

Ash Wednesday

LENTEN PIETY: CHARITY, PRAYER AND FASTING

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

1 “Beware of practicing your piety (Greek, dikaiosunen, righteousness) 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. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your 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 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, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who sees 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 consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Nota Bene: I am challenged 1) by the definition of “piety” as “righteousness” (see Greek), defined by three basic acts of Jewish piety: almsgiving (charity), prayer, and fasting. 2) As we seek to use the Lenten 40 days (Christ’s 40 days in the wilderness?) to prepare for Holy Week and Easter, the Book of Concord, Apology, 210:139 instructs us: “To be sure, we hold that repentance ought to produce good fruits on account of the glory and commandment of God and that good fruits, such as true fasting, true prayer, true alms giving and the like have God’s command.” And 211:143 “Moreover, true prayer, true alms giving, and true fasting possess God’s command, and where they have such a command they cannot be omitted without sin.” Wow! But does Ash Wednesday’s Matthean Gospel provide adequate grounding for a Christ centered “Lenten fast” merely by affirming almsgiving (charity), prayer and fasting in a “true” way? If so, how can we practice this “piety” (righteousness) as a “Lenten discipline” or better “Lenten grace” while embracing the Promise of the “Way of the Cross” as the definitive journey of faith, and so share with Christ the experience that “we do not live by bread alone” while doing the “true” practice of “alms,” “prayer,” and “fasting”?

DIAGNOSIS: Do We Need Ritual, Religion, God, To Be Good? (Righteous, Pious)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Skepticism

From where and why did this trilogy of piety originate, and for what purpose? Given what is seen as so much hypocrisy in

religion, skeptics and atheists suggest that “religion poisons everything!” See the jihads of Islam and the hatred of fundamentalists (who also minimize all rites and ceremonies as destructive of “true” spirituality). Atheists say, Who needs God? Why not just be “good” for goodness sake? Who needs these “external” religious ceremonial exercises? Some become suspicious when they discover that these three are included in Islam’s “five Pillars of Faith” (Salat prayer 5 times each day; Takat, charity, alms for the poor; Fasting especially during Ramadan). The Muslim must practice these duties to gain paradise—an anathema in the Lutheran Confessions that state that this trilogy comes out of “repentance” as “good fruits” and has God’s command and blessing; but they are not “necessary as a divine service,” for merit or reward. As a result many ask, why do them at all?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Superficiality*

Where and when we do them at all, we invent ways to sugar coat the trilogy with “fat Tuesdays and pancake suppers,” or the famed New Orleans Mardi Gras of “feasting before the fast,” and then “for Lent,” hot cross buns and prayer pretzels, or a Lenten denial of sweets, spirits, or “fun” activities for the 40 days supposedly to honor Christ who really fasted forty days and nights! Moreover, the Matthew lectionary is a piece of Jesus’ sermon and seems to affirm as word of God this trilogy of piety and righteousness as a valuable spiritual exercise and therefore is to be obeyed whether during Lent or any other season. In Jewish piety a fast meant abstinence from food for the entire day from sunrise to sunset, and fasting twice a week was regarded as a sign of real devotion! But mere external practice succumbs to a self serving result, “see what a good boy/girl am I!” or as something that has salvatory significance—earning good marks of merit to displace private sins such as avarice and greed by charitable gifts that command public acclaim. (Is that

what Zacchaeus did?) While the outward “obedience” is seen and observed, the heart is missing in most performances. While it is said “faith without works is dead,” the practice of alms (charity), prayer, and fasting is dead without faith. “Your heart is far from me.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Short-Circuited!*

The result is a manipulative piety that, in effect, if not by conscious design, is carried out for an audience other than God. We are EXPOSED doing religious practices for show and human approval rather than as a “true” devotion that appropriates God’s saving word and work among us. Our piety has been “short circuited,” cutting us off from the God who “sees in secret” and therefore “sees through us.” We are exposed as hypocrites. Hypocrisy is fatal not merely because of its pretense (conscious or not), but because we get cursed as those whom Christ did not know, evil doers wrapped in pious wrappings. Away with you (Matthew 7:22-23)!

PROGNOSIS: God Gives Himself as the “Righteous Benefactor” and Good Life in Christ

Step 4: Initial Diagnosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ our “Righteousness” and “Treasure”*

But what if our “piety”(righteousness) could be anchored by faith in Christ? Because, in fact, Christ initiates and invites our participation in his mission to give his life for the world, so that the trilogy of righteousness—alms, prayer, fasting—becomes a resource (rather than an end in itself) for the mission, as opposed to merely gaining “merit.” God sees us through in His beloved Son whose “righteousness” is so much more than a Jewish trilogy of personal piety. As one hymn puts it, “for us baptized...for us he bore his holy fast and hungered sore...for us he prayed, for us his daily works he wrought” (see Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #322), Jesus lives the trilogy of

piety to lead us to what is truly “salutary”—namely, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Again the hymn: “He bore the shameful cross and death, for us he gave his dying breath, for us he rose from death again.” This new and true “righteousness” is the seedbed to make us a “new creation.” As Robert Capon says, “Christianity is not a religion,” but a relationship of faith, hope and love.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Integrity of the “Trilogy” through Christ*

Faith in Christ’s “piety” finds its purpose in that “he gave himself for us.” Genuine faith strips away the superficiality of pious exercises and gives integrity to the trilogy (see Isaiah 58:3-9). Not only that, but when we compare our piety to the treasure of Christ, we are ready to acknowledge our “unworthiness,” for we did only what was expected. The assurance that God “sees” does not need additional public applause for personal prayer, fasting, or charity. And while we may “disfigure” our face with an ashen sign of the Cross, its virtue is that it proclaims Christ and the Cross as the treasure, that others may see it and glorify our Father in heaven.

Step 6: Final Prognosis: (Eternal Solution) : *Investing in Heaven’s Treasure-House*

No longer need we be skeptics or critics. We are confident and dare to invest this trilogy of Jewish piety in Christ, so that it becomes a glad (not dismal) investment in heaven’s bank (where no moth or rust or thieves destroy or steal). Whether in public or private, we are led to sign each practice with the name of Christ, for the sake of Christ, and to the glory of God. Alms given and received are for Christ’s sake, that is, to advance his mission. Fasting in Christ’s name releases resources for “giving life.” Prayer in Christ’s name is for the sake of the world. We will always need imaginative external ways to express the eternal verities of our faith, for where our

treasure is there will our hearts be also.