

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ACTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: GIVING”

Matthew 6:1-4

? Are our righteous deeds of value to God, or are they so much **“dung”**? The apostle Paul uses that language in Philippians 3:8. (Some translators soften σκυβάλα [skúbala] to *refuse* or *garbage*; but others contend that **“dung”** is a closer rendering.)

? Is our Father in Heaven glorified by our good works? Or are they a pointless exercise in futility?

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 6:1: **“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ in front of others, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”**

At first hearing it sounds like we are to live out our faith behind closed doors. Messiah appears to present discipleship as a private affair.

● Then we recall his teaching earlier in the Sermon, in 5:14-16: **“You are the light of the world.... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”**

☑ {France} Discipleship **“is inevitably, and rightly, public”**; but our religious devotion is not something to parade before others. **“There is a world of difference between living a conspicuously good and godly life and striving to gain a reputation for piety.”**

☑ {N.T. Wright} **“Jesus wants us to be so eager to love and please God that we...do everything...for his eyes**

alone.” But **“Other eyes will be watching from time to time, and it’s very easy... to ‘perform’ for them rather than for God alone.”** **“Be careful”!**

■ Matthew 6:2 begins: **“So when you give to the needy...”** Not *‘if you give’*; **“when you give.”** Actually, it’s more emphatic than that: Messiah literally says **“whenever you give,”** and his terminology suggests that this is a frequent action.

■ Jumping ahead to verse 3, he repeats himself: **“when you give to the needy.”** The Lord expects his followers to provide material aid to the poor.

☑ {Barclay} For first century Jews **“almsgiving [is] the most sacred of all religious duties... how sacred... [is] seen in the fact that [they use] the same [Hebrew] word – *tsedakah* – for [both] righteousness and almsgiving.”**

☑ {Barclay; Hos 6:6} And the rabbis assert that those **“who give alms”** are **“greater... than [those] who [offer] all sacrifices.”** This is in harmony with YHWH’s declaration: **“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”**

Merciful God acts for the destitute. His Law commands the well-fed to feed the hungry and the mighty to serve the weak. His Prophets excoriates affluent people who actively oppress *or passively neglect* the poor.

{Jas 2:15-16} This is not just an *Old Testament* priority; it is a *biblical* one. In the NT James asks, **“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing**

about their physical needs, what good is it?” The answer is, No good at all.

{Ro 12:20} This is also true in relation to strangers and adversaries. Paul advises, **“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”**

{Jas 1:27} “[Looking] **after orphans and widows**” and other indigent people is integral to **“religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless.”** Hence, the Son says **“whenever you give to the needy...”**

{Mt 25:41, 45} Believers who think and act as though helping the poor is optional – or worse, a distraction from our “real” mission – are at risk of hearing the King say **“Depart from me... Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for...the least.... you did not do for me.”**

■ But that is not the only danger. Back to Matthew 6:2: **“So when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do... to be honored by others.”**

☹ {Mt 23:2-3} There is the hypocrisy of behavioral inconsistency, a gaping contradiction between *faith claims* and *actions*. These hypocrites say what is right, but do what is wrong. Jesus warns, **“Be careful to do everything” “the teachers ...and ... Pharisees” “tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”**

☹ {Mt 23:5} Then there is the hypocrisy of false motives, a major discrepancy between *action* and *intention*. These hypocrites do the right thing, but for the wrong reasons. Jesus puts it this way: **“Everything they do is done for people to see.”**

The hypocrites in our text are not lying about helping the poor. They give, no doubt frequently, probably generously. There are numerous witnesses to confirm it – and therein lies the problem!

■ They do their **“acts of righteousness’ in front of others, to be seen by them”** (verse 1). They give so that others will notice what they are doing.

■ They **“announce it with trumpets” “to be honored by others”** (verse 2). It’s not as if they pay a bugler to play every time they drop a coin in a beggar’s cup; it’s that they “toot their own horn” by making a big show of it.

They feed the hungry and clothe the naked – as they should – yet they are energized, not by *αγαπη* [agapē] love, but by self-interest. There is a significant discrepancy between their actions and intentions. They have false motives.

