



The Sermon on The Mount Bible Study Session 13 Matthew 6:1



Study By
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Greek NT

Προσέχετε [δὲ] τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς· εἰ δὲ μὴ γε, μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

La Biblia de las Américas

Cuidad de no practicar vuestra justicia delante de los hombres para ser vistos por ellos; de otra manera no tendréis recompensa de vuestro Padre que está en los cielos.

NRSV

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

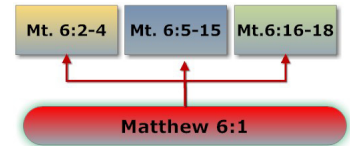
NLT

Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven.

The Outline of the Text:

The block diagram of 6:1 is helpful for understanding how the ideas are structured.

6:1 And
63 **beware of practicing your piety**
before men
in order to be seen by them;
And
if not so
64 **you have no reward**
with your Father in Heaven.



The two Greek main clauses in this single sentence set up an admonition (#63) and a warning (#64) of divinely imposed penalties if the admonition is not followed. This serves as a structure for developing the next three pericopes: vv. 2-4 (almsgiving); vv. 5-15 (prayer); and vv. 16-18 (fasting).

I. Admonition: “**beware of**” (Προσέχετε [δὲ]).

Role of 6:1 as a kēlāl.¹

Header for 6:1-18

Early English Bibles mistakenly followed the Vulgate with “almsgiving” rather than the ‘piety’ phrase.²

PIETY

¹“Mt. 6:1 is to be labelled a kēlāl, that is, a general statement of principle that heads a section consisting of various particular cases (pērāṭôt; cf. m. B. Qam. 8:1; m. ḤEd. 3:1; b. Ḥag. 6a–b; Daube, pp. 63–6). Compare the structure of Gen 5:1–32; Lev 18:1–23; Ecclus 3:1–9; 1QS 3:13–4:26; Barn. 18–20; and especially Mt 5:17–48.” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 575.]

²KJV: “1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” In its dependence upon the Latin Vulgate, which followed later less reliable manuscript copies of the New Testament, it translated not the original wording of the Greek text with τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν, but rather the later altered reading τὴν ἐλεημοσύνην ὑμῶν, ‘your alms giving.’ By this failure the impression is given that verse one is only connected to verses two through four. But such is simply not the case. Clearly the weight of manuscript evidence favors the reading τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν, which sets up an entirely different contextual understanding. The phrase refers to the general practice of piety in a Jewish context. As such, then, verse one is the foundational introduction to the discussion of three significant aspects of Jewish piety in Jesus’ day: almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18). Structurally the framing of this declaration highlights what the disciples are to be careful about.

Matthew's phrase τὴν δικαιοσύνην³ ὑμῶν links 6:1 with 5:20⁴, as well as with 5:6, 10; 6:33.⁵

Meaning of the admonition.

προσέχω. The use of *Προσέχετε* calls upon the readers (you - plural verb form) to focus their attention on the upcoming discussion in order to clearly detect the negative aspects of that discussion. The use of the Greek present tense imperative verb form stresses this as a continuing responsibility, rather than an occasional one. We as disciples must constantly be on guard that our devotion to God be proper and not slip into the negative pattern of the Jewish leaders. The nature of the verb admonition, as well as the subsequent warning about non-compliance (cf. statement #64), stresses the crucial importance of this caution. Some highly important issues are at stake, and failure to take them seriously will lead to spiritual disaster.

II. Practice of piety: “practicing your piety” (τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν).

Piety then and now.

*Ancient meanings of piety.*⁶ Three Greek key terms closely connected to piety in the ancient world, which surface in the New Testament, are *εὐλάβεια*, *εὐσέβεια*, and *θρησκεία*. A careful analysis of their use in the New Testament reveals a tendency toward one particular set of terms by each New Testament writer. All of these terms have a lot of religious ‘baggage’ coming out of the Greco-Roman traditions of piety. This is most likely the reason for the limited use of the terms in the New Testament.

