

Attitude in Almsgiving: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Matthew 6:1-4

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Abstract

This study focuses on Mt 6:1-4, which discusses the act of giving to the needy. The researcher used a socio-rhetorical analysis to explore the importance of attitude in piety as it relates to giving. The study reviewed relevant literature, examined the immediate and social contexts of the passage, and compared giving practices in the first-century Mediterranean world to modern society, with reference to Nigeria. The study found that while giving to the needy is considered a noble act, people in all generations are concerned about their reputation and social status, making it difficult to give in secret. For this reason, the researcher suggested practical ways to cultivate a humble and sincere attitude towards giving, emphasizing its importance in the lives of contemporary Christians and for discipleship. Hence contemporary Christians will be able to appreciate to a greater extent, the deep spiritual import of the text and practicable ways of inculcating the tenets of Jesus' teachings in their daily lives as Christians.

Keywords: Almsgiving, Socio-Rhetorical, Matthew, New Testament

Introduction

Attitude to almsgiving is a fundamental aspect of religious practice. It is necessary to understand the role of almsgiving in religious life as Christians in this modern dispensation, especially in the context of the New Testament as it is recorded in Mt 6:1-4.

The Gospel of Matthew is divided into five major discourses that focus on specific teachings and miraculous deeds of Jesus Christ. Mt 6:1-4 is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the most seemingly radical, contradictory, difficult to practice and yet most famous and widely studied teachings of Jesus Christ. It is a collection of teachings of Jesus Christ that cuts across different aspects of human life - ethics, sociology, morality, spirituality, and jurisprudence. Mt 6:1-4 is all about

almsgiving. Here, Christ was teaching his disciples the best way to give alms and receive a reward from God their Father. He warned them against the danger of practising their act of charity in public. He instructed them to give in secret without expecting any public recognition.

Many times, people like to show off their act of piety. People want to be seen and acknowledged as good. Hence when such individuals want to pray, they may begin to shout so that others will hear them and know that they are prayerful. Such people occasionally develop an attitude of walking with heads bent to a certain angle and speaking in a manner that will mark them out as those who have intimacy with God. Any act of charity by some of them will be advertised on different media platforms. They may not show interest in any good

work that cannot be show-cased. During Lent, they may decide not to shave. They will go about wearing unkempt appearances as a sign that they are observing the Lenten fasting. Jesus considers these attitudes as hypocritical and teaches that an act of piety should be done in secret so that it becomes known and acknowledged by God alone. Before going further, it will be good to explain some of the key words in the topic

Almsgiving is an act of giving charity to another. It is an outward sign of Christian love for others. It is “a religious act, inspired by compassion and a desire for justice, whereby an individual who possesses the economic means helps in a material way his less fortunate neighbour.”¹

A socio-rhetorical analysis according to Robbins, is an attempt to understand the social and cultural contexts in which texts are produced and received, in order to interpret them more accurately and effectively. He argues that by examining the social and cultural factors that influence the production and reception of texts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of their meaning and significance.² Socio-rhetorical analysis is interested in what a given text wanted to communicate in its original socio-historical and socio-cultural situation vis-a-vis the modern society.

So, in this paper, the immediate context of Mt 6:1-4, socio-cultural situation of the first

century Mediterranean world, and Early Medieval Christian Era with regard to almsgiving will be examined, compared and finally applied to Nigerian context. Hence, it is preferred in this research to other methods like “Religionsgeschichte” which is primarily concerned with tracing the historical development of religious tradition.

Attitude in Giving

Lamp focuses on the relationship between attitude, piety, and almsgiving in Mt 6:1-4. He argues that Jesus’ primary concern in the passage is the attitude of the giver and the motivation behind the act of giving, rather than the act of giving itself. He said that the word—almsgiving encompasses a wide range of acts of kindness and generosity towards others, including hospitality and care for the sick and needy. In analyzing the passage, he related the terms - attitude, piety, and almsgiving to the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount and emphasizes the importance of a righteous heart and a sincere faith in Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God. He finally encouraged Christians to cultivate a humble and sincere attitude towards giving.³

Similarly, Yarbrough explores the relationship between almsgiving, piety, and attitude as it is contained in Mt.6:1-4. He noted that attitude to piety and almsgiving in the Jewish culture of that time was that of self-promotion and glorification rather than true piety. He emphasized the importance of

¹Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Attitude and Piety in Matthew 6:1-4” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2, (2014) 15-20 (18).

²Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring The Texture of Texts: A guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation*, (Trinity Press International, 1996), 12

³Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Attitude and Piety in Matthew 6:1-4” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2, (2014)

attitude with which one gives, rather than simply the act of giving itself. Jesus encourages his followers to give in secret, without seeking to be noticed, to avoid the temptation of pride and self-glorification. Attitude of giving in humility is an essential component of true piety. He concludes by pointing out that the passage implies that a true act of piety is not just about performing outwardly visible acts, but about developing an internal disposition that is aligned with God's value. This implies cultivation of a heart that is motivated and encouraged by love and compassion for others rather than a desire for personal aggrandizement.⁴

On the other hand, Kuecker, examining the relationship between piety, humility and discipleship says that the three are closely interconnected and essential for proper understanding of the ethical and spiritual vision of the Gospel. Piety is characterized by a deep commitment to God, expressed through acts of devotion such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In all this, humility is a central virtue and is closely connected to the concept of discipleship⁵

More so, Ed, is of the opinion that, Jesus is warning against outward manifestation of piety. We need to be mindful of our attitude and motivations when giving. Do we do them to impress others or as an act of loyalty to God?⁶ Jesus' main directive here is not

that we should give, rather, he is concerned with the way we give it. Our giving should be secret, not public. What he is not happy with are those who talk publicly about their donations, trying to impress others with their 'godliness'. They would receive from it only temporal public praise and no reward from God.⁷

From the above, it shows that attitude plays a very important role in almsgiving. Attitude matters a lot in determining the value of piety/almsgiving before God. However, there was no mention of how a Christian in the modern world can cultivate the right attitude to almsgiving.

Motivating factor for an act of piety

The motive behind any action of man is very crucial in determining the extent of the correctness or otherwise of the action in question. A motive is the underlying reason behind our actions. People's actions are often carried out from varying motivating factors or reasons which could be theologically positive or negative. An act of piety like almsgiving could be done with a positive or negative motive. When the motive for such an action is to serve God by showing charity to a fellow human being, then the action is considered glorious and worthy of receiving a handsome reward from God. When it is, however done from a negative motive like pride, desire for approval or entitlement, then, it becomes an action of the flesh which cannot please God (cf. Rom 8:8; Jas 4:3).

⁴Robert W. Yarbrough, "Piety and Attitude: a Review of Matthew 6:1-4" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 58 (2015): 221-226

⁵Aaron Kuecker, "Piety, Humility, and Discipleship in the gospel of Matthew," *Lexington Books*, (2017) 120-126

⁶Jarret Ed, "The Sermon on the Mount: Give to the Needy—Mt 6:1-4" *A Clay Jar*, (2021):7-19 (12).

⁷ Jarret Ed, "The Sermon on the Mount: Give to the Needy—Mt 6:1-4," 13

In the Gospel of Mt 6:1, Jesus said: Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. The Greek word προσέχετε (prosechete) translated as 'be careful' can also be translated as 'beware' or 'be on guard'. Its mood is imperative. So, Jesus was not actually giving an advice or a guiding principle of life. He was as a matter of fact giving an order. When an advice is given, one may or may not take it. But an order is meant to be obeyed with every amount of seriousness. Otherwise, a bitter consequence will follow it. In this case, the consequence is that you will have no reward from your father in heaven. In verse two, He further explained Himself thus: "So, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets for others to praise them. "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward". The Greek phrase, ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν (amen lego umin) can be translated as 'Truly I say to you', or 'Verily I say to you', 'or 'Most solemnly I say to you'. It is very emphatic and depicts an air of finality – "they have received their reward" from the people. This must not necessarily be positive. The reward from people could as well be negative depending on how the audience perceived the giver's intention. But the person has no reward from God.

Then in verse three, Jesus says: but when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. The teaching is in a metaphorical statement indicating secrecy, privacy, an action devoid of pomposity and elaborate public exhibition. Hence, in verse four Christ says: "So that your giving may be in secret. And

your father who sees in secret will reward you". A very outstanding fact from the Gospel of Mt 6:1-4 is that Jesus is vehemently against the public show of piety. This is also evident in the following verses of Mt 6:5-18. True act of piety is meant to give glory, reverence, honour, and worship to God. Any other motive for an act of piety will be considered selfish and unwelcomed attitude to God. A very important teaching of the Catholic Church is this: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, freely created mankind out of pure goodness. For this reason, He calls man to know Him, to love Him, to worship Him here on earth, to be with Him forever in heaven".⁸ An act of piety such as giving to the needy, which does not serve these four purposes is not actually considered godly.

