

If you are accustomed to attending Ash Wednesday services—or even if this is your first time—it is possible to have a moment of tension...when hearing Jesus say: “Beware of practicing your piety before others...” and then coming forward and getting smudged with ashes as a *public sign* of your penitence and mortality. Do you know what I mean?

Having come from a Protestant background, I did not even know about Ash Wednesday until I went to college, and once I started observing the day, I embraced the ashes as a tangible experience, unlike any I had had before, of my spiritual surrender to God. But I would usually refrain from wearing my ashes much beyond church—and that’s still usually true for me.

Other Christians intentionally embrace wearing the ashes throughout some, or all of the day--in public--either because they grew up doing that...or because they choose to push themselves past some self-consciousness in order to visibly claim their faith. I think either way of proceeding with the ashes is fine. As is, of course, choosing not to receive them at all.

Receiving ashes is not by any means a requirement for beginning a Holy Lent. But neither is it prohibited by Jesus, as I understand him. Jesus’ warning is about something else...a spiritual risk that follows any religious practitioner, like a shadow...*when our religious practice can become performative.*

Receiving ashes--or doing anything religious at all--“goes off the tracks” when it becomes some kind of *achievement*, some way to *think better of ourselves*, or *wanting others to think better of us*, or thinking it will *enhance our standing with God*. That is *performative religion*—and it is more about *us...* than it is *God*.

Of course, one way to avoid the risk of performative religion is *to just do as little as possible or nothing at all*. We can keep our religion all to ourselves...avoid saying anything religious anywhere...don’t do anything that might lead anyone to wonder that we might be religious...and be so consistently private about our religion *that eventually even we ourselves cannot even tell if we are*. I think Jesus would say, that in that case, it would be better to risk sinning...better to risk sometimes being performative about our religion...*than to be so invisible.*

To truly receive ashes—whether physically on our foreheads...or only mentally upon our minds and hearts—is actually to no longer need to perform...or to be constrained by a fear of performing. To truly receive ashes...is to be set free...for God.

We can surrender to God...making it possible to do the difficult thing of acknowledging our mortality.

We can surrender to God...making it possible to do the difficult thing of honestly acknowledging our sinfulness.

We can surrender to God...even God’s judgment...because as followers of Christ we have been taught to trust in God’s mercy.

We can surrender to God...and be set free...for God.

Free to live... into our endless future...with God.