

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday + February 17, 2021
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Dust and Treasure

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them," says Jesus, "for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." Why?

Because you are dust, and to dust you will return.

"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." Why?

Because you are dust, and to dust you will return.

Giving to the needy is a good thing. You should be giving alms to those in need, because the Lord gives you what you have to use in service to others. It's not necessarily something you want to do, because you only have so much for yourself; and it can be frustrating because you might be giving to a thief or a swindler. Giving alms means sacrifice. It's a noble work. But even when the cause is totally righteous, you don't want to make a big deal out of it – not to other people, not even to your other hand. Why? Because you know how your mind works: as soon as you do something out-of-the-ordinary nice, you start to think you're kinda special. Then you start thinking giving to others is what makes God love you. You start to think you're pretty cool for being nice above and beyond the norm. Strangely enough, you don't spend much time wondering why this *is* out of the ordinary: after all, if helping others is abnormal, then normally you're not helping others. If love for your neighbor takes extra effort, then you're naturally not a very loving person. This also means that your kindness to the needy doesn't stop the corruption of sin, but you'll always be tempted to believe that it does. Put no trust in yourself: instead, give without pride or the hypocrisy that follows. Or, as Jesus says, "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." Do good, but never think that doing good makes you good. Trust solely in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites," says Jesus. "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." Beware of how you pray. Why?

Because you are dust, and to dust you will return.

Again, prayer is a good thing: alms are about how you treat other people, and prayer indicates how you treat God. The problem is that you're tempted to get prayer wrong, and think that it's an exercise to make God love you more. In other words, you start to think, "If I pray, then God will love me." That's totally backwards: that's like saying, "If I ask my mom and dad for stuff, then they'll be my parents." That's sort of the thinking of the public prayer "experts" of Jesus' time, the sort that believe that every good work is a chance to make God notice you and love you a little bit more. However, the only reason to pray is because God already loves you: He already considers you a beloved child for Jesus' sake, and that's why He wants to hear you pray. Public prayer is just fine: the prayers of the church follow this sermon. However, you being you, if you're asked to pray publicly you either look forward to praying in front of people because you like how you sound, or you're terrified of praying out loud because

you don't; but both attitudes are focused on *you*, not the Most High who is listening. Pretty self-centered, huh?

But that's only the little problem. The big problem is that if you think you can earn God's favor by your spectacular prayers, then you don't think that you're a sinner who's saved solely by the grace of God. Beware of turning prayer, this gift of God, into a work that you do for salvation. So, says Jesus, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." Make it not about your show, but about His promises. Trust solely in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites," says Jesus, "for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward." Why?

Because you are dust, and to dust you will return.

If alms are about your neighbor and prayer is about God, fasting is about your relationship to you. Let's face it: fasting isn't fun. Denying yourself food is never easy, and you consider it a major effort when you manage to skip dessert; and if you're pragmatic, you only welcome a Lenten fast because you need to lose a few pounds that have stuck since the holidays. If you're ready to congratulate yourself because you passed on the cheesecake after dinner, you're always going to think that you're going above and beyond what God should require whenever you give up a bad habit or avoid some little temptation. This again is backwards: God doesn't say, "If you make enough sacrifices, I'll make you My child." He says, "I've already sacrificed My Son to redeem you. You're already My child, so don't keep doing those sins that would kill you once again."

So when you fast, don't put on a show as if you're doing something great for God. Fast to remind yourself how little you would have if God didn't do great things for you. Or, as Jesus says, "When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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." Just as He already has.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal," says Jesus, "but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." Why?

Because you are dust, and to dust you will return.

What condemns you goes so much deeper than what you do, and that is the solemn proclamation of Ash Wednesday. What condemns you is your sinfulness, the truth that you are corrupted by sin and unholy before God. What you *do* is a little thing – what you *are* is the problem: sinful. You can change what you do by giving, praying and sacrificing; but you cannot change who you are. Think of it this way: a leper who gives alms, prays and fasts does a lot of good things, but he is still a leper. The same is true of any sinner.

Thus the solemn proclamation of Ash Wednesday: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The imposition of ashes is a helpful rite. It is also about as far from a sacrament as you can get. Sacraments are a great treasure of God which deliver grace and salvation. Ashes, like dust, are worthless. They just smudge and make your forehead dirty. It is not my favorite thing to put ashes on your head, look you in the eye and say you're going to die. It's a stark proclamation of the Law that the wages of sin is death. I like y'all, and I like y'all alive. It's tough to tell you that, apart from Christ, you're a bunch of dust that's just holding it together for a little while.

But you're not without hope. It's just that your hope isn't in you (and your giving and praying and fasting), but in Christ. And, knowing your sinfulness, there is no sweeter news to you than the Gospel. For you, Jesus Christ became flesh – the same sort of flesh that you have and that is slowly failing you; except that, being without sin, His flesh did not fail Him. Because of your poverty of sin, He became poor so that He might give you the riches of His grace. Because your prayers would otherwise go unheard, He prayed that His Father's will be done and then went and did it for your salvation. Because your fasting could get you nowhere, He made Himself nothing and went to the cross. He didn't have to die. But He did – in your place, for your sin. He was laid in a grave, but He didn't return to dust. He rose again on the third day with forgiveness, life and salvation for you. "For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

For His sake, you have life. As God once formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so the Holy Spirit breathes life into you by His means of grace.

As you feel the streaks of ash on your forehead, you remember that you have much better, for the Lord has written His name on you in Holy Baptism, as He did for little Bridgette Josephine today. Christ has shared His death and resurrection with her and with you already. Even though you die, yet shall you live.

As you hear His Word, you hear Him speak life into you even as He spoke through Ezekiel to give life to dry, dusty bones.

And at His Supper, He gives you His incorruptible body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins: where yours is returning to dust, His strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. Life everlasting! That is a treasure given to you, because Christ Himself is given to you. And where Christ your treasure is, there will your heart also be – along with the rest of you redeemed.

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