

Matt. 6:1-4

Intro:

This is the first of three passages (1-4, 5-15, 16-18) which warn against doing good deeds only for the purpose of being seen doing the good deeds, with the motive of receiving public acclamation for doing them. Jesus elaborated three specific examples of this that were prevalent in His time. But the emphasis in all of these is the underlying attitude and purpose for doing them more than the actual deeds. All of the deeds which Jesus addressed are good things, and should be done. Jesus's point in these passages is about how and why they are done. They should be done because it is right to do them. They should be done in obedience to God, and for the pleasure and glory of God. The problem which Jesus was addressing is that human pride easily distorts these good deeds into hypocritical measures of piety which are done to puff up the one doing them before their peers more than to serve God. Deeds which are supposed to glorify God were being used to glorify self. And Jesus strongly warned against doing this by addressing the contrasting rewards one would receive for doing these things rightly versus doing them selfishly.

I. Good deeds done for the sake of publicity and image is not pleasing to God (1)

This verse introduces the first of the three passages warning against doing good things for public acclaim. It directly introduces the acts of charity and alms giving. But this verse serves as a general introduction to all of 6:2-18, and, in a sense, to all of chapter 6. Jesus stated this verse in general language "righteousness" which applies to all of the first three passages. And then in the next verse, He changed to language more specific to charity giving.

A. Be careful not to do good deeds for the sake of publicity and image (1a-c)

1. Pay attention/Be alert/Be conscientious! (1a)

The first word is a word of warning. It is a command to pay close attention to something – to consistently be on guard and alert against a genuine danger, and to take the necessary steps to prevent it. This is an attitude of diligence in taking something seriously, and also an attitude of being wary of something dangerous and/or being zealous for something that is good. Throughout Matthew, Jesus used this word to warn His disciples against something that would harm their spiritual well-being if they did not guard against it (see 7:15, 10:17, 16:6, 11, 12).

2. Don't do good deeds for publicity and acclaim (1b-c)

a Not to do your righteousness before people (1b)

The main emphasis in this proposition is on the phrase "before people." This connects with the following proposition to give the main idea in this verse. Jesus was obviously not commanding His followers to not do righteous deeds. But He was commanding them not to do them with a particular attitude and purpose.

Jesus used a general term here, literally "do not do your righteousness." Based on the following contexts, this means something like "righteous deeds" or "works of righteousness." These are just various possible ways of saying "do things that demonstrate and work out your righteousness," which actions themselves are righteous and rightly called "deeds of righteousness." The term "righteousness" in this context means something that conforms to God's standards and character. And so, these are good deeds that proceed from piety and obedience to God. And they are characterized by upright moral behavior and gracious benefit to those who are recipients of these actions. All of this is good, and Jesus (and the rest of the Bible) commands these kinds of works. Jesus was not forbidding righteous works.

Rather, Jesus was addressing the motive why His followers should do their righteous deeds, and forbidding doing them in a certain manner, and for certain purposes. They were not to be done before people. That is (as stated in the next proposition) they were not to be done to be seen by people. Jesus was not forbidding doing any good deeds when there was a possibility that they might be observed. There are some deeds, that by their nature must be done with others present and able to observe. Rather, as shown in the next proposition, we should guard our attitude so that we are not doing them in a conspicuous place and in a conspicuous way that would make them seen by people in order to build up our own pride and reputation. We are not to care whether they are seen or not for our own sake.

b Purpose: In order to be seen by them (1c)

This proposition is clearly a purpose statement: in order to be seen for selfish, prideful reasons. This purpose is what Jesus was telling His hearers to guard against, not righteous deeds themselves. Righteous deeds done for righteous purposes are a good thing. We should do them for the purpose of benefiting others. We should do them because they are the right things to do. We should do them for the glory of God. Earlier (5:16), Jesus told His hearers to let their light shine “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in Heaven.” And we should even do them for the reward which we will receive from God.

