

Matthew 6:1-4

Aiming in the Right Direction

Part 1 – Doing Alms

As we come into the next section of the sermon on the mount it is good for us to pause to remember that the foundation of this sermon is the blessing of God upon His people. It is the people of God, or the followers of Christ that are comforted, that are filled, that obtain mercy, that see God, and that inherit the earth – theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And if the subjects of the kingdom of heaven are convinced that they're blessed then they're also equipped for whatever the world and the devil hurl at them.

It's important to keep this foundation in mind especially as we continue to see that the standards for kingdom living are very high. The previous section in chp. 5 demonstrated that for us very plainly. The standards of the kingdom are revealed by the law of God and are much higher than mere external conformity to those laws. The heart behind the action counts as much as the action itself and there must be consistency between the inward state of the heart and the outward actions that spring from the heart. And unless this consistency is established and maintained our righteousness will never exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

It is good to remember another aspect of this sermon that is also foundational to our state of blessing. That foundation is Christ Himself who came, according to v. 17 not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it. That statement gives us the heart of the gospel and were it not for such a statement that teaches us that it's Christ's merit that gains the blessings of the kingdom for us – I say were it not for that statement and our understanding of its ramifications this sermon would prove to be of heavier weight than we could bear.

And so following the call for consistency and the call for purity and fidelity – the call for straight-forward honesty as well as the call for self-denial and the call to excel in love – we come now into chp. 6 and in this chapter we will discover an emphasis on aiming in the right direction in all that we endeavor to do in our service to our King.

Man's chief end is to glorify God we learn at the very beginning of our shorter catechism. Unfortunately man has a depraved nature and hence a propensity to want to glorify himself. This desire for self-glory finds its way into everything that a man does – even in his religious exercises. And so we find 4 times in this 6th chapter of Matthew Christ having to warn against this pursuit of vain glory:

- *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them – v. 1*
- *Do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men – v. 2*
- *And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men – v. 5.*

- *Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast – v. 16*

Here is religion aiming in the wrong direction and Christ warns against it. Here we find glaring examples of hypocrisy. The very term *hypocrite* refers to someone who plays a part. He lives his life as if he were a stage performer in a theatre. And of course it is the objective of a stage performer to be seen of men. A stage performer is one who endeavors to put on a good show and to be convincing in the character he plays even though he is only pretending.

The kingdom of heaven sets a much higher standard. The subjects of the kingdom of heaven are not to be among those who play at religion. They are not to live out their religion by pretending. Now when we begin to look closer at chp. 6 we discover that the first verse sets forth the general principle of aiming in the right direction in our religious practice.

Some older Greek manuscripts show a different word for *alms* in v. 1. These manuscripts contain the word *righteousness* instead of the word *alms*. And so the verse would read *take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men*. And then these righteous deeds are broken down into 3 practices – the practice of doing alms, the practice of prayer, and the practice of fasting.

Believing in the majority text, as I do, I think the Authorized version contains the right translation but I also think that the analysis is sound that says v. 1 gives the general principle of religious practice under the general heading of doing alms and then presents that specific practice followed by the practice of prayer and then the practice of fasting.

In all these religious exercises the thing that must be borne in mind is that we must constantly be striving to aim in the right direction which is a Godward direction rather than a manward direction. And so I want to take the first of these religious practices today and focus on it. The theme can be stated quite simply this way:

Aiming in the Right Direction in the Practice of Doing Alms

If we're going to aim in the right direction in this practice then it's important that we first of all understand:

I. The Meaning of Doing Alms

I pointed out already that some older Greek manuscripts in v. 1 use the word *righteousness* instead of the word *alms*. I don't take this to be the best reading but I can say that there's a close connection between doing righteousness and doing alms. The Greek word for *mercy*, you see, is inherent in the word *alms*. And so the verse might read *Take heed that ye do not your deeds of mercy before men*. Youngs literal translation reads: *take heed your kindness not to do before men*.

And as I say there's a close connection between righteousness and mercy (or kindness) as we discover in Ps 37:21 *The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth.* It is characteristic of the righteous that they show mercy and give and so the term *doing righteousness* can certainly be a good interpretation of the phrase if not the best translation.

The thing I want to impress upon you is that the phrase *doing alms* is more far reaching in its concept than mere charitable giving. Charitable giving is a part of it, and it's an important part. We find a very good example of this part in Ac 9:36 *Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.* You may recall if you know the narrative that Dorcas became and sick and died. And when Peter arrived on the scene, before he raised her from the dead, those who benefited from the almsdeeds of Dorcas showed Peter the coats and garments that this lady had made evidently for those that were in need. Here is an example, then, of charitable giving or doing alms.

