

Are you giving up anything for Lent this year? Wait! Stop! Do not answer that. For what we give up for Lent, if we give up anything at all, is between us and God, and no one else. What would be the reason why I would tell you that I am giving up something for Lent other than to impress you with my holiness? No other reason. And so, Jesus' warning in our text would apply to me: "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.*"

There is no time throughout the year when it is appropriate to make an outward show of our piety. Lent being the worst time of all for this because the focus during Lent, more than any other time in the Church Year, is to be on the sufferings and death of Christ, rather than on us.

And yet for some sick and twisted reason, Lent has become the time when it is popular for people, even people like you and me, to make a point of demonstrating to others that we are pious and holy.

But perhaps you recall Jesus' words in the chapter just before our text: "*Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*" What a fine line we walk as Christians. When we are tempted to show our good works, we must hide them. When we are tempted to hide our good works, we must let them be seen by others.

This seems very confusing. Jesus appears to be placing us into an impossibility. Yet, our escape is always through Him, and Him alone.

In our text Jesus condemns hypocrites. It is the hypocrite who wants others to see his holiness. And so his giving, his prayer life, his personal devotional life, he puts on public display. But he is a hypocrite because he wants the praise for all these to go, not to his Father in heaven, but to himself. In his heart he treasures, not what God has done for him, as much as his own piety and holiness. A hypocrite is never aware of his own hypocrisy, but is always aware of the hypocrisy in others.

Lord, we confess, forgive me for my own hypocrisy and for being so judgmental of others.

He who is not a hypocrite has no righteousness of his own. "*Beware,*" says Jesus, "*of practicing your righteousness before other people.*" Then how do we let our light shine before others?

It has to do with the word *righteousness*. A hypocrite puts his own righteousness on display. One who is not a hypocrite puts Christ Jesus on display. When Christ is your Righteousness, then by doing good works, you are letting Christ who is your Light, shine before others.

It all comes down to the heart. The works of a hypocrite and the works of one who is not a hypocrite may well appear to be identical. Yet in the heart there is a great difference. "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth,*" says Jesus, "*but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

What other treasure is there but the forgiveness of sins in the sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? If this is what you treasure most in your heart, then Jesus is your righteousness.

If He is not the true treasure in our heart, then we practice our own righteousness before others and we are hypocrites.

Thank God, as the prophet Joel writes, that our Lord “*is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” God, you see, loves the unlovable. God loves those who despise and mock Him. He loves even those who are hypocrites within their hearts.

But how can this be? It is because what God treasures in His heart are sinners, all sinners, yes, even sinners like us. He proved this on the cross. He was willing to sacrifice Himself for you. He endured the agony of hell itself in your place. Would He have done this if He did not treasure you in His heart?

And because Jesus treasured you most of all, He places the treasures of heaven, which are for you, in Holy Baptism where neither moth nor rust can destroy. He places these treasures in the Holy Supper and in Holy Absolution where thieves cannot break in and steal these treasures from you.

God is no hypocrite. What He says He does. What is in His heart is who He truly is. He puts Himself on display for all to see by hanging from a wretched cross, as one who is mocked and spit upon, because His reward is to have you with Him in heaven forever.

And so, let us leave whatever hypocrisy is in our hearts and “*return to the Lord our God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” Let us return to Him, my friends, because He has forgiven all your sins. Amen.