



Sermon Notes

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Unused Sermon:

First Ordained what Fr. Dan Told about dealing with family struggles then walking into church for a service.

Righteousness focuses on the State of Mind

Piety is defined as a religious devotion or spirituality or a mixture of both.

Piety in Scripture is only found in 1Tim 5:4 Honoring and respecting parents

Relative is Acts 17:23 Greek to worship.

Devotional life is a way of communing with God.

Pitfalls of religious behavior -- Piety intended to garner notice from others is not piety.

Need proper motivation behind religious acts.

Same with Wealth, Wealth is a great gift to be generous with, not for accumulating earthly stuff.

Too bad no one observed Ash Wednesday during the first century.

Jesus could have had a ball with it, given his penchant for directing special criticism toward religious people and their overt expressions of piety. Smudged foreheads are public expressions; as Jesus knew, all public religious statements can bear witness to the gospel or ensnare us in games of spiritual self-congratulation.

Preachers and the liturgies they employ need to find ways of explaining the purpose of Ash Wednesday and Lent, for these observances are postbiblical inventions. A sermon on this Matthean passage might take up the topic of how people conduct a devotional life as a means of communing with God. In the text Jesus highlights the pitfalls that accompany religious behavior, warning that piety intended to garner notice from others is really no piety at all.

The Context: The Sermon on the Mount

Scholars debate whether Jesus' Sermon on the Mount addresses those who are already disciples or those who may yet enlist. But when we consider the overall scope of Matthew, it becomes unnecessary to force a choice on that issue. The audience that first heard the Sermon as a piece of the Gospel of Matthew clearly was a collection of religious folk who knew the importance of particular religious acts. In the first part of the passage (Matthew 6:1--6, 16--18), Jesus does not instruct people to begin giving, praying, and fasting. He grants that faithful people rightly do these things. What Jesus addresses is the proper motivation behind religious practices. This theme makes these verses interesting for Ash Wednesday, when religious folk fill the pews and most seekers stay away.

The Sermon focuses on the righteousness (*dikaiosunē* in Greek) that characterizes the kingdom of heaven. Our passage stands within a series of illustrations of this righteousness (note the context set by 5:20; 6:1 [where the NRSV renders *dikaiosunē* as "piety"]; 6:33). In contrast to a Pauline understanding of *dikaiosunē*, the Sermon describes "righteousness" mostly in moral terms. Still, righteousness that is part and parcel of the kingdom of heaven is not merely a list of actions to be performed. Although Jesus insists that certain behaviors are utterly vital for a life of faith, his greater point is that righteousness encompasses the focus and state of mind that motivates and sustains one's actions.

Part One: Matthew 6:1--6, 16--18

The lectionary offers a passage best understood as two separate pieces. The first comprises three similar sections. (By skipping over Jesus' extended comments on prayer in 6:7--15, the prescribed reading emphasizes the parallel format of the sections.) Each section addresses a practice of individual piety that was widely commended in the Judaism of Jesus' time, and also part of the earliest Christians' devotional repertoire. In addition, other Jewish teachers used language similar to Jesus' to condemn those who paraded their piety for public show. The Sermon on the Mount therefore reminds us just how indebted Jesus was to Jewish ideas and teachings. Far from being a criticism of Judaism and its practices, the Sermon reiterates the thoroughly Jewish identity of Jesus and his message.

The opening verse (6:1) summarizes the point of the first part: if you act in a way designed to secure the notice of others, your deeds of "righteousness" yield no reward. Note that this does not disallow public piety. Jesus warns against perverted piety or piety misused for public self-aggrandizement. Those who do this are hypocrites, and they forfeit reward from God.

Hypocrite is a Greek term for stage actors. It did not necessarily carry connotations of an underhanded person who intends to deceive, yet in Jesus' day the word was sometimes associated with false godliness. Ancient actors wore masks, literally hiding their true selves behind a false identity. This image, when used to criticize those who display piety in particular ways, suggests a degree of pretense behind their actions. Jesus' criticism goes beyond saying, "Hey, you aren't doing that correctly!" It is more severe: "What you are doing demonstrates that you are not really the person you want us and God to believe you are!" False practice and false identity are familiar themes in Matthew's Gospel, which elsewhere

reflects Christian communities struggling to discern friends from foes (see Matthew 13:24--30).

