

Hidden Righteousness

“BEWARE OF PRACTICING your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

¶ “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:1–4).

The fifth chapter spoke of the visibility of the disciples’ community and culminated in the περισσόον, requiring us to understand that what is characteristically Christian is that which steps away from the world, rises above the world, is extraordinary. Then the next chapter links up with this περισσόον and reveals its ambiguity. The danger is great that the disciples will completely misunderstand this as a command to start building a heavenly kingdom on earth, despising and destroying the world order. The danger is great that in enthusiasts’ indifference to this age they will think it their duty now to achieve and make visible the extraordinariness of this new world, separating themselves from the world radically and with no willingness to compromise, in order to force into being what is Christian, what is appropriate to discipleship, what is extraordinary. It was too easy to mistake this for the preaching of another pious style and way of life, even if it was a free, new, inspiring one. And one’s pious flesh would be so willing to accept this extraordinariness, poverty, truthfulness, suffering, or even to seek it out, if only doing so would satisfy the heart’s longing to actually see something with one’s own eyes^[161] and not merely to believe. One would surely be willing to nudge the boundaries of a pious lifestyle and obedience to the word, until they move more closely together, and are finally no longer distinguishable from each other. It would only be for the one goal of finally achieving the extraordinary.

On the other hand, those would gather on the battlefield who had only been waiting for Jesus to speak about the extraordinary so that they could attack him with even more rage. Proclaiming the extraordinary unmasked Jesus as an enthusiast, a revolutionary extremist who wanted to turn the world upside down, who instructs his disciples to leave the world and build a new world. Is that still obedience to Old Testament scripture? Is it not a thoroughly self-selected personal righteousness that is being proposed here?^[163] Doesn’t Jesus know about the sin of the world that will wreck anything he commands? Doesn’t he know anything about God’s revealed commandments, which are given to ward off sin? Isn’t this extraordinariness he is demanding proof of a spiritual arrogance, which is the beginning of all enthusiasm? No, not the extraordinary, but rather the completely ordinary, everyday, regular, unobtrusive behavior is the sign of genuine obedience and genuine humility. If Jesus had sent his disciples to their people, to their vocations, their responsibilities, their obedience to the law as the scribes interpreted it to the people, then he would have shown himself to be pious, truly humble, and obedient. He would have inspired people to more serious piety and stricter obedience. He would have taught what the scribes already knew, but what they liked to hear preached again with emphasis, that true piety and righteousness consist of not only the external deed, but also of one’s heartfelt intentions, and not only of intentions, but also of the deed. That would really be “better righteousness” the way the people needed it, the way no one could have avoided it. But now all

of that was shattered. Instead of the humble teacher of the law, they recognized an arrogant enthusiast. Of course, in all ages the preaching of enthusiasts has been able to inspire the human heart, indeed, even the noble human heart. But didn't the teachers of the law know that the voice of the flesh was speaking from this heart in all its goodness and nobility? Didn't they themselves know the power the pious flesh had over people? Jesus sacrificed the best sons of the country, the honorably pious ones useless in a struggle for a chimera. The extraordinary—that was the works of a pious person, done quite voluntarily, springing from one's own heart. It was the triumphant insistence on human freedom against simple obedience to God's commandment. It was forbidden human self-righteousness, which the law never permitted. It was lawless self-sanctification, which had to be rejected by the law. It was the free works which established themselves in opposition to unfree obedience. It was the destruction of God's community, the denial of faith; it was blasphemy against the law, blasphemy against God. Assessed by the law, the extraordinariness Jesus taught was deserving of the death penalty.

What does Jesus say about all that? He says: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them." The call to be extraordinary is the great, inevitable danger of discipleship. Therefore, beware of this extraordinariness, of the way that discipleship becomes visible. Jesus calls a halt to our thoughtless, unbroken, simple joy in what is visible. He gives a sting to the extraordinary. Jesus calls us to reflection.

The disciples should have this extraordinariness only by way of reflection. They should heed it, watch out for it. The extraordinary is not supposed to happen in order to be seen. This means that the extraordinary deed should not be done for the sake of its being extraordinary. And it should not be seen just for the sake of being seen. The better righteousness of the disciples should not be an end in itself. Of course, what is extraordinary does have to become visible, it does have to happen, but—beware that you do not do it *in order* for it to become visible. Although the visibility of discipleship does have a necessary reason, which is the call of Jesus Christ, it is never a goal in itself. If it were, then the focus would no longer be on discipleship itself; then a moment of repose would occur, our following would be interrupted, and we would not be able to take it up again at the point where we had stopped to rest. We would immediately be sent back to begin all over again. We would have to take note that we are no longer disciples. So something has to become visible, but—paradoxically: beware that it does not happen for the sake of being seen by people. "Let your light shine before the people ..." (5:16), but: pay attention to the hiddenness! Chapters 5 and 6 collide hard against each other. What is visible should be hidden at the same time; at the same time both visible and not to be seen. The reflection we have mentioned, thus, needs to be guided so that we do not stray into reflection about our extraordinariness. Our paying attention to our righteousness is supposed to support our not paying attention to our righteousness. Otherwise extraordinariness is no longer the extraordinariness of discipleship, but the extraordinariness of our own will and desire.

