

# BE HUMBLE OR BE HUMBLED

## Ash Wednesday Meditation

March 2, 2022

**Matthew 5:14-16; 6:1-6, 16-18; 23:12; Romans 6:4**

In Matthew 5, Jesus tells His followers they are the light of the world. *"Let your light shine before others,"* He says, *"that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven".* And then, in the very next chapter, Jesus cautions against being too obvious about letting others see your good works. *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them,"* He warns, basically saying, *"Do it all in secret, then your Father, Who sees what is done in secret, will reward you".*

Huh. Which is it, Lord? What do we do? Do we shine our light for others and let them see our good works, or do we keep our light on something of a dimmer switch so people *don't* see our good works? While that last alternative might be a relief for some bashful Christians who are a bit awkward about publicly displaying their Christian piety and convictions, at first glance it does seem somewhat contradictory. However, perhaps it would be helpful to view these twin injunctions ... *"let people see your good works, but be discreet about it"* ... by seeing them as counterbalancing rather than contradictory. The primary concern here is, **"Who gets the glory?"**

Jesus encourages us to let our good deeds **show** and even **glow** so people may *give glory to God* from whom all blessings **flow**. The danger lies, however, if in doing good works you feel entitled to your OWN glory. Early Christians called this vainglory, the deadly sin of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. It's not about us! To GOD be the glory. With vainglory, you may dutifully follow what God demands, yet grow irritated when nobody notices you or gives you credit for being so righteous. Don't be like the hen cackling loudly when she lays an egg, as if to proclaim to any who would hear, *"Hey, LOOK WHAT I DID! Cluck, cluck, bwalk!"* Quiet down. You're a hen; you're supposed to do that! We are Christians; we are supposed to do loving and good and helpful and constructive and truthful things! And in doing so quietly without fanfare we will be imitating the God Who anonymously blesses us time and again throughout the course of our days. Jesus intimates God reserves a special reward for those who do such things knowing He is the only "audience."

These three disciplines mentioned in Matthew 6: giving to the needy (*or alms-giving or acts of love*), fasting, and prayer are meant to take the focus off ourselves, and they became the classic Lenten disciplines. However, human nature being what it is, Jesus warns how alms-giving, fasting, and prayer, all designed to guard our hearts, can all be corrupted by our hearts. There is sort of an Ash Wednesday "punch line" in Matthew 23:12: *"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Or, as expressed in the meditation title, *"Be Humble or Be Humbled."*

The Greek verb "to humble" has two distinct meanings depending on voice. Bear with me here through this little grammar lesson, but in the active voice (*where the subject does the action*), to humble, as in "to humble yourself," means to regard yourself as no better than anybody else. You quietly know and acknowledge you've may have been uniquely blessed, uniquely gifted, uniquely graced in ways that others have not because of opportunities and/or privileges you've been given, and you act accordingly. Humility expresses itself in that quality of character that does the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not out of any want for applause or payback or affirmation. "Humble" comes from the Latin root word "humus," which means "earth" or "dirt." From the same Latin root come the words *"humanity"* and interestingly, *"humor."* So, being genuinely human and having a genuine sense of humor and being genuinely humble are all etymologically linked with the idea of being, as we express it, *"down to earth."* God created humans out of the humus, the dirt and the dust of the ground. This is not just in the Latin language ... the Hebrew name *"Adam"* (*pronounced ah-DAHM*) is the masculine form of the noun *"adamah"* which means *"ground," "earth."* Adam's very name carries with it the source of our physical origin. As we will hear intoned at the end of tonight's service, *"From dust you came, to dust you shall return"*

Wearing ashes out in public can show you're not ashamed to be identified as Christian, that you're not ashamed of the Gospel. But what if doing that makes you proud of your humility? Some Protestants steer clear of ashes in keeping with Jesus' warning against practicing our piety in front

of others for show. Ashes are an ancient symbol of humility; but if we're not careful, ashes can become substitutes for the humility they symbolize. It starts by thinking that wearing ashes in public shows you're not ashamed of the gospel. But if that makes you proud of your humility, well ... you see the irony.

