

Take Heed & Beware of Vainglory
Matthew 6:1-18

In **Matthew 6:1-4** our Lord Jesus Christ delivered a warning concerning alms giving, saying, “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 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. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.”

In **Matthew 6:5-6** our Lord Jesus Christ expanded this warning to the case of our prayer lives, saying, “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. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

Then in **Matthew 6:16-18** our Lord Jesus Christ expanded this warning yet again to the case of our Biblical fasting, saying, “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. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

With these three cases our Lord Jesus Christ touched upon three of the most significant practices of religious devotion in the Jewish religion of that day. Even so, by these three cases our Lord Jesus Christ warns us to take heed and beware of engaging in any and all religious activities for the motivation of vainglory. He warns us to take heed in this matter continually. Indeed, He warns us ever to pay careful attention to the motivation of our hearts and ever to maintain a diligent guard against the ungodly motivation of vainglory. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ warns us with such emphasis because our selfish character is so prone to vainglory, especially in the “good” of our religious activities. Yet any motivation for vainglory in our religious practice will utterly ruin the spiritual value of that religious practice.

I. The Wrong Motivation

In the opening portion of **Matthew 6:1**, our Lord Jesus Christ delivered the primary principle of His warning, saying, “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them.” Herein our Lord applied this principle to the first case of our alms giving. Yet He will carry over this same principle to the cases of our prayer lives and our Biblical fasting. Indeed, the primary principle of our Lord’s warning concerns a wrong motivation of our hearts in our religious activities. Our Lord is not warning against any occasion wherein our alms giving might perchance be seen by others. In fact, within this very same sermon our Lord taught that we believers are “the light of

the world,” and that as such we are to let our light “so shine before men,” in order that they *may indeed see* our good works, and thereby glorify our “father which is in heaven.” (See **Matthew 5:16**) Rather, our Lord is warning against any heart motivation wherein we purpose for our alms giving “to be seen of them.” With this phrase our Lord conveyed the idea that we intend for others to take notice of *us*. The great difference is in both the motive and the result. When we shine our light, others see our good works of godliness; and it results in glory unto the Lord our God. Yet when we show off, others see our “good works” of religion; and it results in glory unto us. The purpose of the first case is to please the Lord; whereas the purpose of the second case is to promote ourselves.

In **Matthew 6:2** our Lord Jesus Christ applied the principle of this warning in more detail to the case of our alms giving – “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.” Although there is some question due to lack of evidence in the historical record whether trumpet blowing was a common practice in that day, nevertheless the picture that our Lord presents clearly illustrates the point of His message. When engaged in a religious activity such as alms giving, we are not to “blow our own horn.” We are to do nothing for the purpose of advertising our giving. We are not to make any “noise” about it. We are not to seek after any form of announcement. We must not do so in either a religious or a nonreligious setting. In that day the synagogues (a religious setting) and the market streets (a nonreligious setting) were two places wherein many people would gather and thus be available to observe the giving of the alms-giver. The religious hypocrites of that day would choose such places for their giving in order that they might be noticed and “have glory of men.” Even so, our Lord warns us against such behavior and such motivation. We are not to be motivated by how many people might take notice of our giving. We are not to be concerned about attracting attention and gaining applause.

Again in **Matthew 6:5** our Lord Jesus Christ applied the principle of this warning to the case of our prayer lives – “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.” In that day the religious Jews practiced fixed times for daily prayer, no matter where they might be in their daily activities. Even so, those who desired to be noticed for their daily prayer habits would arrange to be in places of large public gatherings when those fixed times of prayer occurred. In this manner they might accomplish their purpose – to “be seen of men.” Certainly, praying in the synagogues was not wrong in itself; for the synagogues were appropriate places for worship and prayer unto the Lord. Certainly also, praying along the roadway was not wrong if that was where an individual happened to be at a time for prayer. However, the religious hypocrites *loved* to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners because of the large audience that might be present to notice their religious piety. They loved to pray in the synagogues in order that the religious crowd might be impressed; and they loved to pray on the street corners, where multiple streets would merge and create open squares, in order that the nonreligious crowd might be impressed. Although standing for prayer is not Biblically unacceptable, they loved to stand forth and stand out in such public places in order to gather the most recognition possible unto themselves. They loved public attention upon their “prayer” habits, and they loved to position themselves for that public attention. Yet our Lord warns us against any motivation to impress others with our prayer lives. True prayer is about an audience with the Lord our God, not about the admiration of other people.

