

SERMON NOTES

Poon Paregentan
(Eve of Great Lent)
Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 6:1-21

THE REWARD OF OUR FATHER

INTRODUCTION

Today, our readings are a portion of “The Sermon on the Mount” as recorded by Matthew. Matthew begins his Gospel with an account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ, His baptism, and the temptation in the wilderness, followed by the calling of His first disciples. Then a brief summary statement of His ministry, with mention of His teachings, miracles, and the enormous crowds He attracted, introduces this great sermon.

The sermon¹ occupies almost three full chapters (5-7). Our reading falls in the middle portion. The passage may have been chosen for Poon Paregentan, the Sunday preceding Lent, because of its teaching on fasting. However, the passage also includes teachings on giving, on prayer, and on forgiveness. It might be broadly outlined in this way:

- I. Introduction (6:1)
- II. Teaching on giving (6:2-4).
- III. Teaching on prayer (6:5-13)
- IV. Commentary on Forgiveness (6:14-15).
- V. Teaching on Fasting (6:16-18).
- VI. Summary command (6:19-21)

The emphasis of the passage is that *if* we do *certain* good things, “practice our righteousness,” in order to enhance our *own* reputation with men, we lose the reward of our Father in Heaven.

SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 6:1-21

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father Who is in heaven.”

¹ This sermon is very like the one Luke records Jesus giving on a plain. The “mountain” that Matthew describes Jesus sitting on to teach may have been a hill on Luke’s plain (Luke 6:17) , or He may have sat a little way up on the mountain where it met the plain so that the great crowd of people could hear Him better. For Davies, who understands Matthew to be drawing a parallel of Jesus’ life to that of Moses’, the ‘mountain’ is simply symbolic of Sinai, and the sermon is a new Torah (Laws of God). For his discussion, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark Limited, 1988) pp.422-428.

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.

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.

And when you pray, you are not to be as hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father Who is in secret, and your Father Who sees in secret, will repay you.

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way:

*Our Father Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
[For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]*

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their

appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

But you, whenever you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will repay you.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

NOTES

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father Who is in heaven.

“Practicing righteousness,” δικαιοσύνην ποιεῖν, is performing or “practicing” one’s obligations under the Law. *Righteousness*, in this context, means “good deeds, deeds of mercy, religious observance.” The thought could thus be rendered: Be careful not to parade your good deeds/ your religious observance.”² This is a general introductory statement. The following teachings deal with the good deeds that are not to be paraded before others to illicit their good opinion. Seeking man’s reward, man’s good opinion, will reap loss of the Father’s reward.

(Our heavenly Father’s approval is far more important and carries a great reward reserved for those who do *not* act for the approval of other people.)

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.

For each of the four deeds/religious observances, Jesus first gave a prohibition with a negative example. He followed each negative with a positive command.

The first good deed/religious observance Jesus mentioned was the giving of alms—charitable giving. Alms are monies given as an act of mercy for those in need. The religious establishment collected alms to redistribute to the poor.

It seems incredible to us that someone would actually have a trumpet blown to draw attention to his contribution for the poor, but Jesus may have used hyperbole. The receptacles for the collection of alms were trumpet-shaped and were placed in the Court of the Women in the Temple. This trumpet shape and the clanging of coins dropped in may be the image behind His words. Possibly one could drop coins in such a way that they would cause the receptacle to resound loudly. Many coins dropped one at a time in this way would really draw attention to the donor. Alms were also collected in the synagogues on the Sabbath.

² Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, unabridged, 4th revised edition, (Rome:Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993) p. 14.

However, these words of Jesus *may* refer to an actual practice for which we have no other documentation. Perhaps “in the streets” refers to the trumpet sound used to clear an important donor’s path to the Temple or synagogue, as sirens are used today for vehicles of mercy.

Hypocrite, in the culture of the day, was used for someone simply playing a part, much like an actor on the stage. And, like an actor, he is playing this part for the applause of others.

