

Reflections on Mt.6:1-21: I have specifically asked you about Mt.6:2-3 in order to dispel a misinterpretation that I was taught early in my study of the Bible. Until recently, I believed that when Christ was talking about the public nature of alms giving involving “sounding the trumpets,” he was referring to the way that some of the Pharisees would throw their coins noisily into the temple collection boxes so as to publicly announce their generosity. I was taught that this clanging of coins into the temple treasury was known as “sounding the trumpets.” Some recent reading has dispelled this evident misunderstanding. The Greek word ὑποκριτής (pronounced “*hupocretehz*”) is where our English word “hypocrite” comes from. And the word was originally used to describe a “stage-player” or actor – so, one who was simply playing a part in life. And the word which is used here to denote “synagogue” can actually refer to any “congregation” or gathering of the people. Apparently, these stage-players would often go through the streets sounding a trumpet before any performance in order to call attention to the greatest potential number of spectators (i.e. the “congregation”) that their play was about to start (see Barnes, p. 28, 2). This is the type of insincere, public acts of piety that Christ is counseling his followers against in this passage from Mathew.

The use of “left hand” and “right hand” in Mt.6:3 is interesting. When Jesus tells his followers “not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (see Mt.6:2), perhaps He is making a net division between one part of the human person and the other, as if there are truly “members” of the human being which operate independently from each other. I believe one of the things Jesus is talking about here is that the human being is made up of character traits. Some are wonderful gifts, while others are more along the lines of “character flaws.” Yet, just because one “part” of us may not have the ability or means to provide greatly for the Kingdom, this is no reason for the other parts of the person to hold back from doing all they can to render unto God what is God’s. So, “don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”

This interpretation of Mt.6:3 would certainly dove-tail with what Jesus is saying in the preceding chapter, when He warns, “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (see Mt.5:5:30a). The NIV study notes point out that Christ is certainly not counseling dismemberment in this verse, “for even a blind man can lust” (see NIV Study Bible footnote, p. 1476, 5:29-30). Instead, a more thoughtful interpretation of Mt.5:30 is that, once again, there are net divisions to be made concerning parts of our human person. And in analyzing all those abilities, and past-times, and even relationships which make up who we are, if there are “members” which are making us deviate from our journey with The Lord, we must in no way insist on maintaining these toxic parts of our person, but must in fact excise them

for the sake of the parts of our being which do indeed glorify God. Else-wise, we risk condemning the whole human person.

I think this focus on glorifying God is really the only way to make Mt.6:3 harmonize with what Jesus has just said in the preceding chapter with Mt. 5:16: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt.5:16 – NRSV). It seems obvious that the requirement for a truly faithful Disciple is not simply to do your alms giving, or your praying, or indeed your living of the Christian life in such a way as to not draw attention to yourself. The full requirement of the faithful follower of the Christ is to do all these things with the precise aim of glorifying God and not one’s self. So, the **motives** behind our actions are brought clearly into focus as a measure of the Christian life.

This last observation that what motivates a Christian’s actions is just as important as the actions themselves, is the key point that I’m trying to bring into focus with regard to my fourth discussion question. When Jesus tells us that we will not enter the Kingdom of heaven unless our “righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and Scribes” (see Mt.5:20), it seems to me that He could only be referring to our motives. An observant Pharisee certainly lived a life in stringent accord with the Law of God. By his own measure, such a Jew would certainly have been extremely righteous. The only way that a Christian’s righteousness might be completely without reproach was in living his/her life in faith, according to righteous **motives** – which must be founded on a determination to glorify God.

It seems to me that this focus on motive is why so many of the verses in Matthew Chapter 6 contain the phrase “so that/so as to/in order to.” Observe:

Beware of practising your piety before others **in order to** be seen by them (Mt.6:1).

Do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do ...**so that** they may be praised by others (see Mt.6:2).

Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **so that** your alms may be done in secret (see Mt.6:3-4).

Do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, **so that** they may be seen by others (Mt.6:5).

