

# The Giving of Alms and Prayer

📖 Matthew 6:1-8

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Let's get our bearings in Matthew 5 so we can go into Matthew 6. There's not really that much of a break here so don't let the chapter division get in the way. What is the key verse of the entire discourse? 5:20, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." So the main idea is what? Righteousness. Jesus was insisting that the kind of righteousness necessary for that generation to enter the kingdom had to surpass the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. How is righteousness revealed? By word and by deed; by what you teach and by how you live; by precept and by practice. So far which of the two have we seen? Precept. Toussaint says, "He has dealt with the Old Testament precept of righteousness; now the King discusses its practice. Both need to be discussed. This is evident from Matthew 5:19 where the Lord says greatness in the kingdom is dependent on both rightly *doing* and correctly *teaching* the commandments. The Lord follows this order since doctrine always forms the foundation for practice."<sup>1</sup> Take a look at 5:19 by way of review. And prefacing this verse, who is Jesus talking to? His disciples. He went up on the mount and His disciples came to Him and He sat down like a rabbi and opened His mouth meaning what? I'm ready to teach. You are My disciples. I am the Master. You learn from Me so keep your mouth shut. He's teaching them how to be salt and light to the nation Israel. How to be fishers of men. And what does he say in verse 19? "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Are His disciples going to be in the kingdom of heaven? Yes. What's the issue then? Rewards in the kingdom. Least or greatest! How does one become least? By annulling the commandments. What does that mean? Changing the interpretation of the text. Who was annulling the commandments? The scribes and the Pharisees. How did they annul them? In both word and deed. Either they added too, changed or took away such that the commandment was invalidated. Did that affect their practice? Absolutely. As Pentecost says, "False doctrine inevitably leads to false practice." And they taught the people to follow their practice. It was a false practice. On the other hand, how would one become great in the kingdom? By establishing the commandments by both teaching them and doing them. So the basis of great reward in the kingdom was for Jesus' disciples to teach the true

intent of the commandments to the people and also to keep the commandments as an example to follow.

So the first element in 5:19 that helps us outline the discourse is to see that Jesus is concerned with the teaching of the Law and he wants His disciples to expand His ministry by teaching what He has been teaching in 5:21-48. If they do they will be great in the kingdom and if that generation follows them then they will be perfect in the sense of maturity and enter the kingdom.

Tonight we turn to 6:1-7:12 and what is the issue here? The practice of righteousness. Up to this point it's been the precepts of righteousness. Now it's the practice of righteousness. So you see that 5:20 is still really the issue. They not only needed to teach the precepts of righteousness but they needed to practice righteousness. Who again is the backdrop against which Jesus will present the true practice of righteousness? The scribes and the Pharisees. They were the leadership of the nation and the people looked to them but they were defunct. Jesus is establishing a new leadership with Himself at the helm. Pentecost said in class at DTS, "what I want to do from 6:1-7:12 is to see Christ's teaching in this section as a second reason that He rejects Pharisaism. Not only is their interpretation of the law wrong, but their practices of the law are wrong." Doesn't that make sense? If you can't interpret the Scriptures correctly then you can't practice the Scriptures correctly. I get so tired of hearing people saying of other Christians who go to spiritually impoverished churches, where they get poor or little accurate teaching of the word, "Well, they're good people." Hell, they don't even know what the Scriptures teach. How can they be good people? That's only looking at the outside, at perceived morality. God looks at the heart, at actual motives. A pagan can look moral. But the issue is the motives and motives, to be good, must be informed by Scripture. So if you don't know the Scriptures you can't be a good Christian. God's not looking just at behavior. What He's really interested in is the heart motive, something behind the behavior, the intent, the thinking in the heart of a person. So I have real trouble going around calling people good people when those people may be Christians but they don't even have a clue what the Scriptures teach. They may be a lot more like the scribes and Pharisees than you think.

