



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 14
Matthew 6:2-4: Topic 14.0

Study By
Lorin L Cranford
cranfordville.com

Greek NT

6.2 Ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην, μὴ σαλπίσσης ἔμπροσθέν σου, ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς ῥύμαις, ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. 6.3 σοῦ δὲ ποιοῦντος ἐλεημοσύνην μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, 6.4 ὅπως ἡ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

2 »Wenn du also einem Bedürftigen etwas spendest, dann häng es nicht an die große Glocke! Benimm dich nicht wie die Scheinheiligen in den Synagogen und auf den Straßen. Sie wollen nur von den Menschen geehrt werden. Ich versichere euch: Sie haben ihren Lohn schon kassiert. 3 Wenn du also etwas spendest, dann tu es so unauffällig, dass deine linke Hand nicht weiß, was die rechte tut. 4 Dein Vater, der auch das Verborgene sieht, wird dich dafür belohnen.«

NRSV

2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

NLT

2 When you give a gift to someone in need, don't shout about it as the hypocrites do – blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing. 4 Give your gifts in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

The Study of the Text:1

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

This scripture passage stands highly dependent on detailed background study for correct understanding. And this is equally true for both the historical and the literary backgrounds of these verses. The social world of Jesus was extremely different from anything found in modern society. And that social world of the first century itself was very diverse in its attitudes and practices. The literary aspects of this pericope stand critically important to the exegetical process as well. The inner dependence of vv. 2-4 upon verse 1 is foundational. The relation of Jewish almsgiving to prayer and fasting inside the Judaism of Jesus' day is also significant. Thus careful attention must be given to each of the background issues. Only then can proper analysis of the verses themselves be made.

Historical Context:

One can never fully grasp the significance of these words of Jesus without a thorough understanding of how the ancient world treated not just the poor and poverty stricken in its midst, but also how people experiencing disaster and crisis in physical needs were dealt with. How a society, be it religious or non-religious, treats people undergoing severe physical needs stands as a defining trait of the character of that society.

In the world of Jesus very different attitudes and practices existed and these ran the full range of doing little or nothing to prevent poverty stricken people from starving to death all the way to assuming responsibility to provide for the basic needs of people in dire circumstances. By placing Mt. 6:2-4 against this historical backdrop details of meaning will more quickly become evident and clearer. Then we will be better able to find legitimate and relevant applications of the text for our time.

Beneficence in Ancient World in general.

Modern western society, even though in varying degrees from country to country, generally feels obligations to develop 'social networks' to help its citizens cope with economic hardships and disasters. Thus welfare programs of some sort exist in every industrialized country of the modern world. Increasingly the

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

An electronic copy of this study can be accessed at <http://cranfordville.com/Cranfordville/Reources.htm>. These are located under IBC Cologne/Bonn Bible Studies. The study is free and provided as a ministry of C&L Publishing, Inc.

so-called 'developing countries' of our time provide economic welfare support for their citizens as well. Such programs can be structured by governmental agencies or non-governmental organizations such as religious based groups. In most countries a combination of both exists. The funding of social welfare most comes through government based taxation of the citizens with the aim of equally sharing the financial burden of welfare support of its needy citizens. The debates that take place in our day are not about whether or not to provide welfare support. Rather, they center on how much support and to which target groups support should be extended. It is a universal 'given' that welfare support is an essential element of modern society.

But this way of thinking is relatively recent in time.

It was predominantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that an organized system of state welfare provision was introduced in many countries. Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of Germany, introduced one of the first welfare systems for the working classes. In Great Britain the Liberal government of Henry Campbell-Bannerman and David Lloyd George introduced the National Insurance system in 1911, a system later expanded by Clement Attlee. The United States did not have an organized welfare system until the Great Depression, when emergency relief measures were introduced under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Even then, Roosevelt's New Deal focused predominantly on a program of providing work and stimulating the economy through public spending on projects, rather than on cash payments.²

One would make a grave mistake to assume that this way of thinking about social responsibility goes back to the ancient world. The above quoted Wikipedia article falsely attributes the roots of the modern pattern to both Jewish and Islamic ancient traditions. No provable link to either of these exists whatsoever. The logic of linking a modern pattern to a religious source from the ancient world that has largely been condemned in the modern world for centuries makes no sense whatsoever, and is false reasoning. What little linkage that can be established to the ancient world comes through the Christian heritage of modern western society. But direct links here are few and very minimal at best. Modern western concerns arose largely out of the industrial revolution and the horrific abuses of poor people that accompanied this period of economic growth. If any traceable source for creating sensitivity to the needs of the poor can be validated, they will mostly go back to Karl Marx and the rise of socialistic philosophy in the 1800s.

