

Alms, Prayer, and Fasting

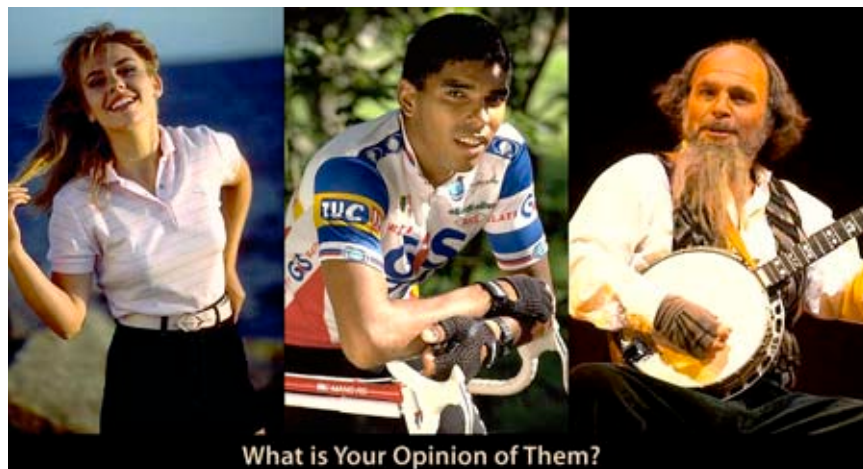
A highly respected Roman Catholic priest, who lived in Washington D.C., was the guest of honor at a banquet. A prominent politician who was to serve as chairman of the banquet was late. So the toastmaster proceeded without him. Honor after honor was paid to the churchman, and then he finally arose to speak. “The seal of the confessional,” he said, “can never be broken, and therefore I can only hint of my impressions when I came to Washington some twenty-five years ago. Oh, I thought I had wandered into a terrible place. The first man who entered the confessional told me a hair-raising tale of his graft and corruption; but as the days went on I knew I’d entered a fine community of lovely people. It has indeed been an honor to have been among you for all these years.” As he was finishing, the tardy chairman arrived and hurried to the front. The politician reached the podium and said, “I’ll never forget the first day our honored guest arrived in the parish. In fact, I have the honor of being the first to go to his confessional.”

We can laugh or cry at this event. The politician did not know what the priest had said. Since he was the chairman of the banquet, many must have thought that he was a wonderful man. The chairman of the banquet had fooled many people. They did not know about his “other life.” Today, we are no longer surprised to discover that a politician, a neighbor, a priest, or some religious leader is not the person we had thought. Was he or she pretending? Was he or she a hypocrite? When you see someone, what do you think about him or her? When others see you, what do they think?

BEWARE. Jesus has been warning His listeners since Matt. 5:20 that their spiritual conduct, their behavior, their deeds, or their righteousness, must be greater than that of their religious leaders. When we come to this study, Matt. 6:1-6, 16-18, Jesus continues with His warning.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. (NASB) Matt. 6:1

The Greek word that Jesus uses for the English word “before” actually means “in front of,” and the Greek word for the phrase “to be noticed” has the idea of “gazing upon.” These words reveal



that the religious leaders behaved in certain ways in front of the people to gain their approval. They wanted the people to consider them spiritual men.

Some years ago, a pastor revealed that when he came to “work” he acted “pastoral” around the people. He chose to act loving and gracious when he came to church and was around the church members. Also, some church people act very friendly around the elders and pastors of the church but not necessarily with the rest of the people. They appear to be

godly, humble, and loving to the church leadership, but not always with others. Are they practicing their righteousness before “those who are important”? Was the pastor pretending to love because he wanted approval?

Life and Heart of Jesus

Jesus' Ministry in Galilee - Sermon on the Mount

	Preparing To Preach	The Beatitudes	Disciple's Purpose	Jesus & The Law	Heart of a Disciple	Disciple & God	Disciple & Others	The Golden Rule	Enter the Kingdom	Two Foundations
Matthew	5:1-2	5:3-12	5:13-16	5:17-20	5:21-48	6:1-34	7:1-6	7:7-12	7:13-23	7:24-29
Mark										
Luke	6:17-19	6:20-26			6:27-36	6:37-42		6:43-45	6:46-49	
John										

Jesus says that if anyone is seeking a reward from the leadership or the people attending the church, he or she is not going to get one from God the Father who is in heaven.

