

# Ash Wednesday, Gospel, Year B

## REWARDING PIETY

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Chris Repp

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.”

**DIAGNOSIS: Boondoggle** –noun. Work or activity that is wasteful or pointless but gives the appearance of having value.

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Self-Serving**  
Public piety is our problem behavior, our surface symptom. We practice our faith for the benefit of others, so that they may see what good, respectable, devout people we are. That is so say, we practice our faith for our own sake.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Earthly Treasure**  
We do this because our hearts are directed toward ourselves rather than toward God. This makes us hypocrites and frauds, says Jesus. But our self-esteem is dependent on what others think of us. We crave approval. We put stock in status and recognition.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Ruin**  
In our quest to deceive others with our showy spirituality, we end up fooling ourselves as well. The opinions of others are fickle and fleeting. Our stock crashes, and our reward is worthless. We may fool others and ourselves, but we cannot fool God, whom we have neither feared, loved, nor trusted.

**PROGNOSIS: Infrastructure** –noun. The basic physical and organizational structures and facilities needed for the operation of a society or enterprise.

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Bailed Out**  
For no good reason that we can fathom, we are too beloved to be left in our ruins. God in Jesus Christ comes to rescue us from our destitution. On Ash Wednesday we hear that the cross, which was his ruin, is the means by which he takes on our debt and

gives us his good name in return. He frees us from our boondoggle and recruits us for to a grand infrastructure project aimed at restoring the fallen creation.

#### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Heavenly Treasure

This unexpected, undeserved gospel redirects our hearts to the source of our rescue and opens our eyes to the inestimable value of what God is up to for the sake of the world.

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Secret Service

Now the practice of our faith, properly directed toward God, actually does benefit others. In faith, our prayer becomes secret, but constant. In love, our almsgiving becomes anonymous, but generous. In hope, our fasting, hidden from others, becomes a joyful discipline of thanksgiving and recommitment to God and God's reconciling and reconstructing mission.