

Ash Wednesday

HOW TO PRAY: MY WAY OR THE HIGH WAY?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

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. 2So 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. 5And 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.

[7When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10Your kingdom come.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

11Give us this day our daily bread.

12And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our

debtors.

13And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

14For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.]

16And 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. 19Do 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.”

PRELIMINARIES: The appointed text is the context for the institution of the Lord’s Prayer. I have taken the liberty of inserting it into the lectionary reading above, in brackets. In my judgment, one cannot preach the text without taking this into consideration.

In regard to prayer, Ed Schroeder suggests (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2002/thur0321.shtml>) that we need to emphasize more the link between prayer and promise than between prayer and providence. In interpreting this passage, I see the various pious practices as accessories to prayer.

DIAGNOSIS: PRAYING MY WAY—SEEN NOT HEARD

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *On Stage*

Do I show up for church in the middle of the week presenting symptoms like those Jesus is talking about here? Here I am, not in a closet but in a church building, praying long prayers and putting offerings in a plate to be counted and accounted. I am looking good. I may even put ashes on my forehead, so nobody can accuse me of missing church! (Don't I do "dismal" well?) Woe to me if this display of piety is nothing but a practiced "Pharisaism" done to be seen by others.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Performances Anxiety*

Do I actually hope that God will be good to me if I am good to God? Or, worse, if I look like I'm being good to God? "Displayism" has this inherent weakness, Jesus suggests: It is as if one depends on the approval of others to guarantee God's approval. It is not smart to pin my hope on my performances, even though others praise me.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"The Gig is O'er, the Jig is Up"*

If I live (work and pray) for the approval of others, even if I do it in a religious way, I am not living for God. Even the applause I (might) get at the end of my act will be more than I am due. I will have spent "my" earthly treasure for earthly reward, and that is that. I will have been seen (by people) but, Jesus warns, my prayers will not be heard by God (v. 1).

PROGNOSIS: PRAYING THE HIGH WAY—HEARD NOT SEEN

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Kingdom Came*

God knew what we needed before we asked. What do we need? That God would be both God to us and good to us—which is asking a lot. Yet God hears us. Else why would Jesus teach us to pray

“Our Father in heaven, etc.”? For the sake of the crucified one, we get an audience even though we do not, for any reason, deserve one. God’s hearing is acute, his faithfulness to those who call upon him off the charts. He gives us the kingdom, in which (by the way) we use the plural—the real “royal we.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Because of Jesus*

The medium, in which those who don’t look so good are nevertheless already heard by the Father, is the Lord’s Prayer; here our Lord tells us to pray with confidence that God will be God to us (petitions 1-3) and good to us (the rest of the prayer). Our hope is thereby pinned not on our own performances, but on Jesus’ extraordinary performance—especially the crucifixion and resurrection—which, though not brought up in the pericope, is an essential precondition to our praying this prayer in faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We’re Good*

We don’t merely seem good, we are good. However, appearances being deceptive, the ways in which we are good will not necessarily be obvious to our public. Maybe we won’t even know ourselves when we are being good! (That ignorant left hand thing.) But God “who is in secret” will be there with us in our goodness, holding our present needs (see the 4th petition), past difficulties (5th petition), and possible future predicaments (6th and 7th petitions) out of the way so we can live brave and free (and modest) lives of holiness and righteousness now and ever.