

## Jesus on Giving and Praying Matthew 6:1-8

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”  
(English Standard Version – ESV)

### **Background:**

- Verse 1 is a thesis statement that introduces the three examples of private piety found in 6:2-16. Judaism stressed that one should not perform deeds for the sake of reward, even though a reward is promised (as Jesus indicates here), which will be rendered at the Day of Judgment.
- Prayer, fasting and gifts to the poor were basic components of Jewish piety, and many rabbis listed qualities or virtues like these in sets of three.
- Greeks and Romans did not support personal charity, and wealthy donations to public projects or to poorer clients were meant to secure the giver’s popularity. In contrast, charity was central to Jewish piety. Some writers even said that charity saved a person, although later Jewish laws technically did not permit one to give over 20 percent above the required tithe.
- Some commentators have taken the trumpet sounding literally, but it is hyperbolic (people did not blow trumpets when giving alms) and may reflect a play on words (charity boxes were often shaped like trumpets). Not letting one’s left hand know about the right hand’s gift is definitely hyperbole. Having a reward “in full” is the language of repayment in ancient business receipts.
- The problem is not public prayer, but motives directed toward other people rather than toward God. It was probably common for pious people to recite prayers individually in the synagogue, but it is not clear that everyone prayed simultaneously in all synagogues as early as Jesus’ time. The “room” could have been a storeroom, as most people did not have private rooms in their houses, and only that room would have a door on it. Standing was a common posture for prayer.
- Jewish scholars debated the use of fixed prayers in this period, but generally held them to be acceptable if one’s intent was genuine. Greek prayers listed as many titles of the deity addressed as possible, hoping to secure its attention. Pagan prayers typically reminded the deity of favors done or of sacrifices offered, attempting to get a response from the god on contractual grounds.

- Judaism recognized that God knew everything. The issue here is thus not the doctrine of Jesus' audience, but their hearts. Jewish people viewed God differently than Greeks viewed their gods. In Judaism, God was a Father who delighted in meeting the needs of his people. Judaism also recognized that God knew the thoughts of all. Jesus predicated effective prayer on a relationship of intimacy, not a business partnership, which was closer to that followed by ancient paganism.

### **Questions:**

- + What are some ways that people practice their "righteousness" before other people?  
What is one way that you practice righteousness before others? Why do you do so?
  
- + Why do you think Jesus focuses first on giving as a way to act righteous before others?  
What does this mean? - "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."  
Is it always wrong to give in a public manner? Explain your answer.  
Is it ever wrong to give in a private manner? Explain your answer.  
When giving, how can you know if your motives are right or wrong?
  
- + Why do you think Jesus follows his teaching about giving with teaching about praying?  
Is it always wrong to pray in a public manner? Explain your answer.  
Is it ever wrong to pray in a private manner? Explain your answer.  
When praying, how can you know if your motives are right or wrong?
  
- + Twice Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." What is the reward?  
Twice Jesus says, "And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." What is the reward?  
How do each of these statements apply to everything Jesus teaches about giving and praying?
  
- + If "your Father knows what you need before you ask him," why ask God for anything?