TRUMPETING FOR ALMS. After His warning, Jesus gave them three illustrations to help them understand His message. His first illustration was the giving of alms.

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (NASB) Matt. 6:2

The Jews in Jesus' time believed that giving alms gained one favor with God. For example, the Jewish apocryphal book, the Wisdom of Sirach, records these words,

. . . alms make an atonement for sins. (Wisdom of Sirach 3:30

The passage indicates that the Jews believed giving alms helped one to have his or her sins forgiven. This gives us

insight as to why the disciples were surprised when Jesus said that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10:23-26). Jesus had said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Jesus wanted the disciples to know that the things and wealth of this world would make the rich content. As a result, many would reject God and not see a need for spiritual things. As a result, most rich people will not make it to heaven. The disciples were surprised because they believed that alms giving gained favor with God. If you were rich, you could give a lot of alms or money and gain a lot of favor with God. As a result, they believed that the rich had greater favor with God.

The religious leaders gave money also. When they gave, they had someone blow a trumpet. Some have questioned if a trumpet was actually used, since no historical evidence has been found. Some have suggested that Jesus was referring to an offering box that looked like a trumpet. Some conjecture that the funnel-like offering box was constructed that way to prevent someone's hands from reaching inside and taking the money. Others believe the trumpet was only symbolic.

Why should we doubt that Jesus was referring to real trumpets? Regardless of one's view, it is clear that these religious leaders were doing something to motivate people to watch them give money to the poor in the synagogues and streets. They wanted favor with God *and* man. They gave to gain favor with God *and* to gain favor with the people.

Jesus said that they had their full reward. They had their reward from those who are watching and not from the Father. Then Jesus adds this,

But when you give to the poor, 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 what is done in secret will reward you. (NASB) Matt. 6:3-4

Why do you give money? Men and women have given money to church leaders or pastors personally because they have wanted them to know who gave the money. Some have given money to gain influence. Money has been given for many reasons.

In Acts 5 we are told about Ananias and Sapphira who brought money to the Apostle Peter and apparently said that they were donating all of the money that they had received from the sale of some land. Ananias lied, and God took his life.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?" (NASB) Acts 5:1-4

This is the first death recorded in the New Testament church, and it occurred because someone lied. Men and women have sought to gain approval and influence church leaders through money. This is not new. It has occurred since the days of the early church.

Then Jesus encouraged His listeners to "not let your left

hand know what your right hand is doing." This is the only way to gain the Father's reward. But what does it mean to "not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"? Since our brain controls both the left and right hands, the left must "know" what the right hand is doing. How can we prevent one hand from "knowing" what the other hand is doing? The answer is, "It is very difficult if not impossible." That gives us the clue to Jesus' point. We will have to work very hard at keeping our giving a secret. We are to give and not tell. Someone once gave me a large sum of money when they heard that I had a very serious illness. The money was sent anonymously. I did not know who gave it, and I am sure that God will reward him or her as a result.

PRAYING FOR ATTENTION. Jesus' second illustration is about prayer.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (NASB) Matt. 6:5-6

The Pharisees liked to pray. But they liked to pray so that others would see them. So Jesus said, ". . . go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father . . ." Jesus was not telling us that we can never pray in public, in the church, or while standing. Even Jesus prayed in public when He blessed the fish and loaves for the 5,000 (Matt. 15:36). In Eph. 6:18 and 1 Thess. 5:17 we are told to constantly pray, and in 1 Tim. 2:8 we are told to pray "every place."

Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. (NASB) 1 Tim. 2:8

This means we should pray wherever we are throughout the day. So what was Jesus' point? His point is that we should not seek the honor of men and women for spiritual deeds. We should not be obvious. We should not pray long prayers because we want someone to think that we are holy. We

should not try to make others think that we have a wonderful relationship with God. When we pray, we should not seek the attention of others. Some of us have forgotten to whom we are praying. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes had forgotten. It is hard to convince God that one is serious about prayer or a relationship with Him when He knows that you are praying for the honor of others. He knows our hearts.

FASTING FOR HONOR. Matt. 6:7-15 is a parenthesis or a detour dealing with prayer. It is a break in His warnings about not “practicing your righteousness before men.” We will look at this section in our next study and skip to the third illustration which occurs in verse 16.

