

Ash Wednesday; March 5, 2025
+ Matthew 6:1-21 +
"This Will Be Done"

"Be careful that you do not do your righteous works in front of people, so that they will notice. If you do, you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. So whenever you perform acts of mercy, do not sound a trumpet for yourself, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be praised by people. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. Instead, when you perform acts of mercy, do not let your left hand know what your hand is doing. Then your acts of mercy will be in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

"Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by people. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your private room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what others cannot see, will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not babble like the heathen, since they think that they will be heard because of their many words. However do not be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Therefore pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

"Indeed if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

"Whenever you fast, do not make yourself look sad like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show everyone that they are fasting. Amen I tell you: They have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that it is not apparent to people that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

According to the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, our Savior Jesus promises that heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will never pass away. And Jesus then draws this conclusion: if his words will never pass away neither will his Church, because his Church is built on his words. Jesus also said to his disciples, **"Whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon a rock."** Jesus is forever. So are his words. And so is his Church.

We are inheritors of his words that warm and shield us. We make coats out of wool and down and polyester and whatever will warm us. Jesus' Church weaves her warmth and protection out of Scripture and sacraments, out of God's commands and promises, and passes that coat down. But it never wears thin or wears out. Through every generation his words remain as strong, just as warm, just as protective, always keeping his Church alive through every storm.

To worship as true Christians is to start and end with these words of God. It begins with the name he gives us: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It ends with “Amen.” In between his name and his final word is our cloak to warm and shield, our feast to strengthen and sustain.

It is in this spirit that we must approach the sixth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. It is a long discourse, many words from our Savior. But throughout it Jesus warns: do not wrap yourself in your own sinful self. Do not step onto your journey to heaven alone and try to make it yourself. Those who go it alone make their march all about themselves. Jesus calls them “hypocrites,” people who present one face to the world while presenting another in private. To the world they present their good works, their fasting, their windy prayers, their faces sunken from fasting, their generous gifts of money. And people reward them approval and praise.

But that is their only reward. Because they have to go home, where only God can see. And he sees only them. He sees those works done not in repentance, not in faith, not in gratitude, not for God, but for them. Still wrapped in themselves, they have no reward from God, because none of it was done for him.

This is also an Ash Wednesday warning to followers of Jesus Christ. We must lose ourselves. We must forget ourselves. We must be unwrapped and freed from our sinful selves. And we must let God do this for us: **“Therefore pray like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”** God’s Word begins with his name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He alone is holy. He alone rips our sin away from and wraps us in the righteousness of Christ. He alone, through his Word of Christ, warms our hearts with the holiness of Christ. **“Your kingdom come.”** He alone brings his kingdom into our hearts by faith. **“Forgive us our debts.”** Here is where we lose our sinful selves and overcome all sin, as Jesus sprinkles his holy blood on us and wipes clean from our slate the debt of eternal punishment. **“Deliver us from evil.”** God delivers us from all evil, even the evil of hypocrisy that makes our righteousness all about us and what we do. He unwraps us from sin and overcomes us, and wraps us in his saving promises.

This is Godly repentance. It is Godly in two ways: it saves us from our sins and makes us right with him, because it receives Christ. It is also Godly because it is his work on our behalf. We do not ask him in the Lord’s Prayer to empower us to repent and believe and receive his kingdom and forgiveness and deliverance – no! – we pray in his holy name for him to do this in our hearts.

And then we become the people he desires. People who do not care if other people notice or praise our good works, only our saving and all-seeing Father who will reward them in heaven. People who show mercy without calculation, who forgive debts freely as God has forgiven ours. People who pray with faith in the one who already knows what we need before we ask it. People who may suffer in service, but only God would ever know it – never the world. People who use the gifts of God freely and generously with the our hearts set in heaven and not in this world.

In a few minutes we will pray the Lord’s Prayer together. It is the perfect Ash Wednesday prayer. It asks the Lord to work this repentance for us in the holy name we find in his Word: the Father who creates us, the Son who saves us, the Spirit who makes us holy through faith. It asks him to deliver the kingdom to us through faith in Son, for him to forgive our debts, for him to save us from all evil, for him to unwrap us from our sin and wrap us in the promise of his Word: all this is our ours in Christ, and the faith to believe it is his gift.

Jesus did not end the Lord's Prayer with "Amen." But we are right to end it that way. "Amen." This will be done, for his words, in which he has wrapped us, say so. Amen.