

Your Father Sees in Secret (Matt. 6:1–18)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Unlike Jesus' day, we no longer live in a world where alms-giving, public prayer, and fasting gain Christians wide social approval. Indeed, the modern world despises Christians and any outward display of our faith. This does not mean, however, that Jesus' warnings against false piety marked public pretense are unimportant. On the contrary, we are still in danger of trying to impress other Christians with our spirituality. Furthermore, the world has its own versions of the forms of piety that Jesus addresses here—public philanthropy, public virtue signaling (especially on social media), and the culture of outrage, oppression, and victimization that dominates our society. Even through Christianity isn't fashionable, people living in this world still yearn desperately to be justified in the court of public opinion. In the never-ending quest to be on the “right side of history,” Jesus' gospel offers freedom and rest, since *God's economy rewards secret obedience*.

Serving to be Seen (Matt. 6:1–4)

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had spoken about the reward promised to God's faithful people: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your *reward* is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11–12). There, Jesus stressed that this reward comes from faithfulness through suffering and adversity. Then, in the immediately preceding passage, Jesus contrasted that faithfulness with a kind of faithlessness that will receive no reward: “For if you love those who love you, what *reward* do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt. 5:46).

Jesus, then, has already begun to teach about *rewards* (μισθός; *misthos*) when we come to his warning in v. 1: “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.” By this statement, Jesus introduces an entirely new subject in the Sermon on the Mount. Where he had addressed *false teaching* about the law in the preceding section (Matt. 5:17–48), Jesus now begins to teach about *false piety*.¹ To begin this section, Jesus sets up a contrast between two kinds of rewards: the reward from “your Father who is in heaven,” and the reward that someone may receive from “practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.” Hereafter, Jesus will use the word “reward” three times to describe this latter kind of human praise that the hypocrites will receive (vv. 2, 5, 16).

Jesus' focal point, then, has to do with our motives: “That which is done solely or primarily for

¹ These two italicized terms are from Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 254.

personal honor or gain may accomplish its objective (v. 2b), but God will grant no further reward.”² In such cases, we are only “pretending that we are seeking [God’s] praise when we are secretly seeking only our own.”³ John Calvin thus warns us against “the disease of ambition, when, in doing what is right, we seek glory from men.”⁴ We see here, then, another contrast between the previous section, which dealt with the *wrong* actions of legalism that tried to skirt out from under the full requirements of the law. Here, Jesus is focused on *right* actions (“practicing your righteousness”) for the *wrong* reasons.⁵ It is important to remember that Jesus is speaking here in a highly religious society. Today, Someone praying loudly on the street corner would be ridiculed and reviled, and perhaps even attacked. In those days, though, (outward) piety was the quickest path to a good public reputation. Jesus is arguing that to gain such a public reputation is to forfeit the blessings of God.

To illustrate the general principle that Jesus articulates in v. 1, he names three examples: alms-giving (vv. 2–4); public prayer (vv. 5–6), and fasting (v. 16–18).⁶ Each of these three examples are written with virtually identical structures, and only small variations: “When/whenever you *x*, do not *y* as the hypocrites do [in public, in this way], in order that they may be seen by others. But you, when you *x*, do it in secret [in this way]. And your Father who is/sees in secret will reward you.”⁷

For alms-giving (“Whenever you do alms/charity/mercy...”), Jesus warns us not to do so publicly: “sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others” (v. 2). It is unclear what exactly Jesus is referring to when he talks about sounding a trumpet. Some have suggested that this is merely metaphorical for “drawing attention to one’s pious act of giving”⁸ (perhaps similar to our phrase, “tooting your own horn”),⁹ others to the loud clanging of the money into the offering boxes,¹⁰ and still others to the blowing of trumpets before feasts, during which alms would have been given to the poor.¹¹ Whatever this means, Leon Morris gets to the heart of the problem that Jesus is exposing: “They were more interested in ensuring that they were known as benefactors than in genuinely helping the poor; reputation rather than relief of poverty was what mattered to them. Jesus teaches that it is important

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 116.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 256.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:309.

⁵ “To do righteousness’ is an expression found elsewhere (Ps 106:3; Isa 58:2; 1Jn 2:29; 3:7, 10). In 1 John 2:29, for instance, it is rendered by the NIV ‘to do what is right,’ and that could suffice here in v.1 as well. Jesus is not so much dealing with a different kind of righteousness or with mere acts of righteousness as with the motives behind righteous living. To attempt to live in accord with the righteousness spelled out in the preceding verses but out of motives eager for human applause is to prostitute that righteousness.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 196)

⁶ Jesus’ teaching about *how* to pray, including the form of the Lord’s Prayer, is something of an excursus after Jesus addresses those who pray to be seen by others. Thus, we will return to focus on that section in our next study.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 138.

