

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 21: How to Avoid False Religious Piety

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:1-18).

With Matthew chapter six, we begin a new topic in our Lord's sermon. The sermon has moved from a true disciple's character (the beatitudes, 5:3-12); to a believer's influence on this world (the contrasts, 5:13-16); to a Christian's relationship to the law (5:17-19); to a disciple's righteousness (5:20-48), which must be based on a true interpretation of the law without human traditions. This righteousness must exceed the so-called righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). In chapter six Jesus continues His discussion of righteousness, but shifts His focus from how a proper regard for the true meaning of the moral law should affect our everyday lives to how Christians are to practice religious exercises (i.e. in 6:1-18). There are some important things to note about this section of Scripture before we examine our Lord's treatment of charitable deeds, prayer and fasting.

First, the arrangement of this section of our Lord's sermon is careful and excellent. Verse 1 contains the central proposition, whereas verses 2 through 18 contain specific examples. The word *eleemosunen*, translated "alms" (KJV), "charitable deeds" (NKJV) or "merciful deeds" (*A Literal Translation of the Bible*), in verse one refers to religious exercises in general. It is best to view the first verse of this chapter as an introduction to the next three points (giving, 2-4; praying, 5-15; and fasting, 16-18) rather than simply as part of the discussion on almsgiving.

Some early copyists recognized this and substituted *dikaiosynen* (righteous duties) for the word *eleemosunen* to clarify the central proposition.

This whole section begins with the words, “Take heed.” The Greek word used, *prosechete*, means “beware” or “be careful.” The disciples are carefully to compare the wrong way to the right way of piety and apply these lessons to themselves. They are to be very cautious when it comes to the motivation behind their good works. Alexander notes that as “the reference is commonly to danger, physical or moral, it is usually rendered in this Gospel by the English verb *beware* (7, 15, 10, 17, 16, 6.11.12), and elsewhere by take heed (Luke 17, 3), give heed (Acts 8, 6), give attendance (1 Tim. 4, 13), have regard (Acts 18, 11), in all which versions the original idea of applying the mind to any object is distinctly traceable”¹ The fact that our Lord instructs us to pay special attention to this kind of behavior shows us that improper motivation behind good works is a common and serious problem. “Our Lord’s emphatic language intimates that what he warns them against is an evil of great magnitude, and an evil which they were in great hazard of incurring; an evil, to borrow the quaint language of Matthew Henry, that they were ‘in great danger *by*, and in danger *of*.’”² This somber warning is a subset of the great warning in chapter five that a Christian’s righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Second, this section is concerned with personal piety. The three examples—charitable deeds, prayer and fasting—do not encompass every aspect of personal piety. However, they are major pious acts that are easy to contrast with the acts of religious hypocrites and even with pagans. The apostate Jews had turned these things into acts of self-promotion and self-exaltation. Charitable deeds were announced so that the giver would receive credit or praise from man. Prayers were done to be seen so that everyone would know how religious the person was. Similarly, men who fasted let everyone know the pain they endured to receive glory from men. Virtually every religion in this world requires charity, prayer and the mortification of the flesh. Buddhism and Hinduism have these features, as does Islam. The Savior wants to contrast biblical Christianity with false professors and false religions.

The Redeemer deals with personal acts of piety instead of public worship because this chapter continues His teaching on what a Christian is and must be. In other words, He is dealing with personal sanctification. Also, everyone who knows Church history understands that many of the corruptions and innovations that came into the churches came through deviations in private and family worship. Reformed churches were corrupted with holy days, the church calendar and hymns of human composition because these things had already been accepted and had become popular on a personal level.

The three forms of piety described deal with three separate areas. The first deals with good works or charity directed toward man. The second deals with our approach to God in prayer; while the third deals with the self-mortification. Although most other religions speak of these things as steps toward salvation, as deeds that merit paradise with God, biblical Christianity views them as fruits of a redemption already achieved by Christ.

