

Ash Wednesday

**'FESSING UP TO THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH,
AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH**

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

1 "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 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 the 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, so that, 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 consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

DIAGNOSIS: Hypo-critical of Our Selves

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hyping Ourselves*

These warnings from Jesus are addressed, not to the scribes and Pharisees (whom we instinctively label hypocrites), but to the disciples, and therefore to us too! This should come as a shock, and shake us to the core. Do not, do not, do not, Jesus says. Do not hype your “self” in front of other people: Do not hype your righteousness (the literal translation); do not get all caught up in the razzle dazzle effects of your goodness, your Jesus-following, your charitable giving, your commendable community service, and so on. Gulp. Don’t we all do that?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hypo-critical of Ourselves*

When others are impressed with us, then we too can believe we must be pretty good (righteous) after all! But this all begs the question: by whose standards and what standards is this assessment made? Answer, God’s own standards, known as His Law, and they’re embedded in us all. We are delighted when we seemingly “measure up” and look good. But Jesus is not impressed. His warning sounds incredibly harsh: we are being, in fact, hypocrites, as in hypo (or “sub”) critical of our selves, not admitting the whole truth which God, who “sees in secret” does. His critique pierces right through our attractive, righteous exteriors to the inner core of our hearts. There he “sees” that our infatuation with Law-keeping betrays that we

trust the program (and the value we can derive from performing it so well) over the Programmer (which would be Him)! Even worse than that, when we employ that program to make ourselves righteous and pronounce ourselves to be so, we usurp a position that's not ours in the first place: that of Supreme Appraiser.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Loosing Our Selves*

Such positioning is extremely dangerous, in fact, it runs smack against the first commandment: having other gods before God, a.k.a. the Supreme Appraiser. After all, it's his final appraisal (and no one else's, especially not even our own) that really counts. Like a scorching laser beam, his scrutiny first exposes us, and then, upon finding us "not righteous enough," literally dissolves us into dust particles: "Dust you are. To dust you shall return." The Supreme Appraiser does not value our righteousness as being worthy of rewarding (v. 1); we are shut us out of the Kingdom of Heaven (5:20).

Prognosis: Confessing the Truth about Ourselves

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"The Truth" who gives us life*

Notice though the immeasurable kindness and mercy already suggested when Jesus calls the Supreme Appraiser "your heavenly Father" (vv. 1, 4, 5, 18). It is in Jesus that we learn "the whole truth" about God, namely, that he has worked mightily to overcome his own appraisal of us. That work has involved conspiring with his beloved Son ("the truth and the life") to trump our damning appraisal. Jesus gets shut out of the kingdom on that bleak Friday, suffering the just reward we all deserve, complete annihilation ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46)). But then, his impressed Father declares his doings "righteous" and raises him from death, in effect, overthrowing his own judgment (28:6).

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) : *'Fessing up to*

the Truth

Jesus didn't go through all that just for himself, but exactly so that he could give his own appraisal of righteousness to us soon-to-be-dust-particles! He promises that as we cling to him, his Father will "see double": that is, will consider us his (Jesus') twin siblings, belonging to his Kingdom. Such a windfall blasts the portentousness out of us and enables us to be totally honest about ourselves. We can agree with God's assessment of us, an admission we couldn't make if we didn't already know we have been (Jesus) value-added. Note now how our trust has switched from what-we-do-for-Jesus to what-Jesus-has-done-for-us. And wouldn't you know it, we learn that the "kingdom of God" operates a whole different way from the old standards' way. Rather than "do what's right and get rewarded," it operates via "forgive and be merciful."

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) : *Losing Our Selves (for Others)*

In the turn-around from trusting our selves to trusting Jesus (also called repentance), we do end up losing our selves, and that in turn leads us to another self-losing. Living the new way (forgiveness and mercy), we lose our selves in the problems and pains of our neighbors and world. To be honest we're really not all that aware of it because mostly, it feels like dying, and there's no razzle dazzle in that at all. What now "matters" is not what-others-think but being tuned into to what God-thinks-matters, namely, getting other soon-to-be-dust people re-valued (the Jesus-way), and cared for.