

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

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Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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• CHAPTER TEN •

From Seeming to Being: The Deeds of Righteousness Considered

Matthew's Jesus has drawn his listeners into a new way of thinking about the law. His Great Antitheses revealed that the underlying and guiding spirit of the Mosaic code is more central to the emerging Christian community than its "jots and tittles" are. We are not only to observe the letter of the law by doing no violence to our brother; we are also to adhere to its spirit and refrain even from directing our anger toward him. We are not only to avoid retaliating against those who would harm us; we are even to love our enemies.

But sometimes, the Christian life is not about dealing with the crises that push us to our limits and test our faithfulness to the Gospel. Sometimes, the Christian life is about plugging along every day, living quietly and modestly as citizens in the kingdom of heaven. It is toward this part of Christian living that we now turn much of our attention in studying Matthew 6:1–18. These verses address the traditional Jewish practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. They also reinterpret these practices for the emerging Christian community.

† *Matthew 6:1 Practicing piety*

“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.”

1. What do you think “practicing your piety” means?
2. How do you feel about connecting the proper practice of piety with receiving rewards from God?

The introductory verse in this chapter speaks of “practicing your piety.” It is not a self-explanatory term, but raises several questions. What is piety? How should it be practiced? How is it connected to receiving God’s blessings?

An alternative translation may help us find some answers. The New International Version renders the verse this way:

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

By using “acts of righteousness” instead of “piety,” and by setting the phrase apart with quotation marks, the NIV leads us to consider the words of Jesus in a slightly different light than the NRSV does. The NIV suggests that Jesus is making reference to a specific set of practices called the “acts of righteousness,” rather than to general good deeds or pious acts.

The *Harper’s Bible Commentary* article on Matthew, written by Professor Emeritus Reginald H. Fuller of Virginia Theological Seminary, an Episcopal

institution, reveals just how important it is to gain insight into Jewish practices of piety when interpreting this passage: “The synagogue across the street had its own list of deeds of righteousness (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting). Matthew provides his community with the same list, but in each case the pious deed is radicalized.”¹

One is not to make a public show of his pious acts. To do so would lose God’s reward. By prohibiting acts of piety done with the purpose of being seen by others, Jesus protects his followers from image-oriented righteousness and hypocritical display. The people of Jesus are not called to *seem* righteous in the public eye; they are called to *be* righteous in the eyes of God. The verses that follow will develop ways to implement these practices.

1. The *Harper’s* commentary mentions three deeds of righteousness: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. What are your experiences with each? You may wish to consider those experiences as you study the following passages.
2. Do you see connections among each of these practices? If so, what are they?
3. The introductory questions asked how you feel about gearing your conduct toward receiving God’s rewards. What do you think Jesus means by that statement? You may wish to keep this question in mind as you proceed through each example.



† *Matthew 6:2–4 On the giving of alms*

20“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.

¹Fuller at 958.

³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

1. What images does this passage offer?
2. Have you been tempted to let your giving be publicly known? What did you do with that temptation?

The first of the three deeds of righteousness is the giving of alms, or donations, to assist the poor. Jesus’ words about it begin with a note of humor. There is no historical record that the Jews of his day regularly broke out trumpeters to call attention to the shekels they were handing out in the local synagogue or to the village beggar. On the other hand, the lack of a record doesn’t mean that events of that nature never happened. And, it is true that segments of the wider culture often did draw attention to their acts of munificence. The Romans considered the giving of huge gifts, such as public baths, or the sponsoring of huge events, such as gladiatorial games, to be acts of virtue that properly drew attention to the benefactor. So, while it is *not* clear whether Matthew’s Jesus was constructing a hypothetical situation to illustrate his point or simply describing something that was seen on occasion, it *is* clear that he was painting a picture of behavior that he considered ridiculous. Jesus uses the image of the trumpet calls to poke fun at those who make a show of their giving.

But there would also have been less ostentatious showoffs, those who waited a half-second longer than needed before letting go of a coin to a grimy, lame, impoverished man. That little half-beat would allow a few more people to see what the giver was doing. Similarly, some of the synagogue’s great benefactors might have tarried over the offering plate a little, fumbling with their large quantities of change long enough to catch the attention of more people.

Jesus equates this sort of conduct, playing the magnanimous and benevolent donor, with hypocrisy. We should be careful to understand what he means. During the time of Jesus, the Greek word translated “hypocrite” simply meant actor;² it

²Barclay commentary on Matthew at 188.

did not have the negative connotation of today. A hypocrite was simply someone who played a role. By using this term, along with a vivid illustration of a gift being announced with a trumpet call, Jesus unmask the actor. “We are not interested in the roles you play,” Jesus suggests. “We are interested in the person you are and the deeds you do—especially while no one is looking.”

But Jesus did not leave the topic with a simple criticism of hypocrisy. Had he done so, his departure to another topic might have invited cynicism toward the whole concept of almsgiving. Jesus instead moved past the hypocrisy-laced form of almsgiving and toward its true substance. It is a practice that remains essential to piety.

He first makes this point indirectly. Jesus does not explicitly direct his disciples to continue with almsgiving, as if the topic were even up for discussion. His expectation is that they will continue, as implied in the first five words of the passage: “So whenever you give alms” Jesus then directs them to undertake such actions privately—so privately, even, that one’s left hand is not to know what his right hand is doing.