Ancient Roman welfare.

In the emerging Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era, concern for the poor was minimal at best where it existed at all. The hierarchal structure of ancient Roman culture divided out the population generally on the basis of ancestry and property holdings. By property Romans grouped people into six categories, the bottom rung being called *proletarii* which was composed of those who owned no property at all. They had no voting rights and existed largely at the mercy of other groups with more economic and political power. Outside of slaves who made up over two-thirds of the population of the empire, the *proletarii*³ were the next largest group of individuals in the empire.

The empire made little to no provision for poverty stricken people in its midst.⁴ What help that existed came through philanthropy⁵ from the wealthy and from rulers. But assistance to the poor by the upper classes was largely motivated by self-serving agendas and existed only at the whim of the wealthy.⁶ Consequently it was spotty at best and seldom gave significant relief to the poor. Jesus' use of a common idiom in his world, "you always have the poor with you" (Mt. 26:11), reflects the attitude of most of the ancient world. Those in poverty were largely helpless and frequently the pawns of the upper classes. Hunger and starvation were everyday realities among the poverty stricken people. No universal network or social structure, governmental or religious in nature, for helping relieve poverty existence in the Roman empire.

²"Welfare: History," Wikipedia online encyclopedia

³The term 'peasant' is avoided because it carries with it the association of a non-urban connection to the land. With the high degree of urbanization in the empire, many if not most of the *proletarii* lived in urban districts rather than in rural areas.

⁴Quite interestingly, the Greek word ἐλεημοσύνη in Mt. 6:2-4 for almsgiving did not exist in the Greek language during the classical period. Giving to the poor did exist in a very limited fashion but was not considered meritorious. The word surfaces late in Greek literature, first in Diogenes Laertius and then with the meaning of 'pity.' It was through the LXX translation of the Hebrew words for almsgiving that ἐλεημοσύνη took on the meaning found in the New Testament. (F. Staudinger, "ἐλέω," The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament)

⁵Philanthropy comes from the Greek word, φιλανθρωπία, meaning 'love of humanity.' The Romans used the Latin word '*humanitas*' for the same idea.

⁶Greco-Roman 'benefaction,' i.e., a charitable donation, largely focused on helping a town or city where the recipients could in some way benefit the donor in return for the donor's contribution. Helping the poverty stricken provided no such benefit, and only enabled the donor to receive honor from society in general as a generous patron.

Life then was often bleak and offered little hope to those on the low end of the economic scale.

Almsgiving among the Jewish people.

The situation was dramatically different among the Jewish people than elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Called *Tzedakah* in modern Judaism,⁷ charitable giving to the poor in ancient Judaism was viewed as a major religious obligation in devotion to God. This grew out of Moses' command in Deut. 15:11 (NRSV):

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Interestingly, the Hebrew language did not develop a specific word for almsgiving, i.e., charitable giving to the poor. But the Old Testament is packed full of admonitions for Israelites to be generous, and to not neglect caring for the poor in their midst.⁸ During the 400 year intertestamental era between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish religious practice elevated and formalized almsgiving to the poor. By the time of Jesus the practice was highly institutionalized between the temple in Jerusalem and the local synagogues both in Palestine and in Diaspora Judaism. In general, worshippers brought either money or food items with them to the Friday evening sabbath service at the synagogue, or whenever they visited the temple in Jerusalem. In the background of Acts 6:1-7⁹ and 1 Timothy 5:3-16¹⁰ lies the traditional synagogue practice

⁷Tzedakah (Hebrew: צדקה) is a Hebrew word commonly translated as charity, though it is based on a root meaning justice (צדק, tzedek). In Judaism, tzedakah refers to the religious obligation to perform charity, and philanthropic acts, which Judaism emphasizes are important parts of living a spiritual life; Jewish tradition argues that the second highest form of tzedakah is to anonymously give donations to unknown recipients. Unlike philanthropy, which is completely voluntary, tzedakah is seen as a religious obligation, which must be performed regardless of financial standing, and must even be performed by poor people; tzedakah is considered to be one of the three main acts that can annul a less than favorable heavenly decree.