Third, each illustration follows the same pattern. Jesus first describes the hypocritical acts of piety in a vivid, almost humorous manner. Christ deliberately shows how artificial, phony and ostentatious false piety is. Then He tells the disciples the proper way that piety expresses itself. Further, each of the three sections contains verbatim, and almost identical, important phrases for

¹ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 163.

² John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:222.

emphasis: “Truly I say to you they have their reward” (vs. 2, 5 and 6); also the concluding formula “to your Father who is in secret” (vs. 6 and 18) or “who sees in secret” (v. 4).

Fourth, the central teaching of this whole section deals with the *underlying motivation* behind a Christian’s acts of piety. The central problem behind the description of wrong acts of piety is the fact that they are done, not out of a genuine desire to please God and be faithful to Him, but rather to gain standing before men. Each illustration forces us to examine our hearts to look to the *why* behind our acts of piety. Do we do certain things only because people are watching or do we act the way we do solely because we are concerned about what God thinks? Christ’s emphasis makes this one of the most penetrating, convicting sections of Scripture. The Redeemer says to each and every professing Christian, “Know yourself. Don’t simply look at what you do, but also ask yourself why you do it.” This process may indeed be painful, for we often act with impure motives. Yet, because of the deceitfulness of sin, it is necessary and practical. Moreover, when we see the deceitfulness of our own hearts we will focus our attention even more upon Christ.

The teaching of this section of Scripture regarding motive is as apt today as it ever has been. Think for a moment what the various churches would be like today if the central motive was not to please men but God. Think of how all the man-made trash that corrupts worship today would be tossed aside. Think of how all the jokes, gimmickry and pop-psychology would be kept out of the pulpit. All the pomp, ceremony and sensuousness of modern worship would fall to the ground. Denominations and churches would be transformed. This section of Scripture overturns the man-made ritualism of Romanism, as well as the man-pleasing entertainment of the church growth movement. Our piety is done for God and before God. If we set out to please man, then declension and apostasy are inevitable.

This section of Scripture teaches us a simple yet fundamental aspect of Christianity—that we are to glorify God in everything that we do. As Paul says, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). When men do good works to be seen by men, they are really seeking to please themselves or their own ego by glorifying self. Thus, ultimately, we must continually choose throughout life whether to please ourselves or to please God. The philosophy of this world tells us the very opposite of what Jesus says. It says that man’s chief end is to seek happiness or personal fulfillment or self-esteem. Christ, however, taught that we must die to self and lose ourselves if we are to follow Him. “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Mt.10:38-39).

Paul taught the same principle when he said that all of our obedience, even under the eye of men, must be done with sincerity, or literally, singleness of heart to Christ (cf. Eph. 6:5). There must be no ulterior motive, deceit, false pretense or egotism behind our obedience. We must be like Christ who viewed everything in His life in relationship with His Father. Jesus lived to please God and do His will. That was His constant obsession from the moment He got up in the morning until He went to bed. He deliberately humbled Himself in order to focus attention upon His Father and glorify Him. He lived with a complete absence of egotism and ostentation. When Christ became immensely popular because of the miracles, He remained detached and unimpressed by the adulation of the crowds. Celebrity meant nothing to Him, while communion with the Father was His passion. When men rejected Him, He did not get angry or upset because He was concerned only with the honor that comes from God. In fact, He identified a fundamental problem of the religion of His day as seeking the praise of men instead of from God. “How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the

only God?” (Jn. 5:44). The scribes and Pharisees were so focused on themselves and their own glory and standing among men that they completely lost sight of the true and living God.

This section of Scripture is very important in our day of celebrity worship and the obsession with getting one’s fifteen minutes of fame. It teaches us that true Christian discipleship involves a singleness of mind toward God. “No one can serve two masters” (Mt. 6:24). It teaches us that we have been saved to exalt God; that a focus on self is the way of the world. Once again, we emphasize that this way of thinking must undergird our whole outlook on life and our obedience to the law.