What does this private style of care-giving accomplish? First, it does not draw undue attention to the act or to the beneficiary. The person receives something of value, but the world does not have to see him groveling in front of a benefactor to get it. The private exchange allows the recipient to retain whatever dignity his station in life allows, rather than submitting to an economic hierarchy that places him at the bottom, a dependent for all to see. The private giver is sparing him embarrassment—also part of the “spirit” of giving.

The biblical text reveals the proper spirit of the almsgiver. If one gives out of the generosity of his heart and in answer to God’s call, it is an offering of active love—*agape*—to another human being. The gospel is about self-giving love, not the all-too-human desire to impress.

Jesus makes the point through contrast with the hypocrite and his trumpeter. Acts that are motivated by self-aggrandizement are not proper examples of Christian behavior. They draw attention to us rather than to the God who cares for the needs of all and calls upon his people to serve those needs. I once heard how Mother Teresa claimed that God has no hands but ours, so that we must use them to serve his ends; otherwise, God’s purposes would remain unserved. By being God’s hands, we live in harmony with him. But by taking on the role of the hypocrite, we get all the reward we will receive in the “admiration” of others.

When we act privately, it seems, God rewards us. Does that mean God will give us more financial resources, so that we can be even more “generous,” so that God can give us more still, and so forth? Even keeping only a residual amount would give us a compound return on our own “generosity”!

While some would argue that this interpretation is consistent with the text, the Gospel is not best viewed as a spiritualized mutual fund. The rewards God offers when we serve the needs of others are more immediate and less tangible than future financial success. We may find God’s reward in the peace that passes understanding. We may find reward in the knowledge that, in one moment at least, we are living as God intends us to live.

Even if we conclude that almsgiving does not pay the giver financial dividends, the passage still leaves some questions for consideration. Two chapters ago, we saw how we are not to hide our lights under a bushel basket. The directions to let our light shine and give glory to God imply that others should be aware of at least some of the services we perform—perhaps even of our almsgiving itself. We are not to bury our acts of generosity so deeply that we fail to provide a light. If Christian service advances faith, hope, and love, and offers meaning to others, then perhaps acts of service should not be hidden too deeply.

Moreover, in twenty-first century America, institutions designed to meet human needs rely extensively on charitable contributions. These donations are tax-deductible—a benefit to the giver that is only available if the gift is reported on one’s tax return. While making a charitable gift, then filing a brain-numbing Form 1040, Schedule A donation record with the IRS, hardly amount to a trumpet call about our own generosity, neither are our gifts kept secret.

Similarly, charitable institutions like to recognize their donors. They hope that the example will inspire others to give generously. The donors’ friends and acquaintances might recognize a few names in the annual report and feel called to keep up with the Joneses—charitably speaking, that is. This practice, while not exactly a trumpet call, also invites the attention of those who support the organization’s charitable work. Where does the practice fit in with secret almsgiving?

If we were to take this passage in an overly narrow way, any public acts of generosity would become spiritually untenable. That decision could eliminate the offering of worthwhile examples to others. Worse yet, those in need may not

receive assurances that real people care and are willing to help them. Requiring too much anonymity could also make giving difficult to accomplish, as one would have to wait until no one is looking to do it. If that sort of secrecy would limit gift-giving to those in need, then where would that lead us?

When interpreted as a requirement to avoid at all costs letting others know what we have done, the passage would be about *us* and *our* ideas and *our* pious practices, rather than about giving alms to the needy and encouraging others. We would be mired in another form of self-absorption worthy of the hypocritical trumpeter.

What are we to do, then? How can we be faithful to the written word, and also to the spirit that animates it? As is often the case, we can find guidance in the text itself. Matthew 6:1, the introductory verse in this chapter, directs us not to do our deeds of righteousness “before others in order to be seen by them.” Similarly, Matthew 6:2, the introductory statement in the passage on almsgiving, uses the image of trumpeters announcing that a few coins are rattling around in a plate to illustrate how ridiculous it is to make a show out of our giving. Both verses point toward our motivation when giving alms.

The lesson is this: Don’t do it for show; do it for substance. By not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing and by giving alms secretly, we follow a path of generosity in sharp contrast to showmanship. Maintain people’s confidentiality. Take off the hypocritical mask. Do things for the right reasons. Remember that the act of giving alms is a response to human need. We are servants, not showmen. Act discreetly.

But also don’t purposefully hide good works under a bushel basket. That, too, is all about the giver rather than the gift or the recipient. A good example is still a good thing, even if it means risking the loss of a feather in your cap of righteousness because someone finds out.

1. The commentary urges us to be confidential, but not overly secretive, in our generosity. Do you accept that distinction?
2. One reason for the distinction drawn in question 1 is that others may see what we do and help the cause we are supporting. Do you agree with this as a practical application of the passage? Why or why not?

3. Jesus uses humorous imagery of pomp and circumstance announcing someone's separation from his loose change. How often do you take what Jesus says as humor? When is it appropriate to do so? How can we know?
4. How do you reconcile private action and public awareness in your own life? How do you remove the bushel basket so that your light can shine, without sounding a trumpet call in the process?



† *Matthew 6:5–8 On the practice of prayer*

⁵"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.

⁶"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.

⁷"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

⁸"Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

1. What images does this passage offer?
2. Have you been tempted to let your prayer practice be publicly known? What did you do with that temptation?
3. How do you compare your prayer life to the prayer life that Jesus describes?
4. What, if anything, does this passage mean for group prayer?