Almsgiving must be totally disinterested, not hoping for anything in return. Perrin maintained that, for almsgiving to have such a value and to merit the reward from God, alms should correspond to the divine pattern. First, the importance of intentions must be emphasized because intentions are the soul of activities and give them their true value. Christ firmly taught that an act of charity should be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret, shall reward you (Matt 6:2-4). In this regard, Perrin, says that "charity carries that delicacy which does not give room for public exhibition and avoids showing superiority"⁹

⁸ Catechism of The Catholic Church; No 1-4

⁹ Joseph-Marie Perrin "Key to Authentic Spirituality," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 6, (2008): 215-223 (216).

Similarly, Oshiokhamele, points out that many people are seen giving gifts to increase their ambitions in politics. For example, what might be the impression behind China donating healthcare equipment and facilities to the Nigerian government to fight the corona virus epidemic? In return, of course, to establish an autonomous economic status over Nigeria under the guise of trade relations. When we get to our local level, we see the rich making huge contributions to help certain communities for public applause or because they seek political or economic reward from the government or society. Nothing is in vain. The same attitude has greatly affected even our modest individual assistance to the poor in our neighbourhood¹⁰

In the same vein, McGraw says that Jesus wants us to understand how not to give and how to give. On how not to give, Jesus said, "Don't practice your righteousness before others to see it." This is because some tend to do their righteousness in front of others for the obvious purpose of making themselves look good or gaining appreciation.¹¹ He further says that coming down to the second verse, Christ said, "When you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be applauded by the people. He says that the meaning of Jesus' statement is that one who gives should not draw to

him/herself, unnecessary attention because those who do such are hypocrites. They have their rewards—the approval of men, but not the approval of God.¹²

On how to give, Christ says in verse three "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." According to McMcrow, this statement of Jesus is a hyperbolic language. Jesus is saying that we should give quietly so as not to attract special attention. Even those closest to us should not know what we are giving. We must secretly give without making a big fuss. We don't have to seek recognition. We must offer sacrifice in humility and silence. Then your father who watches silently will reward you. McMcrow however was defective in his interpretation. He did not take cognizance of man as a social being as well as the educative, pastoral, and uplifting characteristics of piety in the life of the surrounding populace.

Furthermore, Oshiokhamele sheds more light on this. He maintained that almsgiving in practical sense might be the same, however, what may be different is the intentions for which it was done. Many people attend to the needs of other people who approach them. Some give out of their own volition because they knew it is important and needed. Others give because they are asked. Many, give for political reasons while others give for spiritual reasons, and others still, give just for social reasons. According to him, giving alms generally is good, but the good intention of the giver makes it better. This is the reason Jesus would advise his followers not to give

¹⁰ Benedict A. Oshiokhamele, "Almsgiving: A Case of Pastoral Theology" *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* 5 (Feb 2021): 615-625 (618)

¹¹ Matthew McGraw, "How we should Give (Mt 6:1-4)," *God's Fulfilled Promise Series*, (2018), 13-19 (15).

¹² McGraw, "How we should Give (Mt 6:1-4) 17.

alms like the scribes and Pharisees. He further said that we must make our almsgiving an act of piety, that is, we are to accompany the giving with a little heart to heart prayer for the receiver and for you who give out. In this case, the act becomes a holy act, an act of worship and it brings a great blessing upon the almsgiver.

He further classified almsgiving into politically motivated, socially motivated, and theological or spiritually motivated almsgiving. Political almsgiving is alms given just to make people vote for a particular politician. Such alms are given when the elections are around the corner and often stops after the elections such as is seen in Nigeria and other African countries. Socially motivated almsgiving is done within a social group. For instance, when a donation is made within a club, or age grade members for various projects, such donations often have a sole purpose of winning the admiration of members. The reward is often short-lived and have no spiritual undertone. But the theological or spiritually motivated almsgiving is an act of piety, done out of love for God. Such is done with devotion and cheerfulness, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:6-7). This kind of almsgiving is piety which has a spiritual reward from God. It is when almsgiving is done out of charity, according to the mind of Christ and for the sake of the kingdom.¹³ Oshiokhamele discussed very well, what is almsgiving, as a form of piety though, he did it from a point of view of pastoral theology.