Jesus strictly commanded His followers that their giving of alms must not be done for the approval of, or to be honored by, others. Therefore, in their acts of mercy, they must guard against drawing attention to themselves. Otherwise, the applause of men will be their only reward.

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.

The positive command is to give alms without drawing attention to oneself. “Secret,” a form of κρυπτός means ‘hidden’. To make His point, Jesus resorted again to hyperbole: the act of giving alms is to be so hidden that one part of your body should not even know what the other part is doing.

However, nothing is hidden from the eyes of God. Thus, only you and God should be aware of what you are doing. Since the act is for His eyes only, your reward will be from Him.

And when you pray, you are not to be as hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

The second good deed/religious observance Jesus lists is praying.

Again, the prohibition is a command against acting as the hypocrites do. Like the hypocritical alms-giver, the hypocrite prays in public places so others may notice his piety.

This prohibition against hypocrisy should not be seen as a prohibition of prayers organized for public worship in synagogue, temple, or our own Liturgy. The prohibition is directed at wrong motive in personal prayer.³ Those who pray to be seen by men will have only that result as their reward.

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father Who is in secret, and your Father Who sees in secret will repay you.

The positive command is to pray personal prayers privately. In the end, all prayer is between God and the person praying, no one else.

³ However, even in the worship service of the community, the participants need to have the pure motive of worshipping God, not the desire to show off to others.

The “inner room” probably had no windows. It was a private place to store things—something like a closet. It would be dark inside when the door was shut.

Again this word ‘secret’ is better translated as ‘hidden.’ Though God is hidden from man’s view, in the inner room, the one praying would be hidden from the view of all, except God.

Again, actions that are motivated only by the desire for God’s approval are rewarded by our Father.

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.

The pattern of the teaching is changed slightly with the addition of a second negative command concerning this topic. Here, also, the pronouns are changed—from *you* singular to *you* plural—indicating that He is adding a teaching on group prayer. There is no accusation of hypocrisy in this second prohibition.

However, Jesus informs us that repeating the same words over and over is meaningless to God. Evidently it was a habit of the pagans to try to impress their gods by praying long repetitious prayers. Jesus reminds his hearers that God already knows what they need anyway.⁴ Prayer is not to inform God but to worship Him.

Because of this, our Hayr Mer, which is a part of this teaching below, should not be rattled off thoughtlessly—a habit which is insulting to God—as if simply repeating the words as fast as possible is praying. Moreover, if we heed the prohibition above, we should not repeat even this prayer continuously, over and over, as is the habit of some.

Pray, then, in this way:

The negative command is again balanced with a positive command. Jesus gave a model prayer to follow. It is short and to the point. It gives an example of how to pray. Each phrase is meant to guide us in our thinking about what we should properly include in our prayers.

Our Father Who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]

The Hayr Mer deserves its own separate sermon,⁵ but a few points about it should be made here.

⁴ Unlike the pagan gods whose worshippers believed their gods needed to be told over and over and over.

⁵ A future excursus will be offered later.

- 1) This is a group prayer.
- 2) Our prayers should be addressed to our Father in heaven.
- 3) The prayer has seven requests. The first three have to do with God's program and the last three with our spiritual needs on this earth. The center petition can be seen as addressing either a physical need or a spiritual need of our life here on earth. It is probably an efficient way of petitioning that our Father meet both needs.
- 4) The first petition is that His Name be recognized as holy. His Name represents His Person, the essence of His character. The term 'holy' means to be set apart from the others. The noun form of this adjective is 'saint.' A saint is someone set apart for God. A sanctified object is something set apart for God's use. So this petition asks that the holiness—the set apartness—of God be recognized.
- 5) The second petition requests that His kingdom should be finally established on earth, an event He has promised will happen in the last days. This will be a time of justice and peace for man and nature.
- 6) The third and last of the requests for God's program is for His will to be done here, as it is in heaven. His will is perfect and rebellion against His will has caused all of man's misery. In another place, Jesus told his disciples that God's will is that we all come to repentance, and that we all believe and trust in the Savior Who God sent with love into the world.⁶
- 7) The fourth and center petition requests that our needs be met. God knows what we need physically every day, and He also knows that we need His Holy Spirit to give life to and to sustain our spirits every day. Still, following this model prayer, we are encouraged to bring these requests to Him.
- 8) The fifth petition acknowledges that we are sinners and that only He can cleanse us and restore us to fellowship with Him. It also recognizes that God insists that we forgive our fellow sinners. Jesus commented on this point after He finished giving the prayer's outline.
- 9) The sixth petition asks that we not suffer the trials of temptation. Some think that this request has in mind the great persecution to come.
- 10) The seventh petition is not so much asking to be delivered from evil in general, but from the Evil One.⁷ Protection from this terrible and powerful being is what we all desperately need. Thank God, He keeps us safely in His hand.
- 11) The last clause, in brackets, is not found in the earliest manuscripts of this Gospel but it is certainly a true statement.