But the one reason we should not do them is for the acclamation and praise which we expect to receive from other people for doing them. This purpose, Jesus said, is dangerous because it leads to hypocrisy. And it is fruitless, robbing us of a greater reward.

To say this in contemporary terms, Jesus loves and commands virtue. But Jesus hates and warns against virtue signaling. We have all seen the hypocrisy of many people who seek the spotlight to pontificate and/or protest about some issue that claims to have the moral high ground. But they only do it for selfish benefit, and rarely, if ever, actually do anything beneficial to solve the problem they are talking about. And many times, their actions are ultimately counter-productive.

And another problem with this motive is that the standards of righteousness and praiseworthy behavior held by the people may not be the same as God’s standards. If we are doing good deeds for the approval of people, our good deeds are limited to those things which the crowd approves of, which may or may not actually be righteous by God’s standards. And we can be manipulated into doing very unrighteous deeds in order to win the approval of unrighteous people.

Jesus strongly warned against an attitude and motive of doing (or pretending to do) good things in order to bolster our own reputation for being virtuous and righteous. It is more important to actually be righteous according to God’s standards, and not human standards. It is more important to actually do truly righteous things than to receive credit for having done them. And Jesus will go on to tell about the different rewards (good or bad, fleeting or eternal) we can expect for acting out the various motives for our righteous deeds.

B. Good deeds done in the wrong manner/attitude have no reward (1d-e)

1. If you don’t do otherwise (1d)

That is, if you don’t guard yourself and avoid doing these things for selfish, prideful motives. Jesus was warning of the consequences of ignoring or disobeying His warning and allowing yourself to do good deeds hypocritically and for the purpose of impressing people with your “righteousness.” He clearly stated that there would be consequences for this kind of attitude and motive, which He spelled out in more detail in the next proposition, and in the rest of this passage.

2. You don’t have a reward from your Father in Heaven (1e)

The primary consequence of ignoring Jesus’s warning is that you will miss out on the reward from God. In this passage, Jesus did not specify the exact nature of the reward. Later in this chapter (v. 20), Jesus mentioned that heavenly reward never decays, and is never taken away. So, we can infer that this reward is permanent. But beyond that, He left His hearers to imagine the character of the reward. But it is clearly implied that it is wonderful, based on the fact that it comes from our Father in Heaven. Later in this passage, Jesus will make it clear that this reward from God far surpasses any earthly reward we can get from our good deeds. It will be great beyond our imagination because it comes from our Father, Whom Jesus will later describe (see 7:11) as giving only good gifts. And it is our Heavenly Father, Who is the God Who created the universe, Who is all powerful, and therefore able to give any conceivable gift. Therefore, a reward from this God is greatly to be desired over any earthly reward. And to miss out on such a reward is a horrible consequence indeed. Therefore, this is a great reason to take Jesus’s command seriously and guard ourselves against the attitude of which He warned.

II. Therefore, do charity in a manner and attitude that gains true heavenly reward (2-4)

In the rest of this passage, Jesus draws out some implications from the warning which He gave in the first verse. In the rest of this passage, He applied it specifically to the issue of charity giving. In the next two passages (5-15 and 16-18), He will apply it to other issues. And in the rest of this passage, He addressed the positive side of the negative warning which He gave in the first verse. In other words, He had just said what **not** to do. And in these verses, He was saying how to do charity well, in a way that avoids the danger He had warned about.

A. Don't do charity for the reward of public acclaim, which is worthless (2)

1. Don't do charity for public acclamation, like hypocrites (2a-d)

a Therefore, when you do acts of charity (2a)

The word translated "acts of charity" is related to the word "mercy." It has some connotation of the attitude behind the action, but mostly refers to the benevolent action toward someone in need, based on a kind, merciful attitude. This can refer to any charitable action, but in the New Testament primarily refers to giving of money or goods for the benefit of the poor.

