

Understanding Giving
Matthew 6:1-4
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

Matthew 5:20 (*“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”*) provided the basis for Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:21-48 taught six examples of flawed teaching by the scribes and Pharisees, including six corrective teachings regarding righteous conduct by Jesus. In Matthew 6:1-18, we will find three examples of the flawed motivation of self-service by the scribes and Pharisees, including corrective teachings regarding righteous conduct by Jesus.

The general principle (6:1)

Matthew 6:1 is the basic tenet driving the sinful motivation of the scribes and Pharisees. While in this text the Pharisees are not explicitly named, their practice of loving to be honored is described. Jesus told His disciples to “beware” of their teaching (Matthew 16:6-12) and described them as being only concerned with their external appearance (Matthew 23:27). In Matthew 23, Jesus connects hypocrisy with the scribes and Pharisees repeatedly.

Jesus warns His hearers generally about practicing their righteousness before men to be noticed by them before He develops this problem related to giving (6:2-3), prayer (6:5-14) and fasting (6:16-18). In each of these three areas, the statement of 6:1 *“otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven”* is amplified by the repeated words, *“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full”* (6:2, 5 and 16). The concept of reward will be further developed in Matthew 6:19-21.

Jesus warned against practicing righteousness before men to be noticed by them. Earlier in Matthew 5:16, Jesus told His disciples to *“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”* How do we reconcile these two statements since they both involve deeds done before men?

One difference is certainly in regard to motivation. The warning of Jesus was for those whose goal was to be noticed by men. So there is a difference between people seeing our righteousness and wanting people to see our righteousness.

Another difference is found in the verbs. "Let your light shine" speaks of the allowance of others observing us. "Practicing your righteousness" speaks to an active production of this observation. When we abide in Christ, our life will be observed. There is no need to try to hide it from people, but if we seek to ensure that people see our good works, we become focused on doing good for the wrong reason.

We must be careful to practice righteousness in response to the Lord alone, not for the attention of others. If we serve the Lord for the right reasons, love of God and the resulting love of others, we will not seek to serve in order to be noticed by men.

Furthermore, focusing on performing our righteousness so that others can see us will not truly bring any ministry benefit because fruitfulness is not something we can produce.

"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

When we serve others from a heart seeking the Lord, we will be pleasing to the Lord, regardless of the outcome of our efforts. The result of our efforts is according to the Lord's will. Ministry should be centered around serving Christ, not around accomplishing a desired result.

We seek righteousness for the Lord. The practice of righteousness to be noticed by others is the epitome of self-service. Likewise, efforts that we make believing that we can produce righteousness is a similar exaltation of ourselves. God in His graciousness allows people to see our good works and bring glory to Himself.

The specific application to giving (6:2-4)

The example of practicing righteousness before men is first described in the area of giving to the poor. This example will be followed by two other examples: prayer (6:5-15) and fasting (6:16-18). There is a very similar pattern that exists in how Jesus addresses each of these ways that people practice their righteousness before men: (1) the issue, (2) the prohibition, (3) the reason, (4) the command, and (5) the result. In this pattern, the general principle of Matthew 6:1 is applied to each area of righteousness that is connected to the intention of the person.

1. The issue of giving to the poor.

Jesus begins with the problem area, giving to the poor. Notice there is an assumption that giving to the poor is being practiced.

Yet there are priorities in giving to the poor. When His disciples became indignant with a woman who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume that could have been given to the poor, Jesus said of Himself, "*for you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me*" (Matthew 26:11). This is a perspective that teaches that giving to the poor is not always the most significant need. We must give to the poor in service to Christ. Apparently, gifts to the poor were common in Judea and people would traffic in self-aggrandizement while making these gifts.

2. The prohibition against drawing attention to self.

Trumpets were used in religious ceremonies, such as "*blow a trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly*" (Joel 2:15). However, there is no direct evidence that trumpets were ever used in the act of giving to the poor. This is much more likely the usage of a metaphor for gaining attention and making yourself known (cf. Isaiah 58:1). We use a similar figure of speech when we accuse someone of "tooting their own horn."

The examples of those who were giving for personal recognition were the "hypocrites." This was the singular description that Jesus repeatedly used in Matthew 23 to describe those He spoke of in this text when He said, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). It was these leaders who were hypocritically drawing attention to their own acts of righteousness.

3. The reason for the prohibition of drawing attention to self.

The reason Jesus gives for not giving to the poor in a way that gains recognition is because we have our reward in full. This human recognition is the reward and there is no further reward than being with God in heaven (cf. 6:1). Therefore, if we refrain from drawing attention to our giving, there is the implication of reward. This implication becomes an explicit statement of reward when Jesus says in Matthew 6:20, *“But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal.”*

The concept of reward into eternity is clearly a reason Jesus gives for our motivation to do what is right. It not only occurs in each of the three issues Jesus describes here (giving-6:4, prayer-6:6 and fasting-6:18), we have already seen reward promised in regard to persecution in Matthew 5:12 and the implication of it in greeting in Matthew 5:46. Later in Matthew, we will see reward for service (Matthew 10:40-42). To intend to gain recognition from people for righteous acts eliminates the possibility of our future reward and is the reason we ought to refrain from seeking honor from men.