So we come to 6:1 and let's outline. 6:1 is an introductory verse that reveals the basic idea that lies under the three examples that will be given in 6:2-18. So if we're outlining, 6:1 is an introductory idea; 6:2-4 is the idea applied to the giving of alms; 6:5-15 is the idea applied to prayer and 6:16-18 is the idea applied to fasting. So Jesus is going to give an idea and then make application of the idea to three areas; giving of alms, prayer and fasting. What are these three things? Constable says, "The rabbis considered almsgiving, prayer, and fasting as the three chief acts of Jewish piety."<sup>2</sup> Toussaint says, "...each was highly esteemed as an act of devotion."<sup>3</sup> So Jesus is not picking on little things. Jesus is choosing the three most sensitive spots to the scribes and Pharisees and He's poking a big hole in them. They put great stock in these so-called acts of righteousness. Yet note the warning in verse 1, **Beware of**

**practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.** Remember this is about rewards; how to be great in the kingdom. According to this verse how do you become great in the kingdom? Practice your righteousness in the proper way and not like who? Not like the scribes and Pharisees. How did the scribes and Pharisees practice righteousness? To be noticed by men. That was their intent. They made a big deal about letting everyone know when they were giving, letting everyone know when they were praying and letting everyone know when they were fasting. They had a holier than thou attitude. **Beware**, Jesus says, **of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.** That's what the scribes and the Pharisees did and Jesus is condemning it. Note the Greek word **Beware**. If someone says Beware what's behind the warning? Some danger. What's the danger? The danger is that when we practice our righteousness before men we may have the tendency to start doing it to be noticed by the men. In other words, we're just doing it so that men will think we are great. That is a very dangerous tendency and it is a tendency that had crept into the lives of the scribes and Pharisees and can creep into anyone's life.

Just to be clear, is it sinful to **practice your righteousness before men**? No. They should practice their righteousness **before men**. What did 5:17 say? Go back to the salt and light metaphor where Jesus said what to His disciples? "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." So they were to practice their righteousness before men. Jesus is just saying in 6:1 that there is a danger that can creep in that you need to beware of; the danger of starting to do it in order **to be noticed by** men. Alright, what's the real issue? The real issue is the intent of the heart, one's motives when doing righteousness. As one author astutely observes, "Purity of motive was the essential thing..."<sup>4</sup> This section is all about intent and motives. What are your motives in giving? What is your intent in praying? What is your reason for fasting? The Pharisees did all these things but they did them with the wrong motives. They just did them to be noticed by men, to get honor, to attain accolade.

If that is why Jesus' disciples did them then what does Jesus say? **You have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.** So the context is Jesus' disciples storing up **rewards**.<sup>5</sup> Two things about **rewards**. First, what is a **reward**? The Greek word here is *μισθος* and means either "1) remuneration for what is done," or "2) recognition (usually by God) for what is done." Probably what is in view here is the latter, recognition by God for what is done since in the context the scribes and Pharisees did in order to be recognized by men. So what Jesus is saying is that if you do in order to be recognized by men then you will not be recognized by God in heaven. Second, what is the recognition by God based on? On the motives. It's not based on what is done, the act itself, but on the motives underlying the act. One author says, "There are two types of rewards, depending on the motive for which a good work was performed. If a righteous act was done for men's glory, the one who did it has already received his reward in the

form of praise from men. If it was performed in simple devotion to God, the act would be rewarded by God Himself." So summing up the principle of verse 1, there is a danger that when we practice our righteousness that we will start to do it in order to be noticed by men. Yet if we do that then we will not be noticed by God.

In 6:2 we have the application of the idea to the first of the three chief acts of Jewish piety; the giving of alms. Were the Jews to give alms? Was it a biblical practice to give alms? Yes, to see the practice turn to Deut 15:11. God said there would always be poor in the land in order to set up the opportunity to give to the needy. Verse 11, "For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'" So God established a situation in which they were to freely give to their needy brother. To give was a biblical practice. "Giving alms was viewed under the law as an act of mercy, or showing mercy. Showing mercy was a demonstration of righteousness, since men are by nature selfish, to show mercy by giving alms was to show a righteousness that would satisfy the law. And the Pharisees were giving alms. Why was that not a display of righteousness? If they gave something to a beggar, wasn't that showing mercy? No, because their motives were wrong. How do we know their motives were wrong? Look at verse 2. What happened just prior to their giving? There was a **sound of a trumpet**. The trumpet, of all instruments, commands attention. The point is they were drawing attention to themselves so that when they gave they would be noticed by men. There is debate whether the sounding of a trumpet is to be taken literally or metaphorically. Constable, quoting Buchler and Edersheim says, "Interpreters have understood the practice of sounding a trumpet to announce alms-giving metaphorically and literally. Metaphorically it would mean that Jesus was using a figure of speech to picture showy giving something like "blowing your own horn." However, His description seems to have had a custom behind it. There is old evidence that during this period the Jewish priests blew trumpets in the Temple when they collected funds for some special need.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, this may be a reference to the horn-shaped collection receptacles in the Temple that noisily announced contributions that people tossed into them.<sup>7</sup> However, Jesus mentioned the synagogues and streets, not the Temple. Probably Jesus referred to the blowing of trumpets in the streets that announced fasts that included alms-giving."<sup>8</sup> The resounding note was that they wanted to draw attention to themselves and thereby revealed that their motives in giving to the poor were not genuine.