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

The third good deed/religious observance Jesus lists is forgiveness. Jesus returned to the subject of forgiveness mentioned in the Hayr Mer to explain why He included the phrase "as we forgive our debtors."

⁶ John 3:16; 6: 29, 39-40.

⁷ This can be seen from the use of the article in the Greek.

It is not as if we earn forgiveness. Without an attitude of forgiveness for others in our heart, we cannot be forgiven.

The Psalmist has said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear me (Psalm 66:18).” It is a wicked thing to withhold forgiveness from those who ask us. Therefore, an unforgiving heart has not recognized its own sinfulness and has not truly repented. Jesus illustrated this point with a parable of the unmerciful slave in Matthew 18:23-35.

And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

The last good deed/religious observance Jesus lists is fasting. The usual pattern of prohibition—of a certain way of performing the good deed or observance—followed by a positive command, is resumed here by our Lord. Jesus returned in this teaching to the use of ‘you’ singular. Fasting is a personal, private activity.

Fasting in those days was not simply abstaining from some favorite food; it was abstaining from ALL food. This is not easy and is very uncomfortable. A gloomy face would reflect this. But the hypocrites went further and smudged their faces and went about unkempt to really draw attention to the fact that they were fasting.

Jesus prohibits parading the fact that we are fasting before others by showing it in our face and appearance. The hypocrites darken⁸ their face in order to appear (φανίζω) to fast.

The hypocrite’s only reward is the notice of other people, who may think, “My, how pious!”

But you, whenever you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father Who is in secret;⁹ and your Father Who sees in secret will repay you.

The positive command is that we should do the opposite of the hypocrites. When we fast, we should conceal the fact by good grooming and a shining face. The fast, which is a type of personal prayer, should be hidden from all except our God Who is hidden from the eyes of men.

Our Father will see that the fast is only for Him, and He will reward you.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do no break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Our Lord sums up His teachings about charitable giving, prayer, forgiveness, and fasting with a statement about our treasure, what we value, in general. The hypocrites value the

⁸ The verb used here is a form of αφανίζω and means to conceal; with only the addition of the letter α, it is the opposite of the verb φανίζω which means ‘to appear’.

⁹ Here, again, the Greek word is a form of κρυπτός which is better translated as ‘hidden.’

good opinion of other people on earth; that is their treasure. The follower of Christ should value God's approval; what others think of us is unimportant.

Even here, in the summary statement, our Lord puts His commands in the pattern He has used in his teachings about the four good deeds—first the prohibition, and then the positive command.

Jesus used the figure of a treasury to make His point. Things we value stored up in a treasury on earth will disappear, either by corruption or by theft. In heaven our treasures will not disappear.

Where we store what we value is a sure indication of where our thoughts and interests are. Jesus advises us to focus on what is kept for us in heaven, the 'reward'¹⁰ of our heavenly Father.

APPLICATION

It seems to be part of human nature that we all want the good opinion of other people; we all want to be thought well of by others around us and, if possible, in the world. Some of us will go to great lengths to gain that good opinion or reputation. There is a story that illustrates that even people who are really quite wicked still would like others to think well of them. It goes like this:

There were two brothers, Sam and George, who lived in a small community where everyone knew everyone else. These two brothers were extremely wicked and did all sorts of horrible things—and everybody knew it.

