

Ash Wednesday

ACADEMY AWARD OR HEAVENLY REWARD?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Analysis by Bill White

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.

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.”

DIAGNOSIS:PERFORMING FOR GOD AND GOD’S PEOPLE

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Life is a Stage*

Is there anything so enticing, so tempting, as public praise? This may be especially true for Christians. On the stage of church life the pursuit of the title “dedicated Christian” can be irresistible to the human ego.

As odd as it may sound at first, Jesus is warning disciples about practicing their faith. Is Jesus teaching us not to give alms, not to pray, not to fast? Certainly not! But Jesus is warning us of the seductive power of the applause of the world. Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them” (v. 1).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Trusting in One’s Acting Ability*

The problem is worse than giving alms, praying, and fasting in such a way as to be seen by others. If the motivation for practicing piety is the approval and accolades of others, where in reality is one’s faith? Is it not in one’s ability to perform and please? Or is not this kind of faith grounded in the words of approval and applause received from others, especially other Christians? This is certainly not fear, love, and trust in the “Father who is in secret.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Reward for this Performance*

The “Father who is in secret” is the “Father who sees in secret” and this God the Father sees right through us. And what does God

see in the person's heart and life? Does God see the hypocritical actor trusting in his/her own ability to perform acts of Judeo-Christian piety, checking-off the list of alms giving, prayer, and fasting, striving to gain the applause not only of others, but also of God? There are eternal consequences at stake here.

PROGNOSIS: TRUSTING GOD'S PERFORMANCE IN CHRIST

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Performs for All*

But God the Father "who sees in secret", who sees through us, is also God the Father who "will reward you," who sees us through. And Jesus is God's plan to see us through. Jesus the Christ takes the Law's judgment of hypocritical, self-justifying piety upon himself on the cross of Golgotha. Moreover, God the Father raises Jesus from the dead and the resurrected Christ ascends to heaven where he makes provision for "treasures in heaven" (v. 20).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting in Jesus' Performance*

What is more, this crucified and risen Jesus is the one who makes God the Father "God your Father"! Jesus comes now offering to replace the misplaced faith of trusting one's own efforts to gain the applause of God's people (and God!) by performing very public acts of piety, giving in exchange the gift of real Christian faith. Jesus offers true fear, love, and trust in God to believe that the Father who is in secret is the Father who sees us in secret!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *No Stage Needed*

Better still, the Christian, empowered now by the Holy Spirit working real faith within, is able to turn away from the desire to practice faith in order to be seen by others. No longer does one feel they have to receive public recognition for their acts

of piety. No longer does one feel they have to give alms, pray, and fast in order to please God and fulfill the demands of God's Law. Now the Christian is free to practice Christian piety in secret. Motivated and empowered by faith the Christian now gets to experience the joy of a life of giving, praying, and fasting in secret, believing that the Father who sees in secret does indeed see us and will indeed reward.