The idea of *reward* resounds in 6:4, 6, and 18, verses that speak of God giving back. God's reward does not fulfill a precise *quid pro quo* or necessarily indicate something earned. It refers to benefits conferred in the consummating of the kingdom of heaven, just as so many Matthean parables emphasize a coming judgment and God's distribution of privileges or punishments.

When working with Jesus' instructions about giving, prayer, and fasting, preachers should note that he gives burlesque descriptions of pious behavior. The idea of sounding a trumpet when giving money is a joke; no one would do such a thing. Yet the overkill acknowledges that people sometimes give to make public declaration of their own authority or importance. That kind of motivation would have received no argument from the Roman patronage system, in which gifts obliged recipients to return favors or loyalties to givers.

Like the trumpet, the images of keeping one hand from knowing the other's actions, praying on a street corner, praying in utter secret in a closet, and purposely soiling or contorting (these are better translations than the NRSV's and NIV's "disfigure") one's face also inject humor. But the humor intensifies very serious warnings. Charity is not charity when an intent to garner attention and influence lies behind it. Prayer is not prayer when the one praying is more interested in calling attention to one's own efforts, eloquence, or importance than in conducting honest communication with God. Fasting, which enacts humanity's utter dependence upon God (fasting in scripture has connections to repentance, petition, lament, and the yearning for God's justice), instead mocks that dependence when the fast is poisoned by attempts to impress others with the depths of the faster's devotion.

Likewise, those who view ashes on their foreheads as marks of religious achievement - like the adult equivalent of gold stars given for perfect Sunday school attendance - and those who peddle Lenten spirituality as a unique virtue have received their reward in full. Dust to dust, indeed.

And, of course, there is a rub for those of us who scoff at behaviors that strike us as excessively pious: the *refusal* to engage in certain acts of piety can lead to the same self-condemning outcome. Nonparticipation has its public, observable dimensions, as well.

Some people misread the Sermon on the Mount by interpreting the whole thing as a sustained warning to those who would brazenly presume they can achieve the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven by their own effort. Not so. Read on its own terms, the Sermon resounds with words of promise, beginning with Jesus' opening macarism about the poor in spirit. Our passage repeatedly assures that God sees and blesses our genuine service and worship. Jesus promises that people enjoy magnificent access to God, even -- or especially -- through the most simple and understated expressions of devotion.

An individual's religious practices, to be authentic, must concern a person's interaction with God. Jesus' point is not that *only* private or unobservable religious activities count for anything, but that believers should go about their devotion, in whatever forms, as if no one else is watching. Jesus' humor and overstatement underscore this fact: the ways of religious folk have a tendency to bring out our self-centeredness and ironically parade

our *impiety*. This is an important message for Ash Wednesday and for all of the Lenten season.

Part Two: Matthew 6:19--21

These verses introduce a new subsection of the Sermon (6:19--34) that addresses wealth, possessions, and the anxiety they foster. Preachers could end today's reading at 6:18 with a clear conscience. However, these are three important verses, even if their connection to what precedes them is uncertain.

In contrasting "treasures on earth" with "treasures in heaven," Jesus notes that our possessions and acquisitions are always corruptible, vulnerable, and temporary (see James 5:2--3; Sirach 29:10--12). Gathering "treasures in heaven" refers to conducting oneself in anticipation of God's judgment and reward. Jesus did not coin this expression, for many Jewish texts speak about living in such a way that one stores up incorruptible treasures, understood as good standing with the Lord, which manifests itself in eschatological reward. In Matthew's Gospel, this idea is consistent with the fullness of "the kingdom of heaven" and all its benefits.

The true value of monetary wealth, therefore, lies not in its power to accumulate possessions in pursuit of power and comfort. Wealth enables generosity, and a generous heart has its sights set on God. Jesus' statement in verse 21 works in two ways. First, our use of wealth displays where our hearts reside. The uses to which we put money identify what our innermost selves care for most deeply. Second, our hearts can be made to follow where our treasure goes. When we invest in certain charitable causes and people, our hearts will expand to care for them more deeply. This means that a person need not wait until she or he can muster enough heartfelt concern for the needy before writing a check. Giving a gift, putting money toward uses that promote God's vision of righteousness, may help a heart receive a taste of what God desires for the world.