¹³ Oshiokhamele "Almsgiving: A Case of Pastoral Theology," 615-625

Socio-political and cultural context

Some authors have written on Mt 6:1-4 based on the social-political and cultural context. For instance, Duncan, is of the view that the concept of piety in the ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish society was closely tied to the public display of religious activities like almsgiving, to gain honour and recognition from others. But Jesus challenges this notion of piety by emphasizing the necessity of giving in secret. He suggests that the emphasis on secrecy is not to discourage or make it impossible to recognize the good deeds of others, but rather to extol a sincere and humble attitude towards giving that focused on pleasing God alone. He further says that the emphasis on secrecy in giving, not only challenges the traditional notion of piety but at the same time is a call to care for the poor and marginalized without seeking personal gain or recognition. He finally considers the implication of the passage for contemporary Christian discipleship and argues that it challenges modern conceptions of charity and philanthropy that gives priority to public recognition and institutionalized giving, over the relational and personal aspect of giving. He further suggests that Christians should cultivate a humble and sincere attitude towards giving, bearing in mind that giving is not only an act of charity but also an expression of love and relationship.¹⁴

Carter begins by giving analysis of the cultural cum social context of the Sermon on

¹⁴Philip T. Duncan. "Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation and Sermon on the Mount: some Implication for Christian Discipleship" *Journal of Spiritual Formation and soul care* 12, (2019): 81-93

the Mount. He pays attention to the social and economic realities of the first century Palestine and the challenges that the people were facing. He brings to the fore, the tension between the dominant social value of the period that gives more value to power, status, and wealth, and Jesus' teaching that extols humility, generosity, and care for less privileged. He argues that Jesus' teaching on almsgiving and piety are not just moral exhortation but rather a rhetorical strategy to call his followers to a radical, counter-cultural way of life. Jesus' teaching was meant to shape the attitude and behaviours of his disciples in a way that challenged the prevalent cultural values of their time. He further maintained that Jesus emphasis on giving in secret was not meant to forbid public giving all together but rather to challenge the culture and habit of pride and self-promotion that often accompanied public giving. He finally stresses the importance of appreciating the cultural and social context of Jesus teaching on piety and almsgiving, to fully understand their rhetorical power.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Heil, examines the paradoxical relationship between piety and poverty in the Gospel of Matthew, focusing on Mt 6:1-4. He says that in the cultural and social context of the first century, poverty was often seen a curse and a sign of divine punishment. However, the Gospel of Matthew subverts this cultural expectation by presenting poverty as a sign of blessedness and piety. He further argues that the author of the Gospel of Matthew is

¹⁵Warren Carter, "The Rhetoric of Piety in The Sermon on the Mount," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 64, (2010):153-164

intentionally using paradoxical language and imagery to challenge his audience assumptions about piety and poverty. He concludes that this vision has important implications for how Christians should approach issues of poverty and social justice¹⁶

Duncan, Carter, and Heil, maintain that Jesus teaching on Mt 6:1-4 was in opposition to the prevalent socio-cultural and economic realities of the first century Mediterranean world. It was a radical shift from the normal tradition.

Nevertheless, Kim, exploring the relationship between piety, almsgiving, and social justice says that they are intimately connected. Matthew 6:1-4 is connected to Mt 25:31-46. Mt 6:1-4 talks about giving in secret, emphasizing the importance of personal piety. While in Mt 25:31-46, Jesus describes the final judgement in terms of how one has taken care of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, emphasizing the importance of social justice. He is of the view that true piety involves personal devotion, spiritual practices, and a commitment to social justice and care for the marginalized. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing the connection between piety, especially in the form of almsgiving, and social justice in the Gospel of Matthew. He concludes that, a truly holistic approach to piety and social justice is needed.¹⁷ Kim's line of thought is very

¹⁶John Paul Heil, "The Paradox Of Piety and Poverty: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Matthew 6:1-4," *Journal Of Biblical Theology* 48, (2018):150-156

¹⁷Kwang Suk Kim, *The Relationship between Piety and Social Justice*, (Routledge, 2018) 85-90

much *ad rem*. Almsgiving is inextricably linked to social justice as it helps a lot in bridging the gap between the rich and the poor especially when it is done without undermining the personal dignity of the poor.

The immediate context of Matt 6:1-4

For a proper understanding of Mt 6:1-4, it is of uttermost importance to have a look at the context within which the statement was made, which was the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount contains the most famous teachings of Jesus Christ. The teaching was revolutionary in nature and sheds light on what is God's will under the new covenant for those that will enter the kingdom and commanded his disciples to follow on the right direction. Five main points were discussed in the Sermon on the Mount: (i) the Beatitude (ii) The Law (iii) Relationship with God (iv) Relationship with the people (v) The next life.

