

Lord, Creator of all living things, You open Your hand to supply us with the needs of the day, so that we may go about life quietly serving You by serving our neighbors. Remove from us all thoughts of self-glory and find our only righteousness in Your Son, so that He may receive glory through all our words and deeds. Amen.

[Jesus said:] “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. 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. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

In Christ Jesus, whose righteousness was not done to be seen but to be awarded to us by the gracious hand of the Father, dear fellow-redeemed:

Lutheran pastors are taught that when they preach to their congregations, they are to assume they are always addressing believers. But a pastor does not have the ability to look into people’s hearts and know if they are trusting alone in Christ as Savior. There is One who knows as we read in Paul’s second letter to Pastor Timothy: “The Lord knows those who are His.”

No one can fool God. Yet there are many hypocrites who think if they can fool people, they can also fool God. Jesus addresses this in our text. So let us consider what it means that **We Belong to the “Secret Society of Saints” Known Only to God.**

I

This is not to be confused however with the secret societies of the lodges who have their secret religious rites. They attempt to worship the true God but fail since they have not Christ. In their secrecy they threaten to cut out the tongues of those who should reveal any of their man-made work righteous rites and beliefs.

Nevertheless, Jesus warns us in His religion: “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.” Sinners can do righteous things to be sure, but the problem is that while neighbors may be impressed, God in heaven is not. Why not? Well, as Jesus established with the sentence before: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Acts of righteousness do not make a person perfect, a perfect life does.

Scripture clearly teaches none of us is good, no not one. But this requirement of perfection is a standard that remains for all eternity. No accommodations are made for the sinner’s unrighteousness. This is hard news for sinners. The sinner apart from Christ hears God’s standard of perfection and rebels, since it is never achievable by him.

But as you know, the good news is that this required perfection has been produced for you. Christ Jesus, the Son of God made flesh came as your Substitute, your Holy Substitute. Trusting in Christ as Savior means for the believing sinner, he or she is also a saint, a holy one in Christ. You are a saint in Christ. God knows you as His own.

But in this world it is a “secret society” in the sense that there is no way it can be known to the world. We also refer to it as the mystical body of Christ. Yet in another sense it is also an open society, since its members declare with joy and all confidence that Jesus is Lord, Lord and Savior of all people. The Church of Christ is not silent and secretive. We worship our Lord openly in public. As acts of worship we pray together in public; we give of our treasures in public; we tend to the needs of our needy neighbors in public.

When such acts are done, however, to be seen by men it reveals a heart, not of a believer not a member of the “secret society of saints”. It reveals a heart of a hypocrite, an unbeliever who seeks to produce enough righteousness to be acceptable before the Holy Creator God. There is no reward from the one true God for unrighteousness, only condemnation. Christ Jesus, our Substitute produced a holy life to claim as our own through faith and He was eternally condemned for our unrighteousness. As members of this “secret society of saints” we now get to act to His glory and welfare of our neighbors.

II

Those saints who have gone before us to the glorious courts of heaven, dressed in Christ’s eternal righteousness alone, were once among us in the Church on earth publicly praying, giving and showing mercy to their neighbors: Hazel, Bernice, Bettye and Eleanor. All temptations to do these things for the praise of men have now ceased for them. They are at eternal peace with no enemies to bother

them. They are enjoying the open society of saints, singing the praises of God and the Lamb at the center of the divine throne. They are singing with Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, David, Bathsheba, Mary, Joseph along with the holy angels, the whole company of heaven.

Meanwhile, you and I are still gathered here in the blessed communion with our Lord in Word and Sacrament. Our enemies are arrayed all around us and even within us. Satan's kingdom and the unbelieving world attack from without and our sinful nature in league with them assails us from within. All these enemies would have us despair of Christ's righteousness as our righteousness and seek to save ourselves by our own words and acts of righteousness.

Soon we will be making our way forward to bring our pledges and gifts for our special Anniversary Thank Offering. Is this what our Lord warns about here: "when you give ... sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others."? Not at all. If that were the case, we could then not stand and pray together speaking aloud as well. When Jesus says: "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." He is not telling us not to pray in corporate worship. Rather the warning is meant for individuals praying in such a way as to call attention to themselves.

Our walking forward with our secret pledges and gifts is not to seek praise of men, but to glory in what our Lord is enabling us to do together in an effort to facilitate His kingdom advancing in this world which hates Him and His Church. If we walked forward and each gift and pledged amount were flashed on a reader board for all to see, this would violate what our Lord tells us here. Likewise, if we had individuals standing up to pray aloud competitively using their own words this too could violate our Lord's direction here as well.

We belong to the "secret society of saints" here and we worship aright our Holy Lord today through our prayers and offerings. What peace our Lord has established for us. We are not seeking to compete with one another as though we are challenged to win at proving ourselves more righteous than others. We come here as repentant sinners, trusting that all our sin is forgiven by the holy and shed blood of the Lord Jesus, trusting also that our status as righteous ones, holy ones, saints – is something bestowed upon us freely.

It cost our Lord dearly to provide all this for us, but it was done willingly and cheerfully without compulsion. Can our response as the recipients of these great eternal gifts from God's gracious hand be any less? Our membership in the secret society of saints here on earth does not necessarily bring us recognition or praise from our

neighbors. All our enemies still try to lead us to strive for a certain level of unrighteousness, declaring ourselves to be good enough before neighbor and God, or to despair of Christ as our righteousness. But God knows that we are His. Through His Word and Sacrament He continues to give us of His Son, the payment He made for our sin and the righteous life He lived for us.

Soon we will join our brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before into that eternally open society of the saints. Until then we live, pray and give here in humble secrecy, trusting that the reward of Christ's perfect ransom is certain. Thus God, the Giver of all good things, is praised in our speech and actions. He knows us to be His own having been washed clean in the blood of His Son. All the accusations against us by our many enemies will all die with them and we, the righteous ones for Jesus' sake live forevermore. Amen.