

ASH WEDNESDAY: FOR WHAT?

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Church's penitential season to survey our sin and death problem and prepare for God's solution in the passion and cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.



The traditional lessons for Ash Wednesday mark the frailty of human existence because we have a sin and death problem our own resources cannot overcome. We live under the curse of the ground that God pronounced after Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator. You know what we say when our loved one's have passed and their remains are laid to rest: *ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. On this day ashes placed on the forehead are to remind us of our death problem. It is contrary to the popular explanation of our age that death is an essential component to the life cycle. Rather, the death of all life that has come forth from the ground is because of God's curse in response to Adam's fall and loss of righteousness. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden to live under the twin curse of death, spiritual and physical, because they lost and lacked righteousness. In that day, they died and so did we. We have a death problem because we have a sin problem. We have become unrighteous and therefore dead in our trespasses. Death from the curse of the ground reminds of death from the curse of the Law. *Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them (Galatians 3:10)*. The bad news of the curse is that there is no life with God without righteousness.

The traditional lessons for Ash Wednesday would have us ponder the symptoms of spiritual deadness and unrighteousness. Not what they look like among hardened criminal elements; but rather, what do they look like among the religiously committed? What are symptoms of spiritual decay that can show up even in our lives, for instance, when we may be tempted to show others that we are very religious and godly? Such efforts miss the character of true godly piety which might be seen by others but never intentionally. True selfless love of the neighbor provides support in an unassuming way. Needs are met perhaps unnoticed by others but always seen by God. Jesus spoke about this kind of loving piety that fasts with clean shining faces and supports the poor where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3, 17). True godly loving actions are where your sacrifice and help are rather invisible. True godliness is spontaneously, joyful, unassuming, and never for show. Only God sees it at least as far as you are concerned.

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These observations exemplify that our problem of sin has produced, as Luther expressed, a mis-ordered life where loving devotion and our greatest concern are curved in upon ourselves. Moreover, the purpose of Ash Wednesday is not intended to motivate resolve to redouble our efforts to do better. Efforts to be self-less out of concern for your own spiritual benefit are defeated before they even begin. *You cannot become more selfless out of self-concern.*

The point of the lessons is this. By greater clarity about our problem of death, our shows of false godliness, and our inordinate self-love; God would have us heed His appeal. *Return to*

me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping, and mourning; 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. . . (Joel 2:12-13) Ash Wednesday is God's invitation to prepare with penitent hearts to return to His grace and mercy as He is poised to accomplish a redemption that overcomes our problems of sin and death. His plan is to have us travel with Jesus to Jerusalem where he will execute the deliverance we all need from the twin curses that hold us in death's grasp. With rent hearts - not garments or hand wringing - the gracious God intends to embrace us by the saving work of His Son. Let's face it. Penitent hearts are not easy to come by. Our sinful-self rebels against the idea that we cannot improve on godliness by our own resolve. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent where our God is out to remind us of our death problem and fashion repentant hearts. He provides us five weeks of Lent to survey our godless sinful condition in anticipation of the outpouring of his mercy and forgiveness in the cross of our Lord Jesus.

We need to remember that we embark not on a road to glory, but on a cross road, a cross experience, and a cross destination. We make our journey as baptized children of God who have already been united to Christ the crucified in whom we live and serve in His Church. So, we begin in and with the cross. On the journey and at our destination we shall meet up with Christ and his cross and thereby find ourselves, our true selves - apart from Him in His Law and in Him in His Gospel. We begin our journey reminded of our fundamental frailty, the death problem that reduces us to ashes. On the journey through the valley of the shadow, we shall meet and hopefully experience a death to sin from which we will find again for the first time, righteousness and life in Christ, now and forever. So, gather up your dust . . . and let be on our way.

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