

Ash Wednesday—March 5, 2025

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

“[Jesus said:] ‘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.’” That’s an interesting statement Jesus makes at the beginning of the Gospel reading you heard a few minutes ago. It’s convicting as there is a warning about trying to live a life before others so that you would be seen by them and they would be impressed with, “your righteousness.” Seek this and there is no reward only condemnation. Trying to practice your righteousness to seek the approval of others or only when it can be seen is hypocritical as it looks for blessing not from God who is the true source of righteousness but finds treasure in the vanity of the world and things which perish.

Jesus makes the point further as he goes on in that Gospel reading, “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. 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, 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. 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.”

The heart matters to God. He teaches you this throughout the Scriptures. Jesus teaches you what your life is to be and where your heart is as you do these real things in this world and the spirit by which you do them. That gets to what this day is in the Church Year. Ash Wednesday and starting Lent is a call to humility. It’s a call to humble yourself before God who searches and knows hearts and judges with a righteous judgment. The Lord calls you to examine your life according to his word and he exposes that your heart has not served the Lord, your neighbor perfectly and completely. You have sought the approval of men or had ulterior motives when you have done even things which are good and commanded by God or you have neglected. Whatever the case you have indeed sinned against the Lord for you are a sinful from the time of your conception and these actions both done and undone are the fruits of original sin. To make the point even further a few minutes ago you were told, “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Men and women of dust don’t have anything to brag in themselves about only that they are heading closer and closer to the grave. Ash adorns your head as you see this all around you. Ashes are sign of shame, guilt, and a sign of repentance.

The wake-up call, then, is for all of you. It’s to listen to God who says to you what the Prophet Joel wrote, “‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.’” Repent and return to the Lord.

When your heart is not repentant your heart is not with Jesus, but your treasure is found in yourself who is returning to the dust. Some treasure, huh? This treasure, though, is a false treasure, a false righteousness that leads to hell. If sin does what it wants, the Holy Spirit and faith are not present. Being a hypocrite who boasts in yourself all the while refusing to repent has no place in the Kingdom of God. For St. John says 1 John, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning . . . and he cannot keep on sinning.” And yet it is also true when St. John says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” That’s the danger you are called to see and what your Lord says to you not only this night as Lent begins but each day.

You see, repentance looks outside of yourself. It doesn’t delight in your sin and the fact you are a man of the dust. It doesn’t look for a righteousness in yourself or whatever you think that may be on your own. It heeds the voice of Jesus who said, “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.” Jesus teaches you this even as he shows

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himself to be your treasure whose life is truly righteous, whose death atoned for your sin, and who is risen from the grave proclaiming to you that on account of him you are righteous before the throne of God. This is what you have as you are baptized and a new creation, a new man in Christ.

The significance of your baptism is to be lived out daily so return to those waters. Your baptism has given you a new life and a new righteousness which is not your own. Luther sums it well in the Small Catechism when he draws upon Romans 6 and what such baptizing with water indicates, “It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

The Epistle reading also guides and teaches you in a very practical way what your life in Christ should like as you desire in your new man’s heart and mind to live in accord with God’s word where true treasure is found. “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

God does not delight in sacrifices rather a broken and contrite heart he does not despise. Men of dust need deliverance; they need salvation and righteousness that comes from another. Repentance knows that treasure, God’s treasure, is found in his mercy in Christ. Baptized into Christ you have that mercy, and you have been given what your Lord has done for you. To repent is to confess your sin and trust solely in Christ for your forgiveness and deliverance. In the Introit these words from Psalm 57 were sung, “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge. He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me.” Without Christ you and I are lost forever. You see, though, God is in his mercy has come down from heaven and has saved you. God’s heart toward you in Christ is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Your Lord shows you, you man of dust, mercy. He takes those filthy rags of sin upon himself and suffers on the cross for what you deserve. Rather than boasting in your sin and living unrepentant lives the Lord has been publicly shamed, ridiculed, and crucified as he took your sin and the sin of the world upon himself. In return he gives you a real and lasting righteousness, his righteousness and that’s a treasure without compare.

Each Lent God calls you to remember all of this and examine your life as you gather to hear his word and look toward the cross of Golgotha on Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. He calls you to remember what you have already in the waters of your baptism, and he warns you about the danger you walk in this world from your own sinful flesh, the devil, and the fallen world around you. Let it not be said of you that your treasure is in the things of this world which are here today and gone tomorrow nor let it be said of you that you boast in things which God clearly calls sin and you to turn away from lest you perish. Christians repent and you are called to repent each day. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

With renewed vigor hear all this today and cling to Jesus who is the second Adam, the man who does not see corruption and goes down into the dust but instead redeems you by his blood. Know with confidence that your sin has been put away and you have a new life in Christ that seeks him and his righteousness. You are baptized and God’s name is place upon you as he has claimed you as his own. Now even though you are a man of dust you are an heir of eternal life. Even if your body does return to the dust, that is goes to death, and your body decays your Lord is the Lord who doesn’t despise what he has made but shows you mercy and forgives your sin. You see in your future the Lord raising your body up no longer as men of dust but men of immortality and incorruption even as Jesus is raised and the first fruits of them that sleep. That’s all yours and your treasure you have through faith and a real lasting righteousness

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that confesses this to the world around you. Your reward is given on account of Jesus, your righteousness. He is your treasure. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

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