

The Lord's call and gift of His kingdom is one of grace. It is an undeserved, unmerited gift. Salvation is the free gift of what is right, the righteousness of Christ, handed over in its totality to be believed, received, without partiality or degree between people. This is the foundation, the bedrock, of the Christian faith, what sets Christianity apart from all other religions and philosophies; that the way of salvation is by God's descent to us, His working, His giving, His saving. We saw this displayed so beautifully today as this very salvation was given to Milo.

We rest content, confident in the merits of Christ and His blood to save us. In the terrors of sin and death, when the devil tempts us with despair, confidence in ourselves, our works and pious living, will not suffice. This alone, that our sins are forgiven freely for Christ's sake, faith that trusts in this, is what sustains and enlivens the heart in the most violent conflict with despair. Christ alone is the conqueror of sin, death, and hell, and so faith looks to Him, confident in His promise that none who trust in Him will be put to shame.

And yet, the call to be a laborer in the Lord's vineyard, to be on the receiving end of His promised salvation, is not an invitation to laziness but to work. Milo's life as God's child has just begun. There is a task set before each and every Christian. Faith alone lays hold of Christ's righteousness given and promised to us and so receives the grace of God and the promise of salvation. It is from this, the good tree of Christ's righteousness grafted into our hearts by faith that the fruit of love for God and neighbor is produced, and from which good works proceed. It is trust in Christ as our Good and Righteous Savior that gives the desire and ability to do good works.

It can be said in no better or simpler way than the ninth stanza of the hymn we just sang:

*Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone And rests in Him unceasing;  
And by its fruits true faith is known, With love and hope increasing.  
For faith alone can justify; Works serve our neighbor and supply  
The proof that faith is living.*

What isn't automatically given is the knowledge of what works please God. Baptism doesn't initiate a download so that all the rest of our life we run on autopilot, knowing all the time the type of labor we as Christian people are called to do. In short, the Ten Commandments inform us what we are to do, what God desires of us. The Table of Duties in the Catechism, which is simply a list of Bible passages for the various stations in life, in the church, the family, and the state, also gives clear direction from God's Word. It tells us what God desires of Christian preachers and hearers, husbands and wives, parents and children, rulers and citizens, employers and workers, and of everyone.

But we hear today's Gospel, the clear teaching of God's unmerited grace and the call to labor, on the threshold of Lent, the journey to Easter. Lent has us consider our Lord's call to deny ourselves, take up our own cross and follow Him. Even as we place our trust in Him as our Savior, those who believe in Him seek to imitate Him, cultivate His life in their own life. And what is that life but a dying to the self and serving others in mercy, all the while calling upon the Father for strength, help, and blessing?

It is this particular good work of self-denial and discipline that we each do well to consider these two and-a-half weeks before Lent. It is what we hear in the words of St. Paul in the beginning of today's Epistle as he describes the Christian life: **"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only**

**one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control..."**

The Christian life is a serious one. It is not a game, like boxing the air, as the apostle says. It is not playing the way children so often do, delighting in fighting imaginary battles, batting in the final inning of the final game of the World Series with two outs and bases loaded, only one more goal behind in the fourth quarter of the Super Bowl, the crowd roaring, or simply playing air guitar to an awesome song. That kind of imagining is fun, but it is not real. And even when the combat is real, when it is an actual game or race, or a genuine instrument in your hands, it and all that is gained in and from it will perish. Trophies tarnish. Prize money gets spent. Tendons and muscles of the greatest of champions do not remain in their prime.

You strive after something far greater, something eternal, something that will never fade away, perish, or decay. You strive not because you must earn it, because you need to put God in your debt by your actions and goodness. It is promised and sealed to you in your Baptism, in the Gospel, and the Sacrament of the Altar. You strive because it can be lost. You strive because you want what matters most to fill your life more and more, because you want to find true joy and satisfaction in Christ and His life in you.

We live in an age of shameless indulgence, of appetites running unchecked, of always wanting more. The concern for money to survive, to enjoy good things, food drink and possessions, none of these are in themselves bad. We need them to live. But Satan and the world entice our sinful flesh to give these things far more than their due. And like any addiction, they grow in control over us, and far more than just inordinate desires, misplaced priorities, they are sins. And the sin that crouches at your door seeks and can soon gain mastery over you. Our Lord warns repeatedly against the love of riches, of trust in possessions. He and the apostles admonish us against the appetites of the flesh of every variety. Because they grow, they consume, and they destroy faith. This is no game. There are those things that attack us, that would deceive and mislead us into false belief, despair, great shame and vice, that is, they would kill faith and send us to hell. This is no game.