We find another example in Cornelius in Acts 10. So we read of him in Acts 10:2 that he was *A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway.* The apostle Paul, we learn in Gal. 2 was also characterized as one who would do alms. We learn in that chapter that when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to take the gospel to the Gentiles they were admonished by James and Cephas and John to remember the poor – *the same which I also was forward to do* – Paul testifies in Gal. 2:10.

It is good to pause and reflect on this aspect of our Christian duty especially when this aspect of doing alms can easily be overlooked. One of the things that I find most troubling in this day and age is that the world is filled with con-artists. It wasn't all that long ago that we had a lady show up after church here and put on a very impressive show of sorrow and need. She begged for money for a bus ticket so she could go to her Grandmother's funeral. We raised that money for her. Some of you were instrumental in raising that money. She evidently didn't keep very good records of where she had performed her con-work because less than a year later she showed up again with exactly the same story.

And when you experience multiplied instances of this kind of con-game it becomes very easy to become hard hearted toward giving to the needy. It's become a challenge in our day to try to discern where needs exist and where they are only pretended. And in the process we must be careful that we don't become hard hearted in this aspect of doing alms.

So I would not for a minute minimize the importance of giving to the poor but I want to stress also that while charitable giving is a part of doing alms – it's not the only part. The phrase is broad enough to include any deed of mercy that is rendered to those that are needy.

Whenever I think upon this subject my mind is drawn to Peter and John in Acts 3. As they're making their way to the temple to pray they come across a crippled man who was placed on a daily basis before the gate beautiful in order to ask alms of those who entered

the temple. I love the statement that Peter makes in v. 6 because it's a statement that I as well as some of you can readily relate to – *Silver and gold have I none* – Peter says to the cripple. Apparently there was nothing all that lucrative in being an apostle. But then Peter goes on to say – *but such as I have give I thee*. And you know the story – Peter takes the crippled man by the hand and says to him *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk* (5:6).

When we studied that portion in the book of Acts a few years ago I made it a point of emphasis that there's no such thing as a Christian with nothing to give. You may not have silver or gold – Peter didn't either. But he had something that was of much greater value. He had the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have that same gospel and it is that same gospel that can put a man back on his feet.

So we do have something to give. We have much to give. We have a gospel that can bring to a needy sinner forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking you have nothing to give. One of the things that would characterize the ministry of Christ would be preaching the gospel to the poor. You may recall from Luke 7 that when John the Baptist was in prison he sent a couple of his disciples to inquire of Christ whether or not He was indeed the Messiah. And after spending time with Christ those disciples were instructed to go back to John and report to him. So we read in Lk. 7:22 *Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.*

The concept of doing alms, then, is very broad in it's application and has both a physical, or material application as well as a spiritual application. And no act, no matter how seemingly insignificant goes unnoticed by God. The mere giving of a cup of cold water in the name of Christ will not go unrewarded, according to Christ.

But it's important that the aim be right. It's important that the way in which doing alms is performed be right – and that leads to our next consideration. We've seen something of the meaning of doing alms. Consider next:

II. The Manner of Doing Alms

Just as in the previous chapter the Lord called for consistency between inward motives and outward actions so do we find the same thing here. There is a right way and a wrong way to do alms.

The wrong way is to put on a show before men. The wrong way is to call attention to yourself. So we read in vv. 1,2 *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them*. And in v. 2 *Therefore, when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men*.

Now on the surface of these words there appears to be something contradictory to what Christ has said in the previous chapter. You remember what Christ said in 5:16 – *Let your*

light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

In the one instance, then, we're supposed to be seen of men – in the next instance we're not to be seen of men. We know, of course, that there is no contradiction to Christ's sayings. What appears to be a contradiction is easily resolved by bearing in mind where our aim must be. Our aim must be for the glory of God.

If our aim is to be seen of men – then we're in pursuit of vain glory and it doesn't matter what we've done or how much we've done or given – our giving in such a case is not acceptable with God. Our service in such instances is an abomination to God. And in the case of staged religion there are two types of people that detect the hypocrisy. The world can tell when Christians are putting on a show. And God can also tell. Listen to the words of J.C. Ryle on the duty of giving as well as the duty of prayer:

Observe that our Lord takes it for granted, that all who call themselves His disciples will GIVE ALMS. He assumes as a matter of course, that they will think it a solemn duty to give, according to their means, to relieve the needs of others. The only point He handles is the manner in which the duty should be done. This is a weighty lesson. It condemns the selfish stinginess of many in the matter of giving money. How many are "rich towards themselves," but poor towards God! How many never give a farthing to do good to the bodies and souls of men! And have such people any right to be called Christians, in their present state of mind? It may be well doubted. A giving Savior should have giving disciples.

