

THE IDOLATRY OF HAPPINESS

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 6, verses 1 through 6 and verses 16 through 21. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 6, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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.

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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.”

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

The sermon is based especially on those last three verses: “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” (6:19-21).

Also consider Psalm 51:3:

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“For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.”

And verse 17:

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

And especially consider these verses from Joel 2:

“‘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” (2:12-13).

These passages teach us to despise the vain treasures of this world along with our sins, and instead to turn in repentance to our gracious and merciful Lord, seeking his Kingdom and his righteousness.

The purpose of Ash Wednesday is to weep, and mourn, and repent. We mourn over sin and death. We can look around the world and see much evil. But we especially look within our hearts, where any honest person will see every manner of sin and evil. We mourn over this. We confess that “we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.” And that confession should never be theoretical. In our corporate confession, we don’t name all of our individual sins. But there is a great value in going to private confession, so that we can at least name those sins we know and feel in our hearts. And this is why we often take a moment for silent reflection or we read the Ten Commandments before our corporate confession. We should think of our actual sins when we confess our sins, because those are the sins God responds to with forgiveness. And I want you to also know and feel that forgiveness in your hearts. That starts with confession, or mourning over our sin.

The other thing we mourn over on Ash Wednesday is death, which is the universal consequence of sin. Death is not good. It was not God’s good and gracious will when he created the world. He breathed life into man, and he intended that life to stay there for eternity. But death came into the world through sin, and it has spread to us all, and we all experience death. We watch people we love die. And, in the end, we also die. We mourn over this, because it is not right. We remember what the LORD God said to Adam on the day of his sin,

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
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).

This is bad. Let’s call it what it is.

A couple of weeks ago I came across a quote from a sociologist. I don't think he was a Christian, but this has been running through my mind ever since. He said, "Formerly, if men were miserable, they went to church, so as to find the rationale of their misery; they did not expect to be happy" (Philip Rieff, quoted by Carl Trueman, *Strange New World*, 171). I've been thinking about that and trying to process it. First of all, that's a generalization, and generalizations are, at best, generally true, but not universal. Nevertheless, I do think it is generally true, and it's helpful for us to recognize. We live in a time and place where we have come to idolize happiness. But the world has not always been this way. Consider this area of land a hundred and fifty years ago. Imagine walking up to a settler in the fall while he's chopping wood, and you ask him, "Are you happy?" I imagine he would say something like, "Happy? That's not one of my priorities? I'm just trying to make it so my family doesn't die this winter." Or go back to one of the great wars, and you ask a soldier at a battlefield chapel service, "Did that service make you feel happy?" Again, he would be confused and say, "Of course not, I'm just trying to understand this madness." Or go back to one of the plagues, and ask a mourner at a mass funeral for twelve of her friends, "Did that funeral make you feel happy?" She would say, "No, I don't even want to feel happy right now."

Perhaps our world has changed, and specifically our expectations of church. And I don't mean to say that the former times were the "good old days." Every time period has its problems. That's the reality of this fallen world. But to some degree, our attitudes have shifted to the mindset where we go to church in order to feel good. And in a consumeristic society, where we have dozens of choices of churches to attend, we might be tempted to attend whichever one makes us feel the best, rather than a church that tells us what is true. Sometimes, hearing the truth will make you feel bad. If you don't experience this at church, you can remind your pastor that sometimes, he needs to break your heart and stab your conscience. But that's not a normal thing in our world.

In our world, and I specifically mean the United States of America in the year 2025, we have come to idolize happiness. Our nation is even founded upon the principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Preamble of the "Declaration of Independence"). But I doubt our founders had any idea how obsessed we would become with happiness. We've become addicted to happiness like a drug. We live in easy times. I'm not going to say we live in good times, or even happy times. But we do live in easy times. We have countless ways to make us feel happy in and instant. They say, "Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy donuts, and that's pretty much the same thing." At virtually any moment, you can walk to your kitchen and grab something sweet to make your mouth feel happy. You can pick up your phone and type in "Nate Bargatze" – he's a comedian – and you can be laughing in twelve seconds. Or there are a hundred other forms of entertainment or pleasure that are within reach at virtually any moment. We live in such an easy world that it feels like there's no reason to not be happy all the time.