Fifth, before we examine these verses in detail we need to dispense with the common notion that these verses contradict our Lord’s earlier command: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). In chapter six, Jesus tells the disciples that their good works must be done in secret, while in chapter five He tells them that the light of their works must not be hidden under a basket, but placed on a lamp stand so men can see these works. Is this not a contradiction? No, it is not, for the following reasons. For one thing, each of these teachings is speaking to separate issues. In the first, the Savior is warning against cowardice because the disciples’ job is to spread the gospel of Christ in a fallen world. It is obvious from the Great Commission and other passages that the church must interact with the world in order to disciple the nations. This requires courage and good works that are public. In the second teaching Jesus is not dealing with courage, but self-exaltation or improper motives. He speaks about attracting attention to self when it is totally unnecessary and only serves to glorify self. This can be seen from the choice of good works involved. A charitable deed does not need to be advertised by the one performing the deed. To do so is obnoxious and actually detracts from the glory that God should receive. Also, when we speak of individual piety, both prayer and fasting should normally be done in secret. There is no good scriptural reason for doing such things in public. However, there are other good works, such as evangelistic preaching, witnessing and being a good Samaritan, that are by nature public. Thus, we see that each section focuses our attention upon different sins that must be avoided. Further, both sections have the exact same goal—the glory of God. There are works that, when done with the proper motive, glorify God. There are also works that do not glorify God because they are done out of a desire for self-promotion.

Thus, we see the need to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Both of these teachings must be taken together. Our light must shine before men so they will embrace Jesus Christ and glorify God. And we must have a proper motive and intent when doing good works. Moreover, there are certain acts of piety that, by nature, are designed to be private. The same Jesus who healed the sick and preached good tidings to huge crowds also “went up on the mountain by Himself to pray” (Mt. 14:23). Secret works must not be made public and public works must not remain secret.

Sixth, in the introductory statement, as well as each illustration, the central reason given for doing things to please God instead of man is the reward received from God: “Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Mt. 6:1). Those who do things from unworthy motives, to receive praise from men “have their reward” (vs. 2, 5 and 16). They receive a reward in the here and now, in this world. But they forfeit any possibility of a heavenly reward. From this we can ascertain the following.

(1) Those that habitually do things solely for the praise of men are not to be regarded as true disciples, but are to be classed together with the hypocrites—the scribes and Pharisees. Obviously, if hypocrites are to receive any kind of reward, it must be in this world and it must be

from men and not God. This is a sobering thought that should cause all of us to think. “If you are seeking a reward from men you will get it, but it will be all you get. Work through your religious life, think of all the good you have done in the past, in the light of that pronouncement. How much remains to come to you from God? It is a terrifying thought.”³

(2) It is clear from this section of Scripture that a reward from God is a legitimate biblical motivation for obedience. For some reason the idea that we should obey God with an eye to our heavenly reward has come under attack as somehow improper and not noble. The general idea is that we should do what is right, solely because it is right without any other considerations. The problem with this view is that it contradicts the explicit teaching of Scripture. The beatitudes, for example, repeatedly connect a proper attitude, or obedience, or suffering for Christ with blessings. Those who suffer are told to rejoice, for their reward in heaven is great (5:12). Paul motivated believers to greater obedience by speaking of the judgment seat of Christ. Some of our works will be burned up as useless wood, hay and stubble, while others will be treated as gold, silver or precious jewels (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11-15). We are told that the Redeemer Himself looked to His future reward: “Jesus...who for the joy that was before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Given the biblical teaching on rewards, all of us should have a strong interest in heavenly rewards and, consequently, in leading holy lives that please God.

