

The peril of religious observances: part 1: almsgiving (Matthew 6:1-4).

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Verse 1 introduces a new topic, the peril of religious observances. Matthew 5:43-48 may have suggested to some people who listened to Jesus that what God wants is religious observance. Jesus seeks to steer people away from a common trap which people who want to do the right thing by God often fall into.

Before we begin, we must look at a textual uncertainty in verse 1. Some ancient versions read, "*Beware of practising your **alms** before men*", while others say, "*beware of practising your **righteousness** before men*". I think the latter is the more likely original, because verse 2 otherwise says much the same as verse 1, and, more importantly this verse appears to be the overall heading for discussing the three types of religious observance that are mainstays of the Jewish religion:

- alms (v2-4)
- prayer (v5-15)
- fasting (v16-18)

All of them can be done for the sake of appearances, to look good before men. When people want to be right with God, because God's approval is not immediately obvious, it is very tempting to do things which meet with men's approval, so that they say "surely this is a Godly man". Have you ever caught yourself saying something like this?

The problem of religious display is not confined to these three areas. Our **motives** always and in everything determine where and when we get our reward. 1 Corinthians 13 deals with this issue in depth because making a show of spirituality was a problem for that church - it probably was not the first, and it certainly isn't the last! It is possible to make a show of our religion in many ways, for example:

- preaching or witnessing or doing other public worship activity - do I do these things so people will think well of me or think me religious? In my Anglican days I first came aware of the trap in an altar server who by his exaggerated display strongly drew attention to himself. But we are all at risk of this, preacher or not.
- "going to church" - dressing up to look different and making a display of the fact that we are going to the meeting on a Sunday morning. A friend of mine was once chided for not going to church by his father-in-law, and the reason proffered for why he should go, was to show the neighbours he was

going to church. That is making a display of our religion - in fact by emphasising our religious differences from others we probably push them away. Remember the Pharisees.

Jesus is uncompromising, if we do religious acts for the sake of being noticed by men, then our Father in heaven will not reward us. We have already had our reward, in the approval of men.

This teaching is horribly searching: so many of my religious activities have surely fallen over this hurdle, mixed motives. Have yours? We need to consider how best to avoid this stumbling stone. We have to act out of love and be God focused. Public religious activities are more risky than what you do in secret, and almsgiving, praying and fasting are the riskiest of the lot, because they appear so self-sacrificial. We can be rewarded either by God or by men but not both.

Alms Giving. In the verses that follow Jesus expands into the details for the three areas of religion, but this study deals with only the first one, alms giving (v2-4). This is giving money to the poor. A quick review of biblical teaching on giving to the poor is in order.

Old Testament Giving. In Leviticus 18:24 the tithes were for the support of the Levites, but Deuteronomy 12:6 indicates that God's people were expected to make many other forms of offering in addition. Deuteronomy 12:7 indicates feasting as part of the usage of these devotions. Deuteronomy 26:12 expands the use of the tithe to include support for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. Failure to support the poor and needy was one of the main reasons for God's judgement at the exile. Failure to consider the poor was a key element on Sodom's route to immorality and destruction. This is an apt warning to men today, *"they had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not help the poor and needy"* (Ezekiel 16:49).

New Testament Giving. The New Testament records Jesus and his group supporting the poor by their own giving, and in addition to alms-giving there were contributions to the Temple funds, some of which were raised by the Temple half-shekel tax, and some of which were voluntary contributions.

The church continued its concern for the poor, particularly poor church members, and this duty is commanded in a number of places. By contrast, there is no giving commanded for the maintenance of the activities of the local church, though those who work for the church were to be compensated according to their efforts, which presumably meant they had spent less time on earning a living. Support of the apostolic ministry was entirely voluntary, and represented as an opportunity to share in its blessings. (I'll leave it to you to find the NT texts!)

Jesus strongly commends alms giving (Luke 12:33) as an antidote to worldliness - for "*where your treasure is, your heart will be also*" (Luke 12:34). The issue is doing it so that we get the heavenly treasure.

Verse 2. It seems, from this verse, that the religious people of that time made a great show of giving away their alms to the poor, by sounding a trumpet. I expect they justified this by saying that the trumpet call let the poor know there were alms available for collection. But of course, it also let everyone see how "generous" the giver was being. We are often so self-deceiving that our motives are often hidden from ourselves. Jesus calls such people hypocrites - actors - so maybe their giving was only rather "token", and they were less generous than people were being led to believe. I think we may be sure they did it frequently! Jesus accounts them as already fully rewarded.