By application, can actions betray motives? Often we say we can't see the motives of one's heart but that is only a half-truth. There are times when you can see the motives because the actions speak louder than words. That was the situation here. If there was trumpet blowing it would attract everyone's attention and in that context they would give in order to be noticed before men. Yeah, look at what I did. So Jesus says, **when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you.**

That's what who does? **Hypocrites**. The **hypocrites** want to **be honored by men**. The word **hypocrite** is *υποκριτης* and etymologically means "to under judge," which is interesting because it means essentially to misjudge or to incorrectly analyze and this reveals the heart of the word as "a pretender, an actor, a dissembler." They were like actors who put on a mask and played a part. They were playing the part of the righteous practitioners of the Law when in all reality, underneath the mask, they were simply doing it to get honor from men. A. T. Robertson says, "This is the hardest word that Jesus has for any class of people and he employs it for these pious pretenders who pose as perfect."<sup>9</sup> Okay, so they did what was acceptable, but the motive that prompted it was not acceptable before God.<sup>10</sup>

Note how Jesus responds to it at the end of verse 2, **Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full**. Now three times Jesus is going to utter this exact statement, each time with respect to one of these three chief acts of Jewish piety. We see the first one in verse 2 with respect to the giving of alms, note the second one at the end of verse 5 with respect to prayer and the third one at the end of verse 16 with respect to fasting. In all three cases Jesus says because they did it to be noticed by men **they have their reward in full**. They got the accolade, they got the attention. Glasscock says, "In all three cases (2, 5, 16) this stern sarcasm is introduced with "Verily I say unto you," as something that is specially to be laid to heart..." "Note that three times Jesus declared this was all the reward they would receive (vv 2, 5, 16)."<sup>11</sup> That's it; it was done in that fleeting moment of time. There's nothing else. God will not reward it; He does not recognize it. "There is veiled irony in the declaration "They have received their reward," and this adds to its impressive severity. "They receive their pay then and there, and they receive it in full... God owes them nothing. They were not giving, but *buying*. They wanted the praise of men, they paid for it, and they... got it. The transaction is ended and they can claim nothing more." The practice had become "so prevalent that beggars sought to station themselves at the approaches to the temple so that they might receive alms from the Pharisees as they entered." You might recall the situation in Acts 3 when Peter and John enter the temple and the beggar is at the Beautiful Gate. The only way into the court of Israel was to pass through that gate. Millions passed through the gates every year, thousands every day. The beggar gave the scribes and Pharisees many opportunities to display their righteousness before men. In the healing of that beggar that opportunity was taken away, at least by way of that individual.

Verse 3 gives Jesus' contrast. Note, did Jesus say they should not give to the poor?<sup>12</sup> No, the practice was scriptural; the motives and intent was the issue. The way Jesus instructs them to give would be true righteousness noticed by God. **But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing**. What's the principle of not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing? It's the principle of secrecy.<sup>13</sup> Barbieri suggests it be so secret that we forget what was given, "But the Lord said that in giving one should **not** even **let his left hand know what his right hand is doing**, that is, it should be so **secret** that the giver readily forgets what he gave."<sup>14</sup> This would be saying

that the giving is done so freely that there is no thought of return. Stott says it this way, "Not only are we to not tell other people about our Christian giving; there is a sense in which we are not even to tell ourselves." He is making the same point. We should not keep a record of how much we have given because this can lead to thoughts of return. Often the right hand is giving as the left hand is receiving. A graduation ceremony is an illustration that while giving one's right hand he is receiving his diploma of honor with his left hand. Jesus is saying that in the case of giving with the right hand the left hand should not even know what the right hand is doing. This conveys the idea of giving without thought of honor in return. Therefore the kind of giving God takes notice of is the kind that does not keep records and has no thought of return. It is giving in simple obedience to God.