Charitable Deeds

“Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:2-4). In the first illustration Jesus deals with acts of mercy. The word translated “alms” (KJV) or “charitable deeds” (NKJV), *eleemosynen*, refers primarily to charitable giving. “It comes from the noun *eleos* (mercy, pity, compassion) and the verb *eleeo* ‘to have pity or mercy on, to show mercy.’”⁴ In the Old Testament, showing mercy to the poor among the covenant people by helping them with a gift of food, clothing, money or an interest-free loan was an integral aspect of biblical religion. For example, the law says,

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land. And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:17.

⁴ Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 5.

thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day (Dt. 15:7-15; cf. Lev. 25:35; Job 29:16; Ps. 41:1; Pr. 14:21; 19:17; 21:13; 28:27; Amos 2:6, 12).

The teaching of the Old Testament regarding poor believers is continued in the New Covenant era. Note that Christ says “when you do a charitable deed” (v. 2), not “if you do it.” It is assumed that disciples will help a brother in need. When Paul appealed for funds to help the saints, he encouraged the Corinthians to give by quoting Psalm 112:9: “He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever” (2 Cor. 9:9). Therefore, the issue before us is not the necessity of giving, but the motive and manner of giving. As we consider verses 2 through 4, we will note the following: the wrong way to do charitable deeds; the motive or reason behind the wrong manner; the proper way to give; and the reason for giving the proper way with the correct motive.

The wrong way to give to charity is identified as announcing the giving by the blowing of a trumpet. This is said to be done in the synagogues (i.e. during formal worship) and in the streets (i.e. in every day acts of charity). Commentators are divided as to whether the blowing of trumpets is to be taken literally.⁵ Even if it is not literal, the point remains the same: the scribes and Pharisees did everything they could to draw attention to their generosity. When they gave in public worship, they made sure everyone knew about it. When they gave in the streets of the city, they proclaimed their good deeds before the general public. These hypocrites announced their charity as broadly as possible. They, in essence, say, “Look at me; look at how merciful, kind, good and holy I am. Take note of how giving and caring I am.”

Jesus calls these men hypocrites “because they put on the appearance of religion and holiness, but inwardly, and otherwise, were very wicked men.”⁶ The word *hypokrites* in Hellenistic Greek was the word used to describe an actor in the theater. It referred to someone who was pretending to be someone that he was really not. This word is often used against the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; cf. 7:5) because they put on a religious front before men, even though inside they were unregenerate and evil. “In the NT it is used consistently in a negative sense. Matthew captures the duplicity inherent in hypocrisy when he juxtaposes the word with the quotation of Isa. 29:13, ‘this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (15:8).”⁷ The best way to identify a hypocrite is to discover if a person acts one way in private and another way in public. Or, he may act one way in front of his Christian friends and in a completely different way when he is with unbelievers. Our modern culture has become exceptionally adept at hypocrisy in that, during the week, people lie, cheat, get drunk and fornicate, but on Sunday they put on their church clothes and act very piously. Even many modern worship services display a form of hypocrisy, for the service of God has been taken and twisted into something it was never meant to be. The modern service is full of

⁵ A. T. Robertson’s comments on this topic are excellent: “Is this literal or metaphorical? No actual instance of such conduct has been found in the Jewish writings. McNeile suggests that it may refer to the blowing of trumpets in the streets on the occasion of public fasts. Vincent suggests the thirteen trumpet-shaped chests of the temple treasury to receive contributions (Luke 21:2). But at Winona Lake one summer a missionary from India named Levering stated to me that he had seen Hindu priests do precisely this very thing to get a crowd to see their beneficences. So it looks as if the rabbis could do it also. Certainly it was in keeping with their love of praise. And Jesus expressly says that ‘the hypocrites’ (*hoi hupokritai*) do this very thing” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:50).

⁶ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:55.

⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 139.

make-believe and entertainment. It is a theatrical display before an audience that is all done for the applause of men. In a sense, the modern church is in a more degenerate state than ancient Israel, for the Jews' trumpet blast merely preceded their deeds. In the modern church almost the whole worship service is a trumpet blast of entertainment and gimmicks. In the ancient church men merely thought good things of the Pharisees; now people literally applaud.

