



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



Study By
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Greek NT

2 Ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς ἑλεημοσύνην, μὴ σαλπίσῃς 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. 3 σοῦ δὲ ποιούντος ἑλεημοσύνην μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, 4 ὅπως ἦ σου ἡ ἑλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι

La Biblia de las Américas

2 Por eso, cuando des limosna, no toques trompeta delante de ti, como hacen los hipócritas en las sinagogas y en las calles, para ser alabados por los hombres. En verdad os digo que ya han recibido su recompensa. 3 Pero tú, cuando des limosna, que no sepa tu mano izquierda lo que hace tu derecha, 4 para que tu limosna sea en secreto; y tu Padre, que ve en lo secreto, te recompensará.

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

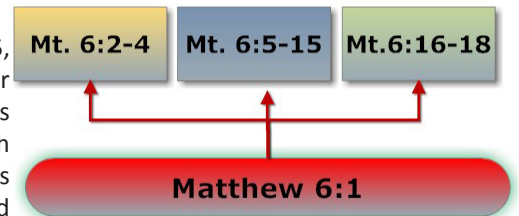
2 When you give a gift to someone in need, don't shout about it as the hypocrites do – blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand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

The Outline of the Text:

In not only this pericope (vv. 2-4), but also in the following two pericopes (vv. 5-15, 16-18) the structural pattern established in verse one becomes the foundation for organizing the words of Jesus. With the focus in 6:1 on a caution to avoid false patterns of piety with the warning of consequence otherwise, each of the passages begins with the negative model of the 'hypocrites', which in Matthew's gospel means the scribes and Pharisees as the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day. These who were considered to be the most pious of all the Jewish people actually were modeling a completely false piety that God utterly rejected. Jesus' words were shocking in His day because He condemned as worthless and dangerous the ideas of the very religious leaders who were considered to have the greatest spiritual insight of anyone in that time.

In both this and the subsequent two passages, the negative model of how not to do piety is then followed by the positive model of how authentic piety is to be done in the Kingdom of Heaven. One note that is important: the negative model is introduced by the plural you in Greek in the second and third examples but not the first one, while the positive model is consistently introduced by the singular you in Greek, except for the second layer on prayer (vv. 7-15). The English translation covers this up but it is clearly noticeable in the other modern western languages because of a different word for you plural and for you singular,¹ unlike modern English. One of the impacts of this is along the lines of Jesus saying, "Here is how the group shouldn't do piety; here is how each one of you must do piety." Don't lose sight of the negative / positive contrast earlier in the six antitheses in 5:21-48.² That pattern is continued in vv. 1-18, only in blunter, more demanding tones.

Also, the subdivisions (the negative and then the positive models for piety) are constructed the same way, based on the structure in verse one. Each pericope (vv. 2, 5, 16) is introduced by 'when you...' (Ὅταν ...), but each positive sub-unit is introduced by either the Greek Genitive absolute participle ('as you...'; v. 3, σοῦ δὲ ποιούντος, v. 17, σὺ δὲ νηστεύων) or an unusual use of the temporal conjunction (v. 6, σὺ δὲ ὅταν προσεύχη).³ This dramatically highlights the contrast between the negative and the positive models of piety in each instance.



¹**You plural:** *ὕμεῖς* (Greek), vosotros (Spanish), vous (French), ihr (German), você (Portuguese), vi (Italian), you (English)
you singular: *σὺ* (Greek), tú (Spanish), tu (French), du (German), tu, (Portuguese) tu (Italian), you (English)

²"You have heard that it was said...; but I say to you..."

³One should note -- as we will in our study on the passage -- the 'double layer' on prayer of vv. 5-6 (- model v. 5; + model v. 6) and vv. 7-15 (- model, vv. 7-8; + model, vv. 9-15). The literary structural markers of the 'second layer' in vv. 9-15 are somewhat different from the normative pattern in the rest of vv. 2-18. The effect of this doubling pattern is to heighten the emphasis on the importance of prayer as central for Christian discipleship.

I. How not to give alms, v. 2.

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.

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.

What are ‘alms’? Ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην

The term used here is ἐλεημοσύνη, which literally designates ‘an act of mercy.’⁴ This was a significant Jewish tradition in the ancient world⁵, but not followed by other ancient cultures.⁶

Modern social welfare programs compared to ancient Jewish almsgiving.

Called Tzedakah in modern Judaism, 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.”

Jewish practices continued in early Christian piety

Acts 6:1-7; 9:36; Lk. 11:41; 12:33; 1 Tim. 5:3-36; 6:6-10, 17-19; Didache 15.4

What are we not supposed to do? μὴ σαλπίσσης ἔμπροσθέν σου, ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς ῥύμαις, ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

The Jewish example of the ‘hypocrites.’

The warning here: ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.

II. How to give alms, vv. 3,-4.

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.

3 σοῦ δὲ ποιῶντος ἐλεημοσύνην μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, 4 ὅπως ἦ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

What are we suppose to do? σοῦ δὲ ποιῶντος ἐλεημοσύνην (**what**) μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου (**how**), ὅπως ἦ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ (**why**)

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.

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.