Notice that Jesus did not say "**if** you do acts of charity" but He said "**when** you do acts of charity." Charity is not optional for a Christian. It is a given part of a godly lifestyle. This is not because God wants or needs our money and help (which is an absurd idea). It is not even because the poor need our money and help (which is true). It is because God wants us to be conformed to His character. He is generous and cares for those who need His help (which is everyone). And so, He invites us to share in His character and priorities by caring for those in need within our sphere of influence. God does care for the genuinely needy and often He meets their needs through His people, like us.

Unfortunately, in our society, a necessary part of charitable giving is discerning between genuine charitable needs and con artists posing as needy people or promoting charitable causes. Not everyone who claims to be needy is genuinely needy. Not every charitable appeal is really a good cause. Some people are the unfortunate or disadvantaged poor. And others are the lazy or irresponsible poor. Our giving should take that into account. But we should never use the reality of scammers as an excuse not to give or to keep us from being generous. We just need to work a little harder to do it well.

The New Testament never sets a legalistic amount which we should give, but only says we should give cheerfully and generously in order that people's genuine needs would be taken care of. And in the rest of this passage, Jesus instructed how to do it without prideful hypocrisy, drawing attention to ourselves, and thus robbing ourselves of our reward from God.

b Don't publicize your charity like hypocrites do (2b-d)

1) Do not blow a trumpet before you (2b)

This proposition refers to blowing a trumpet as a means of announcement. You may have seen a scene in a movie where a trumpet fanfare announces a king or a proclamation from a king.

This is the kind of phenomenon Jesus was referring to. The purpose of the trumpets was to get people's attention. And Jesus's point was that we are not to attract attention to our giving.

Rather, we are, as much as possible, to avoid bringing attention to our charitable acts.

2) Like hypocrites who do it for publicity and glory (2c-d)

a) Like the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets (2c)

Jesus compared the trumpet blowing, which He had just forbidden, to what the hypocrites do. Apparently, there were people who were doing such things to make their giving noticed in the synagogues (religious meeting places) and in the streets (where they would encounter poor people). Jesus called them hypocrites, who were just acting a part to be seen by others doing acts of charity.

b) Purpose: in order that they would be glorified by people (2d)

Here Jesus clarified that the purpose of the hypocrites in drawing attention to their own giving was for their own vanity – that they would be seen and spoken well of by other people. Their purpose for being seen (1c) is made explicit in this proposition. They want to be seen in order to be glorified – in order to enhance their reputation and image. They did not give generously in order to help other people. They gave selfishly in order to help themselves to a better reputation. Their attitude was exactly the attitude which Jesus was warning against in this passage.

2. I emphasize that this is all the reward they will get (2e-f)

a Truly I am saying to you (2e)

This proposition is an introductory statement, introducing what Jesus was about to say in the next proposition. Jesus often used this formula (see v. 5, 16, 5:18), including the word “truly” to emphasize, not only the truth of what He was about to say, but also its importance. This was a prompter of attention, signaling to His hearers that they should pay particularly close attention to what He was about to say.

b They have fully received their reward (2f)

Jesus’s point in this proposition is that the fleeting glory and pride which they would receive from people witnessing their charity was the only reward they would receive for it. This is in direct contrast to the reward they would have received from God (mentioned in 1e above, and 5b below) if they would have given charity with the proper attitude. Their reward is nothing compared to the reward they missed out on. It is appropriate that in English, the word “vanity” means selfish pride and it also means to no ultimate result, as in the phrases “all is vanity” or “in vain.” That is the point of this proposition. Their vanity is in vain. The momentary rise in reputation sometimes attained by hypocritical pretense to righteousness is worthless. It will do no one any good in the long run, and it is a fool’s errand to chase after such vanity. In our culture, it is especially necessary to strongly understand the difference between image and reality. We need to care more about our genuine character than we care about our public image. We need to care more about the kind of people we really are than about what others think about us. We need to put our energy into actually being virtuous and avoid virtue signaling. Because the former has eternal reward, and the latter is completely worthless.

