great deal about the importance of removing any obstacles that would prevent others from hearing this good news. I pray that what we experienced last year because of the pandemic was a once in my lifetime event. I do not want to see more people attend Ash Wednesday Services in person than Easter. One of the greatest tragedies of the pandemic of last year would have been for you to have attended an Ash Wednesday with a cross on your forehead and still wondering if your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. As Paul said in the second lesson, you are not to question your salvation throughout the forty days of Lent and wait to hear the good news on Easter. Paul said, "Now is the day of your salvation."*

*As you will hear from pastors in this season of Lent, two things are certain in the life of a Christian. Our Rebellion from Christ and Christ's desire for your redemption. I hope you continue to join us through this journey through Lent as you hear how you have been delivered from death to new life by the glory of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Amen*