In all our duties, whether giving, or praying, the great thing to be kept in mind is, that we have to do with a heart-searching and all-knowing God. Everything like formality, affectation, or mere bodily service, is abominable and worthless in God's sight. He takes no account of the quantity of money we give, or the quantity of words we use. The one thing at which His all-seeing eye looks is the nature of our motives, and the state of our hearts. "Our Father sees in secret."

The key, then, must be found in our earlier studies in the beatitudes. The person who is able and willing to give generously must nevertheless be poor in spirit. And if he's poor in spirit then the furthest thing from his mind will be putting on a show in any religious exercise. He will constantly face the truth that his righteousnesses are as filthy rags. He will see no inherent merit in anything he does. He's come to see in himself his own spiritual bankruptcy.

If he has mourned over his sins and hungered and thirsted for righteousness and then found joy and peace and fulfillment through the righteousness that Christ provides then the praise of man will mean nothing to him. He'll be immune from the pursuit of vain glory because he'll recognize his constant dependence upon grace.

And it is in the matter of grace that we find the key to doing alms. In the context of giving Paul writes in 2Cor. 9:8 *And God [is] able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all [things], may abound to every good work:*

Grace is a very broad term that describes for us the principle upon which God deals with us. Salvation is by grace through faith. It also describes for us the person of salvation – Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth. You can also say of grace that it describes our standing with God. We are not under the law but under grace. And in the case of this passage in 2Corinthians we find that grace is also a force of power in our lives. As grace abounds to us – we also abound to every good work.

To be bountiful in good works, then, means that we must be bountiful in God’s grace. God’s grace will always keep us humble before men yet God’s grace will also prompt us to be serving all men. And where grace abounds the pursuit of vain glory recedes.

The manner of our doing alms, then, is very important. There’s a right way and a wrong way to be engaged in our deeds of mercy. The wrong way is to attribute any merit to ourselves in anything we do. Those that attribute merit to themselves will seek to impress other men and if they’re not grounded in the gospel they may even deceive themselves into thinking that they’re impressing God.

These are the things that will go up in smoke when we stand before Christ at last. And this leads to final point which is:

III. The Reward for Doing Alms

Interestingly enough, the right way and the wrong way for doing alms have something in common. They both receive some kind of reward. Those who labor to be seen of men *have their reward* Christ says in v. 2. But what does the reward amount to? It amounts to whatever satisfaction is gained by the misimpression that you manage to foist on others.

Whatever you gain by convincing mere men of the dust that you’re godly and spiritual and generous is the extent of your gain. It’s the kind of gain that may contribute to your pride but will do nothing for you in that final day. We read of that final day:

1Co 3:13 *Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is.*
14 *If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.*
15 *If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.*

What a waste then to gain the hypocrite’s reward in this world and then see it go up in smoke on the day of Christ’s judgment. Far better to gain Christ’s commendation then even if you receive no recognition now. What can be more thrilling to the heart than to hear Christ say – *Well done, [thou] good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.* (Mt. 25:21).

Can such words really be heard by saved sinners? Can we actually engage in works that will gain for us such commendation from Christ? And the answer is that it depends on the motive and the aim behind the deed done. If it was done for the intention of drawing attention to you then such commendation from Christ is really quite beyond you. Maybe

you'll gain some commendation from men – but in all likelihood even they will see your hypocrisy.

But if it was done with the recognition that you are bountifully blessed by God's grace already and this doing alms represents on your part not something that you view as intrinsically meritorious but you view it rather as a feeble attempt to render praise and thanksgiving to Christ – I believe those will be the works that God rewards.

The things we do that are grounded in the merit of what Christ has done will be the things that gain Christ's commendation. I trust, then, that you'll be much engaged in doing alms and that you'll be engaged in this activity with the right aim springing from the right motives. If you are so engaged – then the praise of men will mean little to you – indeed you'll come to see it in some cases as something to be dreaded for fear of what it may cost you in the end.

May God help us all, then, to be engaged in the right practices for the right reasons springing from the right motives that we may by His grace receive His commendation on that final day.