

The Practice of Righteousness: Giving, Prayer and Fasting

Doug Hamilton

Jesus made an interesting statement during His of the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew 6:1. He said, “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*” In His day there was a term referred to as “*practicing righteousness*”. There were a series of actions designed to draw the righteous people of God closer to His throne. It involved three things, 1) Giving, 2) Praying, and 3) Fasting. Together these actions were taught to engage the righteousness of the individual. It was the practice ground of the Jew. These three means of engaging our righteousness are just as applicable today to the Christian.

The *hypocrites* of Jesus’ day were guilty of doing it for other reasons. They would practice these things to be seen of others as a means of appearing to be more righteous than others. That is the basis of Jesus discussion in Matthew chapter 6. We will spend one week on each of these topics so as to produce the greatest outcome in our lives.

A) Giving

Mathew 6:2, “When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

What are alms? It is our giving. The giving of alms was introduced in *Deuteronomy 15:11* “*For the poor will never cease {to be} in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’*” The Jews were expected to take care of the poor through the resources which God blessed them with. Eventually it applied to all the giving to Jewish causes.

The misunderstanding came when people thought their giving the Lord had with it the quality of atonement. Understandingly, they came to this conclusion by studying verses like *Proverbs 11:4* “*Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.*” and *Proverbs 16:6* “*By lovingkindness and truth iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil.*” Alms giving became a means of feeling good because of the righteous implications surrounding it. By the time Jesus began His earthly ministry, the word the Pharisees used for righteousness was the same word used for alms. It was considered the standard for righteousness.

We must acknowledge that the giving alms to support the less fortunate was and is the right thing to do. The difficulty comes in when the motive changed. It went from doing it out of love as a saved child of God to a neighbor to a love of self. It was no longer about doing the right thing, but a tool to bring self-glory. The probable meaning of “sounding the trumpet” refers to the containers that were set out for the collecting of money for alms. “*Herod's Temple in the New Testament: In Herod's temple the name ‘treasury’ was specially given to the ‘court of the women’ where were 13 trumpet-shaped boxes for the reception of the offerings of the worshippers*” (International Standard Bible Encycloppedia).

Instead of throwing a couple of gold coins in the bank, the pious leaders would exchange their offering for the smaller and more numerous loose change. The result would be a loud,

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continuous rattling of coins that would be dropped into the container. All the people would gather around and admire the rich as they would put their money in. We see this occurring in Mark 12:41-44. *“And He sat down opposite the treasury, and {began} observing how the multitude were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.’”*

The widow’s two small coins barely made a sound. The rich hypocrites made loud noises when they put funds into the trumpet-shaped piggy bank. The real giver was the poor woman who gave all that she had to live on.

This is why Jesus uses the term *“hypocrite”* to describe them. The word referred to an actor that would put on a one man show, using several different masks throughout the play and never revealing his true self in the end. These same type of givers were living under the mask of glory-seeking of man. Jesus said these type of givers have already received his reward of applause from man, but nothing from God.

Christians give to the work of the kingdom, not because we have to, but because we want to. We give as we *“has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Corinthians 9:7). We do it because we want to, not because a preacher had a sermon about it. That reminds me about three boys on a playground bragging about their fathers one day. The first boy said, “My father jots down a few words on a piece of paper and calls it a poem; and they paid him \$50.” The second boy said, “That’s nothing for my father jots down a few words on a piece of paper and calls it a song; and they paid him a \$100.” The third boy proudly responds, “That nothing! My father jots down a few words on a paper and calls it a sermon; and it takes eight men to collect all the money.”

We should want to give, not be forced to give. This is the attitude of gratitude we are to have. The early church was filled with Christians which gave from a cheerful heart.

- Acts 4:34-37, “For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need...Barnabas...owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”
- Romans 15:26, “For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”
- 2 Corinthians 8:3-4, “For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, ⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints...”
- Philippians 4:14-16, “Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. ¹⁵ You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.”

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They were not bullies to give, but gave from their hearts. They recognized what God did for them through Jesus Christ. Why do we give? Is it because God needs us to? He doesn't need our money. He is the Creator of the universe, the One who has blessed us in everything we have. He wants our eyes focused on Him. He wants us to be a generous people patterned after His grace. How do we achieve this? By practicing the righteousness of a charitable heart, we are reminded of the grace of Christ.

Matthew 5:3-4, "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

What kind of a giver does Jesus love? One who is anonymous in his approach; one who does not draw attention to himself in anyway; one who seeks the reward of the Father. Jesus said we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. The person who gives in such a way is keeping the focus on God. They are laying up for them "*treasures in heaven*". Matthew 6:19-21 "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*"²⁰ "*But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;*"²¹ "*for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*"

Closing Story

Ed was a seasoned, thriving lawyer in the big city. Growing up during the depression and living in poverty, he strove to escape the struggles of an early childhood. He had recently been accepted as a partner in the firm where he worked as a result of a string of trials. His earnings were beyond the reach of most in a lifetime and the people who respected him were many. He drove the fanciest car, wore the fanciest suits and lived in the fanciest homes. Yet, at the end of a day he would go home and weep for he was incomplete and alone inside. He had achieved everything he set out to do, but still felt dead inside and knew there must be something else out there to the meaning of life.

One night while Ed was returning to his motel room while on a business meeting when he drove by a church which was holding a gospel meeting. He felt compelled to go in and see why so many people had showed up. As he quietly crept in the back door and sat in the back pew, listened to the young preacher proclaiming the poverty of Jesus. Jesus gave up His life for us. *2Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."* Meditating on that verse, Ed had had a synapse of images of poverty as a child. He dwelt on the hurt and hunger of such times. He thought about Jesus the Creator giving it all up for us. He was moved by the message of Christ.

Meeting with the preacher afterwards, Ed told him his story of utter grief and loneliness inside. He told him that he was a successful lawyer from another city, trying to escape poverty his whole life, but never finding happiness. Then he lowered his voice, with a tear running down his cheek, asked "I want to know how I can become a Christian and have Jesus as my Savior." The preacher explained the gospel in its entirety and that evening Ed entered the covenant of Jesus Christ through baptism. The young preacher directed him to a congregation near his hometown

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and promised to keep in touch. That night as Ed lay in the motel bed, he wept, but not for the same reason. Before he wept out of pain and loneliness, tonight he wept out of joy and completeness.

A couple of decades later, the preacher spoke at Ed's funeral. He explained, "There was nobody I personally knew who understood the poverty of Jesus better than Ed." He went from extreme wealth to dying nearly penniless in a nursing home. He had become a silent worker for the Lord, giving to all those needs of the Church. He gave to the orphans; he gave to the widows; he gave to the less fortunate; he gave to missions; he gave of a cheerful heart. Someone asked him toward the end of his life why he gave nearly all his riches away. He responded, "Because the Lord gave it all for me." The giving which Jesus desires is for the right reasons, "*and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.*"

What is He Worth to You #629 from Songs of the Church

Jesus the Lord laid His glory aside, Sinners to save and made whole,
Freely He died our transgressions to hide, What is He worth to your soul?
All that was His for the sinner He gave, Pointed the path to the goal;
Sin would deprave, but the Saviour would save, What is He worth to your soul?
All that He saves He will keep till the end, Under His blessed control;
Men may depend on this wonderful Friend, What is He worth to your soul?
All who will trust Him in sunshine and gloam, Shall when they reach the bright
goal;
Ceasing to roam, be forever at home, What is He worth to your soul?
(Chorus)
What is He worth, what is He worth, what is He worth to your soul?
He died on a tree for you and for me, what is he worth to your soul?