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (NASB) Matt. 6:16

In this illustration Jesus tells us that the religious leaders would fast and make it obvious to others they were fasting. They put on a show. They “dressed up” and disfigured their faces so that others would know they were fasting. It was a great act. They were actors. That is the meaning of the Greek word that is translated as “hypocrite” in the English. They were actors - acting for attention.

So Jesus warned them,

But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (NASB) Matt. 6:17-18

Once again Jesus tells us not to show-off.

THE MESSAGE. During a conference in California, Gordon MacDonald tells the following story about himself. He was a new pastor on his first day in his office, standing behind his new desk that had a four-button phone on it when someone knocked on his closed door. He states that he wanted to make a great impression on whoever was going to enter. So he invited them in, pushed a button, picked up the

phone and said,

“Billy, how are you? It is great to hear your voice. Thank you for calling. You would like me to speak at Yankee Stadium tomorrow night because you have laryngitis? I am sorry I cannot do that. I have a committee meeting. I will have to turn you down this time. Please call again.

Then he said, “Just a minute” speaking to the man in his office and punched another button of the phone.

Rabbi Tannenbaum! Thank you for calling. You would like me to come to a luncheon in Washington D.C. next week? Yeah, I could probably pull that off. I would be glad to do that. Thank you very, very much.

Then speaking to the man in his office, “Just a minute” he punched a third button.

Cardinal, you would like me to come to your ecumenical breakfast next week? Sure, I would be happy to do that. Thank you for calling me.

Then he hung up and asked the man standing at his desk, “What may I do for you?” The man answered, “Well, I am from the telephone company and I have come to connect your telephone so that it will work.” What a great illustration of pride. This is an illustration of someone pretending to be something that he or she was not. What a great illustration of what Jesus was talking about. Seeking the approval of others through your spiritual deeds.

When you do something for God, is it for God or is it for others? In Jesus’ three illustrations, He uses the word “secret” five times. In each illustration, Jesus encourages us to practice our righteousness without seeking the honor of people. If we seek the honor of others, we have no reward from the Father.

REWARDS. Jesus has also revealed that His followers will receive rewards in heaven. Read the following passages,

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive

a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. (NASB) Matt. 10:41

Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (NASB) 1 Cor. 3:8

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. (NASB) 2 John 8

The first passage reveals that there are different types of rewards that God will give His saints: a prophet's reward and a reward for a righteous man and woman. The second passage reveals that there are degrees of rewards. Some will be greater than others. The third passage indicates that we can end up with only a fraction of the reward that we potentially could have received. Does God give us rewards? The answer

is yes. There is only one way for people to go to heaven and that is by believing in

Jesus Christ. Is He your God? Will you submit to Him and do you want Him to forgive your sins? Once that decision is made, you will receive a reward based upon your righteousness in this life. What are the various rewards? God has not revealed that to us.

CONCLUSION. Did you know that your reward depends upon your attitude about the reward? That is the message of this verse,

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great . . . (NASB) Luke 6:35

We will close with the following, well-known illustration,

A few years ago a group of salesmen went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They had promised their wives that they would be home in time for the Friday

evening dinner. In their rush at the airport, one of the salesmen inadvertently kicked over a table that held a display of apples. The apples flew everywhere. Without stopping or looking back, they raced to the plane in time for their nearly missed boarding.

But one of the salesman paused and told his friends to go on without him, waved good-bye, asked one of them to call his wife when they arrived at home and explain that he would take a later flight. Then he returned to the airline terminal where the apples were all over the terminal floor.

That is when he saw the 16 year old girl who was totally blind! She was softly crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration, and at the same time helplessly trying to find the apples as the crowd swirled about her, no one stopping and no one to care for her plight.

The salesman knelt down on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and

helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that many of

the apples had become battered and bruised; these he set aside in another basket. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this \$40 for the damage we did. Are you okay?" She nodded through her tears. He continued on with, "I hope we didn't spoil your day too badly."

As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him, "Mister..." He paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes. She continued, "Are you Jesus?"

She did not know the man. She could not see him. She could not look at his face. She would probably never meet him again. He didn't do this good deed to impress his friends, or to make his wife happy, but because he knew it was the righteous thing to do. He did his deed in secret, and Jesus calls us to do the same.

... Your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (NASB) Matt. 6:18