How are we to understand this contradiction? *First*, we ask: from whom should the visibility of discipleship be hidden? Not from the other people, for they are to see the light of Jesus' disciples shining. Rather it should be hidden to those doing the visible deed of discipleship. They should keep on following Jesus, and should keep looking forward to him who is going before them, but not at themselves and what they are doing. The righteousness of the disciples is hidden from themselves. Of course, they, too, can see the extraordinariness, but not themselves in it; they remain hidden from themselves. They see the extraordinary only when they look at Jesus,

and in him they do not see it as extraordinary, but as something obvious and normal. So what is visible really is hidden from them, in *obedience* to the word of Jesus. If the extraordinariness were important to them because it is extraordinary, then they would act like enthusiasts, out of their own power, out of the flesh. But because Jesus' disciples act in simple obedience to their Lord, they view the extraordinary as only the normal act of obedience. According to Jesus' word, the disciples can do nothing else but be the light that shines. They do not do anything to accomplish this; they are the light while following Christ, looking only to their Lord. Precisely because what is Christian is *necessarily* extraordinary, that is, in the *indicative* form ["you are"], it is at the same time normal and *hidden*. Otherwise it is not Christian, it is not obedience to the will of Jesus Christ.

Second, we ask: what in the content of the act of following Christ constitutes the union of the visible and the hidden? How can the same thing be simultaneously visible and hidden? To answer we need only to turn back to the result of chapter 5. What is extraordinary and visible is the cross of Christ, beneath which the disciples stand. The cross is at once what is necessary and hidden, and what is visible and extraordinary.

Third, we ask: how can the paradox between the fifth and sixth chapters be resolved? The concept of discipleship itself provides the resolution. It is exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. Disciples always look only to their Lord and follow him. If they were to see the extraordinariness itself, then they would no longer stand in discipleship. In simple obedience disciples do the will of the Lord who bids them do something extraordinary, and they know in everything only that they can do nothing else, that they are, therefore, doing what is simply a matter of course.

The only required reflection for disciples is to be completely oblivious, completely unreflective in obedience, in discipleship, in love. If you do good, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. You should not know your own goodness.^[170] Otherwise it will really be *your* goodness, and not the goodness of Christ. The goodness of Christ, the goodness of discipleship takes place without awareness. The genuine deed of love is always a deed hidden to myself. Pay heed that you do not know it. Only in this way is it the goodness of God. If I want to know my own goodness and my own love, then it is no longer love. Even the extraordinary love of enemies remains hidden to disciples. When they love their enemies, then they no longer view them as enemies. This blindness of the disciples, or rather this vision enlightened by Christ, is what makes them certain. The hiddenness of their lives from themselves is their promise.

The other side of hiddenness is its being in the open. There is nothing hidden which will not be revealed. That is how God made things to be, before whom everything hidden is already revealed. God wants to show us what is hidden. God will make it visible. Being revealed in public is the reward ordained by God for hiddenness. The question is only where and from whom people receive this reward of public recognition. If they long for it to be in sight of other people, then they will have had their reward as soon as they get such publicity. There is no difference whether they seek it in the cruder form, in the presence of others, or in the more subtle form, in the presence of themselves. Whenever the left hand knows what the right is doing, whenever I myself become aware of my own hidden goodness, whenever I want to know about my own goodness, then I have already prepared for myself the public reward which God intended to store up for me. I am the one who revealed my own hiddenness to myself. I do not wait for God to show it to me. So I have gotten my reward. But those who remain hidden even from themselves until the end^[173] will receive from God the reward of being revealed. But who can live in such a

way as to do the extraordinary in secret? Who can prevent the left hand from knowing what the right hand is doing? What sort of love is that which does not know of itself, but can remain hidden from itself until the last day? It is clear that because it is hidden love, it cannot be a visible virtue, a human habitus [attitude]. Beware—it says—that you do not mistake genuine love for the virtue of kindness or for a human “quality”! It is self-forgetting love in the most genuine sense of the word. In this self-forgetting love, however, the old self must die with all its virtues and qualities. The old Adam dies in the disciples’ love, which is oblivious of the self and bound solely to Christ. The death of the old Adam is proclaimed in the sentence: “Let not your left hand know what your right is doing.” Once again, who can live so that chapters 5 and 6 are one? None except those whose old self has died in Christ and who have found a new life in Christ’s community of discipleship. Love as the deed of simple obedience is death to the old self and the self’s discovery to exist now in the righteousness of Christ and in one’s brothers and sisters. Then the old self is no longer alive, but Christ is alive in the person. **The love of Christ the Crucified, who leads the old self in us to death, is what lives in Christ’s follower.** Disciples find themselves only in Christ and in their brothers and sisters.¹

¹ Bonhoeffer, D. (2003). [*Discipleship*](#). (M. Kuske, I. Tödt, G. B. Kelly, & J. D. Godsey, Eds., B. Green & R. Krauss, Trans.) (Vol. 4, pp. 146–152). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.