⁸"There are, of course, references to the poor and destitute in all branches of the literature of the OT. The psalmist has not seen the children of the righteous begging bread (37:25); rather, the righteous is a liberal giver (112:9); and Job was famed for his charity (Job 29:12-17). The prophet claims that the religious fast acceptable to the Lord includes gifts of bread to the hungry, housing for the homeless, and clothing for the naked (Isa. 58:6-8). The wise commend kindness to the poor (Prov. 14:21, 31). Noteworthy is the frequent phrase "poor and needy." The occurrences of this phrase in law, prophecy, wisdom, and psalmody show that, like the modern phrase "down and out," "poor and needy" is a colloquial, almost technical, term for the unfortunates. Beggary is a terrible fate destined to fall upon the remnants of Eli's house (I Sam. 2:36), and a curse invoked upon the children of the persecutor (Ps. 109:10). Penury and privation are abundantly attested in the OT, and where these are present, we may also assume that almsgiving and succor were not absent.

"Various practices point in the same direction. Much almsgiving is concealed in hospitality which is not merely the feasting of superiors and equals but the charitable provision for the hungry. This is specially true of that hospitality connected with religious occasions and sacrifices (cf. I Sam. 9:13; 25:8; II Sam. 6:19; 15:11; Neh. 8:10). The laws prescribe provision for the poor. Arable land, the vineyard, and the olive orchard are to be left fallow every seventh year, "that the poor of your people may eat" (Exod. 23:10-11). Similarly the Deuteronomist prescribes that a tithe of the produce every third year is to be given to the Levite, the resident alien, and the poor (Deut. 14:28). Every Israelite – thus especially the poor – was allowed to pick grapes and corn to eat as he passed by (Deut. 23:24-25), and the poor would glean corn and olives and grapes (24:19-22; cf. Lev. 19:9; 23:22). The manumitted slave is to be loaded with gifts, but here the idea of reward must also be present (Deut. 15:12-15).

"It may be concluded that in ancient Israel almsgiving was widely practiced, even if there are a good deal of silence and disguise concerning its terminology." [G. Henton Davies, "Alms," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach]

⁹Acts 6:1, "1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked **in the daily distribution of food.**"

¹⁰1 Tim. 5:3-16, "3 Honor widows who are really widows. 4 If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. 5 The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; 6 but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. 7 Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. 8 And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 9 Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; 10 she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. 11 But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, 12 and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. 13 Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. 15 For some have already turned away to follow Satan. 16 If any believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows.

of designated officials of the synagogue distributing either food or money -- or a combination of both -- each week at the end of the sabbatic worship service. Typically enough provision would be made for two meals a day for seven days. Individuals depending on the community for assistance, rather than on their immediate family, were enrolled in an official list at the synagogue. This especially targeted widows and orphans who were especially cared for by others in the Jewish community.

Thus the contributions of individual worshippers to the funds for giving to the needy took on a high level importance. As a means of promoting almsgiving, special merit before God was attached to the action, as G. Henton Davies points out:¹¹

- a. In Jewish writings, generally speaking, the word “righteousness” (צִדִּיק) came to mean “almsgiving” (so in Aramaic, Syriac, and the Koran).
- b. The giving of alms gained merit for the donor. This is already probably evident in such passages as Dan. 4:27; and the same is claimed for Prov. 11:4, though it is less likely, in view of the context. “Alms make atonement for sins” (Ecclus. 3:30; cf. 29:12).
- c. Widely attested Jewish almsgiving is the background for the rich. NT teaching.

Early Christian adoption of Jewish almsgiving practices.

The New Testament passages which treat the matter of almsgiving make it clear that early Christianity adopted the Jewish tradition in principle. Jesus’ teaching here in Mt. 6:2-4 clearly affirms the practice but insists on it being carried out properly. In Acts 6:1-7, the early church had to deal with discriminatory practices in the treatment of its widows among two background Jewish mentalities, Hellenistic and Hebraistic. Unquestionably the treatment of widows discussed in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 reflects the incorporation of traditional Jewish practice into the early church. Beyond these texts, the most detailed treatment is the so-called ‘relief offering’ collected by Paul on the third missionary journey for helping relieve the poverty and suffering of Jewish Christians in Judea undergoing severe deprivation because of famine and persecution.¹² The general principles emerging from the New Testament include generosity in giving, proportionate giving, giving with thanksgiving to God for His mercy, structured administration of funds, granting of aid only to those with genuine need. First Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19 places a special responsibility on wealthy Christians to generously give to help those in need.

