

The #ashtag (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10)

## What would Jesus say about it?

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Hashtags are everywhere. The # symbol has become a ubiquitous modifier online, used to categorize tweets or status updates by a common theme.

There is #TBT (throwback Thursday), #chsocm (church and social media), #mondaymotivation, and so on. Meredith Gould notes in *The Social Media Gospel* that a hashtag makes searching for content easier and holds the power to create virtual community.

What about the #ashtag? It's used only on Ash Wednesday and features selfies of individuals sporting cross-shaped ashes on their foreheads. The #ashtag makes discovering ash-wearing individuals easy, and it creates a virtual community of Christians, a communion of saints, who are beginning the season of Lent.

Lisa Gutierrez [names](#) some strengths and weaknesses:

Pro: Sharing photos of your ashes shares the meaning of the day with the world and is a modern way to evangelize. Evidence: Some priests and ministers do it.

Con: The solemn reminder of the day—that humans are made of dust and to dust they shall return—is diminished and lost in smiley, happy tweets.

What would Jesus have to say about the #ashtag? His words in Matthew 6 warn of the dangers of practicing our righteousness before others in order to be seen by them. Jesus compels his followers three times—often a pattern associated with completeness and divinity—to fast, give, and pray, and to do these activities in a way that does not draw attention. Integrity in spiritual practice is between the believer and God; it doesn't involve the notice of neighbors.

A modern paraphrase might be, "Beware of #ashtagging your ashes, like those on Twitter do, in order to be seen by them. Those likes and shares will be their own reward." Be wary of using an #ashtag, since it can shift our treasure from a closer relationship with God toward increased popularity. Thus it seems a bit ironic to commit to practicing our piety in secret and then #ashtagging it.

That said, while Matthew 6 may warn us away from the #ashtag, our other readings for Ash Wednesday show that the #ashtag might have a role to play in our public expression of repentance. Joel 2 proclaims, "Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on God's holy mountain...call a solemn assembly; gather the people." In this digital age, the #ashtag serves as a modern-day trumpet, calling us to gather, repent, and remember. Approached intentionally, and perhaps limiting oneself to the #ashtag feed, Twitter could be a solemn gathering.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes himself and his cohort as "ambassadors for Christ." Paul might use the #ashtag and tag the Corinthian Facebook page. One well-worded tweet could implore on behalf of Christ, calling users to receive the grace of God and be reconciled to one another. For spiritual seekers, seeing the #ashtag used online could inspire worship or the desire to learn more about Lent, repentance, and the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

We must discern wisely the utility of the #ashtag for ourselves and for our ministry contexts. Fasting, prayer, and charitable giving can be done for self-centered purposes, and so too can our #ashtags. But whether we #ashtag or refrain, we can "like" and "share" God's love to our hearts' delight—remembering that God's grace and love are the everlasting common theme that holds us all together in the communion of saints.