I remember an episode of a popular sitcom where one of the characters adopted the motto, "Here's to feeling good all the time." It didn't really work. In his book *Perelandra*, C.S. Lewis writes about a woman who discovers the most delicious fruit. But nothing could ever compare to that first bite. She looked for the fruit again, and maybe she even found the same fruit, but it was never the same experience. And her quest made her miserable. Or we've all experienced that meal when we were very hungry, and the food was perfectly delicious. The first bite makes us feel like nothing will ever be wrong again. So we keep eating, past the point of feeling full. Or we try to recreate the meal later, but nothing will ever recapture that first experience. That's the way we are with happiness. We've felt it before, we like feeling happy, and there are so many

means of feeling happiness, that we keep pursuing it. Something makes us feel sad, angry, or depressed, so we say, “I just need something to cheer me up.” So we entertain ourselves. But it doesn’t really satisfy. We feel like there’s no reason to ever not be happy. But it doesn’t work. The pursuit of happiness ultimately leaves us in despair. It’s like all the vain things King Solomon writes about in Ecclesiastes. He pursued everything he could think of: riches, fame, power, knowledge. But nothing ever satisfied, until he finally resigned himself to accept his station in life and do the work God had placed in front of him. He learned to rejoice when the time is right and weep when the time is right. Above all, he learned to fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl. 12:13). He found contentment under God’s gracious authority.

But our world idolizes happiness. And I think this is one of the reasons why there is so much depression today, especially among teenagers and young adults. It’s not the only reason, but it must be one of them. There is an expectation that we should be happy. So when we’re not happy, we feel that there must be something wrong with us. And so the tragic irony is that the pursuit of happiness leads to depression.

So here’s what I want you to think about: *Do you really want to be happy all the time?* The way we live might say, “Yes.” We pursue happiness. But take a step back and think about it. *Do you really want to be happy all the time?* When your friend suffers a tragic loss, and they’re telling you about it through tears, do you want to feel happy in that moment? When you see a terrible crash on the highway, do you want to drive by singing “If You’re Happy and You Know It”? When you commit a sin and you hurt someone you should care about, do you want to feel happy? Or do you want to experience guilt in that moment? When we step back and think about it, I hope we will all recognize that we want to feel grief with our friends. We should want to feel guilt when we are wrong. The person who does not feel any of that we call a psychopath, and they also don’t experience much happiness. We should not try to pacify our pain with the fleeting pursuit of happiness. Pain is not bad. We have an aversion to pain. We don’t like it. But pain is not bad. It is godly to experience sorrow. It is right to suffer. We might wrongly equate pain with evil. We might even think, *In the new heaven and the new earth, there will be no more pain* (Rev. 21:4). And that’s true. But why not? It is because there will be no more evil. Pain is the appropriate response to evil. We should feel pain. We should even want to experience pain. It tells us when something is wrong. To not experience pain is to turn a blind eye to evil. Without pain we would have little or no sense of right and wrong.

Do not pursue happiness. For one thing, it doesn’t work. But, more importantly, it is not virtuous. A woman was divorcing her husband, and not for a good reason. Her pastor told her, among other things, that this would have negative consequences on their children. She disagreed and said, “No. If I’m happy, my children will be happy, so I just need to do what makes me happy.” That’s an extreme example, or at least I hope it is. But we can talk ourselves into thinking that way. Have you ever heard someone say, or maybe you’ve said it yourself, “Don’t I have a right to be happy?” No, actually you don’t. Christians should not pursue happiness. We should pursue virtue. We should pursue love. And by that, I do not mean warm fuzzy feelings, but the virtue of sacrificing ourselves for the good of our neighbor. We should pursue godliness, that is, living in obedience to God’s commandments. **“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things”** – that is, the needs of your life – **“will be added to you”** (Matt. 6:33).

And so, as Christians, we accept pain, because it is the appropriate response to evil. In doing so, we follow the example of our Lord. Consider the way he responded to evil. The “very good”

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world he created was corrupted by sin, and it became subject to death. But he did not turn his eye away from this world. Instead he painfully turned his eye toward it. He resolved to love sinners who rebel against him. Of course, that caused him pain, both emotionally and physically. To love sinners meant that he would accept the pain our sin causes. And on the cross of his crucifixion, on a Friday afternoon, on a hill called “Golgotha,” just outside the city of Jerusalem, he experienced the pain of death. And not just any death, but, really, the pain of all death, which I cannot fathom, but so it was. He became sin for our sake, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). There was a redemptive purpose to his pain. He cancelled the debt of our sin. He swallowed up death for us. And so, having cancelled the debt of sin, which is death, death could not hold him any longer, and he rose.

In a lesser way, but in a way that is still powerful, our pain also has a redemptive purpose to it. When we acknowledge our guilt and confess our sin, we look to the cross, where Jesus atoned for that sin. God declares that you are now forgiven. When we weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15), we confess that death is evil. When we mourn, we agree with God that death is not his good and gracious will for us. And if it is not his good and gracious will, then death will not have the final word. He will do something about it. And so we mourn with an eye toward the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day when Jesus will appear in glory.

Out of dust, you were taken.
Unto dust shall you return.
Out of the dust shall you rise again.

Amen.

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