Yet again in **Matthew 6:16** our Lord Jesus Christ applied the principle of this warning to the case of our Biblical fasting – “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.” In that day the religious Jews practiced habitual fasting, often each week. In His parable concerning the Pharisee and the public, our Lord represented the Pharisee as commending himself for fasting twice every week. (See **Luke 9:12**) Now, throughout the Old Testament fasting was often associated with grief and sorrow; therefore, the religious Jews would portray “a sad countenance” on their days of fasting in order to notify all around them of their sacrificial efforts in fasting. In addition, grief and sorrow was often accompanied with the wearing of sackcloth and with the placing of dust and ashes upon one’s head. Thus the religious Jews would “disfigure” their faces with dust and ashes in order that all around them might take notice of their religious efforts in fasting. Indeed, there is significant irony in the terminology that our Lord used to describe this practice. The Greek word that is translated as “disfigure” most basically means “to remove from sight, to make invisible.” Thus our Lord indicated that these religious hypocrites marred the visibility of their faces with the specific desire that their religious efforts in fasting might appear more visible unto others. They did these things all for the sinful motivation to advertise their religious efforts. It was all “that they may appear unto men to fast.” Indeed, they were more interested in the appearance of fasting before men than in the realities of fasting before God. Such is an utterly wrong motivation for any and all religious activities; and thus our Lord warns us emphatically to take heed and beware.

II. The Ungodly Character

So then, any heart motivation in our religious activities to be seen of men for the glory men is an ungodly motivation; and that ungodly motivation is rooted in an ungodly character. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ described that ungodly character by describing such individuals as religious “hypocrites.” Three times our Lord employed this descriptive, once for each of the three cases by which he warned against the heart motivation of vainglory. The original and most basic meaning of the word “hypocrite” is a play actor, one who wore a mask in order to portray a role for a stage performance. By the time of our Lord’s earthly ministry, the word “hypocrite” was commonly used for those who pretended and acted outwardly to be something that they were not truly in the inner character of their heart. As such, in religious and spiritual matters the word described an individual who performed some “good” before the sight of others, but whose inner motivation was unrighteous and ungodly. Such hypocrisy is always treated with firm condemnation throughout God’s Holy Word. “Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (See **Matthew 23:28**) Eight times in Matthew 23 our Lord Jesus Christ cried forth the woe of God’s judgment against the hypocrites.

In **Matthew 6:2** our Lord described as hypocrites those who give their alms to be seen of men for the glory of men. Why? Our Lord God’s intended purpose for alms giving is to demonstrate love for the Lord our God and for those who are in need. He intends our alms giving to be a self-sacrificing work of loving and merciful compassion. Yet engaging in the act of alms giving to be seen of men for the glory of men is not motivated by love for God and others, but by love for one’s self. It is an outward “act” of self-sacrifice with an inward, sinful motive of self-promotion. It is an outward “act” of compassion for another with an inward, sinful motive of passion for self. It is an outward “act” of generosity with an inward, sinful motive for selfish gain and glory. It is not truly about honoring the Lord our God at all. It is actually about honoring one’s own self above all.

In **Matthew 6:5** our Lord described as hypocrites those who love to pray in public that they be seen of men for the glory of men. Why? Our Lord God's intended purpose for prayer is to engage in communion with the Lord our God and to make our requests known unto Him. He intends our prayer lives to be about our relationship and fellowship with Him. Yet engaging in the act of prayer to be seen of men for the glory of men is not motivated by an interest in our Lord's fellowship. It is an outward "act" of relationship with the Lord our God, but with an inward, sinful motive of self-advancement. It is an outward "act" of devotion toward the Lord our God with an inward, sinful motive of devotion toward self. It is an outward "act" of coming before our Lord God's throne of grace for His mercy and help in time of need, but with an inward, sinful motive of advertising and advancing one's self in the sight of others. It is an outward "act" of love for prayer before the Lord our God with an inward, sinful motive of love for self and selfish recognition. This is insincere "praying," for the Lord our God is not its true focus. In fact, it is not real praying at all, but is only an imitation of righteous praying. God Himself was not its focus, and thus was not even included.