The contradictions that challenged preconceived ideas about life and philosophy were the Beatitudes. The Greek word for beatitude "μακάριοι" (makarios) also means blessedness, blissfulness, nirvana. So, Christ is here teaching his disciples the real meaning of blessedness. The general conception is that blessedness entails being very rich, influential, occupying a high position in the society, living in fine houses, going in exotic and classy cars et cetera. Therefore, in the ancient Jewish culture, those looked upon as the epitome of blessedness are the kings, the emperors, the Pharisees, members of the

Sanhedrin, the chief priests and the celebrities. However, Jesus changed the scenario—blessed are the poor in spirit, the suffering, the hungry, those who are thirsty for righteousness, the kindly; pure heart; peacekeepers and those who were persecuted and humiliated for the sake of the kingdom. This teaching of Christ stands in opposition to the status quo ante. In ancient Greek times, the term "μακάριοι" (makarios) also referred to the gods. The implication is that Jesus was referring to a higher level of being blessed as against the worldly conception.

Similarly, Jesus re-interpreted the law. He tried to clarify the real meanings of the Laws as against their misconstrued understanding. Jesus touched on these laws: murder, adultery, vows, justice and nationalism. The Pharisees, because of their wrong interpretation of the laws, justified themselves as righteous before the law. But Jesus wanted his disciples to realize that nobody could be purely righteous as far as keeping the laws is concerned. The salvation of human would require the death of Jesus. There is a popular maxim: the best interpreter of the law is the producer. He brought to the fore the proper interpretation of the law and said that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Mt 4:17). A feat He accomplished by becoming our sacrifice and shedding his innocent blood once for all, for the sins of mankind (Heb. 7:27; 1Pt 3:18). Everything came to perfect fulfilment before His death when He said *τετέλεσται* (tetelestai) – it is finished; paid in full. He exposed what really lies underneath the water of law and wanted His disciples to work on the natural tendency for

self-exaltation. Hence, He enjoined them that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt 5:20).

Jesus teaching on relationship with God and relationship with the people in this passage are intertwined. Here he talked about giving, praying, and fasting in secret. In other words, peoples' good works and actions to God and humanity should be done in secret. Some people are of the view that this is a contradiction of Mt 5:16 but it is not, for there is no contradiction in God. In the social and traditional settings, almsgiving can engender love and serve as a unifying factor as well as a means of reconciliation among the people. So, the problem is not so much with the place where the alms was given as with the intention for the giving. One can give in public on some occasions, but the motive should be for God's pleasure and glory. Oshiokhamele concludes his article thus: "When we perform deeds of almsgiving, we are expected to act in all kindness and humility, not only as offering to God, but in the attitude that it is our duty. It is the right of the poor and the needy to have from our resources. And we are not to blow trumpets or make public displays of our charity as Matthew presents it".¹⁸ For any act of piety like almsgiving to merit God's reward, it should give glory to God. God should be the central object of glorification and not the giver. Ps115:1 also says "not to us, O lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness". In the same way, almsgiving should be a

¹⁸ Oshiokhamele "Almsgiving: A Case of Pastoral Theology," 619

demonstration of our love for God. For "truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you, did for me" (Mt 25:40).

Finally on the next life, Jesus gave a condition for admittance into the kingdom of God. He maintained that "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of His Father who is in heaven. The Sermon on the Mount being taught by Jesus was a turning point. The tone was radical as well as authoritative that those who heard him were astonished. He concluded with an emphatic statement " –Anyone who hears my words and put them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock... anyone who hears my word and does not put them into practice is like the foolish man who builds his house on a sandy ground..." (Mt 7:24-2)

Sociological context of Mt. 6:1-4 in first century Mediterranean world

Almsgiving in the Ancient Graeco-Roman World

In the ancient Graeco-Roman world, almsgiving was a known practice, but the almsgiving was not necessarily meant for the poor. Almsgiving was meant to be directed to the family members, friends, well-wishers, and human beings in general. The Greek word 'philanthropia' did not have the same meaning as the modern English term of philanthropy. There was not much concern for the poor as such. "One is 'philanthropos' towards one's own people, parents and other family members and

guests or strangers, not towards the poor, in the sense of showing pity or mercy. Someone never had the poor as its primary object. The semantic development in which it takes on the meaning "almsgiving" is majorly used by Christians and Jewish."¹⁹

