



January Sermon Series

Practicing Righteousness

Giving, Prayer, and Fasting

Practicing Righteousness: Fasting
Matthew 6:1-18, (focused: 1-4)
January 9, 2022

Main Idea: Following Jesus in giving is practicing righteousness

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 6:1-18, PARTICULARLY VERSES 1-4

Matthew 6:1-18

Giving to the Needy

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The Lord’s Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when 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.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,
¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Fasting

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.¹

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 6:1–18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Highlight – What stands out?

*Within this series you will start to see similarities, so this section should be fairly repetitive to lessons from other weeks. That's intentional because it will build literacy tools particularly when texts of scripture use repeated language (like this one).

1. Look at verses 1-4. Is there anything surprising to you about giving in this text?
2. Look at the entire text now. Do you notice any repeated words, phrases, or themes?
3. What do you learn about God as it pertains to giving? What do you learn about what God expects of us?
4. Look back at verses 1-4. What does Jesus say not to do? What Jesus say to do?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Look up the following verses: Luke 21:1-4, Rom. 15:25-33, Heb. 10:34, 2 Cor. 8:1-15. Based on these verses, what is the purpose of giving? How does giving serve God's people and his glory?
2. Look at Matthew 6:1-4 again. Based on these verses, what is the key component to practicing righteousness? What is Jesus most concerned about when we give?
3. Jesus says in verse 3: "Don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." What does this mean for giving?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. In response to question 3 in the Explain section, how is it possible to not "let your right hand know what your left hand is doing?" What would this look like in your life?

2. Look at Matt. 6:1-4 again. What are some right motivations for giving? What are some wrong motivations based on these verses?

3. As you look at your own motivations for giving and obeying Christ, can you think of a time where you obeyed him in giving (or another discipline) so others would notice you? Why is this dangerous? How did it play out in your life?

4. John Stott says: "Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation." What would this look like in your life? You have to keep accounts of what and how you give to some degree, but how can you practice self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice in your giving?

5. Jesus says that those who make their giving obvious have received their reward and those who do it in secret have received their reward from the Father. What do you think it means to receive your reward publicly? What is the reward for those who give in secret?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Is there a person or ministry in your life that you can give to this year even if it costs you significantly? Make a plan to give in this way.

2. Confess to God the times you have given for your own motivations. Write a prayer of confession and then remind yourself of the hope of the gospel that gives you the power to change and move forward in obedience.

Commentary

*For additional study on giving there are two resources listed below in the “Additional Resources” section that will help prepare you.

Taken From: [*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture*](#) by John Stott

^{6:7} *Beware of practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

The fundamental warning Jesus issues is against practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them. At first sight these words appear to contradict his earlier command to ‘let your light shine before men, that they may see ...’. In both verses he speaks of doing good works ‘before men’ and in both the objective is stated, namely in order to be ‘seen’ by them. But in the earlier case he commands it, while in the later one he prohibits it. How can this discrepancy be resolved? The contradiction is only verbal, not substantial. The clue lies in the fact that Jesus is speaking against different sins. It is our human cowardice which made him say ‘Let your light shine before men’, and our human vanity

which made him tell us to beware of practising our piety before men. A. B. Bruce sums it up well when he writes that we are to ‘show when tempted to hide’ and ‘hide when tempted to show’.¹ Our good works must be public so that our light shines; our religious devotions must be secret lest we boast about them. Besides, the end of both instructions of Jesus is the same, namely the glory of God. Why are we to keep our piety secret? It is in order that glory may be given to God, rather than men. Why are we to let our light shine and do good works in the open? It is that men may glorify our heavenly Father.

The three examples of ‘religious’ righteousness which Jesus gives—almsgiving, praying and fasting—occur in some form in every religion. They are prominent, for example, in the Koran. Certainly all Jews were expected to give to the poor, to pray and to fast, and all devout Jews did so. Evidently Jesus expected his disciples to do the same. For he did not begin each paragraph, ‘If you give, pray, fast, then this is how you should do it’ but ‘When’ you do so (2, 5, 16). He took it for granted that they would.

