

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Year A, B, and C - Ash Wed., Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Verse 6:1: This verse serves as an introduction for the follow section in verses 2–18, which contain warnings about doing good in order to be seen. In these verses, Jesus gives three examples:

- Verses 6:2-4 - almsgiving
- Verses 6:5-6 - prayer
- Verses 6:16–18 - fasting

Jesus warns His followers that they are never to practice their “piety” (“your righteousness”) out in public with the desire to be seen by others. Those who do things to catch human eyes and win admiration for themselves lack true faith and spiritual understanding. They do not look for recognition or reward from their Father in heaven. All they are doing is laying up treasure for themselves on earth.

Verse 6:2 (When you give...): Only hypocrites are those who need to give alms in public — in the synagogue and in the streets, to the accompaniment of trumpet blasts. Their desire is to be seen.

In the Greek world, “hypocrite” was the word for an *actor*. However, in the New Testament the word denotes “a moral or spiritual pretender” — one who plays the part of outer righteousness but lacks the reality of inner righteousness. Matthew uses the word rather frequently (verses 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51) and contrasts hypocrisy with righteousness (v.5:29), perfection (v.5:48), and wholeness (v.22:37–40).

Verse 6:3: Jesus urges His followers to pursue the opposite practice. They are not to devise ways to give alms to win applause. Rather, they are to give alms in an inconspicuous fashion, in a way that their left hand does not even know what their right hand is doing.

Verse 6:4: They are to give alms in secret, hiding their actions not only from the public eye but also from their own eye. They are not to give in order to impress the crowds, nor to win the gratitude and praise of

recipients who patronize them. Their desire must be to act as God’s partners in the practice of divine generosity toward all, especially the poor and defenseless.

In the latter part of this verse, Jesus is not teaching a system of rewards and punishments based on merits and demerits. Rather, He uses concrete and colorful terms to combine traditional religious images and phrases from home and market to demolish tired and traditional systems.

After all, Jesus’ Father is *already* the Father of followers. He does not become their Father only after they have piled up a sufficient heap of deeds well done. Sad to say, the scribes and Pharisees who desire praise have received what they are looking for and settled for human praise rather than God’s.

God likes good deeds better than evil deeds, rejoices at spontaneous generosity, is repelled by posturing, dislikes hypocrisy, and is angry when people use others to display their own supposedly superior religious standing.

Verses 6:5–6 (When you pray...): Hypocrites pray in the same way as they give alms. They love to stand and pray, putting themselves on display in synagogues and on street corners so that they might be seen by those around them. (In Jesus’ day, people stood when they prayed and sat when they taught.)

Jewish people used set prayers and observed fixed hours for prayer. The *Shema*, a creedal statement combining Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:3-21 and Numbers 15:37-41 was prayed twice each day. The chief Jewish prayer, *The Eighteen Benedictions*, was prayed three times each day.

Jesus was not sweeping away all public devotions and the chanting of the Psalms, public liturgy, and set prayers. Rather, He was setting one extreme against another: show versus secrecy, prayer on street corners versus prayer in the tool shed or broom closet, seeking applause from others versus single-minded commu-

nion with God.

God himself.

In 6:5, the Greek verb *apecho* (received their reward) is a commercial term that has to do with giving a receipt for what has been paid in full.

Verses 6:16–18 (When you fast...): Although the practice of regular fasting was common in Judaism, the only fast prescribed in the Mosaic Law was that of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:31). It was (and is) the most solemn fast day among the Jews. It was to be undertaken as a way to strengthen prayer. It was an expression of sorrow over personal or national loss (such as the destruction of Jerusalem; see 2 Kings 25:8; Jeremiah 52:12). It was also practiced as a way to prepare to enter God's presence.

Jesus instructs His followers to do the opposite of the hypocrites. When they fast, they cease bathing, anointing their bodies, and combing their hair. They sprinkle ashes on their heads and put on a garment made of coarse material. In short, they advertise their piety.

However, fasting means abstaining from food as a way of afflicting the inner spirit, and humbling oneself before God. Jesus urges those who fast to do the opposite of the hypocrites: "put oil on your head and wash your face." The piety of Jesus' followers must be for God's eyes only.

Verse 6:19: Treasures in the ancient world included expensive cloth and finely woven garments. These could easily be ruined by moths (James 5:22). If a person's treasure was a hoard of coins, or an exquisitely carved box or panel, or a barn full of wheat, it was vulnerable to being eaten away by rust or worms. Furthermore, thieves could dig through the mud-brick walls of a home, or dig up a family treasure from its hiding place under the ground, and steal whatever they found.

Verse 6:20: The way to deal with human insecurity is not to hire guards or buy more durable goods. It is to turn away completely from treasure on earth to treasure in heaven — to a place beyond the reach of moth, rust, and thieves who break in to steal. Our treasure is the One who dwells in heaven, God himself!

Verse 6:21: Jesus tells His disciples to cut all "security links" to the ebb and flow of markets and fortune. They are rather to focus on the name, sovereignty, and will of God. Those who do that will have a heart, life, and joy that rest on a foundation as firm and eternal as