? What is the outcome?

☹ First, their strategy works. They who serve **“to be seen”** and **“honored by others”** get exactly what they are striving for, no less – *and no more*.

■ What does Jesus say at the end of verse 2? **“Truly I tell you, they have received their reward _ in _ full.”** Human recognition is all they get.

{Eccl 2:11} Fading applause, an inflated reputation, a memory of the spotlight – is that enough? How would it be to stand on the brink of eternity, survey all that you have **“toiled to achieve,”** only to realize it **“was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; [and] nothing was gained”?**

It is not that God denies further blessing; he is extravagantly generous to everyone! It is that, having set their sights so obsessively on *this* one reward, they will not open their souls to receive any others he might give them.

☠ Second, they rob God of the glory due his Name.

{Mt 5:16} You and I are called to **“let [our] light shine before others, [so] that they may see [our] good deeds and glorify [our] Father in heaven”!** He is glorified by our deeds of compassion and justice when we do them selflessly, in *αγαπη* love.

Yet if we do our **“acts of righteousness”** to draw attention to ourselves, the honor that should go to the Living God goes to us instead.

❓ Is this an issue with us?

This is tricky. False motives are difficult to discern. Hypocrites with false motives are good at deceiving others because they are self-deceived.

❓ How can we detect if there is incongruity between our deeds and our intent? How can we determine if there is any such hypocrisy in us?

✍ We ask the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin as we consider questions like these:

❖ When I am deciding if I will serve a poor person, do I take into account how it will make me look?

❖ Am I more likely to give (or to give more) if I know someone is going to pat me on the back?

❖ Conversely, do I hold back in my service if I expect that an observer will express disapproval?

❖ Do I feel resentful or indignant when the person I help does not praise me for my good works?

If we are “[giving] **to the needy**” **“to be honored”** by them or others, let us confess our sin and repent of it.

★ The will of God is for our **“acts of righteousness”** to be authentic and selfless. This brings glory to him and reward to us.

❓ But how can we serve authentically and selflessly?

✍ We can do our **“acts of righteousness”** with a minimum of fuss and self-promotion.

■ Matthew 6:3-4: **“when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”**

Total secrecy is not always possible. When we can multiply our impact in shared ministry, it might not even be desirable. But quiet modesty never inhibits true service.

Negatively, modesty means restraining ourselves from boasting. Positively, it is promoting others.

- We attend to what God is doing and give witness to his mercy and generosity.

- We recruit partners in service to the poor, the hungry, and the homeless.

- We encourage our partners to take leadership alongside us or over us.

- We shine the spotlight on others who serve, drawing attention to their good works rather than ours.

We *can* do our “**acts of righteousness**” with a minimum of fuss and self-promotion.

✈ Going deeper, we can exercise *αγαπη* love.

Loving God entails hallowing his Name; but hypocritical giving glorifies us instead. Doing acts of righteousness to draw attention to ourselves is not loving the Lord with all that we are.

Loving others entails selfless service; but hypocritical giving turns service into a photo op. Worse, it turns our neighbor into a means to an end. Doing acts of righteousness to be honored by others is not loving others as ourselves.

Αγαπη is not natural. It is impossible for us, in our own strength, to consistently love God and others this way over time and in every kind of circumstance.

{Mt 19:26} **“But with God all things are possible.”**

“With God” *αγαπη* is possible. **“With God”** selfless **“acts of righteous”** **“are possible.”**

{Heb 4:12} Remember, the Sermon on the Mount is a self-portrait of God the Son and an invitation to participate in his life. It reveals who Messiah is and, because his word is **“alive and active,”** it has power to draw us into him and fill us with his Spirit.

What we cannot do for him, he can do within, among, and through us. The best way to conquer self-absorption is to be absorbed in love for God and others.

? Are our righteous deeds of value to God, or are they so much **“dung”**? Is our Father in Heaven glorified by our good works, or are they a pointless exercise in futility?

Matthew 6:1-4 is the word of the Lord.