Modern meanings of piety. M-W online dictionary: “**1** : the quality or state of being pious; as **a** : fidelity to natural obligations (as to parents) **b** : dutifulness in religion : devoutness; **2** : an act inspired by piety; **3** : a conventional belief or standard : orthodoxy”

Distinctly Jewish reference here.

The term employed by Matthew in 6:1 for translating the Aramaic expression of Jesus' original words is *τὴν δικαιοσύνην ποιεῖν*, which literally means “to do righteousness.” The phrase is considerably more Jewish oriented and without Greek or Roman heritage. The nature of the expression is more natural to the issue of piety since Jesus will contrast it to the Jewish practice in 6:2-18. The pattern is found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in Gen. 18:19; Psalm 106:3 and Isaiah 56:1, as well as in 1 John 2:29; 3:7; 3:10; and Rev. 22:11, reflecting also the Johannine slant on Christian piety.



III. Boundaries: “before men in order to be seen by them” (ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς).

This specification of boundaries lies at the heart of the difference between the righteousness of the Jewish religious leaders and that of disciples in the Kingdom.⁷ Proper motivation for doing what is right is key to the Kingdom

³See Matt. 3:15; 5:6; 5:10; 6:1; 6:33; 21:32 for the Matthean instances. The word shows up 92 times in the Greek New Testament with 8 instances in Matthew. The term is especially prevalent in the Pauline writings of the New Testament, and particularly in Romans with 34 instances. Paul's use stresses a different aspect of the concept than does Matthew.

⁴NRSV: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

⁵The translation language used by Matthew for the idea of piety expressed by Jesus originally in Aramaic underscores the outward expression of inward devotion to God. The Matthean concept of righteousness (*ἡ δικαιοσύνη*;) is important to what Jesus is describing here. Unlike Paul who understood righteousness essentially as the center of God's character and being that was then given to believer's in their conversion thus making them righteous and therefore able to approach God, Matthew sees in righteousness the older Jewish tradition of ‘right actions’ But in contrast to the righteousness of the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ (cf. 5:20), this righteousness must have an entirely different motive and thus a different character, as the three examples of almsgiving, prayer and fasting illustrate. The righteousness that God will accept is defined in Matt. 7:21-23 simply as those who ‘do the will of God’ (*ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς*). Also important to Matthew's view is that righteousness must be expressed. To be sure, it is an inner attitude of desire and commitment to please God. But for righteousness to be righteousness it must ‘concretize’ itself in specific actions carried out with proper motive. Non-action means no righteousness.

⁶For a detailed treatment of the concept of piety in the ancient world, see my lecture “Frömmigkeit in den urchristlichen Gemeinden” (English translation: “Piety in Primitive Christianity”) at cranfordville.com.

⁷“δικαιοσύνη is not to be done before others in order to be seen by them. True piety is not for show. Right deeds must be accompanied by right intention (cf. the rabbinic *kawwānâ*, as in b. Meg. 20a). The Father in heaven rewards only those whose motives are pure, who care not for what others think but only for what is right before heaven. The key is intention. Even a good deed brings no reward if it springs from the desire for self-aggrandizement. One must rather seek to bring glory to the Father in heaven

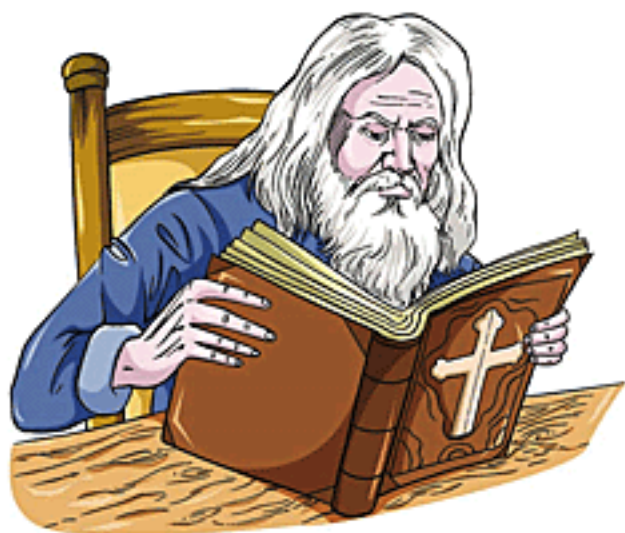
righteousness taught by Jesus in 6:1-18. Why we do what we do is just as important as what we do.

