

Ash Wednesday

PRACTICING WHICH RIGHTEOUSNESS-OF THE LAW OR OF CHRIST?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1 “Beware of practicing your piety [literally, “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 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 the 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 so 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, so that, 18 so 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; 20

but store up for selves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Diagnosis: The Bankrupted Righteousness of the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *“Beware of Practicing Your Piety before Others. . .”* (v. 1)

It may seem strange that “practicing your piety before others” could be dangerous, but that is what Jesus says. What does he mean? First of all, the word “piety” is better translated “righteousness,” since it is the Greek word “dikaiosunhn.” “Piety” in this case isn’t private religion, but everything we do and, hence, is by nature public, that is, “before others” (v. 1). Everything we do in life is an expression of our piety, of our righteousness, of the basic “rightness” (or lack thereof) of our being relative to all others-including creatures and the Creator, whom we claim as “Father.” Jesus thus says “beware” because we are always on display, always under inspection. What’s more, earlier in this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciple: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God” (5:20). Given that seriousness, who among Jesus’ listeners doesn’t practice his or her piety with extreme caution? Of course, we do-as does the whole world that also knows something of this demand of Jesus, a demand which isn’t original with Jesus at all, but is a demand of God’s law, made public through the presence of all those others in need of our alms (v. 2) and our prayers (v. 5) and our frugality (v. 16).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Hypocrisy: Practicing Your Righteousness for Show before Others*

The danger in practicing one’s piety, however, is not

necessarily or primarily in the potential failure of our outward expression of it-our insufficient alms giving, prayer, or frugality-though that happens, also, all too often. After all, the Pharisees (i.e., those who were often most conscientious about the law's demand) are exemplary in this regard and, yet, they are the very ones whom Jesus identifies as in the greatest danger. True piety or righteousness, in other words, is not just about the outward act, i.e., the righteousness or piety of works, but the inward reason or basis for doing the act. That inward reason, so Jesus says, is what defines the act, because it ultimately identifies who the real actor is-righteous or unrighteous. "Beware" that you do not "practice your righteousness" for show, says Jesus, that is, "in order to be seen by others" (v. 1), in order to be "praised by others." To practice your righteousness for that reason is "hypocrisy." It is to practice your piety not for the good of those in need, but as a covering to keep secret from the world your own lack of righteousness. Such outward righteousness is a ploy to keep secret your own inward disregard for the needy and a hoax to elicit a praise from others that you are not worthy of. In reality, it is hypocrisy-no righteousness at all! The danger, in other words, about which Jesus is warning us, is this: Do not believe that the covering of our works is what makes us righteous. Works righteousness may keep secret from the world and from ourselves our deep-seated unrighteousness, it may get us praise on the street or the synagogue, but it doesn't change the inward fact of our basic unrighteousness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – A Bankrupt Piety: The God "Who Sees In Secret"

While it is true that our works may be able to keep our fundamental lack of piety or righteous secret from the world and even ourselves, the deeper truth is that we cannot keep it "secret" from God-and that is the clear and present danger that

Jesus is here warning us of most of all. Don't rely on your works for righteousness. For God "who sees in secret" sees what is really going on in us. God, who sees through us from the inside to the outside, cannot be fooled. God knows a bankrupt, hypocritical piety when he sees it. Moreover, he may even allow it to have its due (earthly) reward of be "praised by others" on the streets and in the synagogue (vv. 2, 5, 16). But God himself will not praise that kind of righteousness nor will God reward that kind of righteousness with the kingdom of heaven. That reward belongs to a righteousness or piety that is far richer and that far exceeds anything the Pharisees can do or imagine.

Prognosis: The Righteousness of Christ, our "Treasures in Heaven"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Father's Secret Reward*

Throughout the passage Jesus identifies God as "your Father" (vv. 1, 3, 6, 18). That is significant. Normally, the God "who sees in secret" and "who judges in secret" and "who leaves us bankrupt in secret" is a hidden God, as hidden to us as our lack of righteousness. But the God whom Jesus reveals here as your Father "not only sees in secret" (i.e., sees through us) but, surprisingly, "rewards in secret" (i.e., sees us through). That's the difference between God as "hidden God" and God as "your Father." But there's more! God as your Father also reveals his rewarding secret to us-and what is that secret? Well, Jesus Christ himself-the one who is not only graciously giving us this warning, but the one who makes that warning gracious by fulfilling the Father's secret plan. And the plan is this. Jesus takes upon himself our bankrupt righteousness, puts it to shame and defeat on the cross, and rises up to establish for us a new kind of righteousness, based on his filial relation to the Father, one characterized as a storehouse of "treasures in heaven" (v. 20). True, the world, which "sees NOT in secret,"

may not sing in the streets and synagogues the praises of his cross, death and resurrection as the secret to a new and exceedingly more rich, kind of righteousness. But the secret is now clearly out in Jesus Christ! It was publicly displayed at Calvary, publicly witnessed in his resurrection, and is still being publicly proclaimed by the Church.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) – *Believing Is Our “Seeing In Secret” and Being “Rewarded In Secret”*

The secret reward that Christ has won in his death and resurrection is received by faith. Faith is not only our “seeing in secret” what God “sees in secret”—namely, our unrighteousness as repentance—but also being “rewarded in secret” with what God “rewards in secret” (namely, accounting Christ’s righteous as our own). That all this happens inwardly by faith, where “others” in the world cannot see it, is all part of the Father’s secret play. For the righteousness of Christ, the righteousness that “exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees,” is so secure, so certain, so non-ostentatious, that it doesn’t need public recognition. It is quite content with knowing that God sees it in secret our faith in Christ and rewards that faith as righteousness.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) – *Practicing the Secret Righteousness of Christ before Others*

The “secret” character of the Christian’s righteousness, namely, that it is an inward righteousness based on faith in Christ, is also the “secret” of its practice. The Christians no longer takes their cues for practicing their righteousness from the Law that pressures from outside, but from Christ who dwells within. As Luther says in his “On the Freedom of a Christian,” the Christian ethic is “spontaneous love.” It is not an ethic that asks, “Will I be seen as right if I do this?” That is an ethic based on the outward demands of the Law. Rather, the Christian ethic asks “Is this what my neighbor needs?” It is an ethic or

practice of righteousness that is based wholly on the love of Christ for others. True, Christians still give alms, pray, live frugal lives, etc., but not because they become righteousness by doing so. Rather they do all these things because their neighbor gets cared for by doing so. If you would ask such a faith-righteousness person, "What do they get out of doing good for the neighbor?" they'd probably look at you strangely and say "What do I get out of it? That never crossed my mind. But now that you ask, let the 'secret' be out: nothing, because I already have everything-treasures in heaven-through Jesus Christ."