Generosity was generally seen as good attitude but not considered as an act of piety that deserved any spiritual reward. One gives for the sake of gaining honour, prestige, social approval or for reciprocity. So, when Greek literature speaks of the joy of giving to others, it has nothing to do with altruism. Honour is the driving intent behind most Greek benevolence and that is why the Greek word 'philotimia' (love of honour) could evolve to mean generosity; benevolence, not to the poor but to fellow human beings in general, especially those from whom reciprocity can be reasonably expected.²⁰ Wealth was a sign of being favoured by the gods. Poverty was despised. The poor were seen as morally depraved and those prone to evil. There was not much care for them except when the giver wants to enhance his social status.

Almsgiving in the early Medieval Christianity

Unlike in the ancient Graeco-Roman era, almsgiving was an essential and indispensable aspect of Christian life in the early medieval period. It recurs in descriptions of religious activity as

something done in common by believers. To understand what it meant to be Christian in the early Middle Ages, one must understand almsgiving. Simply put, almsgiving was one of the key post—baptismal practices of both lay and clerical Christians, along with forms of prayers and fasting²¹ The purpose for almsgiving in this period rested on three important foundations: (i) Temporal and Eternal reward (ii) Forgiveness of sin (iii) Love and mercy

Temporal and eternal reward

Almsgiving involved a significantly wonderful and mysterious exchange between human beings and God. It is an essential way of improving one's relationship with God and obtaining eternal reward hereafter. This conception is basically based on two scriptural passages—Mt 25:31-46. Here it is vividly stated that when the son of man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels of Heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. Then he will separate them into two groups as a shepherd separates sheep from the goat. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, and the goat on his left. The criterion for the separation is based on the act of charity towards others - giving food to the hungry; drink to the thirsty; clothing to the naked; visiting the sick and those in prison; welcoming a stranger et cetera. Those at the right hand will be welcomed into heaven while those at the left hand will be

¹⁹Pieter Vander Host, *Organized Charity in The Ancient World*, ed Yair Furstenberg, (Boston: 2019) 116

²⁰ Host, *Organized Charity in The Ancient World*, 118

²¹ Eric Shuler; *Almsgiving and The Formation of Early Medieval Society: A.D 700 - 1025*, (Notre Dame University, 2010), 36

condemned to eternal punishment in Hell. Christ concluded with the emphatic statement - 'I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me...as often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me' He, by these statements identified himself with the less privileged, the downtrodden and the weak in the society. More so, some temporal reward and blessings are also expected from God to those who are charitable to the poor by giving them alms. It was also a strong belief that almsgiving attracts heavenly blessings based on Mt 10:42 "And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these young ones to drink, because he is a disciple— Amen, I say, he will surely not lose his fruit." So medieval Christians were inspired to give alms because of both the temporal and eternal reward associated with almsgiving. Lk 6:36 and other similar passages gave this belief a concrete support.

Forgiveness of sin

Another factor that motivated the medieval Christians to embrace the virtue of giving alms was the belief that one can obtain pardon for the post-baptismal sins. It was a means of healing the old wound of sin. There was a serious attachment between almsgiving and forgiveness of sin. This belief was part of early medieval Jewish culture. "It is better to give alms than to keep gold. For charity saves from death and cleanses every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who sin and do evil are their own worst enemies" (Tobit 9:19).

Love and mercy

The root word for charity is 'caritas' which simply means love. Almsgiving was seen as a way of showing fraternal love which was the fundamental Christian 'ethos'. The love of God and humanity can only be made eloquent through 'opera bona' (good work) and 'opera misericordiae' (work of mercy). Love should be concretized because "faith without good work is in vain (James 2:17). Almsgiving to the poor and less privileged was one of the good works that portrays love. The almsgiving has also to flow from the person's compassionate heart. "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy". When one gives alms, the person is at the same time being compassionate to the poor, the weak and disabled. This will eventually merit the giver the mercy of God at last. Love, mercy, and charity are joined together in such a way that they cannot be removed from each other in the life of early medieval Christians. Thus, giving for the sake of boosting one's reputation or for other vain glories was antithetical to the early Medieval Christians 'ethos'.

Comparative study of Mt 6:1-4 in first century Mediterranean world and the modern society

A comparative study of Mt 6:1-4 in the first-century Mediterranean world and contemporary society will reveal a lot of similarities as well as some differences in the way people understood and approached the act of almsgiving. First, almsgiving was a common practice in both societies, especially in the early medieval Jewish and Christian societies vis-a-vis modern society.