With this historical backdrop of the beginning Christian century in view, we can now probe the literary design of these verses as preparation for exegeting their meaning.

Literary Aspects:

The literary aspects also play a crucial role in proper understanding of vv. 2-4.

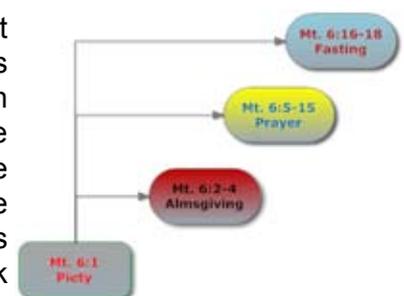
Literary Form:

Among the different types of sayings of Jesus in the gospels, the material in vv. 2-4 represents what has been called a ‘discipleship saying.’ In contrast to the previous section in 5:17-48 where the six “you have heard it said...but I say to you...” pattern frames six different topics, the literary framing of not only vv. 2-4, but also vv. 5-17 and 16-18 is established by the admonition structure in 6:1. Again a contrast between one way and Jesus’ way is set forth in strong expression that occasionally utilizes deliberate exaggeration as a caricaturing of the false way of practicing one’s piety. Much blunt, strongly accusatory language is used to paint the false piety in forceful expression.

The sources used by Matthew for vv. 2-18 defy precise validation. Apart from the Lord’s prayer section in vv. 9-15 no parallel elsewhere in the synoptic gospels exists. And thus the source for Matthew goes back to some exclusive material that Matthew had access to but none of the other gospel writers.

Literary Setting:

The literary context for vv. 2-4 is critically important for correct understanding of this passage of scripture. The diagram to the right attempts to visualize the literary relationships in 6:1-18. The foundational admonition in 6:1- set ups a core structure that will be used to frame the core structure of each of the following three pericopes in vv. 2-4, 5-17, and 16-18. The negative orientation in 6:1¹³ sets up the first segment of each of these three passages, which paints in dark tones the falseness of the pietistic practices of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. This in turn will be set in stark



¹¹G. Henton Davies, “Alms,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach.

¹²For details sketched out in the New Testament see 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Rom. 15:14-32; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15; Acts 24:17. A helpful broader discussion is available at Darrell L. Bock, “Contribution,” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

¹³Mt. 6:1, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

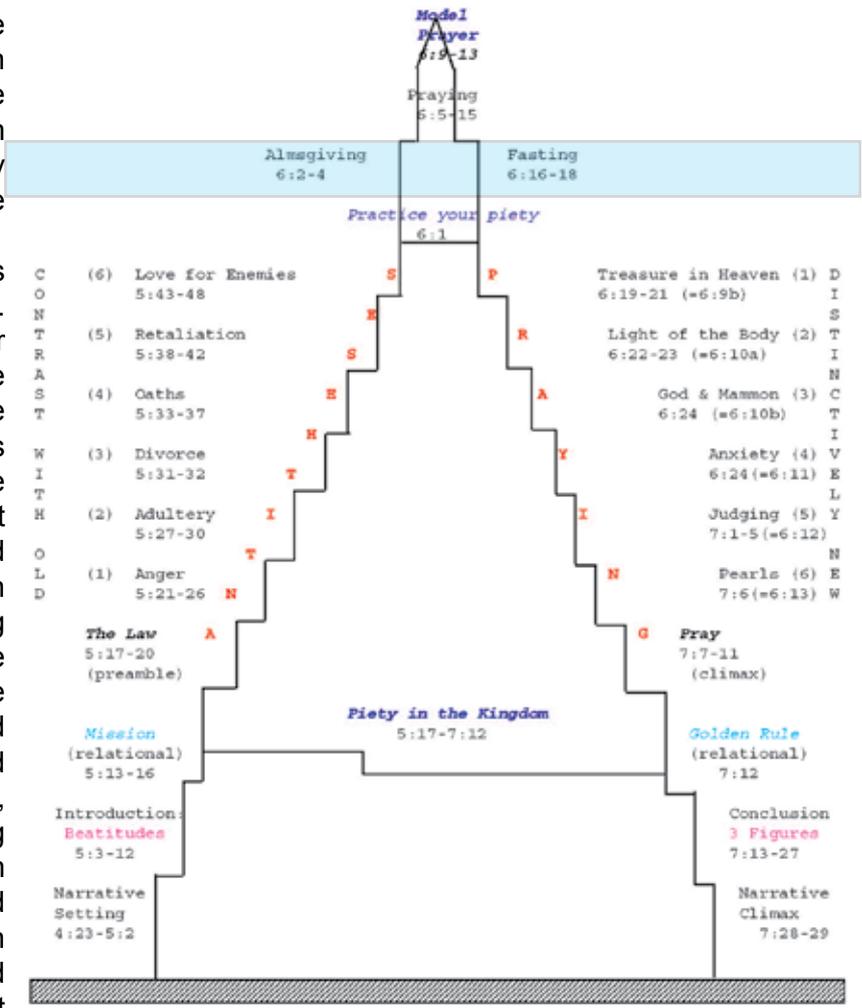
contrast to Jesus' way of almsgiving, praying and fasting. Careful repetition of key words and phrases from verse one in the 'negative' assessment of the false piety sections links each section to the foundational admonition in verse one. Then by antithetical parallelism the opposite positive approach to piety is framed by the elements of the false piety expressions.

