

Matthew 6:1-4

Coram Deo

People of God, Jesus began the sermon on the mount with a warning, saying, “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.*” He then went on to contrast the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees with the righteousness of God, as it is in relation to the Torah, which is the law of God. Jesus addresses six specific issues in the law: Murder, Adultery, Divorce, Oaths, Retaliation, and Love of Neighbor.

Now Jesus moves on to a new section. But he is still contrasting the righteousness of God with that of the Scribes and Pharisees. But now he shifts his attention away from righteousness in relation to the torah, in order to discuss righteousness in relation to the three central pillars of Personal Piety in Judaism: **almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.**

But Jesus is not content to discuss almsgiving, prayer, and fasting for their own sake. He is always looking to go deeper to the heart of matter, which is, the matter of the heart that is behind almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

And so he begins this section in 6:1 saying, “take heed” or “be careful” about doing your righteousness before men **to be seen by them.** Christ is calling upon us to be vigilant, to be watchful, about practicing your righteousness before others to be seen by them. Which is what the Scribes and Pharisees were doing. They would give their alms, and pray, and fast, as all good Jews did. But they did those things in the wrong way. They did them in order to be seen by others to be doing them, and to be praised by men for doing them. Christ says that they loved the praise that comes

from men. But Christ's disciples are supposed to be different. They are to love the praise that comes from God.

And so, we are to practice our righteousness *Coram Deo* – before the face of God, to be seen by God. The focus of our piety, the purpose for which we practice our righteousness, whether it being giving alms, praying, or fasting, is to please God, not man.

Someone might think that because of the danger of falling into self-righteous pride, that we ought not even to do righteous deeds at all. But Jesus does not say “do not do your righteousness.”

Nor does Jesus even say: “do not do your righteousness before men.” Jesus already told his disciples they were the light of the world, and they are to let their light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in Heaven.” So it becomes necessary at times to do your righteousness before men.

At the heart of what Jesus condemns here is hypocrisy. Hypocrites make a good show about being religious, about being pious, but their hearts are far from him. God looks for truth in the inward parts. And he wants us to live before the face of God in truth. But when we do things in order to receive praise from men, something happens inside of us that further corrupts our sinful hearts. Like many sins, it goes undetected at first. But after a while, after receiving the praise of men for doing righteousness, we begin to cloak and dissemble our manifold sins and wickedness, such that we think we are better than we actually are.

Pride then steps in, and we are puffed up so that we do not confess our sins with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart. And before we know it, we find ourselves like the Pharisee

in our Gospel reading today. We begin to compare ourselves to others, like that wicked tax collector over there, and we thank God that we are not as sinful as he is.

And notice what the Pharisee boasted in - how much he gave, and how often he fasted - Two of the three central pillars of piety. And he was doing this in prayer, the third pillar of piety. And notice he did not confess his sins to God, because he was not God centered in his piety. He was obsessed with himself because he had received the praises of men for so long, that he even began to flatter himself, which was manifested in him comparing himself with other people. And that led to him not taking inventory and stock of his sins. Psalm 36 says: *For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.*

He was self-centered, and self-righteous. And the way he got there was from listening too carefully to the praises of others. His religious devotion was no longer about God, it was about receiving the empty and false praises of men, rather than the honor that comes from God alone. He exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and he became false before the face of God. And so, his religion was false, and he was a hypocrite.

As Jesus says in John 5:44: *“How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?”*

Christ desires his disciples to do their righteousness with an aim of pleasing God alone. To the glory of God alone. Soli Deo Gloria. We do not do our righteousness in order to be praised by others.

Jesus speaks of doing your righteousness to be praised by others as “sounding a trumpet before you.” None of the commentators I have read think that there was a literal trumpet that person sounded as they gave money. Rather, what they say is that sounding the trumpet is a metaphor for calling attention to one’s giving and act of charity. In some ancient texts “sound a trumpet” meant to advertise or call attention to oneself with fanfare.”

However, the reference could be semi literal, in this sense. The offering boxes were called “shofar chests” or “trumpet chests” because the opening where the money was placed were trumpet shaped – wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, in order to help facilitate giving, and prevent theft. And so, to sound the trumpet, could therefore mean to draw attention to oneself as you noisily tossed your money into the trumpet shaped entrance of the poor box. It could be like saying, when you give to the poor, don’t sound the bell before you, indicating the bell that the Salvation Army has at their giving stations.

Now of course, giving to the poor was not a bad thing. The law of God had provisions written into it that were meant to help the poor. Gleaning laws were meant to help the poor. If you had a field of crops, you were not to harvest all the way to the edges, but you were to leave some for the poor of the land. During the Feasts when the tithes were brought in the poor were to be invited and you were to use your money to buy wine and beer and meat to share with the poor, the widow, and the Levite, who had no inheritance in the land.

The prophets constantly upbraided the people, however, for how they mistreated the poor.

Amos 2 says

⁶Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
⁷those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;*

King David in Psalm 109 curses the man who oppresses the poor,

For he did not remember to show kindness

But pursued the poor and needy

And the broken hearted, to put them to death.

So Jesus expected the people to give to the poor, which is why he says, “When you give to the needy” – not if you give to the needy.