People in both cases believed that almsgiving was a noble act pleasing to God and which would attract temporal and eternal reward from God. In both societies, people were concerned about their reputation; how they were seen by others, their social status and honour. For this reason, giving in secret has remained a social problem today as it was in the first-century Mediterranean world.

However, there are more formal and organized charitable organizations or social welfare in modern society that take care of the needy which was not prevalent in the first-century Mediterranean world where almsgiving was mainly an individual or community-based affair. The situation has made some people especially in the Western world become less conscious of giving alms. Similarly, people believed that the reward for charity comes from God. So, their almsgiving was mainly motivated by divine remuneration but today, peoples' acts of charity are tied to various other mundane motivations including tax reduction incentives in the Western world and psychological manipulation in many African societies.

Again, giving in secret was common and easier in the first century Mediterranean world than it is today because of the exponential increase in the use of mass media and social communication systems. People like making the world to know of their acts of charity. Differences in socio-economic and cultural context of the two periods have also affected the mode of almsgiving and other works of charity in a tremendous way.

Applying Mt 6:1-4 in the Nigerian context

The teaching of Christ in Mt 6:1-4 demands that almsgiving should be done in secret to merit reward from God the Father. However, the attitude of some people towards almsgiving in Nigeria is a far cry from the teachings of Christ. Some people in Nigeria find it difficult to give without some ulterior motives. This attitude has cut across almost every sphere of life in Nigeria. In the churches, most people can only give substantially when they can be honoured in one way or the other. Some would expect the priest or the pastor in charge to become a tool in their hands because they give to the church. In the same vein, some people will put ten or twenty Naira in the offertory box because nobody sees it but if before the end of the Mass, the priest calls for donations, the same person who put ten or twenty Naira in the offertory box will come out to give a cash of twenty; thirty or more Naira because everybody in the church will see that he donated such an amount.

In political sphere, some politicians may turn into sudden philanthropists during election campaigns but stop when the election is over because their motive is to buy the people's conscience. Some have developed a higher strategy of coming around the polling units with a large sum of money to distribute to the electorates. According to Premium report, the recent 'off-season' Ekiti State governorship election was blighted by vote buying among other malpractices. Voter fraud has become an atrocious phenomenon in every election in Nigeria without a strong official response to stop it. According to election observers

and media reports, some voters received between five thousand Naira and ten thousand Naira [about 10 and 20 dollars] each with a "See and Pay" ploy in which a thumb-printed ballot was shown to a party agent standing next to a voting booth. While the bigger parties allegedly gave out these huge sums, some smaller parties purportedly offered between one thousand Naira (N1,000) and two thousand Naira (2,000) per vote. Admittedly, this kind of electoral malfeasance did not originate in Ekiti State poll. It prevailed in every election and grew with every new poll. In the past, bags of rice, physical cash or more were distributed for free to buy voters. The same process of corruption also occurred in the November 2021 Anambra State gubernatorial election.²²

In many communities, one can find some rich people who appear to be very generous to the poor—paying their house rents, hospital bills and even the school fees of their children. However, behind their seeming generosity is to have a psycho—social control over the people. Sometimes, the young teenagers who were helped are lured into sexual escapades with those ungodly rich men. This kind of obnoxious attitude is becoming so institutionalized that it is now difficult to see people who are doing act of charity for the sake of the glory of God without expecting some form of recompense from the recipient directly or indirectly. During funerals in many communities in Igbo land, people keep a conscientious record of those that come for condolence visit. The idea is that when such

people are bereaved, they will check their list to know what the people gave them before they decide on what they will bring while going for condolence visit in that family. So, when a rich family is having a funeral, it is common to see a lot of people coming for condolence with big and expensive items and fat envelopes because they expect a reciprocation but when a poor family is having a funeral, not many people will come for condolences.

Cultivating a good attitude to piety and almsgiving

As Christians, the importance of cultivating a good attitude to piety and almsgiving, and integrating them into practical lives cannot be over-emphasized. It is necessary for our spiritual growth. It also reflects our understanding of our relationship with God and our obligation as stewards of his marvellous blessings. Christians should recognize the fact that all blessings come from God irrespective of one's efforts, skills, and capabilities. We are merely stewards of God's blessings. In 1 Cor 4:7, Paul reminds us that all we have is a gift from God and calls on everyone to eschew boasting as though it were not a gift. So, our giving should be done with cheerfulness, and humility, out of gratitude for the blessings we have received rather than out of compulsion or self-recognition.