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces **so as to** show others that they are fasting (see Mt.6:16).

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **so that** your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret (see Mt.6:17-18).

The realization that as well as actions, a person’s motives must also be righteous before God is not a concept which occurs only in the New Testament.

That's why I have brought up the passages from Ezekiel, where God expresses His yearning for His people.

I will give them [my people] one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh (Eze. 11:19 – NRSV).

This change of dimension between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh ties right into what Paul was saying in Second Corinthians Chapter 3.

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2Cor.3:2-3 – NRSV).

What Paul is referring to here seems to me, at least in part, a comparison between the Law of God's righteousness as communicated to Moses on Mt. Sinai (so, tablets of stone), and the grace imparted to us by Jesus and our faith in His salvation, as nourished in the heart of the redeemed by the power of the Holy Spirit (so, the tablet of the human heart).

As I was reflecting on this contrast in preparation for this Bible Study, I began to wonder if there were any parallels between God's Law as set forth in the Decalogue (see Ex.20:3-17), and the Lord's Prayer as taught to the Disciples by Jesus in our passage from Matthew (see Mt.6:9-13). I discovered a perspective which might be enlightening.

A New Testament Perspective on the Ten Commandments

You may think that The Decalogue, what many people call "The Ten Commandments" is uniquely Old Testament material. But is it? In the red texts below, I have rewritten what you might think of as a prayer based on each of these commandments. Let's go through this together (The text in black is from the NIV translation of Ex.20:3-17)

³ "You shall have no other gods before ^[a] me.

(Lord, I believe that you are the only heavenly God.)

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

(Lord, your will is absolute and divine, and your Kingdom is here on earth and everywhere else.)

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand {generations} of those who love me and keep my commandments.

(Lord, I believe you are the God of divine power and awesome glory, whose dominion extends forever. Amen!)

⁷ "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

(Lord, please help me to keep your name holy.)

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

(Lord, I commit myself to rest regularly, but I understand my Christian responsibility to work for my living.)

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

(Lord, please help the love in my family to (imperfectly) model here on earth the love you bear for me in heaven.)

¹³ "You shall not murder.

(Lord, protect me free from doing evil.)

¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery.

(Lord, deliver me from temptation!)

¹⁵ "You shall not steal.

(Lord, deliver me from temptation!!)

¹⁶ "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

(Lord, deliver me from temptation!!!)

¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

(Lord please preserve the holiness of my relationship with all in my community.)

OK! So we've taken these Old Testament commandments that God gave the Israelites in the desert through His servant Moses, and we have sort of re-set them in a kind of New Testament Prayer Language. Do they remind you of anything?

DON'T TURN THE PAGE QUITE YET. JUST THINK ABOUT THIS FOR A MOMENT.

Now, if you go to the next page, I think I've rearranged the order of our prayers just a little bit. On the right side, I think you'll see a corresponding prayer you will recognize!

(Lord, please help the love in my family to (imperfectly) model here on earth the love you bear for me in heaven.)

(Lord, I believe that you are the only heavenly God.)

(Lord, please help me to keep your name holy.)

(Lord, your will is absolute and divine, and your Kingdom is here on earth and everywhere else.)

(Lord, I commit myself to rest regularly, but I understand my Christian responsibility to work for my living.)

(Lord please preserve the holiness of my relationship with all in my community.)

(Lord, deliver me from temptation!!!)

(Lord, protect me free from doing evil.)

(Lord, I believe you are the God of divine power and awesome glory, whose dominion extends forever. Amen!)

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 trespasses as we
forgive those who trespass against
us.*

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

*For Thine is the Kingdom, and the
power, and the glory, for ever and
ever. Amen.*

So, it would seem that the original commandments of God were initially set forth with the full knowledge that Our Lord Jesus Christ would eventually come along to perfect them. The verse from Matthew Chapter 5 seems incredibly appropriate here.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt.5:17-NRSV)

James Barnhill, 02-22-12