And thus, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

Because the point of giving to the poor was **to give** to the poor and **to give** glory to God. But when the Pharisees gave, they gave **in order to receive praise** from men. That is why they were hypocrites. For they did it for themselves, that others might praise them as being righteous, and noble, and virtuous. But quite the opposite was true.

Now when we give to the needy and poor, we give because we too were once poor and needy, and Christ out of the riches of His glory emptied himself in order to make us rich in Him. 2 Cor. 8:9 says: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he*

was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

He did this in order to give glory to God in bringing many sons to glory. That is our reward – to be always with God and to have his face to shine upon us forever. And so, we are to live before the face of God now, in honesty and sincerity of heart, only seeking his honor and praise, in order that we may see the face of God then, on the last day. That is our reward.

But the reward of those who want the praise of men now is fulfilled now in that very praise. They have nothing more to look forward to. They have their reward.

But Paul says in Col. 3:23 – *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance of your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*

How can we apply this teaching to our lives? Firstly, Be Charitable.

According to the Heidelberg Catechism one of the requirements of obeying the Fourth Commandment, to Keep the Sabbath Day Holy, is to give Christian offerings to the poor.

The Lord says through the Prophet Isaiah that God desires His people, that when they fast *to share their bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh.* – Isa. 58:7

And remember that the mission of Christ in the world is set within the context of preaching the good new to the poor.

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,*

The government of course tries to take over the role of Christ and the Church to the poor. They take our money in taxes in order to provide the charity work that Christians ought to be doing. But the mercies of the wicked are cruel, People of God. The government doesn't teach the poor how to work with their hands and to be productive, they merely give them hand outs which encourages laziness, and keeps them dependent upon the govt dole, which simultaneously keeps people trapped in poverty. Along with that, they incentivize fatherlessness, while setting up gambling dens in the poorest parts of the cities, all while giving out free crack pipes and syringes. All in the name of charity.

Christians can do better. And have done better. Christians have been at the forefront of making the world a more compassionate and merciful place. Before the time of Christ, there were no orphanages, no homes for the poor, no hospitals even. The world was filled with toil and hunger and poverty and sickness and slavery and the exposure of children.

But already by the time of AD 125, Athenian Philosopher Aristides delivered a defense of the Christians to Emperor Hadrian, contrasting the belief and behaviors of the Barbarians,

Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews with that of the Christians. And here is what he said:

But the Christians, O King, while they went about and made search, have found the truth; and as we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations. For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come.

Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols (made) in the image of man; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others; and of the food which is consecrated to idols they do not eat, for they are pure. And their oppressors they appease (lit: comfort) and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; and their women, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest; and their men keep themselves from every unlawful union and from all uncleanness, in the hope of a recompense to come in the other world.

Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly.

And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.

They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near. And when a child has been born to one of them, they give thanks to God; and if moreover it happen to die in childhood, they give thanks to God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And further if they see that any one of them dies in his ungodliness or in his sins, for him they grieve bitterly, and sorrow as for one who goes to meet his doom.¹

The charity of the early church, and the righteousness which Christians manifested in the world was unlike anything the world had seen before. And of all people, Christians, by far are still the most charitable people on planet earth. So be charitable, and do

¹ The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher - <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html>

your righteousness in the sight of God, and not in the sight of men.

Secondly, do your charity secretly.

Jesus says: *when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

What this means is that when you give, you are not to do so in a way that as you give with your right hand your left hand is patting yourself on the back. Don't give yourself celebratory praise because you did something good. A person who is not willing to receive praise from himself for a job well done, will be that much less susceptible to receiving praise and flattery from others.

Don't be motivated by a desire for human praise. Perform your acts of righteousness motivated only by your concern for the needs of others and to glorify God.

For God sees the intention of the heart from which the act proceeded. Do you do your righteousness to give glory to God, or to receive glory and praise from men? God knows. He sees. And He will reward you accordingly.

And so Give charitably, give secretly, and thirdly, expect a reward. Christ is not against the ideas of rewards. But because of Ephesians 2, Christians can sometimes be afraid of doing good works. Ephesians 2 says, salvation is by grace through faith, not a result of works, lest anyone should boast. So, people get so protective of the grace of God, they scare themselves out of doing any good works at all. They don't want to contribute to their salvation, they don't want to boast in their salvation, and so they

think if they do a good work, it will be cause for boasting, and they will take away from the grace of God.

But notice what verse 10 says – *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in.”* So, walk in them. God has prepared them for you to walk in. So do so, with a heart focused on God, and he will reward you.

But this is not earning or meriting anything before God. You are not earning salvation, or anything like that. The salvation you have is one that does acts of righteousness with a heart set on God, and God, because he gives and give and gives, not only prepares the good works for you to walk in, but then he also rewards you for walking in them. Augustine said it like this: God crowns his own gifts.

God promises to reward you with that which your heart is set on, him you have set your face toward – God. God is your reward. And the reward will be infinitely greater than the praise of men. Imagine all the packed stadiums of the world, every one who ever lived singing your praise, people flocking to get to you. Men willing to die for you, women willing to do anything for you. All the praise of the world, is nothing in comparison to Him who says, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.”

So live before the face of God, and seek your reward in him and him alone, as you do your righteousness, and give to charity. For in this way, your reward will be great in Heaven. Amen.