B. Do your charity in God’s sight, for His reward, which is eternal (3-4)

1. As you are doing acts of charity (3a)

This proposition is very similar to 2a, with slightly different wording. The word for “acts of charity” is the same. The word for “when” is not stated, but implied by the grammar. The word for “you” is more explicit. And the word for “doing” is in a different form. The result of these grammatical changes is that this proposition is more subordinate to the following propositions. It is not the focus, but just a reminder of doing charity in order to concentrate on how to do charity, as communicated below, which is the point of these verses. This proposition is just a setup for the main point communicated in the following propositions.

2. Don’t publicize them in order that you will receive God’s reward (3b-4)

a Do not let your left [hand] know what your right [hand] is doing (3b)

In this proposition, Jesus used an intentional exaggeration to communicate how secretive our charitable giving should be. It is hyperbolic language that does not really make sense if taken literally (because it was not intended to be taken literally). Rather, it makes His point in an over the top fashion, in order to drive it home.

He said we should do something with our right hand in such a way that our left hand is unaware of it. Of course, neither of our hands do anything on their own. They only do anything because they are connected to our brain. And so, in that sense, our hands are never completely independent. And that is why Jesus used this image – to compartmentalize those things that cannot be totally compartmentalized, as an illustration of the kind of zeal with which we should be secretive in our giving. We should take pains not to give in order to be seen. Rather, we should go out of our way not to be seen, as much as possible.

b Purpose: So that your private righteousness will be rewarded by God (4)

1) In order that your acts of charity may be in secret (4a)

The purpose for our not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing is so that our giving will not be publicly known. Rather, we should give as secretly as possible. Of course, Jesus did not intend that we take this to extremes. It would be better to be seen giving, than for someone to suffer the lack because we didn't give because we could not find a way to be completely secretive about it. There are some forms of giving where it is necessary to be known at least by someone. Jesus's overall point is not that no one should ever know that we give. Rather, His emphasis is on our own motivation and attitude. His point is that we should make pains to guard our own heart, so that we don't take pleasure in the accolades we get for giving. And we should give in a way that prevents, as much as possible, us taking pride in our giving and giving in order to bolster our reputation.

2) And your Father, Who is seeing in secret, will recompense/reward you (4b)

As usual, whenever Jesus forbids something, it is ultimately so that we would gain something infinitely better than the thing He forbids. He is constantly calling us away from sinful idolatry in order that we may experience the One True God. He is forbidding the fleeting pleasures of sin in order for us to gain the eternal pleasures of holiness and relationship with God. And in this passage, He was commanding us not to seek the puny, temporary reward of accolades from other people, in order that we would experience the eternal rewards from our Heavenly Father. This proposition is parallel to 1e above. In that proposition, Jesus warned us not to miss out on the reward from God. In this proposition, Jesus motivated His hearers with the promise that giving done in the right way would find that reward from God. Jesus does not expect us to give without any promise of reward, but He wants us to get the best possible reward. Of course, God is not a vending machine. And we cannot treat giving as a selfish means to extort material blessings from God. God is not stupid, and if we selfishly give only in order to get a selfish reward, He will not be fooled. We don't give because we love the reward, but we give because we love God. Or, to put it another way, the greater reward we will get is God Himself, Who is better than any of His gifts. And He has promised, as part of His giving of Himself, to take care of our material needs (not always all of our material wants) as we are generous to others. And Jesus highlighted that God is able to see in secret. He will notice our giving when we give in a way that is private and hidden from other people. Therefore, we can give in a way that protects us from taking selfish pride before other people. We can do this because of the assurance that God knows and God will bless us, because our giving is for His sake – for the sake of conforming to His character by helping others, and for the sake of pleasing Him by our obedience and sacrifice for His glory. And we can give in the assurance that God will reward us greater than whatever we have given away.