

Ash Wednesday

TO TELL A SECRET

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

6 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever 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.

16 “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

DIAGNOSIS: A Secret Kept

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“...in order to be seen by them”*

It’s all in the “why.” Jesus assumes that his disciples will give alms, pray, and fast. But in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, he warns against practicing these disciplines in order to be seen by others. The ancient term for this would be “vainglory,” wanting to be recognized by others as righteous or excellent. It is a desire to appear morally or spiritually advanced because such an appearance will get us ahead. And so gifts aren’t given to help another human being; prayers are not poured out in a desperate quest for God’s face; and fasting is not practiced to mortify the flesh. It is all done to make us look good.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Faithless Piety*

Vainglory, of course, means that I, not God, get the glory. Practicing our piety for the sake of human reward reveals at the very least a lack of faith in God’s goodness. Why would we need to chase after public approval if we believed that God alone is sufficient for our soul’s needs? But even worse, this type of vanity implies a cynical use of God; he is a tool to be employed for the sake of our own self-aggrandizement. The one who wants to be praised by others uses piety but has no faith in the God

to which such piety should point. It is, from first to last, all about “me,” and about how others view “me,” with God simply being a means to an end. God is not treasured, and our hearts do not cling to him. Our appearances are treasured, and our hearts are fixed firmly on ourselves.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Heavenly Reward*

With such a faithless approach to God, we can expect no reward from him. This may seem harsh, but it is simply what Jesus warns us is true. When we seek to use God or his name, God will not be favorably disposed towards us. While there will be no reward, there will be just desserts: the wrath of the Holy One who is jealous for our hearts, and finds that they are far from him. We may pull the wool over the eyes of our neighbors, who believe us to be righteous, but God sees our secrets, and we cannot hide behind our supposed good deeds when he uncovers the truth.

PROGNOSIS: A Secret Shared

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“Your Father who sees in secret...”*

To find the fundamental Good News in this passage, one must “read into” the text a little bit. By this point in Matthew’s narrative, the deepest, most profound secret of all had yet to be told. But the Father still sees it. God does not see only our public pomp. He doesn’t just see through our good deeds to find the self-serving spin, pride, and lack of faith beneath them. God doesn’t just see us misusing his name to chase after the world’s approval. He sees something deeper and better: the righteousness of Christ given to us by grace. He sees the washing of baptism, the forgiving word of Jesus, and the sin-destroying Cross. That is what the Father, who sees in secret, sees when he looks at us. The most amazing secret in the universe is the righteousness of Christ, hidden inside sinners like us. It is given to us not as a reward for our works, but as

a gift despite our selfish efforts. And because the Father sees this, we can be confident that all our sins, even the ones that would deny us all reward, are forgiven!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“...will reward you”*

So if forgiveness and righteousness are given to us freely as a gift in Christ, then what are we to make of this “reward” talk? God will, Jesus tells us, reward the one who gives out of generosity, the one who prays without seeking attention, and the one who fasts without boasting. But he does not say the reward will be salvation or public acclaim. The one who gives, not seeking their own gain but simply the blessing of others, will find the joy of generosity and a loosening of greed’s grip on their own hearts. The one who prays will be rewarded with the intimacy of communion with their Lord and a deepening of their faith. The one who fasts will find the flesh disciplined and will receive new strength to fight temptation. These are not powers we develop by our own exercise; they are outcomes of the spiritual disciplines Jesus assumes all his followers will practice (notice the “whenever you...” language). In simple, unspectacular practices, God’s grace works to crucify the flesh and bring us new life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *A Life that Displays the Secrets*

Think about these qualities that God’s work creates in us: generosity and a lack of greed; intimacy with God instead of superficial “spirituality”; faith that is strong in the face of hardship; an ability not to simply follow every prompting of our appetites and be governed by something else. These qualities are not routinely praised in our culture. But our culture does not embrace, or even know, the “open secret” of God’s gift of righteousness in Christ. So why would they praise the fruits of Christ’s work? And how will they ever know, unless there are

hints pointing to the secret? Lives that are rich with heavenly treasures display the truth, not of one's own righteous superiority, but of God's grace. We must not practice our piety in an attempt to win worldly praise. But we can let our lights "so shine before others" (see Matthew 5:16) that the attention is drawn not to us, but to the one who has saved us. May the Holy Spirit grant that we would all have lives abundant in generosity, prayer, and self-denial, so that the world may see not more of "us," but more of Christ!