The promise here: καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

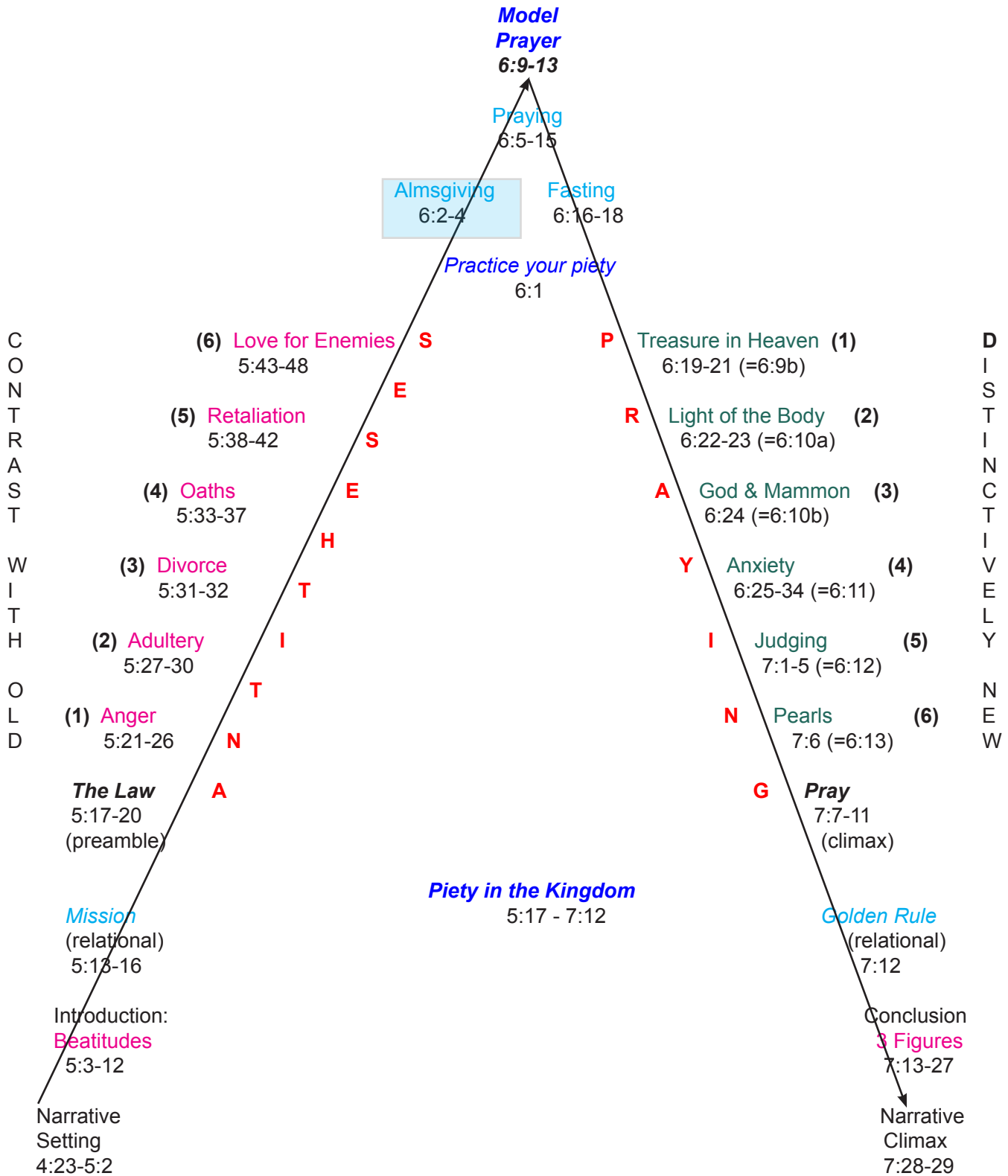
Cf. Mt. 10:26: “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” Also Matt. 25:34-43; 1 John 3:17-19.

⁴“**eleēmosýnē**. This word for “sympathy” is late in Greek. The LXX speaks of the **eleēmosýnē** by which God judges and what he shows to the righteous, innocent, and oppressed (cf. Dt. 6:25; Pss. 24:4; 103:6). A divine act and not merely an emotion is presupposed. The equivalent in Judaism takes on the sense of benevolent activity and can thus be used more narrowly for almsgiving. This is the meaning of **eleēmosýnē** in the NT (cf. Mt. 6:2ff.; Lk. 11:41; Acts 3:2ff.). Doing works of benevolence and giving alms are common expressions (cf. Mt. 6:1-2; Acts 9:36; Lk. 11:41; 12:33). With fasting and praying, giving alms is a special practice of piety for both Jews (Mt. 6:1ff.) and Christians (Did. 15.4). It is lauded in Acts 9:36 (cf. 10:2), but Jesus warns against its misuse in the service of personal vanity (Mt. 6:2-3) and Did. 1:6 warns against imprudent almsgiving (cf. Sir. 12:1).” [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 224. S.V., “eleēmosýnē,” by Rudolf Bultmann.]

⁵Quite 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*)

⁶The Roman empire made little to no provision for poverty stricken people in its midst. What help that existed came through philanthropy 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. Consequently it was spotty at best and seldom gave significant relief to the poor.

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



Source: Lorin 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.