The tragic reality is that later on Christianity lost sight of this central principle of Jesus. A second century manual of Christian living called *The Didache* in 8:3 simply declares in comment on Matthew's text:

And let not your fastings be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and the fifth day of the week; but do ye keep your fast on the fourth and on the preparation (the sixth) day.

The inner motive for righteous deeds has been replaced with a focus on outward actions. The difference in the piety of Christians and Jews (i.e., 'the hypocrites') is that the two groups do their piety on different days of the week. Thus Christian piety practiced in this manner had no more value before God than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Neither reflect genuine piety.

This remains true in our day as well.



IV. **Warning:** “And if not so, you have no reward with the Father in Heaven” (δὲ μή γε, μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς).

The warning follows the admonition and contains stern reminders that failure to follow the admonition entails serious spiritual loss. Jesus makes the situation unmistakably clear. Inner motive leading to proper pietistic expression is essential if one expects the Father's approval and blessing. Anything less means no approval from the Heavenly Father.

The idea of 'reward' (*μισθόν*) is fairly common in Matthew⁸; cf. 5:12, 46, 6:2, 5, 16; 10:41, 42; 20:8.

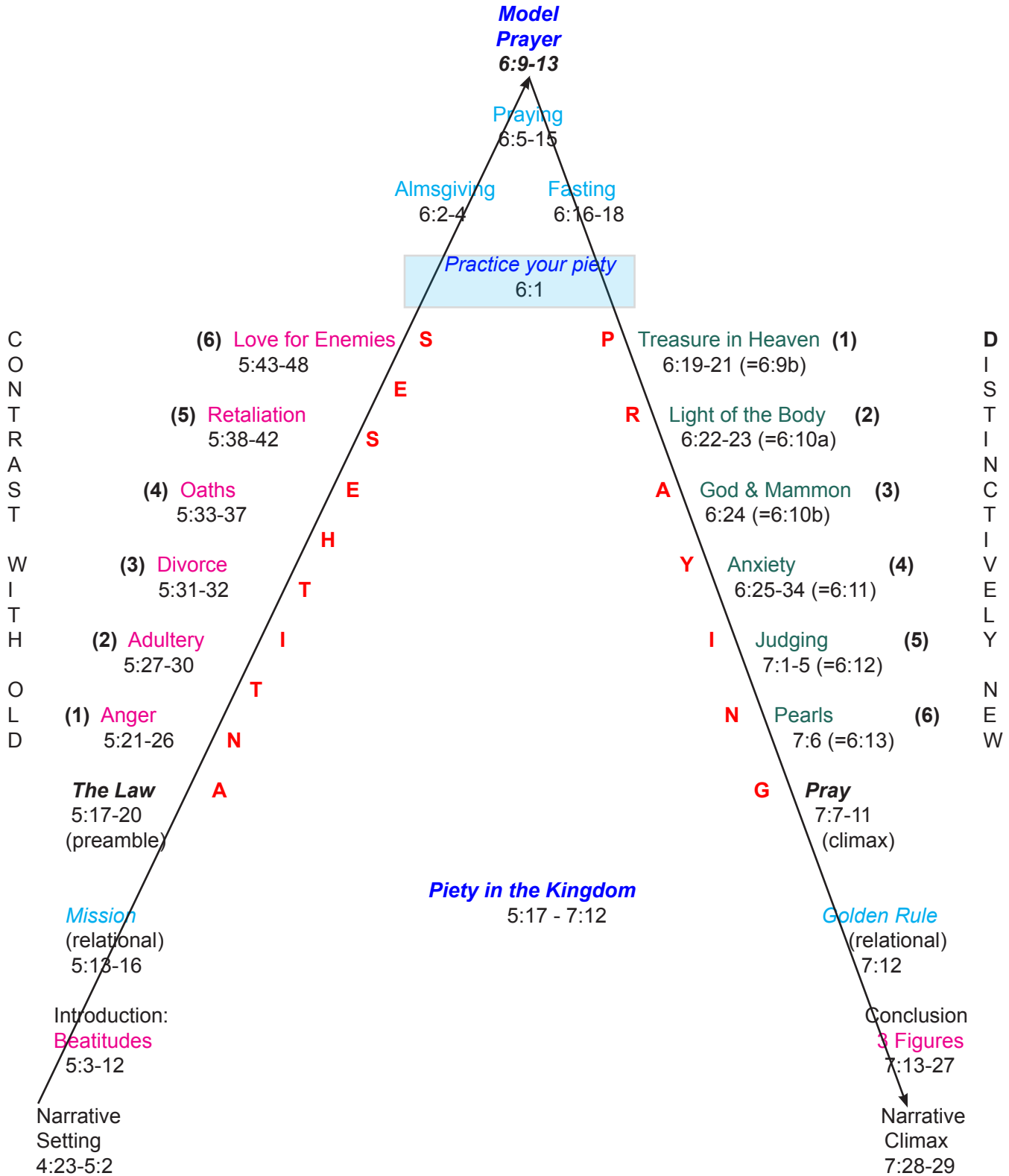
We are not practicing piety in order to achieve merit from God. Rather it is a generous God who observes true piety and rewards it with His blessing both now and in eternity. Improper practice of piety brings no such blessing from the Heavenly Father.