When that kind of giving takes place verse 4 says **your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.**<sup>15</sup> In other words, two things take place. First, the Lord sees or notices what you have done. It should not be forgotten that the Lord does not overlook true obedience to His word. Instead He takes note of it. Second, the Lord will reward you. The word used of **reward** here is not the same word that was used in verse 2. The word there is *μισθος* and referred to simple recognition. This word is *αποδομι* and goes beyond to the concept of remuneration. God will recompense those who give in this way with assets to be enjoyed in the kingdom. Again we should not forget that the Lord does not overlook true obedience to His word and He is just in giving compensation for it.

In summary, giving alms was commanded by the Law and the scribes and Pharisees gave. However, it was not the true practice of righteousness because as they gave with the right hand they expected to receive honor from men with the left hand. They had their reward in full. God did not take notice. Jesus' disciples should not conduct themselves in this fashion. Instead, they should give without keeping records or thought of return. This would not only be noticed by God but also would result in receiving honor and compensation from Him. It should be noted that the passage is not condemning practicing righteousness before men. They and we should shine our light before men. But what matters when we do so is the purity of our hearts in doing so. That is what God is looking for and what Jesus was looking for in His disciples and that generation in order for the kingdom to come.

In verse 6 Jesus turns to make application of the idea of verse 1 to the second of the three chief acts of Jewish piety; prayer. Here the issue is the same as with giving alms. Pentecost says, "Just as the Pharisees made a public show of almsgiving, so they did with prayer."<sup>16</sup> The Pharisees loved to put themselves in a publicly prominent place such as a street corner or the synagogue in order to impress people with their piety. It's this practice that is condemned in verse 5. **When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites.** Again a **hypocrite** is someone who is acting, putting on a show, and it is the worst word of condemnation uttered by Jesus in the NT. What did the scribes and Pharisees do to

deserve this title? **For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men.** The verb **seen** is not the typical *βλεπω* but *φαινω* which means to “shine forth” as in a light. They wanted to make themselves conspicuous. Plumer says, “...when they were in a public place at the hour of prayer, they were ostentatious in performing their devotions. They were glad to be seen praying, and chose a conspicuous place. As in almsgiving, it is not the being seen, but the wish to be seen, and to be seen in order to be admired, that is condemned...Christ, of course, does not condemn public worship: it is saying private prayers in needless publicity, in order to gain a reputation for special sanctity, that is denounced.” The point is not to condemn public prayer. It is again, the motive of the one praying that is the issue. If he is praying to draw attention to himself, as the scribes and Pharisees, and to make himself out as a super-spiritual giant, that is a problem. That is what they loved to do. But this is something that verse 1 said we should beware of. It is a dangerous trap that we can fall into, to be admired by men, and therefore we want to avoid it at all costs.

Jesus then repeats His analysis of this behavior word for word as He did in verse 2, **Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.** God does not notice their prayer, He does not hear it; it will therefore not be answered. Note that Jesus is not just talking about praying, He is also talking about how to get our prayers heard so they can be answered. And if someone merely wants to draw attention to themselves by their prayers then they already have their answer; God is not listening, **they have their reward in full**, they got the attention they desired and that is the end of it.

Against that background how does Jesus in verse 6 instruct His disciples to pray? **But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.** Is Jesus condemning public prayer? If you think so you miss the point. Just like with the giving of alms, the issue was not condemning giving publicly, the issue was condemning wrong motives in giving, so here the issue is having the right motives in praying. Glasscock says, “Certainly Jesus was not discouraging shared worshiping experiences of communal prayer (e.g., Acts 1:14; 12:5) but contrasting the motives in prayer.” The point is that we should be interested in God hearing our prayer, not man. God alone should be our desired audience! That public prayer is not being condemned is illustrated by even the publican who prayed publicly in the temple while standing. The point is not to condemn public prayer but to exhort having the proper motive of prayer, which is prayer to God alone. Prayer to Him expresses dependence since the chief element of prayer is asking Him to accomplish something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

When we do that, no matter where we may physically be, **our Father who sees what is done in secret will reward.** Again, this word for **reward** is the same one used in verse 4 and refers to more than mere recognition, it refers to some compensation and the compensation is most like an answer to the prayer.

In verse 7 Jesus condemns another practice in prayer, this one the Pharisees had brought over from pagan Gentiles. **And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.** Pagan **Gentiles** went on and on in their religious babblings to their false gods, as if all the repetition and length would make their prayers efficacious. The one true God is not like that. He is a true person and does not want us to pray to Him that way.