In **Matthew 6:16** our Lord described as hypocrites those who seek to be noticed when fasting that they may find glory among men. Why? Our Lord God's intended purpose for fasting is to emphasize and enhance the spiritual contrition, humility, concentration, and reflection of our prayer lives. Yet engaging in the act of fasting to be seen of men for the glory of men is not motivated by spiritual contrition and humility before the Lord God. It is an "act" of humility with an inward, sinful motive of self-exaltation. It is an "act" of spiritual concentration with an inward, sinful motive of carnal purpose and worldly interest. This is not spiritual fasting at all, but is only a show of fasting. It is more concerned with the public appearance of fasting than with the spiritual reality of fasting.

Even so, a great amount of religious activity is done for the purpose in order to impress others. Yet although it may carry the appearance of spiritual devotion and service to the Lord, it completely lacks the substance thereof. It is not devotion and service to the Lord at all, but only devotion and service to self. It is only pretense. Yet the Lord our God is not fooled, and is not pleased. Rather, His anger is kindled against such ungodly hypocrisy. However, we must take care; for religious hypocrisy may also arise more subtly within our hearts. We may be motivated to do more publicly what we could have done privately without notice. We may be motivated to do good in order that others might "accidentally" notice what we have done. After the fact, we may be motivated to withdraw from doing good because others do not show gratitude for what we have done. Any motive for recognition among men, whether it be boldly administered or privately harbored, is the ungodliness of hypocrisy. No matter how "good" these things may appear in the sight of others, they carry no righteousness in the sight of the Lord our God.

III. The Vain Reward

In fact, no matter how "good" these things may appear in the sight of others, they will draw forth no positive reward or blessing whatsoever at all in even the smallest manner from God our heavenly Father. In **Matthew 6:1** our Lord Jesus Christ clearly delivered the warning, "Take heed that ye do not your alms [or any other religious activity] before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." God our heavenly Father not only sees the actions of our outward behavior, but He also sees the true character and motivation of our hearts. He clearly sees and knows if our good works are to impress others or are truly to serve Him. He

clearly sees and knows if our good works are the “righteousness” of hypocritical showmanship or are the righteousness of genuine spirituality. He is not fooled in any way whatsoever by our hypocrisy, no matter how polished it may be in the sight of others. Even so, He is not moved in any way whatsoever to bless and reward that which He knows to be fake and false. False motivation of heart brings forth fake “righteousness,” and God our heavenly Father emphatically will not bless it. There may be earthly benefit, but there will be no heavenly blessing whatsoever at all. Why would we expect there to be any heavenly blessing? Such religious activities and “righteous” works were not done in service to the Lord our God for His glory, but were done in service to ourselves for vainglory. If they were not done to please Him, why then should He bless and reward them? He should not, and He will not.

Now, religious activities and “righteous” works that are done with the motive to be seen of men for glory among men may acquire just that as their reward. Concerning those who engage in this practice, our Lord Jesus Christ declared, “Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.” In fact, our Lord repeated this declaration three times, in the closing portions of **verse 2**, **verse 5**, and **verse 16**. Our Lord began this declaration with the word “verily” in order to grab our attention and emphasize the importance of this truth. He desires for us fully to understand that this is a spiritual principle without any exception. Furthermore, in the phrase “have their reward,” our Lord employed a type of commercial terminology that meant “payed in full.” Nothing more is owed. Nothing more needs to be payed, and thus nothing more should be expected. Religious hypocrites do their “good” works to be seen of men for the glory of men. They seek recognition among others and honor from others. Whatever recognition and honor they receive from and among men is their full payment and reward. Such is what they sought; such is what they get. Nothing more should be expected from the Lord our God, and any expectation of blessing from the Lord God is an utter delusion.