One day one of the brothers, Sam, died and the other brother, George, went to the church to arrange the funeral. The priest was a fine upstanding man and everyone trusted him. He always told the truth. George insisted that the priest say during the funeral service that his brother Sam was a saint. The priest said he could not lie. George offered to make a huge contribution to the church if the priest would say just one time that Sam was a saint. The priest thought for a while, the church badly needed the money, and so he agreed. But just one time during the sermon would he say it; moreover, he wanted the money in advance. George paid the money.

On the day of the funeral, the church was packed because George had spread the word that the good priest would announce that Sam was a saint. During his remarks on the life of Sam, the priest did not praise him, but described the terrible and godless life the man had led. But then the priest added, "But compared to his brother, Sam was a saint."

Why is it so important to us that others think well of us? Perhaps it has something to do with our self-esteem. It makes us feel good about ourselves if others respect us. However that may be, the need to be valued is no doubt part of the way we are designed. The

¹⁰ A suggestion of what our Father's reward is will follow in the APPLICATION.

question that our reading poses is: how should that need be filled? The answer depends on what we value most.

Jesus gave two options: the opinion of other persons or the approval of God. The hypocrites pretend to value the good opinion of God in order to win the good opinion of men. They publicly display their good deeds and religious observances so that others will notice their piety. What they value is the immediate gratification of being thought of as good, pious people. In order to win this, they will make charitable gifts, pray lengthy prayers, and endure the hardship of fasting—all for the audience’s applause. It is a reward, but in the long view, it is temporary and worthless.

For those interested in the approval of God, good deeds and religious observances must be done to please Him. These good deeds must be for His eyes only. That would mean that our name would not appear on a list of donors; our name would not appear on a building; no one would hang a medal around our neck and take our photograph for the Church newsletter. That sounds pretty tough! And how do we reconcile that concept with the admonition, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven.”?¹¹

Looking back over the four good deeds/religious observances under discussion, there was only one that was not to be performed hidden from the eyes of men, forgiveness. Forgiveness, by its very nature, must be known to the one forgiven. The other three—charitable giving, prayer and fasting—were done in the context of the religious community; but they were done as a part of private worship. Private worship should not be on public display for the glory of the worshipper. The other good deeds, following the injunction to “Let your light shine” in Matthew 5:16, are things done for others, which help others, and cause them to glorify God. People glorify God because they can see that God is the Worker behind the man. We need to make sure that the end result is *God’s* glory and not our own.

For those who give their alms, pray and fast for God’s eyes only, a reward from our Father in heaven is promised. What might that reward be? In heaven we will not need things—although St. Paul mentions crowns will be awarded. These crowns may be what the reward is, but we are told elsewhere that we will cast our crowns down before the feet of Christ. They are not something that we keep.

There is a passage in the book of Genesis that may throw some light on this subject. Abraham has just fought a battle with a group of kings to rescue his nephew Lot, and others from the city of Sodom, taken in a raid. When he returned with the people, Abraham refused a reward from the king of Sodom.

Later the LORD appeared to Abraham and made a statement that is usually translated, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.”¹² The statement could be translated in another astonishing way, “Do not fear. Abram, *I* am a

¹¹ Matthew 5:16

¹² Genesis 15:1. Abram turns the discussion to a plea for children.

shield to you and *your very great reward.*” The emphasis in either translation is on the pronoun *I*.

Could our Father in heaven *Himself* be our reward? He has given us His Son,¹³ He has given us His Holy Spirit,¹⁴ and 1 John 2:23 tells us “the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” What more could we ask or dream of! Everything in heaven and earth pales in significance for those who long for the Presence of God. The reward of our Father is very great indeed! Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift.

¹³ Isaiah 9:6-7; 1 John 4: 9-16.

¹⁴ I Corinthians 3:16; 1 John 3:24