

DUST

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 6, verses 1 through 6, and then skipping down to verses 16 through 21. In this gospel lesson, Jesus warns us against hypocrisy and teaches us where to find our true treasure. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 6, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

^{6:1} "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.

...

¹⁶ "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.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's hard to be good. "When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand" (Rom. 7:21). Sometimes it seems like Jesus isn't even that much help either. That probably sounds bad, so let me explain what I mean.

DUST (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

You would think that being a Christian would make the Law easier to keep. You would think that it would be easier to do the things we know are right. And it is, but it isn't. We have a new nature, born of water and the Spirit in Baptism. And this new nature seeks to do good works. But just because we desire, by this new nature, to do good works, does not mean we always succeed. And I'm quite sure you know what I mean. You've been there. You wake up in the morning full of resolve. You're going to be nice to your family. You're going to treat your coworkers with respect. You're going to put in an honest day's work, or you're going to do something helpful at home to help your family. You're going to watch your language a bit more today. You might even drive the speed limit. It could be these or any number of other things. Basically, in the morning you resolve to do the good things you know you should and refrain from the evil deeds. But how often, when you lay your head on the pillow, do you think back on your day and think, *That wasn't so good?* When we examine our actions in light of our best intentions, we usually come up lacking. We're optimists in the morning, sort of. And pessimists in the evening, at least if we're honest.

Martin Luther attached some prayers to the end of the *Small Catechism*. They're quite helpful. There is a morning prayer, an evening prayer, and prayers for before and after meals. Part of the Morning Prayer goes like this: "I pray that You would keep me this day from all sin and evil, that in all my thoughts and words and deeds I may serve and please You." It's kind of optimistic, praying that God would keep us from sin. But the Evening Prayer is forced to take an honest look at the day, so part of it goes like this: "I pray that You would forgive me all my sin and the wrong that I have done." And this is right. In the morning we should always pray that God would keep us from sin. And in the evening we should pray that he would forgive us our sins, because even if we pray to be kept from sin, we still fall into it. So what gives? Did God not answer the Morning Prayer? Because we did end up sinning. And if God didn't answer the Morning Prayer, what makes us think he'll answer the Evening Prayer to forgive us?

God answers both prayers. God does keep us from sin. The reason we still sin, then, doesn't have anything to do with God not answering prayer, but it has to do with us. Even though God has granted us faith to trust him and a new nature to serve him, our old self still clings to us, and so we still sin. Whether or not we sin, at least in part, still depends on us, and so we still sin. However, whether or not we are forgiven depends solely on God, and there is no conflict within him, so our sins are forgiven.

But what we see from this comparison of our intentions in the morning and our examination in the evening, is that there is a conflict within us. Being a Christian doesn't necessarily make our lives easier. Even within our own souls there is a greater conflict than there would be otherwise. Without Christ we would whole-heartedly serve sin. Our consciences would still accuse us, but our loyalty wouldn't be divided. But with Christ there is a conflict. The old self is still the same as it was before, but now the new self has come to life, and so we are constantly at war with ourselves.

Now, we have a tendency whenever we hear about this doctrine to think of ourselves as being this third party who chooses between the old and the new—kind of like the TV thing where a person has a demon version of themselves on one shoulder and an angel version on the other. And then the person chooses between the two. But that's not quite right. That's not how the Bible talks about the old and new natures. We don't get to be a third, independent party who has ultimate control over the two. That might make the conflict easier to manage,

but that's not how it is. We are only the two natures. We are the old, we are the new, and that's all. There is no third party there to mediate or choose between them. That's why this conflict is always raging within us, and that's why it's so frustrating. The new nature has good intentions, and then we sort of live up to them, but sort of not. And it tears us apart inside, because a Christian really consists of two opposing natures. This can actually make our lives as Christians less peaceful than they would be otherwise. The only peace we have comes from the forgiveness of our sins. If we seek to find peace in our own performance, we will either despair, or we will become hypocrites, concealing our unrighteousness even from ourselves.

So being a Christian—being born again of water and the Spirit in Baptism—it does strengthen us to obey the Law more, but it doesn't always feel like it's working.

And sometimes the stuff Jesus says actually makes the Law harder to keep. "The Sermon on the Mount" has a few examples of this. "The Sermon on the Mount" is this section of Matthew from chapter five through chapter seven. And it has quite a bit of moral instruction in it. It's not all moral instruction, but probably the majority of it is. It's the kind of stuff that makes you think, *Boy, if everyone in the world lived like this, the world would be a much better place.* It has things like the golden rule: **"Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them"** (7:12). Even people who aren't Christians like it. So they say things like,

I don't really believe in the God of the Bible, but I like the Jesus who preached "The Sermon on the Mount." Kind of like Gandhi, you know? If we all lived like that, the world would be a better place.

The problem, though, is that one of the things Jesus does with "The Sermon on the Mount" is prove that no one actually lives like that, nor could they if they tried. Jesus makes the Law impossible to keep, because it is, and he leads us to recognize it.