(cf. 5:16, which in no way contradicts the present passage, as Augustine, *De serm. mont.* 2:1:2, rightly argued). The pride of show is a malignant growth on religion which leads to counterfeit goodness. One must always remember that 'the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (1 Sam 16:7). God sees what goes on in the dark, even within hearts, and that is what matters (cf. *Ecclus* 17:15; 23:19; 39:19). Recall Boethius, *de Consolatione* 1:4: 'For as often as a man receives the reward of fame for his boasting, the conscience that indulges in self congratulation loses something of its secret merit'." [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 575.]

⁸"The concept of reward is important for Jesus. Yet God rewards as a father, not as a judge (Mt. 6:1ff.; 25:34). He demands obedience, but the reward far exceeds what is deserved, and it is thus a matter of divine generosity rather than human merit. This lifts the concept out of the sphere of calculation. In Mt. 20:1 ff. the equal treatment of the laborers shows that reward is not according to achievement but according to the prodigality of love. Lk. 17:7ff. makes it plain that the concept of merit is totally repudiated. The promise of the kingdom to children in Mk. 10:15 strengthens this thought. God alone is good (Mk. 10:18), and this means that like children we must simply let the kingdom be granted to us. In Jesus the kingdom has already broken into time and it catches up the disciples in its living power, so that their moral actions are not autonomous achievements that deserve a reward but manifestations of a divine power that moves on to future fulfilment. For Jesus, disciples stand under the eyes of a holy God and owe obedience to him, but salvation is God's own work and in his generosity God grants to receptive hearts a reward which finds in the kingdom its commencement and consummation. The concept of reward is thus taken up into that of the kingdom as the divine glory undeservedly received."

[Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Translation of: Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985), 599. S.V. "misthós [reward], **misthōō** [to hire], **misthios** [day laborer], **misthōtós** [hired hand], **misthapodótēs** [rewarder], **misthapodosía** [reward, retribution], **antimisthía** [reward, penalty]" by H. Preisker.]

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lorin L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.