⁸ Osborne, *Matthew*, 219.

⁹ This suggestion is noted, and rejected, by both Blomberg, *Matthew*, 116 and Carson, “Matthew,” 198.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 116.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 198.

to give, not to be known to give.”¹²

In contrast, Jesus says that our giving should be so secret that we should not even “let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (v. 3). This is clearly hyperbole, and therefore we should not even think that Jesus is counseling us to give recklessly or without financial accountability.¹³ In the context, William Hendriksen accurately captures Jesus’ point: “Not only is it wrong, however, to seek praise from others, it is also wrong to praise oneself...”¹⁴ Even if we give secretly in order to avoid being seen by others, Jesus warns us against feeling prideful when *we* see the things we have done.¹⁵

While we may be giving up one benefit by giving secretly (i.e., the praise of others or of ourselves), Jesus wants us to know that we are thereby gaining a *better* benefit: “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (v. 4). On this point, Leon Morris wisely writes, “In our anxiety to make sure that we do not serve God for what we can get out of it we must not go to the other extreme and think of God as not caring what we do, or if he does, as not doing anything about it. God notices what his children do and responds to it.”¹⁶ In all that we do, we should do it for the glory of God, and not for the praise of men.

Speaking to be Seen (Matt. 6:5–6)

Second, Jesus tackles the problem of public prayer. Now, there is nothing wrong with public prayer in itself.¹⁷ As with the public alms-giving, the problem is not the *prayer*, as the desire “that they may be seen by others” (v. 5). If being seen and admired is the motivation for prayer, then that will be their only reward. Jesus forcefully tells us that we should pray differently (“But *you*, when *you* pray...”).¹⁸ When we pray, we should do so in a closed room, and pray to our Father in secret, “And your Father who see in secret will reward you” (v. 6).

Once again, Jesus is testing our motivation for our piety. Do we follow through with our religious practices in order that we may be *thought of* as pious? Or, do we enter into our times of

¹² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 136.

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 117.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 320–21.

¹⁵ “Christ therefore wishes, that we should not be distracted by indirect thoughts, but go straight to this object, that we may serve God with a pure conscience.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:310.)

¹⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 138.

¹⁷ “Now Scripture nowhere condemns public prayer (II Chron. 6:14–42; Neh. 9; Acts 4:24–31), nor individual prayer offered in a public place. Neither the Pharisee nor the publican sinned by praying in the temple (Luke 18:9, 10). What the Lord condemns here is *ostentatious praying*, that is, having one’s private (?) devotions in the most public place, with the intention of being seen and honored by the people. That was, however, exactly what the hypocrites were in the habit of doing. When the Pharisee of Christ’s famous parable (Luke 18:9–14) entered the temple, he took care not to be standing in some corner or at a considerable distance from the front, like the publican. He stood up in front, in full view of everyone who might be present.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 322.)

¹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 142.

prayer in order to seek fellowship with the Lord? The fact that our Father “sees in secret” cuts both ways. If we genuinely, earnestly seek him in secret, then he will see those efforts and reward us accordingly. If, however, we only pretend to seek him in prayer when there is a crowd watching, then he also will recognize our prayers as hypocrisy. Why, then, do you pray?

Suffering to be Seen (Matt. 6:16–18)

After his excursus on how we *should* pray (to which we will turn our attention in the next study), Jesus gives a third warning about fasting to be seen by others: “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others” (v. 16). There is a bit of a wordplay between the words “disfigure” (ἀφανίζω; *aphanizō*) and “be seen” (φαίνω; *phainō*; also in v. 5). The first word, “disfigure,” literally means something like “to cause to disappear,” while the second word is the opposite: “to appear.”¹⁹ There is an intended irony here, since by “disfiguring” their faces so that their faces “disappear” under dirt, soot, etc., they have really made their faces a spectacle.²⁰ Nevertheless, there is also an *unintended* irony, as John Nolland notes: “What on the surface seems to proclaim people as of special piety, instead reduces them to nothing.”²¹ They made themselves *nothing* (“they have received their reward”) by making their faces *something* (“disfigure their faces”) by disfiguring/causing their faces to *disappear*. Their elaborate troubles gained them exactly what they wanted, by which they ultimately gained nothing of value.

