

Ash Wednesday

UPGRADE YOUR TREASURE TODAY! ONE SAVIOR, NO WAITING!

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by James Squire

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.'

NOTE: Isn't it interesting that on a day when many churches engage in the ritual of imposition of ashes, we have verses 19-21 imploring us to store up treasures in heaven because earthly treasures crumble and disintegrate? "You are dust, and to dust you shall return," the pastor says to each parishioner, as he or she rubs the sign of the cross on them.

Notice also that this text says a lot about how we get in trouble and a lot about what we should be doing, but nothing about how to get from trouble to joy. "In secret" is the familiar refrain Jesus uses. Is it coincidence that this text also skips verses 7: 15, which just happen to include one of Jesus' great gifts to his followers—known to us as "The Lord's Prayer"? "When you pray, say this," he invites us. It's as if the Lectionary's goal this week was to take "In secret" literally to heart and secrete those verses from our eyes. Do I think that was really what the Lectionary writers had in mind when they segmented this text the way they did? No, not really. But maybe it is what the Holy Spirit has in mind for us. Stay tuned ...

DIAGNOSIS: Earthly Treasures Let us Down

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Practicing Show-and-Tell Piety*

We lobby for prayer in public schools. Our professional athletes and political candidates never miss an opportunity to bring their own faith front and center in interviews—both in print and

broadcast. We live in a hyper-critical age when everyone is constantly evaluating everyone else according to a set of standards. It is no different in the church. We look for certain external markers in others and seek to practice those same marks ourselves. It warms our heart to see a fictional character on TV who believes in God, and we immediately label that show “Christian.” An athlete gives thanks to Jesus for everything he is able to do on the field of play, and we praise him or her for their strong Christian faith. And what earthly rewards do we get out of these things? The truth is, we get the same kind of earthly rewards that folks outside the church get for their show-and-tell endeavors: we get a sense of security, a feeling of belonging, credibility, success, recognition, and ultimately happiness. The emphasis is on saying and doing things “the right way”—and making sure other people notice, even if we have to be coy about that. No one wants to go through life anonymously.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Fearing, Loving, and Trusting Earthly Rewards*

The reason why we are obsessed with show-and-tell piety is because our hearts are hung up on approval, recognition, and power. The world is an alien place for many of us. It’s going down the tubes and we are determined not go down with it. Charity, prayer, and restraint are a few of the many shibboleths we naturally traffic in. They have great meaning to us—as badges of honor and signposts to others. We need to know who our enemies are and who our friends are, and these are the signs we look for and proudly display. Ultimately we trust in these earthly rewards for our spiritual well-being, just as others trust in money and possessions for their well-being. Whether our piety is spiritual or economic, we all have a “coin of the realm” we deal in and seek to store up for ourselves. If we were to lose that coin, we’d have nothing; so we guard it with our lives.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Rewards Rusted and Disintegrated: Left with Nothing*

Unless you're Gordon Gecko (the main character in Oliver Stone's "Wall Street"), that "coin" ultimately gets spent on earthly treasures that we consume and use up. Eventually we are left with nothing anyway. Even if you are Gordon Gecko, the world of hapless suckers is not an endless resource either. They can still perpetuate themselves, for now, but the world deteriorates until all your "coin" is worthless and you're left alone. That's just karma for the Gordon Geckos of the world, but what about for us? Well, we chase that dream that Gordon Gecko sells even though we've been shown hundreds of times how false it is. When you trust in earthly rewards, you have nothing to lose by going for the gusto. The sad part is, even in the attempt we lose. We have hung our hopes on everything but God-which makes us not only profitless, but worthless (and not just in human eyes).

PROGNOSIS: Saved by the Treasure from Heaven

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Rescues Us from the Evil One (v. 13)*

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." This treasure in heaven is coming to earth. In fact, he's already come in the person of Jesus. Treasures in heaven, Jesus commends us to store up, but heaven has been extended to earth in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. This is the kind of treasure you would sell all your possessions to acquire (13:44). In Jesus, God plants his treasure in our midst for us to find. It is in plain sight to all whose earthly treasures are crumbling to dust all around them. The truly desperate are rescued from their despair, and therefore from the clutches of the Evil One. And Jesus rescues them from (of all places) his perch at Despair Central (a.k.a. Golgotha), hanging on a cross with all the might of the Evil One pressing down on him. "Do not bring us to the

time of trial,” we are encouraged to pray. Instead Jesus takes our place and makes his own the time of trial we all deserve. The rust and disintegration that haunts our lives, feasted on him like a vulture feasted instead. And after that he rose victorious from those ashes to give us a new, heavenly, rust-proof life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting Jesus' Time of Trial (v. 13) As Our Own*

“Give us today our daily bread and forgive our sins”-just as God delivered the Israelites from hunger through the free gift of food in the wilderness, so also God delivers us from our hunger through the free gift of living bread (Jesus). This free gift has the added benefit of wiping away all our blemishes and restoring us to health. For those who hunger, there is no greater gift. We gladly sell all our perishable possessions—for whatever price we can get, even give them away if necessary—for the chance to acquire this heavenly treasure. This treasure can only be found when we are no longer beholden to earthly treasures, because earthly treasures cloud our vision. When we cling to money or things or prestige or popularity, the treasure from heaven is not picked up by our radar and we miss it. Wipe those things away, and it suddenly shows up for us to grab hold of, and no one will keep us from it or take it away from us once we take hold of it. That is the most concrete definition of trust: grabbing a hold of something (or in this case, someone) and never letting go. This treasure welcomes such a lasting embrace; Jesus yearns for it.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Practicing Forgiveness*

“...as we forgive those who sin against us,” continues the prayer. Grabbing hold of this heavenly treasure means sharing it with others who hunger for it and desperately need it. As if to underscore just how vital this is to Jesus’ ministry, Matthew

includes a curious tale about the ungrateful slave (18:23-34). If the gift is not liberally shared, it morphs into a curse (see 18:28-34). This treasure is like the jar of "very costly ointment" poured on Jesus' head (26:7). Our natural instinct is like that of the disciples: How wasteful (26:8)! On the contrary, wasteful in this case would be selling it for a large sum, even if the intention is to give it to the poor (26:9). Good stewardship is what the woman did. The same goes for forgiveness. Forgiveness from Christ is meant to be poured out liberally, in total disregard of conventional wisdom or societal scorn. To do anything less would be wasteful, for forgiveness thrives in excess, not in moderation. That also makes it a wonderful gift that has been left in our hands to distribute as we see fit. We have been empowered to forgive just as God forgives us, with the same divine authority. And we are freed from the need to impress others with our spiritual prowess and judge the spiritual prowess of others. Forgiveness can be practiced in secret if necessary for the one being forgiven. In any event, what gets shown and told is not our own piety but the spiritual prowess of Jesus the Forgiver.