ALMSGIVING

Be careful not to practice your piety before others in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward with your heavenly Father. When you give alms, therefore, do not blow a trumpet to attract attention, as do the hypocrites in the synagogue and in the streets, so that they may be glorified by others. Truly I say to you, they are having their reward at that moment. But as for you when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your almsgiving may be in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.
Matthew 6:1-4

Now we come to a new section of the Sermon on the Mount which begins in Matthew 6:1 and carries all the way to v.18. It concerns three important exercises of the religious life: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Jesus does not place these three practices under criticism. Jesus does not regulate them. What he does is pierce through to the motives that one has in performing them.

These three sections do not have a parallel in the Synoptic Gospels and as their stylized form suggests, were probably derived as a unit from the special oral tradition which was available to Matthew.

In the tradition of Jewish life, the linking of the three items – almsgiving, prayer, fasting – is found but in reverse order.

His disciples questioned him and said to him, "Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Shall we give alms?"
Gospel of Thomas 6

That these sections, *almsgiving/prayer/fasting* are parallel is evident from the words:
"Truly I say to you, they have their reward."
"to your Father who (sees) in secret (who is in secret) will reward you."

In addition to these verbatim parallels, there is also similarity in the structure of the three passages. Each contains the following with only slight variation.
"When" or *"Whenever you"* followed by *"do not."*
They have their reward" contrasted with *"but when you."*
The *"but you"* is followed by a *"so that"* and *"in secret."*
"Truly I say to you" concludes each section.

In an outline form, the pericope may be structured as in the following:
1) A general warning about doing righteous deeds to be seen by others.
2) The specific example of almsgiving.
3) the proper performance of almsgiving: *"in secret."*

Be careful not to practice your piety before others in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward with your heavenly Father.
Matthew 6:1

Though this is v.1, it actually stands as the rule for the entirety of vv.1-18.

The warning of *"Be careful"* admonishes the listeners or readers to avoid performing their righteousness, *their piety,* for the purpose of being seen by others.

The phrase *"to do righteousness or do piety"* is a Hebraic term found in both the Old and New Testaments.

For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring Abraham what he has promised him.
Genesis 18:19

Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.
Psalm 106:3

Thus says the LORD; "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.
Isaiah 56:1

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.
1 John 2:29

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.
1 John 3:7

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.
1 John 3:10

Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.
Revelation 22:11

The word *"righteousness"* as used here is to be understood in the broad sense of *righteousness*.

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5:20

The specific examples of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are three aspects of Jewish piety.

Just as in the antitheses, the supreme importance of motive – the *inner thoughts* – are what Jesus is getting at here. The deeds of the person should be a reflection of the inner thoughts resulting in motives that glorify God and not the individual performing the deeds.

> *The deeds may be thought of as the Christian's self-offering in "spiritual service" and may correspond to the demands of the Shema to love God with all your heart (prayer), soul (fasting), and might (almsgiving), with the order changed from the easier to the harder.*
>
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 138*

Jesus places a strong emphasis on the idea of performing deeds with the intention of being seen by others. The phrase *"before others"* is followed by and intensified with the following phrase *"to be seen by them."* So much so that this formula is repeated throughout all three aspects of righteousness.

Those who do their righteous deeds before others are described as *"hypocrites"* in each of the three following sections (vv.2, 5, and 16).

Matthew almost certainly has in mind the Pharisees since they are repeatedly described as *"hypocrites"* in Matthew 23 and of whom it is said that they do all their works to be seen by others.

The fact that Jesus tells the disciples that they don't have a reward in the Kingdom of Heaven if they need their deeds to be seen by others anticipates the stress on rewards in each of these three sections. Those who display their piety have already gained their reward.

> *When you give alms, therefore, do not blow a trumpet to attract attention, as do the hypocrites in the synagogue and in the streets, so that they may be glorified by others. Truly I say to you, they are having their reward at that moment.*
>
> *Matthew 6:2*

Giving alms here literally means *"to do an act of mercy."* By the time of the first century however, the term had become a technical expression for almsgiving.