We see this in the gospel lesson for this evening. Jesus says, **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them"** (6:1). That sounds good, right? Don't be a hypocrite. Do good simply for the sake of doing good. In fact, it's sinful to do it for the purpose of being noticed. That's good moral instruction. We should all hear and obey.

But if we back up a little bit in the sermon, we hear Jesus say, **"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"** (5:16).

So in the one place, Jesus commands us to let our lights shine so that other people may see our good works, and in the other he tells us to beware of practicing righteousness in order to be seen by others. So which is it? Should we do good works in order to be seen or not? Should we let others see our good works or not? Jesus commands both. He seems to make the Law impossible to keep.

These commandments seem to contradict each other, but both are true and good. And it is possible to keep both ... in theory. The difference between these two commandments has to do with our motivation. And when we get down to examining our motivation, we begin to see just how wretched we really are.

The commandment to let our lights shine is about glorifying our Father in heaven. We are to speak and confess our faith in such a way that people know we are children of our heavenly Father. That's what it means to let our lights shine. We don't hide our faith, but we confess it

DUST (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

before the world. And then we are to live in such a way that is honorable and respectable, so when people hear our confession of faith and see our good works, they will glorify our Father in heaven.

That sounds pretty simple. But it's impossible to do this without becoming a hypocrite. We receive praise for our good works, and we kind of like it, so we begin to do good works in order to be noticed. If we examine ourselves honestly, we will find that, at best, we have mixed motives, and, at worst, we're completely self-serving. It's impossible to do a good work without sinning. So what should we do? When we notice a hypocritical attitude in ourselves, should we just avoid doing good works in order to avoid hypocrisy? Probably not.

Suppose you're driving down a country road in your Chevy truck. And you see a guy with a Ford in the ditch. What should you do? Should you stop and tell him he should have bought a Chevy? Should you just keep going? Or should you stop and pull him out? The taunting idea is out from the start. That's just mean. Maybe you should stop and help. But what if someone sees you helping him? And what if that's why you want to help—so you can be seen by others and praised for your kindness? Even if no one else drives by, the guy you help will obviously see your kindness. If the reason you help is to receive praise, that's sinful, even if that's only part of your motivation. It's hypocrisy. So if you stop and help, you will be committing a sin, even though you are doing a good work. So maybe you should just keep driving. But if you ignore someone in need when you can obviously help, that's a sin too. So you're stuck. Either way, you sin. So what should you do?

The answer to the ethical dilemma is that you should put your neighbor's need above your own personal holiness. You should stop and help the guy. And you don't need to give him a lecture about why Chevys are better than Fords. He might figure it out. And you don't even need to tell him that you stopped because you are a Christian. He might figure that out on his own too. The answer to the problem of what you should do is pretty simple: you should love your neighbor as yourself. And if you don't have a truck, I'm sure you can think of some other scenario where you have the ability to help someone out. In those cases too, our duty is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But the answer to our sin problem is more difficult. When we examine our motivations we inevitably find that even our good works are tainted with sin. So what do we do? We confess our sins; that's what we do. We confess that we are not the people we thought we were. We are not the people we want to be. We are "*by nature* sinful and unclean." Our problem with sin is not just the random misdeeds we commit throughout the day. The problem is much deeper, and the random misdeeds simply reveal this. The problem is our nature—the very essence of our being. We're not good people who happen to do bad things, we're corrupt people who do bad things because it is in our nature, and even the good things we do are at least sort of bad. That leaves us in a bad spot, because "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23a).

And this is what Ash Wednesday is about. We acknowledge our sin and our mortality in light of that sin. Ashes are a symbol of mourning. We mourn that we have been overcome by sin. Sin has become our master, and we are doomed to return to the dust from which we were taken. That's the curse God declared to Adam after the Fall into sin:

By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,

DUST (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

We use some of those words in our graveside liturgy. But we add a few words to the end of it, because what God spoke to Adam in the garden wasn't the end of the story. So we rightly add the end of the story. And for me, this is the most moving part in the whole funeral and burial thing. When we're standing at the grave, I get to take some dirt and put it on the head of the casket, saying, "Out of dust, you were taken. Unto dust shall you return. Out of the dust shall you rise again." Then, with my finger, I make the sign of the cross in the dirt. And I remember that somewhere, sometime, some other pastor made the sign of the cross on this dear saint's forehead when they were baptized. It's a sign of who they belonged to then, and who they still belong to. Jesus Christ has purchased them "with His Holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death" (*Small Catechism*, "Second Article"). So this dust isn't the end for them, and it won't be the end for you. We will return to it, but not forever.

Our treasures on earth will rust or burn or be destroyed in some other way (6:19). Even our bodies are fading. Today they are dying. Someday they will be decomposing. But we will be raised, for our treasure in heaven is Jesus Christ, and he will bring with him all who believe in him. He will share his treasure with us, and we will "serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (*Small Catechism*, "Second Article"). No more divided loyalties. No more of the corruption of sin. For you are his. He has redeemed you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.