

Ash Wednesday, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when 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. "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Dust you are; to dust you shall return. There's an ugly black smear on your forehead, but it's nothing like the blackness of your heart. Everyone alike is marked. Whether the skin on which the ash was smudged is taut or wrinkled, whether it risks being smeared on fancy clothes or thrift store bargains, whether you've spent all day at the office or the hospital, you are marked by sin.

2 The church has a remarkable power to level the playing field. While the world exalts the rich and powerful, the popular and successful, the church doesn't care. There are plenty of ashes for everyone. There are no degrees in the church, no castes, just sinners. The same is true of those outside the church, as well, sinners there, too, all of them. There are only two kinds of people in the world: those willing to admit their sinfulness and those unwilling.

3 You are dust. Your best attempts at righteousness are filthy rags. And even when you do practice righteousness, isn't it much more like a show, a production, so that others will notice? Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Would you still do good works if you got no recognition for them? When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. When you give to the needy, do not expect acclaim, a memorial plaque, or even a

“thank you.” But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not pray so that you will be seen or heard by others. And when you fast, do not fast so that others will notice and have pity on you for your hunger. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

4 If you’re chiefly thinking about yourself when you do good works, you’re sinning. Even acts of self-discipline in Lent, prayer and fasting and alms-giving, are designed to get you to think about yourself less. Repent. Dust you are.

5 Dust you are, and dust you would have remained, were it not for one thing. The Lord of creation, the Word of God that spoke you into existence, the Word through whom the Creator scooped dust from the earth to make Adam, became dust. God took on the dust of human flesh, was born of a Virgin. God took on your dusty, dirty, earthy existence. He became flesh and was like you in every way except He was without sin, that is, He was not bound to return to dust, not destined to die.

6 You are dust, but the black smudge on your forehead is not shapeless. The symbol of your mortality is made in the sign of the cross, the symbol of the mortality of your Lord. He who became dust to redeem dust, Jesus Christ, took your mortality, took your sinfulness. Even on Ash Wednesday, even with the smear of black ashes on your forehead, even amid the somber season of Lent, there is hope. All your sinfulness is gone, all the blackness of your heart is cleansed, all your guilt is taken away, punished through the death of Jesus on the cross.

7 Those who do good works for show have already received their reward in the praise and admiration of others, but you who have received the reward for the righteousness of Jesus have a reward yet to come. Until then, with sins forgiven, with selfish motives erased, you’re free to pray, fast, and give alms. The purpose of these Lenten disciplines is to sharpen your focus on your Lord and to serve your neighbor, both while drawing your attention away from yourself.

8 And even now you have a guarantee of your eternal reward. The Lord who came to be dust and bear the consequence of your sin in your stead, who marked you with the seal of His cross in Holy Baptism, gives you proof of your eternal reward. You don't need to wait for the return of Jesus to know His goodness toward you. He gives you Himself—His flesh is true food and His blood is true drink—for the forgiveness of your sins. Where the treasure of forgiveness of your sins is, your cleansed, renewed heart is also.

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Soli Deo Gloria
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