Further, this trio of religious obligations expresses in some degree our duty to God, to others and to ourselves. For to give alms is to seek to serve our neighbour, especially the needy. To pray is to seek God’s face and to acknowledge our dependence on him. To fast (that is, to abstain from food for spiritual reasons) is intended at least partly as a way to deny and so to discipline oneself. Jesus does not raise the question whether his followers will engage in these things but, assuming that they will, teaches them why and how to do so.

The three paragraphs follow an identical pattern. In vivid and deliberately humorous imagery Jesus paints a picture of the hypocrite’s way of being religious. It is the way of ostentation. Such receive the reward they want, the applause of men. With this he contrasts the Christian way, which is secret, and the only reward which Christians want, the blessing of God who is their heavenly Father and who sees in secret.

1. Christian giving (2–4)

There is much teaching in the Old Testament on compassion for the poor. The Greek word for almsgiving in verse 2 (*eleēmosunē*) means a deed of mercy or pity. Since our God is a merciful God, as Jesus has just emphasized, ‘kind to the ungrateful and the selfish’, his people must be kind and merciful too. Jesus obviously expected his disciples to be generous givers. His words condemn ‘the selfish stinginess of many’, as Ryle put it.

Generosity is not enough, however. Our Lord is concerned throughout this Sermon with motivation, with the hidden thoughts of the heart. In his exposition of the sixth and seventh commandments he indicated that both murder and adultery can be committed in our heart, unwarranted anger being a kind of heart-murder and lustful looks a kind of heart-adultery. In the matter of giving he has the same concern about secret thoughts. The question is not so much what the hand is doing (passing over some cash or a cheque) but

what the heart is thinking while the hand is doing it. There are three possibilities. Either we are seeking the praise of men, or we preserve our anonymity but are quietly congratulating ourselves, or we are desirous of the approval of our divine Father alone.

A ravenous hunger for the praise of men was the besetting sin of the Pharisees. 'You ... receive glory from one another,' Jesus said to them, 'and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God.' Similarly John the evangelist commented: 'They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.'⁴ So insatiable was their appetite for human commendation that it quite spoiled their giving. Jesus ridicules the way they turned it into a public performance. He pictures a pompous Pharisee on his way to put money into the special box at the temple or synagogue, or to take a gift to the poor. In front of him march the trumpeters, blowing a fanfare as they walk, and quickly attracting a crowd. 'They pretended, no doubt,' comments Calvin, 'that it was to call the poor, as apologies (sc. excuses) are never wanting: but it was perfectly obvious that they were hunting for applause and commendation.' Whether Pharisees sometimes did this literally or whether Jesus was painting an amusing caricature does not really matter. In either case he was rebuking our childish anxiety to be highly esteemed by men. As Spurgeon put it, 'To stand with a penny in one hand and a trumpet in the other is the posture of hypocrisy.'

And 'hypocrisy' is the word which Jesus used to characterize this display. In classical Greek the *hupokritēs* was first an orator and then an actor. So figuratively the word came to be applied to anybody who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is no longer himself but in disguise, impersonating somebody else. He wears a mask. Now in a theatre there is no harm or deceit in the actors playing their parts. It is an accepted convention. The audience know they have come to a drama; they are not taken in by it. The trouble with the religious hypocrite, on the other hand, is that he deliberately sets out to deceive people. He is like an actor in that he is pretending (so that what we are seeing is not the real person but a part, a mask, a disguise), yet he is quite unlike the actor in this respect: he takes some religious practice which is a real activity and he turns it into what it was never meant to be, namely a piece of make-believe, a theatrical display before an audience. And it is all done for applause.

It is easy to poke fun at those Jewish Pharisees of the first century. Our Christian pharisaism is not so amusing. We may not employ a troop of trumpeters to blow a fanfare each time we give to a church or a charity. Yet, to use the familiar metaphor, we like to 'blow our own trumpet'. It boosts our ego to see our name as subscribers to charities and supporters of good causes. We fall to the very same temptation: we draw attention to our giving in order to 'be praised by men'.

Of such people, who seek the praise of men, Jesus says with emphasis: *they have their reward*. The verb translated 'have' (*apechō*) was at that time a technical term in commercial transactions; it meant to 'receive a sum in full

and give a receipt for it'. It was often so used in the papyri. So the hypocrites who seek applause will get it, but then 'they have had all the reward they are going to get'.² Nothing further is due to them, nothing but judgment on the last day.

