

Ash Wednesday

WHAT WE TREASURE

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 selves 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.

Author's Note: There are many crossings already done on this text, in fact, I wrote one of them, which I'd like to share called "[Fessing up to the Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth.](#)" The others, all excellent, offer different perspectives. I encourage you to take a look. Here is a list:

- "[Paeans and Paydays, or Getting Lutherans to Fast](#)" by Jerome Burce,
- "[Academy Award or Heavenly Reward](#)" by William White;
- "[Lenten Piety: Charity, Prayer and Fasting](#)" by Norb Kabelitz;
- "[Upgrade Your Treasure Today! One Savior, No Waiting!](#)" by James Squire;
- "[To Tell a Secret](#)" by Eric Evers;
- "[How to Pray: My Way or the High Way?](#)" by Marcus Felde.

In thinking of what angle to take, I was reminded of Robert Bertram's theses called "X is for Christ-ening" which is found in his book "A Time for Confessing" (edited by Michael Hoy; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI: 2008). It is as part of the essay entitled "Postmodernity's CRUX." Bob begins with the premise that "God is that One on whom all things depend" (p. 188), that Jesus' godhood involves being God-Dependent, ("But that is our glory as well, that the One who eventually assumed our fallen condition was, already prior to becoming human, not only a God on whom all things depend but also a God (the same God) who on God depends." (Bertram, p.

190)), and that real freedom comes through God-dependence rather than (slavish) independence.

DIAGNOSIS: Storing up Earthly Treasures

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Treasuring Goodness, Craving Validation*

Goodness, are we ever in love with goodness! We TREASURE it, we crave it, most especially, we want, desperately, to BE good ourselves. Interestingly though, even when we try our hardest, we are anxious and insecure about how well we manage, so we need, desperately, for other people to validate our goodness. Can you blame us that we end up “playing to the crowds” and ostentatiously hyping ourselves, just as the scribes and Pharisees did? It’s compulsive behavior.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Declaring Independence*

Little do we catch that our hyping is a tell-tale sign of what Jesus calls hypocrisy—hypocrisy as in being hypo, meaning, sub-critical of ourselves. This sub-criticalness is the result of having fooled ourselves into believing that (1) goodness is something we can ACHIEVE and (2) that somehow our good actions will make our hearts good rather than the opposite, and that (3) when our hearts and actions are authenticated as “good,” we will be rewarded. (“Just be good,” our mothers tell us, “and I’ll give you a toy.” After all, that’s the way God’s Law works, and you know Who gave it to us!) The underlying problem is called sin and it goes all the way back to The Beginning. In that instant when Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation that they could “be like god,” they separated themselves from God and in the process, severed their God-dependence (Bertram, p. 190).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Discarded*

What catastrophe that declaration of independence brought on creation! Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden, became ashamed and made clothes to hide themselves from God's scrutiny. Rewarded for goodness? Au contraire! "You have NO reward from your Father in heaven" (v. 1). Worse, having severed that life-giving, life-sustaining umbilical cord which had transformed mud particles into human flesh, humans became doomed to biodegrade back into their original ingredients: "Dust you are...to dust you shall return." Picture Almighty God turning his back and shaking the (our!) dust off his feet, walking away muttering, "Have it your way then...I'll do as you wish and leave you alone." Gulp! Gasp!

PROGNOSIS: Jesu, Priceless Treasure

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Real Goodness*

Real Goodness reveals itself when God stops short, makes a surprise about-turn and does the unthinkable: He sets about re-inspiring helpless dust-particles and rewarding the un-good with good! We are smitten by the incredulous mercy so evidenced as the umbilical cord is re-connected, making us, once again, God-dependents. How delightful that this is accomplished via the actions of The Dependent Son, that second member of the Deity, who, as the incarnate Jesus enters/joins creation and takes our condition of "slavish dependency" upon himself (Bertram, p. 191) only to completely transform (as in, puts an end to) it all via his crucifixion and resurrection (Bertram, p. 191-192).

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) : *Depending*

Giveaway-Goodness streams our way as the resurrected Jesus proceeds to depend (audaciously) on the fact that his Father will extend that loving treatment/relationship originally lavished on him (Jesus) now also to us, his co-fleshlings. Notice how that makes us co-heirs with Jesus, indulged kids given "the run of the household" (Bertram, p. 192). Adding

goodness onto goodness, enters now the Third Member of the Deity, the Holy-ing Spirit who joins Jesus' efforts on our behalf to prod and enable us to depend (we call this faith) on him. Note the significant omission of verses 7 to 15 in today's reading which contains the Lord's Prayer. This is a perfect illustration of total, God-dependent trust, the absolute antidote to independent, slavish hypocrisy.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) : *Freedom to Treasure Others*

How silly we've been to fret and worry and strut, to think that we could "lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven" when the greatest treasure of all—Jesus the Christ—is already given us! The marvelous fallout of such renewed Dependence is freedom-in every way imaginable. Interestingly now, the very concept of "treasure" is redefined: rather than being those rewards and benefits we can pile up for ourselves, we now see that it is our neighbors and our world that are our treasures. And then, wouldn't you know it, we become consumed with treasuring these treasures! Apparently, that's just what happens when goodness takes over in God-dependent hearts.