The generous gift so graciously offered can be, is, despised and set aside by many who had once tasted and seen the Lord's goodness. The impulse to do that, the forces that entice you to value and prize what is far beneath you as the child and heir of Christ's kingdom are real. They are all around you. They are within you. In the world they must be avoided. From the devil, they must be resisted. Within you, they must be brought under subjection, disciplined, and put to death.

Lent is not the only time we are bid to do this. As we confessed in last week's Catechism section, we are to put the old Adam and all evil desires to death every day. But we often waver and fail. The devil's tactics change over time. And new pet sins arise as we age and change. This is why Lent is a real gift of the Church to serve our spiritual good. It is a fitting time to renew Christian discipline. How that looks and works is going to vary for each of you. But these two and-a-half weeks are the perfect time for self-reflection, to identify those areas in your life as a Christian that need some work, and to plan how to engage in that labor.

First, most simple and essential, is to regularly examine yourself on the basis of God's Word; to hear His will for us, and look at your life in that light. Here again is where the Ten Commandments play a key role. Available in the narthex is a guide in using the Commandments in this way, with a short summary of what

God demands in each Commandment, and then questions to apply to yourself. This is a simple way to become aware not just of your sins in general, but those concrete areas of temptation and sin that call for special attention in the waging of spiritual warfare.

The natural step after this, is to hear the consolation of Christ's Gospel; to seek His forgiveness in His Word. That is what's given in the comforting passages towards the end of this booklet. It's what you receive in the Scripture readings and sermon on Sunday, in the absolution at the beginning of the service, the reception of the Holy Sacrament, and, what I encourage especially for when you are greatly troubled, or when you need aid and encouragement in the fight against sin, it is given in the individual absolution, the hearing of Christ's forgiveness directly spoken to your sins that nag and trouble you.

Lent is also when Christians have historically focused on the three spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, what our Lord Jesus says His Christians will do, in Matthew chapter 6; **"When you do a charitable deed...when you pray...when you fast."** Today there is also available in the narthex a little tri-fold that discusses each of these that I encourage you to take and make use of.

By way of summary, by "prayer" we mean those things that have to do with the Word and worship of God. So if reading the Bible, or praying every day is a struggle for you, and this is something every Christian should be doing every day, focus on that this Lent. Make a plan. Or if your Sunday attendance is haphazard, commit to weekly attendance through Lent and strengthen that practice which should be year-round for every Christian. These do not come naturally, they are not easy. They are work and need a plan.

By "almsgiving" we mean those duties of love to the neighbor. It's easy to think of the needy at Christmastime. The food banks will tell you, sometimes the supply during the rest of the year can be tight. So perhaps this Lent, each time you go to the store, get an extra can or box of food, and then during Easter week, take it to the food bank, or bring it here for Project Hope. Or if your giving to the Church is hit or miss, or you know that just plopping a \$20 in the plate isn't exactly what God means by sacrificial first-fruits giving, make a plan. None of this comes naturally. It is not easy for our flesh to part with the money it so treasures. It is work.

Finally, by "fasting," we simply mean self-denial, discipline of the body, controlling the impulses that demand immediate satisfaction, which swiftly imprison us and become our false god. This is where the practice of "giving things up" for Lent comes from. And it may be that chocolate or your morning latte are worth setting aside for a time, but such external things are often mere symptoms of something deeper. There are more serious temptations that need to be identified and pressed back against as you learn to rely on Christ and what He gives, rather than the things of this world to satisfy. None of this comes naturally, it is not easy. It is work.

If you've never done any sort of intentional plan for Lent like this, you don't want an elaborate or overly demanding goal for all of these. So perhaps use the Self-Examination guide, one Commandment each day, and make use of individual confession and absolution once this Lent. Or pair up two of the disciplines. So if there is a particular temptation or weakness in your life, when that arises, let it drive you to Bible reading and prayer. Fight back rather than give in, and the Christian fights with the sword of the Word, and cries out to his Father in heaven for aid.

Again, this will vary for each person here, and should be approached with seriousness and a plan made for this coming Lenten season. And part of why God has given you a pastor is to have someone who can help

you in these matters, to offer guidance, whether in developing a regular prayer life, or how to fight against temptation, all of these grounded not in worldly self-help strategies or self-chosen good works, but grounded in the Word of God, to pray with and for you, to encourage you in your Christian life.

The coming Lenten season is not a command from God. Nor is any specific practice of fasting, prayer, or almsgiving. But we are called, it is not optional for the child of God to deny the self, to call upon God and flee to His Word, and to be generous with what we are given. Lent is a good and useful time to re-focus our priorities, to get a spiritual check-up, to be reminded that God's grace for us in Christ Jesus, freely and generously given to us, is enough to support and encourage us as we labor against devil, world, and flesh. Use these next weeks to your advantage, to make this Lententide a beneficial time, to engage in the work to which your Lord calls you.