The motive or reason for announcing charitable deeds is to "have glory from men." They advertised their good works to be seen by men and thus to be praised by them. They wanted others to think that they were great. They did not do good deeds to glorify God's grace and mercy, but their own beneficence. They viewed good works as ego boosters. Their problem was that they were filled with pride. Their giving to the poor was not contrary to Scripture, but their motivation or thinking behind the giving was immoral. As John says, "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (12:43).

We see once again that our Lord is very concerned about hidden thoughts and not simply outward acts. Earlier Jesus warned us of adultery in the heart (Mt. 5:28) and murder in the mind (Mt. 5:22). Now, He wants us to search our hearts and root out all unlawful motivations, especially pride. The scribes and Pharisees thought more highly of themselves than they should have (cf. Lk. 18:12) and did not mortify the pride in their hearts. Consequently, pride controlled them; it became like a cancer that devours all before it. Their whole outlook on life and their whole way of doing religion was tainted by inordinate self-esteem and conceit. Every action was calculated to exalt their status, achievements and position as religious leaders. They had completely perverted the true purpose of good works and charity in the process. The good works that we do are to be done only to glorify God and not ourselves. To minister to the needy for the purpose of being seen and glorified by men; and, in the process, receive more power and influence over others is worldly and sinful. It is not a display of true Christian love, but rather of carnal ambition. To give to the poor to increase our own status in this world is dishonest and insincere; it is a form of covetousness. It is a very grievous sin because men are coveting and then stealing the glory that belongs only to God. Moreover, it puts man in a place that he does not really belong, as the judges and approvers of our works.

This section of Scripture is very convicting because we all know that we have been guilty in this area. There have been many times when we were more concerned with what men think of us than what God thinks. There perhaps have been instances where we became very upset because men thought ill of us; even more upset than when we know that our actions have offended God. Such thoughts prove that, at times, we have been guilty of selfish pride.

Christ's Remedy for This Sin

After identifying the behavior that His disciples must avoid, Jesus tells them the proper way to give and the correct motive. "But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret" (Mt. 6:3-4). There has been much speculation regarding the meaning of the left hand and the right hand. It is wrong to see something esoteric or mystical in the naming of the two hands, for the Savior is making a point about secrecy in giving and even the proper attitude of the giver. This is clear from the explanatory "that" clause which follows. This is the central point of instruction in all three illustrations that righteous acts must be done in secret, beyond the attention of others. Therefore, the two hands may represent others and ourselves and perhaps, at times, even just ourselves. In other words, we are not even to take note of our own works. We are not to have

pride and self-congratulations over our own good deeds that have been done in secret. From this teaching we must learn to do a number of things in the future.

First, the most simple and obvious application is that we must do everything we can to avoid doing charitable deeds to be seen of men. This means that we should not go around bragging about our merciful acts to others. We should keep things as secret as possible.⁸ Another thing that we must do is not participate in fund-raising practices that violate this passage of Scripture. A number of charitable organizations attempt to stimulate giving by publishing lists of donors. Some lists even are categorized according to the amount given. Organizations that seek donations do this because studies indicate that people give more when they receive credit for doing it publicly. Believers who want to give to such an organization must first insist that their name not be published as a donor. Certain churches do something similar when they post little brass plaques on the side of the pews or below a stained glass window indicating which parishioners donated money for that item. Such practices are in complete violation of this passage. If you give to have your name on a plaque, then you have your reward. Colleges, seminaries and hospitals occasionally will name a building, facility or a wing after a rich, generous donor. This is unbiblical and should be stopped at once. We must never advertise our giving.

