

Ash Wednesday

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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

On Ash Wednesday, we think of our own responsibilities. Conflicts within church may often stem from judgements made of the 'other' as hypocritical. Texts such as this lend themselves to misuse, especially within a conflict situation. Today, we are considering what practices we may follow that are like the prayer on the streetcorner; more for show than for love itself. Perhaps in our generation, we may find it easier to brag, blog or tweet about our beliefs than to serve, love, and cherish others.

'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' Jesus closing words are a good starting point for reading this passage. It is too easy to simply read the passage one way, pointing a finger at the hypocrites, and not reading it as a challenge to our own piety. If we ground ourselves before starting with the idea of our personal unique treasure, and why we value it, then we might find the passage easier to hear.

What is your treasure?

What would you say were the most important things in your life?

What is the true purpose of religious faith or practice?

What is the most precious thing about your faith for you?

Does your 'treasure' and your 'faith' bring about a conflict in your heart?

Text

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"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. "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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who

sees in secret will reward you. “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. 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. “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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Comment

The conflicts in this text leap off the page at us. There is no need for deep reading or careful analysis to see conflict on almost every line and it is a conflict started by Jesus. He sets up two groups of people, the audience, and the ‘hypocrites’. The charge of hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another, is one of the strongest reprimands Jesus uses, in Matthew 23 he preaches against hypocrisy, ‘For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.’

Here the hypocrites are accused of using religious ritual as a means of receiving praise from others. Whereas the audience are instructed not to be like the hypocrites, for whom receiving that praise in the moment is their reward, but instead to pray to God in secret, and God who sees in secret will reward the audience in due course.

Assuming that hypocrites will always be ‘other people’ is the danger for the reader, or for the member of Jesus’ original audience, disciple, follower, or casual passer-by in first century Palestine. We are reminded throughout the passage that human actions are what are being judged here. In the story of the sheep and the goats later in Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus describes two groups again, sheep who have done what God wanted without necessarily knowing it, and goats who have not done what God wanted. It is not the profession of faith, but the actions of kindness that Jesus judges.

Deciding that other groups, whose ecclesiastical or theological ideas are not the same as your own, are ‘the hypocrites’ is not an armchair sport devised by Jesus to keep us guessing. Seeking out people with whom we disagree, online or in person, just to tell them so, is not the solution Jesus sets out for us here. Instead we are called upon to act in accordance with God’s command to love our neighbour, and to do so in secret. The eternal judgement is God’s alone, not ours to measure or weigh our fellow Christians.

Conflicts within church may often stem from judgements made of the ‘other’ as hypocritical. Texts such as this lend themselves to misuse, especially within a conflict situation. This is why it is important to come back for a second time to the idea of heavenly treasure. What is it that we treasure most? Why is that the dearest thing to us? What does it say about God that he gave us this treasure as a gift? How do we understand this treasure to be eternal?

Once we have identified our treasure, some conflicts may be solved by reordering our priorities. It may be that if we focus on what gives our spirits treasure, move our prayers and our good deeds into the private realm, and refuse to try and expose the hypocrisy of others, the issue we felt was an unsolvable conflict will in fact

slowly diminish for us.

Response

Sometimes we offer rewards for the return of lost property, or to help obtain information about a crime. At other times the reward which comes from a good ethical choice is more subtle, but is there nonetheless. Think about a time when you did a good deed, without meaning to be rewarded for it, but in some way or another you did receive an immediate positive experience.

How does it feel to be rewarded?

How does it feel to be helped without being able to offer a reward?

OR

In Jesus' day news was shared mainly by word of mouth and the street corner was a hub of social interaction, gossip and news. In what ways would you see social media to be the street corner of today? What would be your definition of a 'troll' or 'trolling' behaviour? How do we share news of the good things we have done, and are we rewarded by tweets, likes, shares or followers? Is your social media set up in such a way that you are kind to others, and your good deeds are done in secret?

Prayer

God of the secret, who seeks out those who love in secret;
who care in secret, work for the poor and the outcast,
but not for praise or immediate reward,
enable me to be braver in my secret kindness,
respectful of others, gentle in my heart,
repenting of my hypocrisy and any harm it may have done.
God of the secret, hold my heart in secret,
that it may begin to dwell on earth with the priorities of heaven.
Through Jesus Christ who offered treasure that will not spoil or fade,
AMEN
