

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

X. "Secret Giving"

1-07-07

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Mtt. 6:1-4

INTRODUCTION

"Daddy, Mommy, watch me!" For us, now it's, "Grandpa and Grandma, watch me!" Generally, those are words that warm our hearts, as a three or four-year-old learn something new and feel a sense of pride in their accomplishment and want us to share in it. The desire to be seen and to be noticed is healthy in that form. It is part of a love relationship, delighting in one another. Likewise, it is good for us to be appreciated for things we do. Any healthy relationship will include honoring and appreciating the other person. This is the way we are created.

However, there is a subtle danger here. A child's "look at me" can become the adult's unspoken, "notice me," rooted in sinful pride. Here we find some of the ugliest human traits in the big show-off, the hypocrite, and hollow, unreal people that are always living for what looks good to others. There are plenty of people we meet who think of themselves as the big somebody— who are constantly letting you know how important they are. They need to be the center of attention. They drop names, they puff their accomplishments (often in subtle ways) so that when you leave them, you are impressed with how important they are, if they're good at it. Of course some are not so subtle and you leave them feeling slightly nauseous at their bragging. People do it through their dress, through their good figure, with their cars, their houses, and an infinite number of other ways. And most of us get pretty good at it so that we don't even see how we're playing the "notice-me game."

And, it enters into our Christian living and our attempts to be righteous. Pastors can fall into this as well as church members— attempting to appear to be better followers of Jesus than we really are. How do we avoid this theatrical righteousness that does good in order to be noticed by others? How can we keep pride from contaminating all the good we do? We spend an hour in prayer, fast, or give a gift of \$1,000 to a ministry and soon find what we've done it slip into a conversation. In fact, the better we get, in one sense, the more vulnerable we are to spiritual pride. Between our carnal natures and the devil, it seems like even the best and noblest things can be exploited!

Jesus confronts this issue in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, as we resume our series after the break we took for Thanksgiving and Advent. Before our break, we finished the fifth chapter of Matthew. That chapter taught the what of the Christian life— what it looks like to follow Jesus. Now, as we move onto the next chapter of this three-chapter sermon, we see more of an emphasis on the how of the Christian life.

Here, Jesus begins with three practices of living for God. The common teaching of that day said

there were three pillars upon which the good life was based: Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. So Jesus takes the first 18 verses of this chapter and talks about these three practices. Just as Jesus has reinterpreted seven Old Testament commands in the previous chapter with His, “*You have heard that it was said.... But I say to you....*,” He now gives new meaning to these three core practices. Each of these activities cover one of the three main relationships of our lives: we relate to others through giving; we relate to God through prayer; and we help ourselves through fasting. This morning, we’ll only look at giving, devoting a sermon to each of the other practices.

It is interesting that Jesus doesn't deny the need in us to be rewarded for doing good, or our desire to be noticed, and to be praised. But, He redirects our desire to be noticed to God. Jesus prefaces this section where he talks about these three practices with 6:1

Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven (Mtt. 6:1).

In these 18 verses where He covers giving, prayer, and fasting, He uses the word "reward" seven times. But, with each, He says your audience is God, not other people. That truth both liberates us and purifies us of our self-absorbed pride. To reinforce that truth, consider how The Message puts it:

Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding.

Now, let's look at how Jesus applies this to our giving:

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (6:2-4)

OUR NEED TO GIVE

Here is a clear call to relate to others through giving— especially to those who have needs. While money is the obvious reference here, certainly other ways of giving are included. And “the needy,” when you think about it, ultimately involves everyone. Is there anyone here who isn't needy in some way? This involves more than economics. It includes emotional support, helping one another and being a part of filling some gaps in a person's life. So, here we can include any good deed that helps others, makes life easier and communicates God's love.

However, in Scripture, the issue is not only the need of others but also our need to give. There is a spiritual law here. In Luke's recording of this same sermon, Jesus says,

Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Lk. 6:38).

Also, note a few verses from Proverbs. The first is from The Message, Prov. 11:24-25,

*The world of the generous gets larger and larger;
the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller.*

*The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed;
those who help others are helped.*

And then, Prov 19:17:

*He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward him for what he has done.*

Paul writes about giving to the church in Corinth saying,

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously (2 Cor. 9:6).

The famous psychologists, Dr. Erich Fromm writes how he experienced this principle in his counseling practice. He writes, "The essential difference between the unhappy, neurotic type person and him of great joy is the difference between get and give." Churchill understood this when he said: "We make a living by what we get...we make a life by what we give."

Giving defines the basic movement of our lives outward toward others— a sharing what we have and who we are with one another. Spiritual health is not achieved alone, in isolation with God. It needs this outward movement in service to the needy. We need to share what God's blessed us with. It is the way we're designed. And, in the divine economics we always end up getting back more than we give. This is the nature of the life of faith. I love this quote by Edicio de la Torre, one I've used before:

"If we look at our life as some precious treasure we must hoard, the demands made by others of our life are like losses. And death is a final loss, a final failure to hold on to our life. But if we look at our life as a treasure we must share, every service we give to others is a fulfillment of our life's purpose. And death is the final giving, the total giving.

