

“Being Righteous”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure you're aware of Aristotle's theory of moral virtue even if you haven't studied Aristotle or haven't heard it formally presented. It goes something like this. Moral virtue is the disposition to act rightly. This acting rightly is acting between the extremes of deficiency and excess. Have you heard something like, “all things in moderation?” It's espousing an Aristotelian view of moral virtue.

Another famous one is, “practice makes perfect.” To achieve more virtue, or righteousness according to Aristotle, is to practice doing virtuous things. In other words, habit and practice will bring you the virtuous life.

There's some truth to this. At least in the civil realm. If you've ever participated in any athletic endeavor, you know you have to practice constantly to become better. A better example for us may be with music. To get better at music, you must practice. You see a lot of it in business today. It looks something like this.

You find successful people. Then you find out what their habits are. You implement these practices into your own life and voila... you're successful too!

That's exactly the approach the Pharisees took. You have a list of rules that you follow. If my source is accurate, they had 613 rules to follow. You follow these rules, or habits, and you become righteous.

There's only one problem with this system. The Pharisees have the same problem that you and I have... bad hearts! This is what Jesus says about your heart in its natural state:

“Out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person (Mk 7:21-22).”

Ouch! I mean, does Jesus leave anything out? Is there any question as to your state of righteousness in your old man?

It doesn't matter what you practice or how hard you practice, you can't remove this wickedness from your heart.

The old man is dead in his trespasses and sin. That is the result of this bad heart we inherited from our father in the flesh, Adam.

That old, dead, wicked heart must be transplanted with a new heart. You must be born from above with water and the Word.

You're given a new heart through faith by repenting and being baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Now the struggle begins.

You still have that old heart. The one full of wickedness. But you have the new heart. It is full of righteousness. And you have enemies.

First, you have Satan.

Did you know that Satan cannot create anything? He can only pervert God's perfect creation. But he is a master of this. Luther calls him the master of a thousand arts (LC Preface.12). Satan comes across as the angel of light which he was created to be. He makes sin look attractive. And let's face it... sin feels good. But it never produces good results. Sin promises great rewards but always delivers massive problems. Think of how many marriages and families are destroyed by a fleeting pleasure that never lasts.

This attractiveness to sin would not be a problem for you except for your old evil hearts. Satan wouldn't be able to get a foothold if not for this. The struggle you feel inside of you is the new heart and old heart waging war with each other. That's why the Epistle reading today tells you to pick up the shield of faith to extinguish the fiery darts of the devil.

What is faith? Faith is grasping hold of the promises of God. Faith is believing in the God Man Jesus Christ, who God the Father promised before the creation of the world, is your savior. You cannot overcome Satan on your own. But Jesus has defeated Satan on the cross. He protects you from the evil one. Cling to the shield of faith. Cling to Jesus who is your mighty fortress (Ps 46).

Second, you have the world as your enemy.

Righteousness in the world's eyes is earned.

Righteousness in God's eyes is a gift freely bestowed on you. As Paul says in Romans, "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Rom 4:5)." This is foolishness to the world.

Man is the measure of righteousness in the world's eyes.

Christ crucified is the measure of righteousness in God's eyes. And that is foolishness in the eyes of the world (1 Cor. 1:18-25). To the world this looks like child abuse. Some famous atheists, like Brian McLaren, have described the cross as "cosmic child abuse."

Imagine these scenarios. A firefighter enters a burning building without regard to his safety to rescue a child trapped inside. A parent jumps into raging waters without a concern for their physical safety to rescue his child who is drowning. What about Elizabeth Joice who sacrifice herself so that her baby could be born? She was diagnosed with a return of cancer after she was three months pregnant. Instead of aborting her baby, as advised by her doctors, so she could undergo cancer treatment, she refused treatment until her baby, Lily, was born. Elizabeth died from the cancer, but baby Lily is alive and well.

Would we describe these events as abusive?

Of course not! They are rightly described as heroic.

Jesus is heroic. He sacrificed Himself on the cross so that you and I can live! Hebrews says that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him (Heb. 12:2). That joy that was set before Him is you! You were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. You bring Jesus joy.

You're made for fellowship with God. That is the source of joy. The world seeks joy in the same kind of wickedness that flows out of your unregenerate hearts. True joy is only found in Jesus. Jesus gives you a new heart in your Baptism so that you cling to Jesus and find true joy in Him alone.

Third, your old wicked heart is your enemy.

It would turn you away from the righteousness of Christ to righteousness in your own works. Just as it did the Pharisees.

You didn't receive righteousness from your works. You don't continue to be righteous by anything you do.

The church in Galatia suffered from this problem. The church in Galatia didn't have a problem with gross sexual sin like the church in Corinth. They didn't have a problem mishandling the Lord's Supper like the church in Corinth also struggled with. What was their problem? They were trying to be faithful Christians!

You and I caused quite a problem for the early church. As Paul says in Romans, the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew *first* and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16, emphasis added)." Does a Gentile have to observe the dietary restrictions of the Jew? Does a Gentile need to be circumcised before he becomes a Christian? Even Peter struggled with this problem. The first church council in Acts 15 dealt with this problem.

They determined the call of the Gospel was for Jew and Gentile alike. They also determined that Gentiles weren't bound to the Old Testament Law that was fulfilled in Christ. Early Christians still struggled with this problem like the church in Galatia.

What is Paul's response?

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh (Gal. 3:1-3)?”

You are perfected in the faith in the exact same way you were brought into the faith. In other words, you continue to be righteous in the same way you were initially declared to be righteous. You continue to be righteous by hearing the Word. The same Word that was declared over you in your Baptism. The same Word that I pronounce every Sunday, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The same Word that is proclaimed in the Lord's Supper, “take eat, take drink for the forgiveness of your sins.” These are what make you righteous.

Your heart would have you depend on your works for the assurance of your salvation. Cling to the Word of forgiveness found in the proclamation of the Gospel and the reception of the Sacraments in faith.

Your works are a testament that you have a living faith. You are a very loving congregation. I am constantly amazed at how much you show your love for each other. This is a wonderful testament that you have a living faith.

Aristotelian ethics would have you believe that the more you practice your love for each other, the better you will be at loving each other.

You know that you love each other because you've been loved by Christ first. The more you receive His love in Word and Sacrament, the more loving you become.

Continue to receive Christ here in Word and font and altar.

Christ has defeated your enemies of Satan, the world, and your sinful flesh.

Cling to Christ and He will continue to give you the victory over these same enemies until you join Him in the joy of the wedding feast of the Lamb, which will have no end.

In Jesus Name. Amen.