Two questions need to be answered. First, was Jesus condemning repeating prayers, in the sense of being fervent and persistent in prayer? By no means. That is not the point. Of course we should be fervent and persistent in prayer. Some prayers are conditioned on our fervency and persistence. Jesus himself in Matthew 26:44 went away in the Garden of Gethsemane for a third time and prayed “the same thing once more.” Praying the same thing multiple times is not what Jesus was condemning. He was condemning vain religious babblings; formulated prayers, probably scripted prayers that are quoted or read mindlessly. To repeat what someone else has written as your own in a mindless type of mantra does not get God’s ear.

Second, was Jesus condemning long prayers? By no means. He Himself in Matt 26:40 prayed for over an hour and condemned others for allowing sleep to overwhelm them when there was a need for prayer. The point is not to condemn persistent prayers or long prayers. The point is what? To condemn vain repetition religious babblings and long prayers because you think that will get God’s attention and make your prayer efficacious. We can’t manipulate God and we shouldn’t think that we can.

Verse 8 tells us why we should not pray that way, **for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.** God is omniscient and He knows what is best for you. He is not going to answer a prayer that you are asking if it is not what is best for you. Even if you pray and pray and go through all kinds of prayer ritual God is not going to be moved to answer your prayer because of your prayer. He already knows what you truly need and will answer your prayers accordingly. Constable says, “Jesus’ disciples do not need to inform their omniscient Father of their needs in prayer. He already knows what they are. Why pray then? Jesus did not answer that question here. Essentially we pray for the same reasons children speak to their parents: to share concerns, to have fellowship, to obtain help, and to express gratitude, among other reasons.”<sup>17</sup> The point is we are in a relationship and a relationship requires two way conversation. How does God speak to us? In the Scriptures. How do we speak to God? In prayer. Both are essential to a thriving relationship.

Next time we’ll look at the manner in which Christ taught them to pray in 6:9-13. In conclusion tonight, what’s Jesus doing? He’s turning from the principles of righteousness to the practices of righteousness. What’s the basic idea Jesus is condemning in 6:1? Wrong motives underlying practice. The scribes and Pharisees had as their chief motive to be noticed by men. If that was their motive then there was no



recognition of their actions by the Father in heaven. He applies this basic idea to the three chief acts of Jewish worship. First, in 6:2-4 to the giving of alms. Was anything wrong with the giving of alms, even publicly? No, there was everything right about it. It was commanded by the Law. What was wrong then? Doing it in order to be honored by men. God required them to do it without thought of return. If they did they would be rewarded in preparation for the kingdom. The same principle applies to the Church in giving and we too will be rewarded. Second, the idea is applied in 6:5-15 to the issue of prayer. Was there anything wrong with prayer, even public prayer? No, there was everything right about it. It was worship. What was wrong then? Doing it to be noticed by men. God wanted them to do it only with Him in view. Further, what was wrong was babbling repetitiously with lots of words like the pagans. Was this condemning persistent prayer? No, it was condemning repeating religious prayers such as prayer books. Finally, what was also wrong was long, wordy prayers. Was this a blanket condemnation of long prayers? No, it was condemning long prayers because you think that your long prayer can manipulate God into answering. The answer to that is that the omniscient God knows what you need before you ask Him and so efficacy is not affected by length. This principle also applies to the Church today in prayer.

In the end, if His disciples truly wanted to follow Him as their Master they would reject the practices the scribes and Pharisees and follow the practices of Jesus. This would result in recognition by God and reward in the coming kingdom. If the nation followed in the footsteps of Jesus and His disciples then that generation would have a righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees and would qualify for kingdom entrance.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 106.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 6:1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Toussaint, p 107.

<sup>4</sup> Pentecost quoting someone else in *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 182.

<sup>5</sup> Toussaint says, "The fact that rewards are in view indicates that the discourse is still being addressed to disciples." Ibid, Toussaint, p 106.

<sup>6</sup> David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*, p. 26; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 170, n. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 6:2.

<sup>9</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 6:2.

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<sup>10</sup> Dwight Pentecost, Course Lectures from *Dispensational Problems in Matthew*, DTS, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, p 143.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, Glasscock, p 143.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 6:2.

<sup>14</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 32.

<sup>15</sup> "The KJV reads "shall reward thee openly." Whereas everyone might wish to think he would be rewarded "openly," there is only weak and late manuscript evidence for this addition. It would also seem to be antithetical to what Jesus had just warned about, that is, wanting public recognition for charity." Ibid, Glasscock, p 143.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Pentecost, p 182.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 6:7.