Second, when we give or do some charitable deed, we need to examine our heart to make sure our actions are not based on self-exaltation or egotism. Ask yourself, “Am I seeking the praise of men, or is my sole concern the glory of God? Am I giving because I want to glorify the Savior and advance His cause, or do I want to feel good about myself and pat myself on the back? Self-congratulation must not be our motive to do good works. Everything must be directed toward the exaltation of our heavenly Father. Modern unbelieving concepts about charity and giving which are based either on some concept of duty toward humanity, self-esteem, or both are humanistic and egotistical. The point of self-examination in this area is to identify pride in our hearts and then subdue it by proper giving. This soul-searching will require diligence and honesty because our hearts are deceitful and many professing Christians are living in complete self-deception regarding their motives.

Third, there are some things that we should be continually thinking about, that will give us a proper perspective about ourselves that should help us subdue pride in our hearts. (1) We need to consider the fact that we have been saved by grace and have received everything as a gift from God. Thus, we have no reason to boast (Rom. 4:2) or brag about our achievements. As Paul says, “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). We can replace pride with humility when we understand that it is God who created us “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). We should thank God and glorify Him alone, for apart from a work of the Holy Spirit in us we would be walking in darkness. The scribes’ and Pharisees’ pride and exaltation of themselves in works of mercy were merely a reflection of their doctrine of salvation by works, of personal redemption

⁸ That all charity is not to be secret is obvious from Acts 11:29-30 in which the disciples sent relief to the believers in Judea and Acts 4:32-5:5, in which the disciples were selling their property and laying proceeds at the apostles’ feet. Ananias and Sapphira his wife were struck dead not because they did not give all their property, but because they lied to the apostles about how much they gave (i.e. the percentage, vs. 2-3). In the ancient church, people would bring all sorts of things to pay their tithe such as oil, wine, produce, gold, silver, pottery and even farm animals. These things would be brought to church on the first day of the week (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-2). In the synagogues and the Temple, a tithe box was used to receive monetary funds. Obviously, with such tithes absolute secrecy was impossible.

through human achievement. Unlike the Pharisees, we look at all our works through the cross of Christ. We know that everything we have and do that is good is founded upon the Savior's shed blood at Calvary.

(2) We also need to keep in mind that all of our good works are tainted with sin and thus do not merit boasting. Thus, we need to follow our Lord's instructions when He said, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Lk. 17:10). When we have done a good work, we should praise God and thank Jesus. Whenever we are tempted toward spiritual pride, we need to remember that even our best service does not bring any gain to God. Nothing we do, or can do, gives us a claim on Him. Even our best works do not really deserve to be rewarded by God. If we think of them as we should, we will see that they fall so short and contain so much that is wrong mixed in them, that we should not presume to think them worthy of Jehovah's notice. (God only rewards our works because He has graciously promised to do so and because our sins have been removed by Jesus Christ.) With all this in mind, we can fight against pride through a continual consciousness of humility. Moreover, we can embrace humility far easier with a consciousness that it was our sins which sent the beloved Lamb of God to the cross. There is nothing more effective in humbling the pride in our hearts than the realization that it was our sins that sent Jesus to the cross to suffer and die.

Jesus' Reason for Obedience

After Christ tells us the right way to do charitable deeds, He gives a very weighty reason why He must be obeyed. If we keep our charitable deeds a secret, "[our] Father who sees in secret will Himself reward [us] openly" (Mt. 6:4). From this statement we learn two important things.

First, we see that there are two kinds of rewards. There is the reward from men (v. 2) and the reward received from God (v. 4). If we live to glorify self and seek the praise of men, we will be rewarded. Men will think better of us and we may advance ourselves socially and economically. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the charity of the rich and famous that is announced in front of cameras. Movie stars and corporations do this as a publicity/marketing tool to improve their image before the general public. Such publicity usually works. In correlation with such self-glorification, Hollywood and corporate America have all sorts of award shows where great givers are handed beautiful plaques or golden statues, once again in front of the lights and cameras. Indeed, they have their reward. But, Jesus' underlying message about the rewards of men is that they are temporal, earthly, fleeting and ultimately (i.e. in the long run) worthless. A movie star's many glittering awards are of little comfort on his death bed; they mean even less when he dies without Christ and goes to hell.

