

Matthew 6:2-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-6/matthew-62-4/>

Jesus warns against giving to the poor to win the hollow rewards of man's approval and self-congratulation of self-righteousness. Instead He encourages His disciples to seek the greater reward from their Heavenly Father by giving without regard to being seen by men.

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

The first example Jesus shares for how to seek the best *reward* involves charity.

Jesus assumes His followers will *give to the poor*. He says, “*when you give*,” not “*if you want to give*.” He likely makes this assumption because giving to the poor was the cultural norm for Jews in His day. From the time of Moses, taking care of the poor was a clear divine expectation for God's people (Leviticus 19:9-10; 25:35, Deuteronomy 15:7-11). Taking care of the poor meant many things, including charitable giving. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Jewish culture was that they donated and gave a portion of their money to provide for their poor. (This is something Rome did not do, by contrast).

With the rise of the Pharisees who served as guardians of Jewish tradition and Law, giving money *to the poor* had become a spectacle. It was apparently a competitive sport among the self-righteous as to who could draw the most attention to their giving. Generally speaking, the bigger the donation, the greater they would *be honored by men*. Such charity was not motivated by taking care of the poor. It was about buying honor and respect from peers.

Jesus humorously mocks this kind of giving as he describes it, *when you give to the poor do not sound a trumpet before you*. (Dignitaries would have their trumpeters blast their horns so everyone would pay attention when they arrived.) In similar fashion, Jesus warns against making a spectacle of your giving. He brands these types of givers as *hypocrites*.

“Hypocrite” was the Greek term for “actor.” It literally means to over-judge or over-emphasize a situation. It is an apt description because these hypocrites are both overdoing things and pretending to care about *the poor*, when really they only care about what other *men* think of them. When Jesus says that *the hypocrites* do this *in the synagogues and in the streets*, He is likely describing the Pharisees, who taught *in the synagogues*. Jesus will later directly name the Pharisees as *hypocrites* (Matthew 23:13).

Jesus sums up why giving for show is not in our best interest when He says, *Truly I say to you they have their reward in full*. Jesus does not say that giving to be seen by others has no *reward*. It does. It feels good to be seen as generous by others. But that's all the *reward* they will receive, and it is fleeting. *Their reward* could be much greater if they gave with a motive to please their *Father* in heaven by helping others.

Jesus seals this warning with His own divine authority, *Truly I say to you* that there is no additional reward from God, that they *have their reward in full*. Jesus is adamant on this point. He wants his disciples to understand the consequences, and urges them to make good choices, choices that provide them maximum benefit. Jesus is appealing to their self-interest, and acknowledging that God has given the choice to us.

Instead of making a spectacle to gain the approval of men *when you give to the poor*, Jesus advises to give *in secret*. Jesus emphasizes this secrecy to the point that you *do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*. In other words, don't *give so that* other men see your giving and think you are righteous, and don't *give so that* you can convince yourself that you are righteous. If you give in this manner, your only *reward* will be a short-lived honor by men or the tasteless pleasure of self-congratulation. This is a poor *reward* compared to what *your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you* with.

Jesus always encourages His disciples to seek the greater *reward*. In doing so, Jesus acknowledges human nature to seek benefit. Jesus is not admonishing His disciples to behave in such a way that there is no personal benefit they will gain. He teaches His disciples to look beyond mere sight, and see with the eyes of faith that there is a much greater return on investment to give *in secret* and receive compensation from God, than to win the hollow praise of *men*.

It is not only hypocritical to seek to be *honored by men* while pretending to care about the poor, it is also foolish because you miss the greater *reward*. After demonstrating these things to His disciples and counseling them of the better *reward* (from *your Father*), Jesus acknowledges God has left to them to decide how they will give and whose *reward* they will seek. He is acknowledging that God has granted them freedom to make this choice. Jesus is training them to make wise investments. He is teaching them to be self-governing, which prepares them to better serve and reign in His kingdom.

Jesus asserts that their *Father sees what is done in secret* and *will reward* them if they actually give for the purpose of benefitting others, rather than gaining glory from men. Jesus's emphasis on *what is done in secret* makes clear that God sees everything we do, even when no one else sees. In fact, Hebrews tells us that God sees even the thoughts and intentions of the heart, which will enter into our accounting before Him (Hebrews 5:12-13). Jesus's admonition could be paraphrased as follows:

My disciples, you were designed by God to seek rewards, to gain glory. God has given you the freedom to choose your actions, and decide how to seek reward. Let me tell you how to gain the best glory, a glory that lasts forever. Obey your Father in heaven, and seek the welfare of others. Don't worry about what others think or say. Focus on pleasing your Father in heaven. In so doing you will gain all that your heart desires. Otherwise, you will just be getting a small taste of what you truly desire. God is always watching, and sees all you do. Everything you do for Him will be rewarded by Him.

Biblical Text

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.