The larger context concern is charted in the diagram to the right. Mt. 6:1-18 stands as the second major section of the Sermon and follows the six antitheses section in 5:17-48. Here three pietistic practices of the religious leaders of the Jews of Jesus' day are treated. The contrastive nature that characterized 5:17-48 is continued here but with more direct application to perceived 'models' of piety among the Jews of the first century. Three topics are singled out for contrastive assertion: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. By targeting the 'scribes and Pharisees' as how not to do piety, Jesus unloads a barrage of stinging indictment with the labeling of them as 'hypocrites.' This dark background provides the basis for his teaching on how to properly give alms, pray, and fast. This continues the thrust first declared in 5:20¹⁴ about the woeful inadequacy of the righteousness of the Pharisees to gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

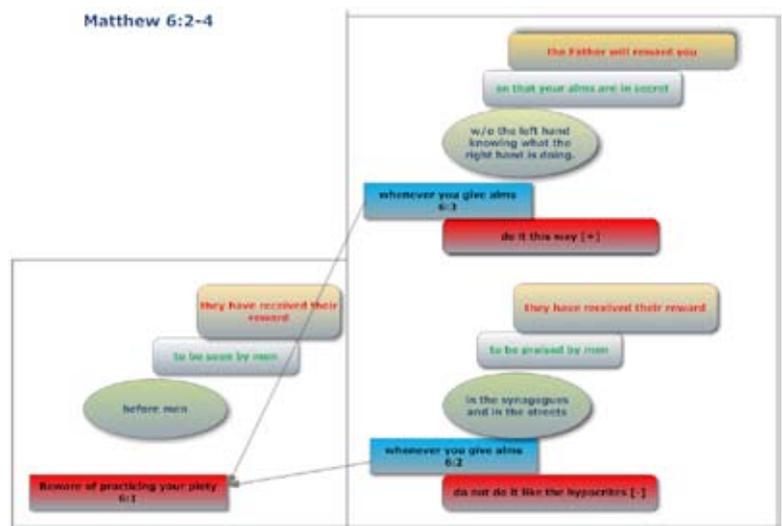
Literary Structure:

As the diagram on the right charts out, the foundational admonition in 6:1 establishes as framing structure for vv. 2-4. The particular piety in mind is identified twice as a header from the negative and positive expressions: 'when you give alms...' The negative portrayal of the Pharisees as hypocrites is set forth first, playing off the negative tone of the foundational warning in 6:1. The essential elements of where and why the pietistic practice is done are highlighted. The outcome of acknowledgement of the practice follows in parallelism to the foundational assertion in verse one. The negative practice is assessed with the same language as in the warning in 6:1: men acknowledge the practice. But the positive practice receives the divine acknowledgement, which is the much preferred acknowledgement. The language of eschatological final judgment is employed to affirm that the divine acknowledgement comes when the

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Leoin L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.



¹⁴Mt. 5:20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

issue of eternal destiny is at stake.

