

ASH WEDNESDAY



Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

by: Rev. Mark Schlamann

MATTHEW 6:(1-6) 16-21 ESV

Author and Date:

The Holy Spirit is the divine author of all Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21). As such, He inspired the apostle and evangelist Matthew (a.k.a. Levi [cf. Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-28]) to pen his Gospel around 50 A.D. This reading is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), near the beginning of His public ministry.

¹ [Jesus said,] **“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.**

- Jesus here previews His teaching regarding almsgiving, that is, giving to the poor and needy. He warns against giving only to be noticed by others, as this is one's sole reward—none from God. Faith in Christ must be present for a work to be truly good in His sight. The Lutheran Confessions cite Luke 11:41, adding that God “requires not only alms, but also the righteousness of faith.” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* V:34).

² **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.**

- Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites, their “righteousness” being a sham. He later exposes them, quoting Isaiah: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me...” (Matthew 15:8-9a, citing Isaiah 29:13). He instructs His disciples to not blow their own horns but to give quietly. When the hypocrites are publicly noticed, they get what they wanted:

recognition of their “righteousness”—nothing other than sinful pride.

³ **But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing**

- The gift is given so secretly that only the giver and God know of it. Martin Luther: “...by making the contribution one does not seek his own glory or popularity, gratitude or reward, and is not concerned about whether any human being is grateful or not. But he contributes freely what he wants to contribute, just the way God grants His gifts every day and causes His sun to shine, regardless of the thankful or the unthankful, just as if He did not see anybody. A heart is truly single in motivation if it neither seeks nor desires nor looks at anything except the will of God and the glory of God” (*Luther's Works* 21:134).

⁴ **so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

- Give secretly, and the Lord will reward you in mercy—in His time, in His way, and on His terms, but He will reward you. An anonymous Early Church Father said, “But it is the Lord who in due time will reveal. Every good thing becomes more pleasing when it is hidden by us but revealed by God. ...For it is impossible that the Lord would ignore the good work of a good person [believer in Christ] done in secret. God will make such a one known in this age and boast in him in the future, because the glory comes from God.” (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. 1, 125)

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⁵ **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.**

- Here Jesus begins teaching on prayer. He warns against having the same sinful attitude the hypocrites have when giving to the poor—wanting their outward “piety” noticed by others. Jesus would later teach this contrast via the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14).

⁶ **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.**

- One Lutheran commentator states, “Jesus speaks of prayer as a good work and thus says that for this good work, truly good in His sight, He ‘will give what is due,’ just as He will for any other good work. Jesus says nothing about God’s answer to the prayer that is thus acceptable to Him. God’s answer to every acceptable prayer is assured and is here taken for granted” (Lenski, *Matthew*, 261-262). The only power in prayer is in the One who answers prayer: God. Only Christians can pray to God; nonbelievers can’t to it—they won’t be heard.
- In the subsequent verses, Jesus’ teaching on prayer reaches its climax, giving us the Lord’s Prayer to use.

¹⁶ **And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.**

- Fasting was a common spiritual discipline in first-century Judaism. The hypocrites contort their facial expressions to oversell that they were fasting so others would notice. Again Jesus warns against this self-serving attitude.

¹⁷ **But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face**

- Jesus teaches His disciples to look as normal as possible, no one seeing their fasting but God.

¹⁸ **that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”**

- Some people fast prior to receiving the Lord’s Supper; however, it’s not necessary. “Fasting and

bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words [of Christ]: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’” (*Small Catechism* VI:5). That person thus receives what God promises: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

¹⁹ **Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal**

- The adage “You can’t take it with you” is true. When one dies, his/her possessions aren’t also buried. It’s not sinful to have possessions, but it’s sinful to fear, love, and trust in these things above God (First Commandment).

²⁰ **but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.**

- This is “the reconciling work of the community of Jesus. The members...are reconciled among themselves and preach God’s reconciliation in Jesus to all people. As they live their lives and preach this message, reconciliation takes place, people are joined to this community, and thereby treasures are laid up in heaven. This is the work of God in and through the community of Jesus.... More simply put, the ‘treasures in heaven’ are the church” (Scaer, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 210).

²¹ **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

- As one LCMS seminary professor puts it, “The external choices reveal the internal spiritual condition. ...The primary response is to turn and believe again that the heart of the Christian is founded upon Christ, upon the life He gives and the identity He bestows. That is where the believer’s heart is fixed” (Gibbs, *Matthew* 1:1–11:1).



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