*Left out of tonight's meditation due to time constraints, but included in years past, is the following: Jesus says in verse 16: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show they are fasting ... but when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that it won't be obvious that you are fasting." In churches today, ashes are imposed and these words are spoken, "From dust you have come and to dust you shall return." Ashes are a symbol of dust; there is a bit of a play on words in the Hebrew vocabulary here: roughly transliterated, Dust is Aphar, and Ashes is Ephar. ("Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." is much more poetic in Hebrew.). I've gone back and forth on this over the years, trying to rectify the propriety of what is a public display of piety with what appears to Jesus' very strong admonition against it. Jesus says to the faster, "Wash your face!", and here we are in church liturgically dirtying our faces on Ash Wednesday. This seems disturbingly like the public "disfiguring of the face" Jesus specifically tells us NOT to display. Two things, though: (1) Jesus' words about piety in private are misinterpreted if they are used to suggest piety must not ever be public. Where else should you and I live out our piety BUT in public? If we are not publicly displaying our sincere piety, then I would say something is wrong with our piety! I believe Jesus' point is simply one of motivation. Are we "play acting" for the human audience around us, or are our actions truly borne of our love for God? I'm certainly convinced it is OK to bear public witness to our faith through discreet and tasteful outward adornment, be it on our clothing, jewelry, or foreheads ... symbols of our piety. (2) However, an alternative option we've offered here the past ten years or so may help better balance private piety and public propriety: In light of Jesus' imperative for proactive, but hidden, acts of spiritual discipline, those who desire ashes may have them imposed on your hand of action, as a discretely hidden reminder to you that Lenten disciplines are proactive; they are as much about DOING as they are about sacrifice. Or, you may opt for the traditional forehead imposition, which will be offered as well. If you choose to come forward, just indicate to me your preference by either holding out your hand or stand with arms at your side.*

There is something of a dark side to being humble. In the **passive** voice, the subject receives the action. Instead of humbling yourself, you **get** humbled by somebody else. In English, we make the distinction between humility with humiliation. We could interpret Jesus as saying in Matthew 23, "All who exalt themselves will be humiliated, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." The verbs "will be humiliated" and "will be exalted" are also in the passive voice. Theologically speaking, the passive voice is often known in the Bible as the DIVINE passive voice, meaning God is the One doing the action. Ergo: Humble yourself and God will exalt you. This is a good thing. Or, exalt yourself and God just might humiliate you. This is a bad thing. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord," exhorts James, "and He will lift you up."

You know, it's called the imposition of ashes for a reason. Humility is always an imposition. Nobody likes being reminded they are dirt and that their destiny is in the dust. Indeed we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But the reality and hope we celebrate and contemplate this season of Lent is this: Yes, we are dust, but that is not *all* we are! The Lenten goal is resurrection! That is the hope of the Lenten season! We are eternal beings inhabiting physical bodies of animated dirt, and as we are humbly reconciled to the eternal God through the grace and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we humbly put our lives in His gracious hands, He lifts us up, He exalts us, and when we depart this earthly realm, we will receive our ultimate exaltation for eternity as our earthly vessels return to dirt. He does not humiliate us; we become the recipients of God's grace, mercy, and love. We are dust, yes, but now we have an eternal destiny, a high purpose, a holy calling ... to be co-workers with God while we are in these physical bodies, going about the work of humbly bringing glory to our Father in the day we have. As Christians, we are "buried with [Christ] through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

New life is not one solely reserved for eternity. It begins here and now. We are given grace and a purpose and a promise of eternity. Yes, our bodies are still dust, but we are inhabited by a redeemed, eternal and living spirit that makes us dust with a high purpose and a holy calling .... to be about the faithful proactive work of bringing glory to God while we are able.

So let your light shine, with humility and quiet grace, yet also with boldness ... so others may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.