Thus with powerful tones of both warning and encouragement Jesus makes it clear that almsgiving remains important in the new covenant, for it will play a role in final judgment. But for almsgiving to bring about a positive evaluation from God it must be done properly. And this focuses on where and why we give alms. The manner of giving and the motive for giving become decisive factors in whether or not our charitable giving brings God's blessing or His scorching denunciation in final judgment. Jesus assumes the fact of giving as the normal expectation of Almighty God. Failure to give brings certain indictment and reflects the absence of being in the Kingdom of Heaven. But merely to give is not what the Father is evaluating. How we give and why we give are just as important as the giving itself.

This is to be a significant part of the 'greater righteousness' of the disciples than that of the Pharisees (cf. 5:20). It also continues the pattern in the Sermon of stressing the inner spiritual condition as foundational to outward actions of piety.

Exegesis of the Text:

“When you give alms, don’t...” : **“So whenever you give alms**, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward” **“Οταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην**, μὴ σαλπίζης ἔμπροσθέν σου, ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς ῥύμαις, ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.

“So whenever you give alms” **Οταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην**. This first ‘header’ introduces the particular expression of piety to be discussed. The indefinite temporal nature of the Greek dependent clause sets up the possible scenario of almsgiving. The date and the frequency of almsgiving is not defined, but instead left general. The assumption, however, is that almsgiving by disciples will be done.

As discussed above under Almsgiving Among The Jewish People, the Greek word *ἐλεημοσύνη* owes its meaning as almsgiving to the LXX since the practice was distinctly Jewish and had no counterpart elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. Charitable giving to the needy had become an important part of traditional Jewish piety by the beginning of the Christian era. It could be done in one of three basic ways: 1) contribution at the synagogue as a part of sabbath worship; 2) contribution in the Jerusalem temple as act of worship; and 3) individual contributions to beggars. Jewish understanding was that almsgiving was limited to helping fellow Jews only. Non-Jews lay outside the responsibility of the Jewish worshipper.

“Do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets” μὴ σαλπίζης ἔμπροσθέν σου, ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς ῥύμαις. Consistent with the negative orientation of the foundational warning in verse one, the first admonition of Jesus to individual disciples (note 2nd singular ‘you’ in Greek verb) stresses how not to do almsgiving.

The negative example not to be imitated is that of the ‘hypocrites’ (οἱ ὑποκριταί). This pejorative label¹⁵ signals falseness in their practice. The nature of this is simply that they outwardly appeared to be doing a religious action as a part of their devotion to God. But the inner reality was completely different. They were doing this ‘religious’ action purely for self-glorification. By this label Jesus was referring to the religious leaders called the Pharisees. These ‘lay lawyers’ of the Torah developed extensive oral interpretation of the Law of Moses and by strict legal adherence sought to obey their interpretation. Thus they ‘separated’ themselves from religious uncleanness and focused on ritual purity before God. Jesus had little use for these people and issued His most scorching denunciations upon their false practice of devotion to God.¹⁶ Although outwardly they appeared to be highly devoted to God, the inner spiritual reality was completely different. Most stinging is Jesus’ accusation that their hypocrisy is comparable to a ‘yeast’ that can spread its infectious ideas to the destruction of others.¹⁷

The manner of almsgiving from the Pharisees condemned by Jesus is depicted as ‘sounding a trumpet’ before them as they prepared to give alms. Most scholars with good reason are convinced that Jesus is using hyperbole here to dramatically underscore the self-serving motivation of Pharisaical almsgiving. Trumpets were blown at festivals in the temple, and the shofar ram’s horn would be blown in the synagogue. The dramatic attention these horns called to themselves provided a natural analogy for

¹⁵The Greek word ὑποκριτής had its roots in Greek theater where the actors wore a mask to project the personality of the character they were portraying on the stage. This mask presented a character completely different than that of the actor underneath the mask.

¹⁶Most severe is that in Matt. 23. See the NRSV concordance listing of the 93 instances of this word.

¹⁷Cf. Mt. 16:6, “Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’” Also see Mt. 16:11; Mk. 8:15 and Lk. 12:1.

Jesus' expression.¹⁸ The dual reference to synagogue and streets calls attention to both the institutionalized almsgiving in the synagogue and individual expressions of almsgiving to beggars encountered on the streets. These sought to be extraordinarily generous in their charity, so long as people noticed them.

“So that they may be praised by others” ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων. With this statement Jesus negatively assesses the motivation of this public spectacle of almsgiving according to the standard established in verse one.¹⁹ The depiction moves beyond merely being noticed by others to solicit the praise of those noticing.