Yet what an empty reward this is! By seeking after vainglory in our religious activities and “righteous” works, we sacrifice substantial, eternal blessing from the Lord our God. By seeking after vainglory, we acquire only the empty, passing rewards of this world. Is such empty reward truly the highest interest of our hearts? Are we not at all interested to receive our Lord God’s blessing and reward instead? Concerning the matter of giving unto those in need, **Proverbs 19:17** delivers the promise, “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.” Yet when we give that we “may have glory of men,” then our Lord views us as “paid in full” by the honor of men, and is not moved to reward us out of His heavenly treasury. Furthermore, if we pray that we “may be seen of men,” then our Lord is not moved to hear our prayer; and we do not receive His grace and mercy to meet our need. Finally, if we engage in fasting in a purposeful manner that we “may appear unto men to fast,” then our Lord will completely disregard our fasting as having any spiritual value in His sight. So then, is this benefit of honor among men truly worth the cost? Is it truly worth the loss of blessing and reward from the Lord our God?

IV. The Godly Way

Indeed, there is another way, a better way, the godly way. In **Matthew 6:3-4** our Lord Jesus Christ gave instruction concerning our alms giving, saying, “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” Furthermore, in **Matthew 6:6** our Lord Jesus

Christ gave instruction concerning our prayer lives, saying, “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” Finally, in **Matthew 6:17-18** our Lord Jesus Christ gave instruction concerning our Biblical fasting, saying, “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

Clearly throughout these instructions our Lord Jesus Christ placed the emphasis upon doing our religious activities in secrecy. Six times our Lord employed the word “secret” in these passages. Once He instructed us to do our alms giving so that they “may be in secret.” Once He instructed us to enter a private place, shut the door, and pray to God our heavenly Father who is in secret. Once He instructed us to fast in such a manner, not to be noticed publicly by men to fast, but only to be noticed by God our heavenly Father who is in secret. Finally, three times He reminded us that God our heavenly Father sees in secret. Yet this emphasis on secrecy is not intended to indicate that our religious activities and good works must never, ever, ever, ever be seen by others; for such a view would contradict our Lord’s previous instruction in **Matthew 5:16** – “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Rather, this emphasis on secrecy is intended as a direct contrast to the heart motivation of the hypocrites. As our Lord has revealed, religious hypocrites do their religious and “righteous” works to be seen of men for the glory of men. In direct contrast to such a sinful motivation, we are to do our religious and righteous works secretly, with a heart motivation to be seen by God our heavenly Father for His service alone. We are not at all to be concerned whether others might notice and be impressed. Rather, we are to be wholly focused upon the Lord our God and heavenly Father, to serve Him, please Him, and glorify Him. The central issue of the whole matter is not a mechanical pursuit after privacy. Rather, the central issue of the whole matter concerns the motivation of our hearts. Are we at all motivated to impress others, or are we entirely motivated just to please God?

Now, in **Matthew 6:3** our Lord Jesus Christ gave specific instruction concerning our alms giving, saying, “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” Certainly, this instruction is intended as a figurative illustration. It portrays an individual giving to another in need with such a quiet and secretive manner that as his right hand gives, even his own left hand is not made aware of the transaction. Yet in literal reality neither our right hand nor our left hand has a mind of its own to know or notice what the other is doing. In literal reality our one brain knows and governs for both hands. However, this figurative illustration clearly makes our Lord’s point in its picturesque way. As much as we are reasonably able, we are to give in such a manner that even those closest to us might not be drawn to take notice. In addition, since both our right hand and our left hand are a part of our own person, this principle may even have application concerning our heart attitude toward ourselves. When we give unto others in need, we must not even be moved in our hearts to give ourselves credit and to have admiration for ourselves. The exaltation of self, whether in the view of others or in the view of ourselves, must not be a part of our motivation in any way. Absolute secrecy in our giving may not always be perfectly possible, but doing our giving in such a manner as never to draw attention and never to lift up self must always be our motivation.

Again in the opening portion of **Matthew 6:6**, our Lord Jesus Christ gave specific instruction concerning our prayer lives, saying, “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when

thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.” Herein our Lord instructs us to practice our daily, personal prayer lives in a private, solitary room with the door shut, in order that we may engage our praying before God the Father in secret. Again, the principle of this instruction is on the matter of privacy, no matter where we may find it. On a few occasions our Lord Jesus Christ Himself found this place of privacy in a solitary place early in the morning away from the house (See Mark 1:35) or upon a mountain side away from others (See Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12). Even so, the principle is that we are to find a solitary place wherein we may shut out the world, that we may avoid both vainglory and worldly distractions. Our personal prayer lives are to be all about our personal walk with the Lord our God. He is to be the focus thereof. Thus a private place is most appropriate in order that we may shut out the world and be alone with the Lord our God. The place itself is not the primary point. Rather, the solitary, sincere devotion of our hearts is the point.

