

## On Being Religious

*Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 ~ November 6, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

When I was in the first grade my parents decided that it was time for me to learn to play the piano. Both my parents loved music. My mom could play the piano fairly well. My Dad had studied piano a little bit as a youngster, but never really mastered it. He gave up on the piano when an opportunity came for him to play the clarinet in the school band.

Well my story about becoming a virtuoso pianist followed my Father's path more than it did my mother's. It was clear from the beginning that playing the piano did not come naturally to me. At first I was fascinated with practicing. But as time went on that fascination faded and then lapsed entirely. The fights to get me to do the requisite practice grew more frequent. I hung on to the idea that I could learn to play the piano through the third grade. But then it became clear that a different instrument, one with a single line of music, would work better for me.

Of course the desire to be a pianist has never left me. In fact, I have spent significant time in my early adult life practicing in hopes of mastering it. And I'm ashamed to say that I inflicted a certain amount of musical torture on anyone within hearing distance.

During college I even made a short foray into formal keyboard instruction with a series of organ lessons. The pipe organ is a true passion for me. These lessons gave me an opportunity to spend many joyful hours in the practice room in the sheer pleasure of a pipe organ's overtone cascade. But, eventually my long suffering organ professor clarified for me that my lack of keyboard technique made my future in organ performance highly unlikely. To be honest this revelation was not all that devastating for me. And I don't think that the 3 college credits that I gained in organ performance were a waste in any way.

Over the years the various attempts I have made at learning musical instruments have been beneficial to understanding the nature of how one learns such things. And more than anything I have learned about how practice works. It is from this perspective that we come to Jesus words in today's text:

***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.***

On the surface this teaching of Jesus seems easy to understand. But it doesn't take long when we delve into it to become confused. It is clear that what Jesus means by the practice of righteousness is the same thing we call, "religious practice." Much of our Christian religious practice involves a religious community. The Church is a community where we find acceptance through shared public religious practice. This Church is meant to be a beacon of God's light in the world. Its actions and activities are meant to be public. As Jesus says just a few verses earlier in Matthew:

***...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***

Doesn't that sound like exactly the opposite teaching from, "***Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people?***" Is Jesus being inconsistent with his teaching? We know that this cannot be the case. So it must be our interpretation of his words that is at fault. To better interpret what Jesus means, we need to pay attention to the specific words he is using. How can Jesus call for us to let our light shine and at the same time warn us about practicing our righteousness in public? It becomes clearer when we really focus on the word, "practice."

Let's begin by using the illustration of a great piano virtuoso. What does the word, "practice," mean to a pianist? It means time alone in a practice room; time without an audience; time for privately working out every detail of a piece of music. If you have ever heard a person practice the piano, and believe me I have heard a lot of piano practicing, you know that it is not a very lovely thing. Learning a new piece of music has many starts and stops. It is filled with wrong notes and the repetition of two or three measure segments until you want to scream. Practice is a distinctly unlovely thing. But it is all aimed toward developing the pianist's ability to play that piece flawlessly in a public performance. So the distinction between practicing our righteousness and letting our light shine becomes a little clearer when we compare it to the work a pianist does in practicing a piece for public performance.

But let's dig a little deeper into this. When we think about it, we can understand that there is a connection between a Christian's charitable giving, prayer, and fasting on the one hand and a pianist's scales, finger exercises, and repetitious rehearsal on the other hand. We get that. And it makes more sense why Jesus wants us to do that practice of our Christianity in private or secretly. But, if Hollywood gets a hold of this to make a movie about a pianist they make a great deal out of the practice part of being a pianist. The actor playing a pianist spends hours practicing which the movie portrays with

special cinematography. If they make a movie about a Christian, then the actor is seen making a great big deal about prayer, charitable acts, and struggles of conscience. That is how Hollywood portrays Christians. As a member of the audience we don't usually care so much about whether the actor is a pianist or not. We perhaps care a bit more about whether the actor is Christian or not, but in the end it is primarily the performance that matters.

And this brings us to Jesus teaching in today's text. "***Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people?***" It is quite possible for someone to pretend to be Christian, through public religious behavior without actually having faith. It is like they are an actor or actress in a movie. In fact that is the base meaning of the word hypocrite. A hypocrite is a type of actor pretending to be someone else for the audiences benefit. Jesus is warning that outward religious activity is not what connects us to God. We connect to God by an inner transformation of our hearts. The religious acts themselves require this inner connection to be valid. Keeping our religious practice secret and private is a kind of discipline that helps us to focus on the inner connection the Spirit is seeking to establish with us. It eliminates the distraction that an audience can cause. This is the same dynamic that a pianist harnesses when they close the practice room door to search for their true musical ability through practice.

But now we come to another matter that is extremely important for Christians. Sometimes when we start talking about being religious we stir up some very nasty feelings for true Christians. People who faithfully practice their religion in private are often filled with doubt about the genuineness of their own faith. They feel like their prayers and their religious activities are just going through the motions. They worry that their devotional study is not filled with the meaningful joy they once had. They tire of the repetition and tedium of practicing religion even in private; perhaps especially practicing religion in private.

Let me assure you that those feelings are natural and normal for Christians. They do not in any way constitute a lack of faith. Saying your prayers, regular giving, and other religious activities are not what make you Christian. Your salvation comes from outside of you. Your salvation comes from a savior who breaks into your life and promises you eternity based on his righteousness, not your own. You cannot think your way into the Kingdom of God. You cannot act your way into the kingdom of God. You are called into the Kingdom of God by a Savior who loves you. Each of you here has that call and promise. It has nothing to do with your religious practice. It has everything to do with how your light will shine out for all to see.

However, in the same way that scales and exercises benefit a piano virtuoso, our religious exercises do benefit our Christian life. The more careful our discipline is, the more benefit it brings. Just to be clear, this discipline is not so that we can be saved. Rather we practice our religion because we believe the promise that we have been saved. It might seem that positive support from others who see our disciplined practice will help our resolve, but this is what Jesus is warning us about. It is too easy to be distracted by the acclaim of an audience. In the end this will backfire like a pianist who only plays scales and exercises for the audience. It does not serve their true purpose.

Now we finally come to the true point of what we are saying here. The purpose for practicing your religion in private is precisely to ***“...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*** Jesus is not talking about religion when he talks about light. He is talking about how you live your whole life. It is the way you honor your family. It is the way you parent your children. It is the way you serve your community. It is the way you glorify God in every aspect of your life. These are not things that you do by conscious determination. These are things that have become part of you. They have become part of you the same way a great musical work becomes part of a pianist who has thoroughly practiced it. Your light shines because it has become a practiced part of you.

My dear friends, this is what Jesus is up to in your life through the work of the Holy Spirit. You are religious individuals, Christians seeking God’s leading in your life. Yes, you will give, pray, worship, and other Christian disciplines. These are important. But they are only practice. Your performance as a Christian, the times when your light will shine out for others to see, will not happen at when you choose. Your light will shine by the will of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. You may never even know about it. But God will have his way in your life. He has made you for this purpose. Yes by all means practice your righteousness. But close the practice room door. Trust that God is preparing you for the particular performance he has in mind for you. Trust that he will wait until you are truly ready. And trust that you will not fail as you are carried on the wings of God’s Holy Spirit. That is what it means to be who you are. You are a child of God. For this you were born into a life that will not end.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.