

February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday 2021  
Real Christianity  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**Opening words:** According to the Revised Common Lectionary this is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the somber season of Lent. Let me say two things before I begin. First, Ash Wednesday and Lent are not Biblical. However, they are rooted in the tradition of the early church. It is a forty-day span of time from now until Easter, April 4. During this time, we focus on Christ's battle with sin. The 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays, because each Sunday is considered a "miniature Easter." Lent is a time of self-evaluation and repentance. Lent is a time to renew your desire to serve God. That is the first thing.

Second, in the Bible, ashes were always associated with humility and remorse. Repenting Christians would sprinkle ashes on their heads as a sign of their repentance. During 6th or 7th centuries, Christian churches incorporated that private practice into public worship. Instead of sprinkling the ashes on your head, the ashes would be rubbed onto the forehead in the shape of a cross, as a sign of repentance. The ashes are made from palms of the previous Palm Sunday. Having said these two things let us look at this evening's traditional Ash Wednesday text, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. Let me call this message *Real Christianity*.

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

**2** "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

**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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**5** "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

**6** But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**16** "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

**17** But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

**18** so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**19** "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

**20** But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

**21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We find ourselves in the sixth chapter of Matthew. It was written about the year 50 AD by the disciple known as Matthew, also called Levi. The Gospel was written to Jewish or Jewish-Christians crowd to prove to them that Jesus was their Messiah. The sixth chapter is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. The scripture is rich. The first verse of our reading introduces three acts of righteousness, giving, praying, and fasting. The entire reading can be distilled down to two words: real Christianity. Jesus wants our faith to be genuine. That is what Jesus is really saying. The Master does not want us to be hypocrites. He does not want us to say one thing and do something else. Jesus wants our faith to be genuine! Jesus wants our faith to be authentic. Jesus wants our faith to be real. So, when you give to the needy, pray and fast do not do it to put on a big show for this world. Do those things privately. Do those things to cultivate your relationship with God, so you can be more like Jesus. Being a real-Christian-sounds easy, but it is difficult. I hope you do not find the next line too shocking.

I was wrong! I thought you punch anything into the google search engine and get an answer, but I was wrong. As I prepared this message, I punched into my google search engine "Examples of Real Christians." I expected to get a list of names of martyrs or missionaries. Instead, I got qualities of a real Christian, things like loving unconditionally and always forgiving. One site made an interesting comment. They said in the history of the world there has only been one true Christian. His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and he lived several thousand years ago. That means the rest of us are failing in our Christian walk. That means we all have some work to do. I do not want to be depressing, but I do want to be honest. This evening I do not want to just challenge you this evening to do better. I want to help you do better. I am confident your faith will grow if you look at three things. If you are ready to look at those three things say, "**Amen!**"

First, on this Ash Wednesday, I want to **look at yourself**. When you look at yourself in a mirror what do you see? I do not mean your mother's smile or father's pattern baldness. I mean what kind of a person do you see when you look at yourself? Do you consider yourself a good person? I would guess that most of us consider ourselves good people. The reason we consider ourselves good is because we compare ourselves to the bad people in our community and the world.

If you look at the news, then you know the truth. There are some bad people in our world. Has anyone here looked at the local news or read the newspaper lately? Violence

has taken over both the city and the suburbs. Places that were once considered safe are now off limits. We have surplus of murders, abusers, drug dealers and sexual predators. We have suicide bombers and human right violators. There are some bad people in this world. Sin now comes in all sizes and shapes. It is impossible not to compare yourself to them. How can you not feel like a good person when you stand next to a suicide bomber? You can be honest with me? If you consider yourself a good person say, "**Amen!**" Are you a real Christian or are you a respectable Christian?

Second, on this Ash Wednesday, I want you to **look at Jesus**. When you compare yourself to a suicide bomber you reach one conclusion. When you compare yourself to Jesus you come to a completely different conclusion. The gospel story tells us how perfect Jesus was. Jesus was born in the ordinary way but lived an extra ordinary life. He never committed a single sin. His reward for the perfect life was to be executed like a common criminal. His perfection made him the perfect sacrifice for the world's sins. When you stand next to a suicide bomber you reach one conclusion about yourself but when you stand next to perfection you discover your flaws. If we compare yourself to this suicide bomber you look fine. If we compare ourselves to Jesus, then it is another story. Lent is a time to compare yourself to Jesus. Are you a real Christian or are you just a respectable Christian? We have some work to do. And all of God's flawed people said, "**Amen!**"

Third, and finally, on this Ash Wednesday I want you to **look at the cross**. The cross was a Roman form of execution. It was designed to make an example out of the criminal. The cross was a common site in the Roman world. Everyone had seen someone die on a cross. It is safe to say, Jesus saw people die on the cross before he went to the cross. He knew the agony that was waiting for him. The dying process took hours! It is difficult to look at the cross, but it is *important* that we look at the cross. The cross reminds us of God's great love for us. The cross calls us to rediscover the person inside of you that God intended from the very beginning. Are you a real Christian? Or are you just a respectable Christian? That is the question that haunts us every Lent. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Andrew Young (born 1932) was the fifty-fifth mayor of Atlanta. He and his wife did their best as parents. They had four children. They taught each one right from wrong and exposed them to what was important. One night they took their daughter to church to hear an African missionary speak. The speaker was powerful, and their daughter took in every word. Their daughter stayed behind when the program was over to get more information. On the way home she told her parents she believed God was calling her in to the mission's field. They dismissed those words as a school-girl's passion. Several years later, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Young stood at the airport saying good-bye to that daughter. She was headed to the mission's field of Africa. On their way home the Young's got into their car. They looked at the empty back seat. They fought back the tears and rode in silence. It was Mrs. Young who spoke first. She said, "Andrew, we always wanted to raise a respectable Christian. I never knew we were raising a real

one." It is the question of Lent. How many real Christians do you know? Perhaps, this is a better question. Are you a real Christian? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"