In contrast, there is the reward from God. This refers to the rewards of grace that Christians receive for their deeds done in the name of Christ, to glorify Him. In the area of charity, these good works are a secret. The person who does them is not praised or rewarded by men. He has received no accolades from the public; there are no plaques or golden statues on his shelves. But there is something far more important—God Himself will reward Him openly. The deeds done for God's glory will receive a public reward on that great day when our Savior returns and sits on His throne of judgment. Whereas the rewards from men are temporal, earthly and fleeting, the rewards received from God are eternal, heavenly and can never be taken away. "Note, they who in their alms-giving study to approve themselves to God, only turn themselves

over to him as their Paymaster. The hypocrite catches at the shadow, but the upright man makes sure of the substance.”⁹

This teaching regarding rewards is amazing and should spur all of us on to greater holiness and devotion toward God. Yet, how many professing Christians live as though this glorious promise were not really true? Do you practice good works simply to receive praise from men, to increase your own prestige? If you do, then you have your reward from man; but, that is all you will have. Do you live your life to serve Christ and glorify Him so that you will have great treasures in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy (Mt. 6:20)? If not, then why not? What you do for the Savior will last forever. But to live for self is complete and utter vanity and foolishness.

Second, this verse tells us that God is always watching what we do. Jehovah sees everything that we do. He sees all of our actions, all of our words and even all of our thoughts. This is a sobering truth that we should think about all the time, especially when we are tempted to sin. The hypocrite can easily fool men. He can become adept at acting one way in front of people at church and another when he is in the world. But God sees everything, even our hearts; we cannot fool God. When we wake up in the morning, we need to remember that God is with us, watching us. When no one is around and we could say or do anything we want without another soul knowing—God is present with us. He observes and notes everything. We need to practice the presence of God; this is fundamental for our sanctification. Matthew Henry writes,

Consider the eye of God is always upon you. When we are with our superiors, and observe them to look upon us, that engageth us to look upon them; and shall we not look up to God, whose eyes always behold, and whose eye-lids try the children of men? He sees all the motions of our hearts, and sees with pleasure the motions of our hearts toward him, which should engage us to set him always before us. The servant, though he be careless at other times, yet when he is under his master’s eye, will wait in his place, and keep close to his business: we need no more to engage us to diligence, than to do our work with eye-service, while our Master looks on, and because he doth so, for then we shall never look off.¹⁰

Everyone (generally speaking) is on their best behavior when they are at church or are fellowshiping with serious Christians. It is usually when professing Christians are alone that they commit secret sins. There is the sin of pornography that is ravaging our nation. There is drunkenness, filthy speech, lascivious movies, debauched literature, gambling and so forth. Professing Christians who struggle with these sins and backslide do so behind closed doors when no one is around. They would be shamed and embarrassed if other Christians knew what they were doing. But what they don’t realize, or they simply choose to ignore, is that God is watching. In God’s universe there is no such thing as a secret sin. This thought should put the fear of God in all backsliders; it should terrify all hypocrites. If people would focus on this fact and live in terms of it, then backsliding and hypocrisy would be a thing of the past.

The thrice-holy God of Scripture, who sees in secret, is the main motivation for obedience in the text before us and should be a main motivation for obedience in general. If everyone could consistently live in the presence of God all the phoniness, hypocrisy, showmanship and plastic worship would cease. If every professing Christian would heartily live in God’s presence every moment of every day, the effect upon Christendom would be profound.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:69.

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, “How to Spend the Day with God” in *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1855] 1997), 1:227-228.

No doubt, a great revival and reformation would break out at once. What a wonderful blessing that would be to individuals, families and churches.

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