

Ash Wednesday – Epistle

From Enmity To Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you.

And on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing

everything.

DIAGNOSIS: Enmity

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *“Liar, liar,...”*

Paul is upset that the veracity of his good news is being disclaimed. Like him, none of us appreciates being called a liar (6:8). Being called a liar raises our defenses and causes us to get mad at the person who dared to insult us. To avoid an angry response, we sweetly reply “liar.” In other words, we say, “You exaggerate,” or, “He misspoke,” or “What he really meant to say was... .” To avoid the label of “liar,” we may hide the truth to protect ourselves when we have not completed a task we were asked to do. When asked to account for what we did, we may announce we did it even though we forgot to. We do such things to protect our image of competence and worth. That’s the moral side of truth and lies. Now imagine the complexity of discerning truth-tellers from liars in our pluralistic world: In this setting, one person’s truth about God is as good as another’s, so that even veracity is not enough to make one’s view point better than the next.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *“...pants on fire.”*

Paul attempts to prove the integrity of his message by listing all he has done to prevent obstacles from blocking anyone’s way to hear him. He is not self-serving or doing this to get money. He has suffered beatings, hunger, and hardships (6:4). We will back up the truth of our words with experience, with more experience than others; with the authority of being an eyewitness because no one knows better than the one who was there. Paul and we defend our understanding of God with ourselves and our doings and our worth. Just as we lied to

protect our image, we now base the worth of God on what we have done. We do not base it on Christ or the goodness of his news. We treat Christ's sacrifice as if it were in vain (6:1). In the church, the status of the pastor and the size of her church and her involvement in synod committees or books written are more important than the goodness of the news. We do not trust what Christ offers. It's not enough. We have to make it better with what we do. We even take death, the reason we try to have an understanding about God, and lie about it. We say that it is natural and a part of life. We say that our soul freely gets heaven without God's permission. We will say that we have been good enough (another lie) so that we are guaranteed heaven, leaving unresolved the cause of our lying (the cause being our lack of faith). Christ is not needed. We have better ways to get to God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Ashes to Ashes*

When we try to make things better with what we do, we cover up with a lie what we have not done. We disregard what Christ has done. When we disdain Christ, it is no longer the day of salvation (6:2). Now is the time of trial. The outcome of that trial is that not only are we guilty of perjury, we are guilty of not having faith in God. We are sentenced according to the standards of justice. To have lied about God by saying that Christ is not enough means that we are left without Christ, and without God's mercy. And we are left with God's enmity and the grave, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

PROGNOSIS: Reconciliation

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The one who "lied" in a tomb is now risen.*

God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be our sin (5:21). God did this so that in Christ we would be the righteousness of God (the righteousness of God being what God does to make us right with

God). However, that declares our other ways of trying to be right before God a bunch of lies. We kill Christ on the cross for calling us a liar. But God raised Christ from the dead! Here is the event that cannot be overcome or hidden by our lies. God has made Jesus to be God's very rightness and goodness! God has made Jesus the only way for us to have victory over death. God has raised Jesus to be the way to heaven.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *We “lie” in Christ.*

Even better, God puts us into Jesus so that we have what Jesus got—resurrection and God's goodness and God's heaven. We are put into Jesus by God's Word spoken to us in forgiveness, in baptism, in the Lord's Supper. God speaks God's Word of salvation now in Christ (6:2). In Christ we are reconciled with God (5:20)! Christ is thus given to us as God's way of salvation, a more winsome way and more sure way than the ways we pretended were true.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Free to live in Christ.*

We are free to say we are not good enough, as we do in the Ash Wednesday Confession. We no longer have to lie to protect ourselves, but get to say that Christ is our rightness with God. We confess that Christ gets us God's righteousness and not our love for our neighbor. We have Christ's goodness so we do not need our pride and hypocrisy, not our self-indulgent ways, not our envy or intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and especially not our negligence in worship (which is another way of saying that Christ's way is not needed). We have Christ's goodness, freeing us from God's enmity and from a troubled conscience, and freeing us to give that goodness to those around us.