THE NEED FOR SECRECY

"So when you give to the needy, don't announce it with trumpets..." (2). This may be another use of hyperbole by Jesus. But it has also been speculated that trumpets may have actually been blown to announce an especially generous person being brought to the front of the congregation with his or her gift. Jesus says, when we get our recognition by men, that's it, we've "received [our] reward in full" (2). The term here is as in a business transaction, marked "paid in full." Secrecy is the antidote to pride.

I remember in the little church my mother started in Montana, every couple of years, a distant relative from one of Montana's larger cities stopped by "to hear Evelyn preach." Our family knew he was a millionaire— and that was back in the mid-1950's when millionaires were not as plentiful as they are today. One of his practices was to buy his wife a new pink Cadillac each year. (No, she did not sell Mary Kay cosmetics. I doubt if the company even existed back then). Whenever he came, and the offering was taken, he'd place a crisp new \$100 bill in the offering plate. To get the effect today, with inflation, think of five new \$100 bills. This was a little church with 50 people in worship. He always had the desired effect— the ushers eyes were bulging with wonder. There were no trumpets. But the calculated effect was much the same as he made sure he had a new \$100 bill when he left home to come to Evelyn's church.

A second reason for secrecy is for the benefit of the recipients, so they don't feel indebted to any one individual or feel demeaned by the gift. There was a beautiful story of this kind of giving in The Reader's Digest a few years ago. At Whitworth College in Spokane, as with most small Christian colleges, professors are greatly underpaid and make a considerable sacrifice for the sake of Christ to provide a Christian college education. For a number of years, there has been an alumnus, simply known as "Mystery Man" providing such things as:

- all expense-paid trips for faculty vacations;
- special gifts to a professor to meet a need for equipment in his department;
- or other financial needs of faculty.

The gifts always include a thoughtful, encouraging note like:

- "I am profoundly impressed by your tireless pursuit of intellectual and spiritual growth..."
- or, "Many years ago, I came to Whitworth, much like the freshmen on campus today. I was confused. You gave me direction. I was frightened. You gave me encouragement. I was poor. You lent me a helping hand. I was lonely, you invited me to your house. Your students haven't forgotten you."

When this article was written, 15 years ago, there had been about 50 recipients altogether with gifts often amounting to \$4-5,000. And, there were no tax write-offs for any of the gifts. None were given to or through the school, just anonymous gifts to individual professors and needs this unknown alumnus had heard about.

A third reason for secrecy is that it allows us to give as the Lord moves us, not as others pressure us. In II Cor. 9:7 Paul says our giving should not be *reluctantly, under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*. Secrecy means we don't have to worry about looking good to others or being misunderstood by others. The only issue is what the Lord calls us to do either through Scripture (as in the tithe) or as His Holy Spirit moves in our hearts. If the Lord moves you to give \$50.00, then that settles it. No matter that others are giving less or more, that's your part. It purifies our motives. It moves us beyond the pitch we so often hear: "If you just send a contribution of \$25.00 or more, we will say thank you by sending you this book." Remember, it's God's approval and thanks we seek. It does make a difference in how we give.

Suppose you were to prepare a meal for a vagrant. Now think of preparing one for a good friend. How about the president of U.S.? They'd probably be different meals, right? Now, think about what kind of meal you'd prepare for Jesus? For Jesus we would give the best, not just the stuff we no longer want, or some left-overs. If we are looking for God's approval, reward, our giving will reflect the very best we have to give.

A fourth reason I can think of for secrecy in giving is to keep us from judging one another. Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher of 19th century was a preacher of world renown. He had what was probably the first mega-church and I'm sure he was paid an adequate salary. He and his wife kept chickens on the side and sold the eggs. The Spurgeons refused to give away the extra eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were refused free eggs, being told they too needed to pay for the eggs. As result, some people labeled the Spurgeons as greedy and grasping. They accepted the criticisms without defending themselves. Only after Mrs. Spurgeon died was

the truth revealed. All the profits from the eggs went to support two elderly widows. Because the Spurgeons were not willing to “*let their left hand know what their right hand was doing* (3).” they endured the attacks in silence.

CONCLUSION

The first action of the Christian life Jesus calls us to in this sermon is giving to others who have needs. If you obey that, and do it well, it is okay to want approval, to want to be rewarded as long as it is God’s approval you seek. However, if you seek human affirmation and applause, it will only work to your spiritual detriment. Man’s approval is fleeting and only serves to swell our pride. How much better to go for what is eternal and be rewarded by your Father who sees in secret (4). Live your life for God alone— giving to others as a means of giving to Him. God assures us He keeps good accounts, not even missing the cup of water given in His name.

Remember, it is only what we give that we keep for eternity. James Elliot, who gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life as a martyr, going as a missionary to the Indians in Ecuador, wrote those memorable lines in his journal: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” It applies to all our giving: our money, our lives, our service. In Westminster Abbey, the 1680 tomb of Christopher Chapman reads:

"What I gave I have.
What I spent I had.
What I left I lost by not giving it."