> *I, Tobit, was trustworthy and behaved righteously during my entire life. I would help support my relatives and others of my country who were captured and taken with me to Nineveh in the country of the Assyrians.*
>
> *Tobit 1:3 Christian English Bible*

> *Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas; this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.*
>
> *Acts 9:36 American Standard Version*

It is difficult to know whether the reference to blowing a trumpet is intended literally or metaphorically. It is possible – despite a lack of solid evidence – that a trumpet was blown to draw attention to very large gifts, in order perhaps to encourage others to do similarly; on the other hand perhaps the association was made because trumpets were blown at fasts, at a time when large gifts were given to avert disaster. Or perhaps the sound is temple specifically for the collection of alms (the "Shofar-chests) in order to attract the attention of others. The point, in any case, is clear: the hypocrites did all they could to draw attention to their generosity.
Hagner – Matthew, page 139

The sense in which these persons are hypocrites is that their real motivation in their apparent pious conduct is self-glorification, so that they might be glorified by others. And this self-glory was sought after in the synagogue and in the streets which could be rendered as *in the places of worship and in the public sphere.*

For context, the word *"hypocrite"* in Hellenistic Greek commonly meant *"actor"* – one who performs in front of others, pretending to be something he or she is not. In the New Testament the word is used in a negative sense, and Matthew captures the duplicity inherent in hypocrisy when he records Jesus quoting the prophecy of Isaiah.

And the Lord said; "Because this people draw near with the mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.
Isaiah 29:13

The word itself occurs in the following:

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
Matthew 7:5

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, "The people honors me with the lips, but their heart is far from me."
Matthew 15:7

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?
Matthew 22:18

(For an absolute scalding use of the word, see Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

The response of Jesus to self-glorification is the formula, *"Truly I say to you."* This formula is found some thirty-two times in Matthew, more than twice as often as in any other gospels.

"They are having their reward" implies a temporary praise from others that will be all the reward they will receive. This stands in deliberate contrast to the statement at the end of each section that promises a future, eschatological reward.

And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

In the doctrine of the tradition of the Rabbis, almsgiving was promised a high return. Jesus' remark that those who give alms to gain the praise of others as already having their reward, must have had a stunning effect on those who heard him.

But as for you when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your almsgiving may be in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.
Matthew 6:3-4

Jesus tells his disciples that when they give alms, their almsgiving must be an act done without the aim to gain attention and admiration of others. In fact, it should be done so that even the left hand – in a figurative sense – has no idea what the right hand is doing.

This act would not border on one being self-conscious, but rather, unself-conscious.

Jesus said, "I speak mysteries to those who are worthy of my mysteries. What your right hand does, let not your left hand know what it does.
Gospel of Thomas 62

Righteous deeds are to be done in secret, beyond the attention or approval of any onlookers.

These deeds will not escape the attention of God.

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man look s on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."
1 Samuel 16:7

The idea of God who sees one's deeds in secret then rewards, finds a direct connection with the writing of Paul concerning one's being a Jew in secret.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.
Romans 2:28-29

The reward motif is important to Matthew, more so than in any other gospel.

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.
Matthew 16:27

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first. Matthew 20:8

The sermon has been concerned thus far with the defining of true righteousness by a correct understanding of the law. Now specific deeds of piety come to the picture of true righteousness. The practice of righteous deeds - here specifically almsgiving – in order to capture the attention and admiration of others cancels the possibility of any reward from God. The only reward such deeds receive is the momentary applause of the onlookers.

"They were not giving, but buying. They wanted the praise of men, they paid for it." (Davies – Allison), 1:582).

The deeds of righteousness performed by Christians will of course be seen by others. According to 5:16 followers of Jesus should let their light shine "before others (precisely the language of our pericope), so that they may see your good works." Although this at first may seem to be a contradiction, 5:16 goes on to say, "that they might glorify your Father who is in heaven," which is in bold contrast to the desire of the hypocrites that "they might be glorified by others" (v.2). Only deeds done for God's glory will receive an eschatological reward. This stress is in keeping with the emphasis on the inner obedience to God's commandments, which we encountered in chapter 5. God is concerned with the heart, with the motivation behind a person's deeds, as much as with the external deeds themselves. *Hagner – Matthew, page 140-141*