

Ash Wednesday

No Performance Required

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Analysis by Jonas Ellison

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 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. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so 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. 6But 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. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so 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; 20but

store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.



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Your Father rewards you for the things you do “in secret.” The things you do when you’re not even thinking about how good, pious, or holy they make you look (or, in today’s social-media-driven world: woke, successful, clever, healthy, intellectual, provocative, etc.).

DIAGNOSIS: We Want to Earn the Love We Receive

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): We All Perform

Jesus calls us out in this passage for being performative and hypocritical in our spiritual lives. Though this has long been something that humans have done, but more recently with the advent of social media, it's become more pronounced. We're all trapped in a performative culture, not just spiritually, but in all aspects of our lives from parenting and politics to fitness and health. This divides us and roots us deeper in our various silos of so-called rightness. Purity and virtue cultures emerge in all kinds of different ways. Religiosity reigns and love loses when this happens.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Public Good Works = Counterfeit Change

Jesus holds up a big mirror to our performative self-rightness here. In our own pharisaical ways, we're showing where our hearts are and we're limiting the love we are given to live into (v. 21). If we truly knew our belovedness, we wouldn't be trying to one-up each other spiritually or otherwise. But we've forgotten/fallen from our belovedness. So we try to earn it through comparative works. Even when we "win" that game—even when we get all the attention we want for our so-called goodness—we find no fulfillment (treasure) there. Works righteousness is counterfeit change and ultimately has no value before God. What's more, the key aspect of grace or belovedness is that it cannot be earned. Love is freely given and freely accepted. It is not a transaction but a gift.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Your Works Don't Impress God

Whenever we try to performatively earn our way into God's good graces, we may receive the reward of attention from the world ("Look how holy s/he is!" Or, "Look how much she gives to the church!" Or, as with today, "Look how many likes she got!"). But

God doesn't reward attention (vv. 1, 2, 5, 16). And the God-shaped hole in our hearts remains empty. When we confuse the vertical (God-to-human) realm with the horizontal (human-to-human) realm—when we think that God works in accordance with human egos—we can easily think that the more pious/good we appear to others, the more valuable we'll be in God's eyes. But that isn't reality. As Jesus teaches us, there is no treasure there as far as our Father in heaven is concerned.



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PROGNOSIS: God's Unearnable Love Is Given Freely

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's Love Leaves an Impression

God's love comes only as a gift that's free from any sense of earning or performative one-upping. In Christ, the love of God comes from what Christ does in the cross and resurrection, not from anything we do. Love is given by God to be freely accepted as a gift given, not earned. When God's unconditional love hits our hearts, the last thing we think about is how "good" we're appearing before others. We're free from all of that. This is where our true treasure lies.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Priceless Treasure; Freedom from External Validation

Your Father rewards you for the things you do "in secret." The things you do when you're not even thinking about how good, pious, or holy they make you look (or, in today's social-media-driven world: woke, successful, clever, healthy, intellectual, provocative, etc.).

When we find our treasure in the unconditional love of our Father, we have our reward. And it's the only reward that has any real value. It's a treasure that we've stumbled on rather than a counterfeit prize achieved by performative self-righteousness. And with this reward, we can't help but extend our Father's love and mercy for us outward into others' lives.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Your Life as a Treasure

When the unconditional love of God hits our hearts—when we're God-smacked by the treasure that lies there—we peacefully refrain from life's performative pitfalls. We're not striving or straining or parading or one-upping. We know we're loved by God no matter what, so we turn to our neighbors in loving service without concern of how we appear to others—often without even knowing we're doing it ourselves! We pray in earnest to our loving Father rather than putting on a fake public display of

piety to impress others. We're not mired in the endlessly inward-turned loop of performative self-rightness. We're ... free. Free to live and move through God's love, not in a way that tries to grasp or scrape for God's love. Our life and our good works are gifts that move through us "in secret." We don't even think about them. And we even find—often while looking back—that God has made treasures of even our biggest mistakes and blunders. God's grace is an unearnable treasure that we can't help but go out and spend on ourselves and others—for nothing more than the joy of it.