Regarding the practice of fasting in particular, it is worth noting, as Hagner writes, that this “is the only place in the NT where fasting is actually taught.”²² Nevertheless, Jesus clearly understands that his disciples *will* and *should* fast: “when you fast...” (v. 16).²³ He is not de-valuing fasting, but (as with alms-giving and prayer) he insists that his disciples fast in an appropriate manner: “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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” (v. 17–18). While Jesus had warned his disciples not to give or to pray *so that* (ὅπως; *hopōs*) they would be praised/seen by others (vv. 2, 5), he now *both* warns them not to fast to be seen by others, *and* to do so in order to be seen “by your Father who is in secret.” Again, Jesus is not condemning all desire for reward, but he does condemn crass motivations for the rewards of the praise of this world.

What kind of rewards should we expect from God? While the Bible often speaks of rewards we may gain in the life to come (Matt. 10:41–42; Luke 6:23, 35; 1 Cor. 3:14; Col. 3:24; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; 2 John 8; Rev. 2:10; 3:11), the figurative language of “reward” (i.e., “wages”) or “crown” are more suggestive and symbolic than specific. We should leave our Father to give of his own generosity than trying to plot out what we expect to receive from him for our troubles (Matt. 20:11–15). Nevertheless, the

¹⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 273.

²¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

²² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 153.

²³ “Yet Jesus, far from banning fasting, assumes his disciples will fast, even as he assumes they will give alms and pray (vv.3, 6). His disciples may not fast at the moment, for the messianic bridegroom is with them and it is the time for joy (9:14–17). But the time will come when they will fast (9:15).” (Carson, “Matthew,” 210.)

Bible does give some indication that we will experience our *rewards* in this life as the satisfaction we gain from the labor itself (1 Cor. 9:17–18; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19). Just as the hard work toward a good marriage receives the “reward” of a good marriage, so we enjoy the “reward” for worshiping and serving the Lord in the joy of our relationship with God himself. God works through our fasting, for example, “to train us to abstinence, to subdue the lust of the flesh, to excite us to earnestness in prayer, and to testify our repentance, when we are affected by the view of the tribunal of God.”²⁴

Ultimately, though, our “Father who sees in secret will reward [us] in secret,” through the *secret* enjoyment of his love. There is no reward better than the secret enjoyment of God. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus rejoicing that his Father had “hidden” (κρύπτω; *kryptō*) the knowledge of the Son from the wise and understanding (Matt. 11:25–27). So, when Jesus here urges us toward the “secret” (κρυπτός; *kryptos*), we should remember that Jesus is describing a characteristic of his own mission and ministry. Jesus did not come publicly trumpeting his identity. Rather, he veiled his glory by taking the form of a servant, so that the rulers of his age did not realize that they were crucifying the Lord of Glory (1 Cor. 2:8; Phil. 2:7). Jesus rejoiced in the hidden nature of the gospel, and he is teaching us to do the same.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of errors did Jesus address in Matthew 5:17–48? What kind of errors does Jesus now address in Matthew 6:1–18? Why is the temptation to “practice our righteousness before other people” (v. 1) such an enduring temptation? What do we hope to gain from it? In reality, how valuable is the reward of public approval? By contrast, how valuable is the reward that we have from our Father in heaven? Why can we not try to gain both rewards?
2. What kind of giving is Jesus addressing in v. 2? Whom are the hypocrites trying to impress by their giving? What might it mean for Jesus to warn us to “sound no trumpet” when we give to the poor? In v. 3, whom does Jesus have in mind when he warns us not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing? What is the modern equivalent of this practice? Why does giving in secret promise a better reward?
3. What kind of prayer is Jesus addressing in v. 5? Whom are the hypocrites trying to impress by their prayers? Inside the church, where might this temptation arise? Outside the church in a world public that despises public exercises of religion, what might a modern equivalent of this sort of public praying be? Where are you most tempted to speak in such a way that will win the approval of the world around you?
4. What kind of fasting is Jesus addressing in v. 16? Whom are the hypocrites trying to impress by their fasting? How does Jesus counsel us to fast instead (vv. 17–18)? Why is the difference so important? Have you ever fasted like this? Why or why not? If you did, what did you learn from the experience? Through this whole section, why does Jesus stress the importance that God is and sees “in secret”? Why does God’s economy reward secret obedience?

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:331.