Having forbidden his followers to give to the needy in the ostentatious manner of the Pharisees, Jesus now tells us the Christian way, which is the way of secrecy. He expresses it by another negative: *But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret.* The right hand is normally the active hand. So Jesus assumes we shall use it when handing over our gift. Then he adds that our left hand must not be watching. There is no difficulty in grasping his meaning. Not only are we not to tell other people about our Christian giving; there is a sense in which we are not even to tell ourselves. We are not to be self-conscious in our giving, for our self-consciousness will readily deteriorate into self-righteousness. So subtle is the sinfulness of the heart that it is possible to take deliberate steps to keep our giving secret from men while simultaneously dwelling on it in our own minds in a spirit of self-congratulation.

It would be hard to exaggerate the perversity of this. For giving is a real activity involving real people in real need. Its purpose is to alleviate the distress of the needy. The Greek word for almsgiving, as we have seen, indicates that it is a work of mercy. Yet it is possible to turn an act of mercy into an act of vanity, so that our principal motive in giving is not the benefit of the person receiving the gift but our own benefit who give it. Altruism has been displaced by a distorted egotism.

So then, in order to 'mortify' or put to death our sinful vanity, Jesus urges us to keep our giving secret from ourselves as well as from others. By his words 'Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,' writes Bonhoeffer, Jesus 'was sounding the death-knell of the old man,'³ For self-centredness belongs to the old life; the new life in Christ is one of uncalculating generosity. Of course it is not possible to obey this command of Jesus in precise literalness. If we keep accounts and plan our giving, as conscientious Christians should, we are bound to know how much we give away. We cannot very well close our eyes while writing out our cheques! Nevertheless, as soon as the giving of a gift is decided and done, it will be in keeping with this teaching of Jesus that we forget it. We are not to keep recalling it in order to gloat over it, or to preen ourselves on how generous, disciplined or conscientious our giving may have been. Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation.

What we should seek when giving to the needy is neither the praise of men, nor a ground for self-commendation, but rather the approval of God. This is implied in our Lord's reference to our right and left hands. 'By this expression', Calvin writes, 'he means that we ought to be satisfied with having God for our only witness.'¹ Although we can keep our giving secret from others, and to some extent secret even from ourselves, we cannot keep it secret from God.

No secrets are hidden from him. So *your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Some people rebel against this teaching of Jesus. They neither want nor expect a reward of any kind from anybody, they say. More than that, they find in our Lord's promise of a reward an inherent inconsistency. How can he forbid the desire for praise from others or from ourselves and then command us to seek it from God? Surely, they say, this merely exchanges one form of vanity for another? Should we not rather give purely for the sake of giving? To seek praise from any quarter—from man, self or God—seems to them to vitiate the act of giving.

The first reason why such arguments are mistaken has to do with the nature of rewards. When people say that the idea of rewards is distasteful to them, I always suspect that the picture in their mind is prize-giving at school, with silver trophies gleaming on the platform table and everybody clapping! The conjuring up of this kind of scene may be due to the AV words 'shall reward thee *openly*'. This adverb should be omitted, however. The contrast is not between a secret gift and a public reward, but between the men who neither see nor reward the gift and the God who does both.

C. S. Lewis wisely wrote in an essay entitled 'The weight of glory': 'We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it.' Similarly we might say that a silver cup is not a very suitable reward for a schoolboy who works hard, whereas a scholarship at the university would be. C. S. Lewis concludes his argument: 'The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.'

What, then, is the 'reward' which the heavenly Father gives the secret giver? It is neither public nor necessarily future. It is probably the only reward which genuine love wants when making a gift to the needy, namely to see the need relieved. When through his gifts the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick healed, the oppressed freed and the lost saved, the love which prompted the gift is satisfied. Such love (which is God's own love expressed through man) brings with it its own secret joys, and desires no other reward.

To sum up, our Christian giving is to be neither before men (waiting for the clapping to begin), nor even before ourselves (our left hand applauding our right hand's generosity) but 'before God', who sees our secret heart and

rewards us with the discovery that, as Jesus said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'²

² Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). [*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture*](#) (pp. 126–132). Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.