Finally, in **Matthew 6:16** and the opening portion of **verse 17**, our Lord Jesus Christ gave specific instruction concerning our Biblical fasting, saying, “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret.” Herein our Lord instructs us that when we engage in a time of personal fasting, we are to maintain our public appearance in the same manner that we would at any other time. We are to wash ourselves, groom ourselves, and dress ourselves as we would normally would. We are to do nothing which might announce or reveal unto the public the personal affliction of our fasting. We must maintain the humility and affliction of our personal fasting in the sight of God our heavenly Father alone, and not to appear unto men to fast. In all of our religious activities, nothing for self, but everything out of devotion unto the Lord our God must be the driving motive.

V. The Valuable Reward

As we have learned, those who perform their religious activities before the sight of men for the glory of men receive a vain reward. Since they performed their religious activities for the notice and honor of men, whatever recognition they receive among men is the entirety of their reward. From God our heavenly Father they shall receive no reward whatsoever at all. On the other hand, those who engage in religious activities more secretly before the sight of God our heavenly Father out of devotion to Him for His pleasure and glory alone, these shall receive an eternally valuable reward. In **Matthew 6:3-4** our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us to do our alms giving in such a way that they may be “in secret.” Then in the conclusion of **verse 4**, He delivered the promise, “And thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” Furthermore, in **Matthew 6:6** our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us to pray secretly to our heavenly Father “which is in secret.” Then in the conclusion of **verse 6**, He delivered the promise, “And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” Finally, in **Matthew 6:17-18** our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us to fast in such a way so as not to appear unto men to fast, but only unto our heavenly Father “which is in secret.” Then in the conclusion of **verse 18**, He delivered the promise, “And thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

First, we are encouraged to engage our religious activities in secret out of devotion for God our heavenly Father alone because He sees in secret. The Lord our God and heavenly Father is in the secret place, just as He is in every other place; and He sees in the secret place, just as He sees in every other place. It does not matter whether others may see at all. It does not matter whether others may take notice at all. It does not matter whether others may give acknowledgement at all. It only

matters that the Lord our God and heavenly Father sees, that He notices, and that He is pleased. This is our true, godly motivation for righteous service. The secrecy of our religious and righteous service away from the sight of men does not in any way prevent the Lord our God and heavenly Father from seeing. Indeed, He takes notice of all; and He keeps account of all. Indeed, He is “not unrighteous to forget” our “work and labour of love,” which we have showed “toward his name.” (See **Hebrews 6:10**)

Second, we are encouraged to engage our religious activities in secret out of devotion for God our heavenly Father alone because He Himself will reward us. This is the promise that our Lord Jesus Christ gave in the closing portion of Matthew 6:4, “And thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” He Himself is the Rewarded of those who walk aright before Him. He Himself is the Rewarded of those who engage in righteous service out of devotion to Him, and not out of a desire to be recognized by others. Indeed, He Himself will draw nigh unto such faithful servants, such that He Himself will BE their “exceeding great reward.” (See **Genesis 15:1**) In addition, He Himself will reward us as our heavenly Father. He Himself will reward us as a Father would reward one of His dear children in whom He is well pleased. How could there be any better reward than that which the Lord our God and heavenly Father might give?

Third, we are encouraged to engage our religious activities in secret out of devotion for God our heavenly Father alone because He will reward us openly. In what time and by what means this reward will be poured out is not revealed. Yet we may be abundantly assured that in due time we will experience the best of reward, for God our heavenly Father has committed His faithfulness unto it. Indeed, the Lord our God and heavenly Father will certainly give an abundantly good reward out of His abundant grace unto His faithful children. In addition, that abundantly gracious and good reward will be given openly, so that there will be spiritual blessing upon our public walk in this life and so that there will be a public expression of divine approval on the day of judgment. Even so, in this context the promise of **Proverbs 19:17** may be claimed with full assurance, “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.” In this context we may have full assurance that our prayers and fasting will be heard, and that God our heavenly Father will move on our behalf.