

# Our Father Who Sees in Secret

Ash Wednesday

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**A**lmighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (NRSV)*

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—<sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

<sup>12</sup> Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. <sup>14</sup> Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God? <sup>15</sup> Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; <sup>16</sup> gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. <sup>17</sup> Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

*2 Corinthians 5:20-21, 6:1-10 (NRSV)*

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>1</sup> As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup> For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have

helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup> We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup> truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup> in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

*Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (NRSV)*

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup> "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>5</sup> "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever 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.

<sup>16</sup> "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Today's readings, like Ash Wednesday, remind us that all is not right with the world. Most of us live in peace, security, prosperity, and health compared to most people in the world today. We are educated. We have advanced technology that makes life easier and

better in many ways. Nevertheless, we're all aware that there is much suffering and evil in the world.

Joel prophesied in a period of unprecedented power and prosperity in Judah. His prophecy is a response to a particular event. The nation's crops had been completely destroyed by a massive infestation of locusts that stripped the fields bare. Joel insists this is a judgment from the Lord for his people's having become complacent and satisfied with their outward show of religion, when what God really desires is heartfelt devotion to him. The alternative to devotion is God's judgment: the darkness and gloom of the Day of the Lord.

Broadly speaking, Joel was prophesying against religious hypocrisy. Like all hypocrisy, religious hypocrisy is behaving in a two-faced manner. It means appearing to other people to be devoted to God, when you're really not. The judgment that Joel prophesies for those whose hearts are not devoted to God is the natural outcome of human beings seeking fulfillment or peace or reality or affirmation from something or someone other than God. All is not right with this world, but all is completely and absolutely and eternally right with God. We can't hope to get things right by relying on anything this flawed and defective world has to offer, including ourselves.

Jesus is talking about religious hypocrisy in our gospel reading. But rather than directly warning his disciples of God's judgment, he speaks in terms of rewards. He says **“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”** The people who give alms to the poor, or

fast, or pray so that others will think they are spiritual and holy get their reward: the approval of other people. But the people who do these things not for other people, but for the Lord, get another reward: God himself. He is the treasure that never deteriorates, whose market value never declines, who can never be taken from us. All is right with God, and he makes everyone who lives in relationship with him right as well. He is our treasure if we see that in this broken world he is our only hope for wholeness and peace and joy. Our ashes are a stark reminder that we have no hope but in Jesus.

Hypocrisy is lying. It is living falsely. Sir Francis Bacon wrote an essay on truth in which he said that a man who lies **“is brave towards God and a coward towards men.”** We could put it another way: who are you afraid of? The liar and the hypocrite are more afraid of what other people think of them than what God thinks of them. Jesus tells us that if the reward we are after is other people’s approval, then that’s all we’ll get. We’ll be relying on the unreliable. All we’ll be left with is disappointment and ruin.

The problem, of course, is that we can see people, but God is invisible. We can get an instant reward when other people see the good things we do. God is invisible, but as Jesus says, he is **“your Father who sees in secret.”** He is not the meddling eavesdropper, or the computer hacker, who sees in secret, but your Father. He doesn’t have you under surveillance. He has complete knowledge of you because you are his beloved child, created in him and for him from before all time. He is utterly reliable and unchanging. He is our most treasured possession. Behaving as though the favor of other people is more important

that his favor is not only a tragic mistake, it leads to the inevitable misery of those who have put their trust in what will prove to be untrustworthy on the Day of the Lord.

I'm going to suggest a discipline for us all this Lent that will help us draw near to God and see him for who he is: reading the New Testament through in the 40 days of Lent. The Internet tells me that if you read about 8 chapters a day, you can finish the New Testament in 40 days. Each day will take about 30 minutes to read out loud at an average reading speed. Before you read, ask the Lord to open his word to you and teach you more about himself. This is just one way to draw closer to Jesus, and to seal your heart with his love and care for you and his desires for your life.

All is not right with the world, or with us. That is why our Father has sent his Son as one of us, to bring us back to him, so he can make us right again. So let's keep life simple. Let us live our lives as whole persons, completely given to our Father, who sees in secret. Let us allow him to mold our hearts and minds and behavior in him over our lifetime through prayer and giving and fasting in a living relationship marinated in his word. Let us enjoy him in secret all our lives long so that at the end, we can rejoice in him before angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Amen.