Verse 3. This figure of speech, about not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing has passed into common speech. It signifies the kind of split mind that, having given alms, promptly forgets that anything had ever been given. It should apply to all our giving to others, our time and effort as much as money. It is similar to the confessional: when someone tells you something in utter confidence to unburden their soul, the wisest course is simply to forget all they told you. Yes it can be done. It is an act of will: God remembers our sins and iniquities no more.

There are special dangers attached to giving to the needy:

- We can feel superior, for money represents worldly power, and even in giving it we exercise power which can feed our "old man". "*If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, ... but do not have love, it profits me nothing*" (1 Corinthians 13:3) Divinely disinterested Love must motivate us.
- Have you really given freely (and I'd say firstly to God), or is a string of control attached to your gift? It is all too easy to give something in a way that retains power over the person who receives the gift, which can then be used to manipulate them. Have you ever been on the receiving end of such a gift, and felt that to receive a gift would make you beholden to the giver, that the price of receiving the gift exceeded its value? Be careful then how you give. No wonder we have to forget our giving!

Verse 4. Alms must be given secretly, and God who sees will reward you. How does God reward those who give alms? Most if not all of you are Gentiles. Cornelius, the first Gentile man to receive the Baptism in the Spirit was heard on account of his almsgiving (Acts 10:4). So giving alms is powerful in terms of its spiritual effects. Dorcas, another alms giver (Acts 9:36), was raised from death. "*He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord*", and He repays, not usually with money, but, as in these cases, with what money cannot buy.

Secrecy is not only of moral benefit to the giver, who will be rewarded by the Father. Recall the man who was giving with the trumpet call. How would the recipients of his gifts have felt? Why is it that people generally resent being the objects of charity? There are a number of reasons, but a principal one is that they are made to feel small, less of a person, and they lose respect, in their own eyes and that of others. Is my giving secret, so I cover their sense of shame?

Good works and almsgiving. It remains to deal with a common misconception. Good works are not the same as alms giving. Dorcas is commended for doing both. Matthew 5:16 commands us to *"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."* Given the command to secrecy, alms giving cannot be good works. In fact the good works spoken of here are the works of God through us by His Spirit, which cause men to recognise and worship the Father, just as Jesus did good works of healing and men gave God the glory. By their very nature, they are works which men cannot do, nor receive glory for. Nothing grates on my spirit more than the use of Matthew 5:16 as an encouragement to put money in a collection plate!

Religious offerings. Which finally brings us to religious offerings, which are not strictly almsgiving. The passage about the widow's mites (Mark 12:42) is usually interpreted solely in terms of the wonder of the generosity out of poverty of the widow. That is what is emphasised but it is only one aspect of the story, which is significantly wedged between two other stories to which it is linked. Jesus has just spoken of the scribes *"who devour widow's houses and for appearance sake offer long prayers"* (v40). I am unsure how scribes were paid, but the connection to this passage about the treasury and the widow suggests that they probably obtained money from the Temple treasury. The treasury was public, to pass it without paying would, I dare say, have been a public humiliation, maybe worse. The rich parade their wealth by their big, but relative to their incomes small, offerings. They have their reward from men. This widow is placed under pressure to give, when she cannot afford it. No wonder the verses that follow (the chapter and verse divisions are not original) deal with the destruction of the Temple. Adorning such a Temple was futile (Mark 13:1-2). Pressurising the poor to give in the name of religion is about as abhorrent to God as you can get (compare e.g. Isaiah 58). How do we measure up?

I do not like public collections at Christian meetings: it places people (and unbelievers) under pressure to give, and so results in giving for wrong motives. I was once a member of a church that recognised this. All giving could be done surreptitiously into discreetly located boxes, and you could write on the envelope containing your gift to say what you wanted it used for. This encouraged prayerfully considered giving. The church was never short of funds, and it

supported many missionaries, because God told people what to give, and for what purpose.

Feed the poor in secret out of love, and God promises you will receive your heavenly reward. Remember Cornelius and Dorcas: "*God is no man's debtor*".

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