



*“THE REASON FOR PRACTICE”

Biblical Text: Philippians 4:4-9

Dr. Michael F. Gardner, Senior Pastor
Old Mission United Methodist Church

Despite what’s been going on in the world, August has been terrific at Old Mission. *Third grade Bible Sunday was great. *Back to School Sunday last week was such a kick. And the new *windows – their installation was completed this week! Jerry Busch of Marvin Windows and Pat Duseman of Chicago Lumber were just terrific!

They drive the point home that I want to make today. *Both have a lot of knowledge in their areas of expertise, but even more importantly, they have the practiced skills to deliver on their promises! And everyone knows - ***practice makes perfect!**

I learned that lesson when Ann and I were at *Baker University. We took two classes together the summer before we graduated. One that she needed - Economics 101. We got a “A!” One I needed - a one hour Phys-Ed credit. And all they offered that the summer was tennis with Baker’s legendary coach, *Jim Irick.

*I didn’t want to take it alone, so Ann tool it with me. The problem was, I was terrible at tennis. And second, Ann was five months pregnant. **She loved me a lot!**

I’m personally responsible for the only "C" on her honors college transcript. I did better but only on the written test. The playing test – well, without going into detail - let me just say it was embarrassing for all involved. Here’s my point!

Book learning is no substitute for practice. Because ... you can even say it with me, ***practice makes perfect!** I have books on roses, archery, fly-tying and other subjects I’ve read but in which I have zero proficiency. Why? I never practiced.

*Ability or talent doesn’t hurt! What we know does matter. But what we do with what we know matters even more! The same is true of the Christian faith.

*Knowing the Bible is not the same as practicing what it teaches! The thing about Christianity is that it’s a lot like soap – **application is everything!**

*Our Biblical text from Philippians 4 ends with this advice found in Philippians 4:9. I think it is clearest in the Revised Standard Version: * *“What you have learned, and received, and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.”*¹

Unless someone **practices** - what anyone preaches – it all comes to nothing.

*It is the practice, the “doing” of the faith that’s where the “*rubber meets the road.*”

¹ Philippians 4:9, Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

James 2:15-16 says: **“If someone is without clothes or food, and you say, ‘Go. Be well. Stay warm and well fed,’ and then do nothing to meet their needs, what good is that?”²* That’s clear and direct. It’s so inconvenient when the Bible does that!

*It’s much easier for us when the meaning is debatable or obscure. But it isn’t. Not here. Unless faith finds its way into what we do, it isn’t worth much.

Put in a positive way, it still rings true. In my life verse from Matthew 5:16 in the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus said, **“...let your light so shine, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”³*

Having light for the times of darkness is important. Knowing where you put the flashlight is also important. But unless you can actually find the switch and turn it on, what good does it really do? * Light isn’t really light - until someone shines it!

What I am saying is this. Our our actions, our practicing the faith matters!

*More than thirty years ago, Sociologist and educator Robert Bellah’s book, Habits of the Heart, reminded us that, **“If you really want to know about a religious tradition, don’t ask them what they believe, observe what they do!”⁴*

I believe that observation to be true. *Last fall, before the Presidential election of 2016, I stopped by a large congregation here in Kansas City to inquire about a concert. In the lobby, I picked up what amounted to be a *political tract, with positions of national, and state candidates on issues like abortion, homosexuality, immigration, gun control, with the what was called the “*Christian*” position marked.

*I found it interesting that nowhere were issues addressed in their materials that I consider vital, pivotal, Biblical, and just - like poverty, homelessness, hunger, race, abuse, drug addiction, care for the elderly and sick or the stranger in our midst.

It left me wondering – “Is there no “*Christian*” position on those issues?” Again there words ring true. **“If you want to know someone’s faith - observe what they do!”*

I never did go to the concert. Why? *Because our practices matter. Our lives are a living illustration of our faith. And I knew that kind of faith was not for me.

People notice what we do. It’s true for conservatives and liberals. It is true for Clergy and Church members. It’s true for everyone. And the Bible puts it this way: **“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked: for whatever we plant, we also shall reap.”⁵*

² James 2:15-16, paraphrased by the author.

³ Ibid. Matthew 5:16, paraphrased by the author, but based on the Revised and New Revised Standard Versions.

⁴ Habits of the Heart, by Robert N. Bellah, et. al, Copyright © 1985, Harper-Collins Press, first edition.

⁵ Op.Cit., Galatians 6:7, paraphrased.

Every Christian including you and me, is continually judged by our practices more than my preaching or Pastor Karen’s teaching or anyone else’s. *We sometimes think that if everyone *“gave their heart to the Lord,”* everything else would take care of itself. The problem is that it rarely is all it takes. That only gets us part way there.

And that’s not all that Jesus, Paul and the early Church taught. Their faith was eminently more practical than ours often it. It had to do with *practicing* the faith.

*There’s a reason for practice. It is the same as it is for playing the flute or playing tennis or working on a car, you get better at it the more you practice doing it.

*It’s that way in the remainder of our text from Philippians 4 this morning. It’s Paul’s conclusion to his letter to the Christians at Philippi. And it is full of practical advice about living the faith. Philippians 4:4-5 says: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”*⁶

Joy requires practice. *In all circumstances, we can find something to thank God for. But it is not a natural act. We can choose to rejoice. But it requires practice. I love one translation’s rendering of verse 5, *“Let your confidence in God be known to all.”*

Or verse 6, about worry, which most of us do all the time, *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer ... with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*⁷ I wish our first instinct was to pray. But it isn’t.

*Again – it requires practice to pray and turn our worries over to God! But verse seven says that doing so is the pathway to a peace-filled life

And verse 8, If you ever need guidance about what to read, what to listen to, what to fill your words, your mind, your heart and conversation with, which you do. Trust me, I do, so I know you do. Just listen: *“Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise, think on these things.”*⁸

He could also have said, talk about these things. Pray for these things. Test your actions by these things. Spend your life pursuing these things.

*I am convinced of this. More what we believe, it’s the things we do, the practices we follow that change us. If you want to change your life, it’s not enough to have a change of heart. What you need is a change of practice!

Or as Paul concluded his letter to Philippi: *“What you have learned, and received, and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.”*⁹ Amen.

⁶ Philippians 4:4-5, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Copyright © 1989. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁷ Ibid. Philippians 4:6, New Revised Standard Version.

⁸ Op. Cit. Philippians 4:8, paraphrased.

⁹ Op. Cit. Philippians 4:9, Revised Standard Version.