More so, cultivating a good attitude to almsgiving and piety requires a regular and conscious commitment of practising to giving and serving others. Virtues can best be inculcated by intentional and regular practices. Hence, integrating a sincere and

²²Editorial, *Premium Times*; June 27 2022

humble attitude towards giving into broader Christian discipleship practices requires intentional and constant efforts to live out these values in our daily lives. This can include regular participation in acts of service, visiting and helping in the nursing homes for the elderly or volunteering at other local charity homes, tithing regularly to support the work of the Church, seeking out opportunities to donate anonymously, among others.

Furthermore, Christians can cultivate these virtues and integrate them into their practical lives by constantly focusing and meditating upon both the temporal and eternal rewards promised to those who have a good attitude to piety and almsgiving. For instance, reflecting on some passages like, Lk 6:38, Mt 25:31-46, 2Cor 9:6-7, et cetera can be of tremendous help.

Finally, to cultivate a good attitude to piety and almsgiving according to the demand of Jesus in Mt 6:1-4 will require a willingness to recognize and repent from pride and self-centredness in our lives as Christians. We must commit to seeking God's grace and guidance to help us overcome our natural inclination to self-centredness, self-promotion, and arrogance. Then our actions when giving alms will be solely for the glorification of God through love and service to humanity.

Implications of Mt 6:1-4 for contemporary christians

The teachings of Jesus in Mt 6:1-4 have a lot of implications for contemporary Christians. Jesus teaches about the importance of humility and selflessness in our acts of

kindness and charity, urging believers to avoid selfishness and self-centredness. This passage emphasizes that genuine acts of kindness should be performed discreetly, without seeking public recognition or praise. By internalizing and practicing these lessons, contemporary Christians can improve their relationships with others and deepen their spiritual growth. Pope Francis aptly captures this teaching by saying it "sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbours as a brother or sister," highlighting the transformative power of selfless giving.

Furthermore, Jesus' teachings in these verses promote social justice by encouraging the treatment of the poor with love, respect, and dignity, free from any form of exploitation. When the needs of the less fortunate are addressed with genuine care and compassion, it fosters societal peace and stability. By following this guidance, Christians can contribute to creating a more just and equitable society where everyone is valued and treated with kindness.

The sincerity of intention is a crucial element of Jesus' message in this passage. He warns against performing good deeds merely to receive recognition or praise from others, urging instead that acts of kindness be done out of a genuine desire to help. This focus on humility and sincerity ensures that the primary motive behind our actions is the love of God and neighbour. When we give without expecting anything in return, our actions become a true reflection of compassion and generosity, aligning with the core principles of Christian faith.

Jesus' discouragement of pretensions and false piety is also central to this teaching. He reminds us that God sees our actions in secret and knows the intentions of our hearts. Therefore, the ultimate reward for our righteousness can only come from God, who rewards each person according to their deeds. By giving according to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 6:1-4, Christians demonstrate their faith and commitment to God, trusting that He will reward them in His own time and way. This perspective shifts the focus from seeking human approval to seeking divine approval, fostering a deeper, more authentic spiritual life.

Conclusion

The whole corpus of Sermon on the Mount was indeed as revolutionary in the ancient Jewish society as it is in the present Nigerian context. There is a whole gamut of hypocritical attitude found in many people—a lot of deceit and double dealing even among the perceived religious personalities. Many individuals want to be acknowledged by human beings as good and engage themselves in acts of piety just for the sole purpose of attracting human accolades or for other egoistic reasons that are mundane, and devoid of any divine inclination to please God. Many people engage in act of piety like almsgiving just to win people's admiration or influence in the society, to win election, to manipulate others or to receive a proper reciprocation in the future. It is sad that after more than two thousand years of Christianity in the world, multiplication of Christian churches and other religious groups in Nigeria, many people have

remained egocentric in their attitude of almsgiving. This work has examined the text, using a socio-rhetorical analysis to suggest possible ways of making Christians in the contemporary Nigerian society, to appreciate to a greater extent, the deep spiritual import of the text and practicable ways of inculcating the tenets of Jesus teachings in their daily lives as Christians. For future studies, one can explore how churches and different Christian associations can help promote a culture of humility and generosity and address the systemic issues responsible for promoting poverty and inequality.

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