“Truly I tell you, they have received their reward” ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. With solemn declaration, as the divine Judge, Jesus pronounces the heavenly verdict on the almsgiving practice of the Pharisees. In short, these received what they seemed to want: human praise. Against the framework of both the standard in 6:1 and the subsequent assessment of the positive practice in 6:4, the meaning is clear. Although they received human praise, that would be all they would receive. Absolutely no praise would come from the Heaven Father in final judgment. To paraphrase one scholar, they got what they bought! Their motivation negated the idea of genuine concern to help people in need. It focused on self-serving ends. And in so doing, their almsgiving achieved absolutely nothing spiritually.

“When you give alms, do....”: **“But when you give alms**, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” *σοῦ δὲ ποιούντος ἐλεημοσύνην* μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, ὅπως ἡ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

“But when you give alms” *σοῦ δὲ ποιούντος ἐλεημοσύνην*. This second header introduces the topic of almsgiving through the use of a participle phrase, rather than with a dependent clause as in verse two. This pattern of header introduction (1st - negative header - dependent clause; 2nd - positive header - participle phrase) will be used in all three topics in vv. 2-4, 5-15, and 16-18. Stylistically it creates a balanced well structured pattern that helped make memorization much easier.

“Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου. The positive approach to almsgiving is framed in highly metaphorical expression. In ancient Jewish society the right hand was the hand of power while the left hand typified shadiness and deception, i.e., the dark side of human nature. The alms would have been given with the right hand. If the left hand knew what the right hand had done, it would promote negative reaction and rejection of the actions. The later use of right / left hand imagery in Matt. 25:34-43 is very informative here:

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, F189 you did it to me.’ 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?”

The image of ‘right handed’ giving is of compassion and concern for others, just the opposite of the self-glorifying motives of the Pharisees.

¹⁸Note the efforts of Bible translators using the DE method to communicate this: **NLT**: “When you give a gift to someone in need, **don’t shout about it** as the hypocrites do – blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity!” **TEV**: ““So when you give something to a needy person, **do not make a big show of it**, as the hypocrites do in the houses of worship and on the streets.” **Message**: “When you do something for someone else, **don’t call attention to yourself**. You’ve seen them in action, I’m sure - ‘playactors’ I call them - treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds.”

¹⁹Mt. 6:1, NRSV: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

“So that your alms may be done in secret” ὅπως ἡ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ. The motive expression contrasts ‘secret place’ with synagogues and streets. The point is that no one notices what you are doing, because you aren’t seeking to catch their attention in your almsgiving. This is not to be taken to prohibit making an offering in a worship service. According to Seqal 5.6 in the Talmud, two chambers in the Jerusalem temple existed. One was called the ‘chamber of secrets’ where worshippers could make their donations to the poor in private, and the poor could also come in private to receive their provisions without public shame of being poverty stricken. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind, and if so, then the meaning to His audience would have been instantly clear. But whether the secret place is such an allusion or not, the meaning is quite clear.

“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.²⁰ The eschatological setting for the divine reward is the most natural meaning of the action of the Heavenly Father.²¹ That God can ‘see in the dark’ is affirmed repeatedly in the Old Testament and in early Jewish writings. Nothing is hid from the eyes of God, Ps. 90:8. Similarly is Jesus’ saying in Mt. 10:26: **“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”** The point of Jesus’ declaration is that God will openly acknowledge true almsgiving on the day of final judgment.

What Jesus demands as true piety in the Kingdom of Heaven is almsgiving done in proper manner and with the right motivations. In today’s world almsgiving becomes charitable giving to those in physical need. Discipleship must always reach beyond itself, if it is real discipleship.

“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.” (1 John 3:17-19, NRSV).

2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) What motivates your giving to the work of God?

- 2) How concerned are you with the needy in our day?

- 3) Do governmental social welfare programs take care of poverty needs in our land?

- 4) What responsibility does the church have to help the needy?

- 5) Is taking care of poverty stricken people the responsibility of government, church, or individuals?

²⁰In some very late manuscript copies, the additional phrase is inserted: σοι ἐν τῷ πανερῷ, with the meaning “in the open.” This was an effort to balance the secret / open analogy. But this wording is not found in the early, reliable mss copies.

²¹Cf. Mt. 16:27, “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.”

Mt. 20:8, “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’”