4. The command to give in secret

Obviously the hyperbolic figure of speech *“do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”* is teaching the requirement for discreteness in our giving. This is the antithesis of publicizing our charitable acts. According to Jesus, our giving must be secretive.

How to apply this instruction can be challenging since in many cases those who we seek to give to cannot help but know who gave the gift. And if we use an intermediary, then we replace one person not knowing with another person knowing. This then should not necessarily be taken to the conclusion *“do not let anyone know of your gift”* for three reasons:

- a. There is a contrast between giving in secret and sounding a trumpet in giving and thus discreteness is more to the point.
- b. The issue is not the outward conduct but the inward motivation. The intention cannot be for self-exaltation.
- c. We cannot necessarily prevent information from becoming known but it cannot be our desire. Even more so with the monetary practices of first century Israel where complete secrecy would be impossible.

5. The result of the command to give in secret

When our giving is done in secret, in an unpublicized fashion, the One person who will certainly know of our giving is our Father who sees in secret. While we can hide things from men to a large extent, there is nothing hidden from God. Jesus taught “there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Matthew 10:26).

God is omniscient and knows everything. This is a blessing since our reward will not be missed by God. His knowledge will result in an equitable and righteous reward according to His sovereign will. This is the essence of Jesus’ words: *“Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return”* (Luke 6:38). Our reward in heaven will be far greater than any possible personal gain that being honored by men can bring.

The application of Jesus’ teaching

The hypocrites in a real sense were not giving; they were buying. By giving to the poor, they were buying acclaim for themselves and the advancement of their reputation. The personal gain in order to be honored by men (6:2) was a broad statement that covers a number of benefits that are gained when people seek honor from men. Below are some of the ways that religious people today fall into this same practice that Jesus condemned:

1. Giving to get publicity

This is the first thing that comes to mind when we think of seeking honor of men. Having the benefit of being recognized by others positively is a common way of self-service. This human appetite for self-exaltation is appealed to by religious organizations that desire to gain financially from the giving of people. Systems for providing publicity for those giving are established, thus robbing Christians of the opportunity to give in secret.

The longer the recognition lasts, the more meaningful the publicity, and often the more giving is required. This has given rise to the practices of putting names on buildings or walls or establishing special seating or parking for larger givers. A more subtle way is as a tribute to a loved one, where some sort of honor is bestowed upon a person you care about.

2. Giving to get something of value

People feel honored as they gain possessions. This is a main tenet of the teaching of the prosperity movement, that God will bless people financially who give. Those who give and have an abundance of material possessions are considered especially blessed by God and respected as such by their religious community.

Jesus taught God will give to those who are givers when He said, *“Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return”* (Luke 6:38). However, this cannot mean only financially since this was not true of the disciples whom Jesus taught.

“Peter said, ‘Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You.’ And He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:28-30).

Since Peter and the disciples obviously did not receive this only in this present life, Jesus clearly was referring to the age to come. People who give in order to receive material wealth can fall into the condemnation of Matthew 6:2 since they are motivated by the desire for personal gain and the benefits that such gain brings. Typically, religious groups that teach prosperity giving do not practice secret giving, but seek to demonstrate the material benefits the givers receive.

3. Giving to get access

With honor comes tangible benefits that honor among men brings. Respect gained from honor is often leveraged into the ability to influence others to do things the giver wants to see happened. This benefit is overlooked by people when there is not an immediate and direct result advertised, but it is nevertheless real.

The most obvious way religious organizations bestow honor that leads to access is putting givers in positions of decision-making. This position of power is usually on a board of a committee that rewards givers with a certain amount of influence in the organization. The honor of the position within the organization is multiplied by the resulting benefit of influence.

Even when there is no specific, official position to appoint a giver to, there is still a potential benefit that allows access to certain people. Separating givers out into a select group for dinners or meetings allows the honor that comes with the invitation but

also provides the opportunity for relationships with well-to-do or well-known individuals. This access then can be leveraged into tangible benefits to the giver. We see this commonly in modern philanthropy and religious organizations at times adopt the same methodology.

Also, there is the subjective value of influence that access through giving can bring. This is known as “influence peddling” by the word, defined as the practice of using one's influence to obtain favors or preferential treatment for another. Giving that brings honor allows for influence that brings preferential treatment.

The way to offset these problems of access that brings influence is to have those in places of decision making be necessarily completely unaware of gifts. If leaders are unaware of gifts, they will not be able to be influenced by those who give. Likewise, those who are giving will not be tempted to give in order to gain influence if they are aware there is a system in place to prevent this.

4. Giving to avoid guilt

People naturally feel guilty, since “*There is none righteous, not even one*” (Romans 3:10). There are erroneous ways that people will seek to have their guilt removed. Like the concept of indulgences under Roman Catholicism, people can be moved to give in order to absolve themselves of the guilt they feel for having possessions while others do not. Giving does not truly free anyone from guilt since no good deed can absolve guilt.

When giving is not in secret, it not only affects those who give who do so with the intention of being honored by men, it also affects those who are not inclined to give. When people's giving is known and brings the resulting honor, those who have not given may feel shamed for their lack of participation, particularly when they have the means to do so. There are people who may have no desire to give to be specifically honored by men but who may be inclined to give in order to not be dishonored by men.

Unfortunately, people who desire money will play on this innate guilt that mankind experiences in order to receive gifts. Religious organizations make constant requests, imagery of those in need, and campaigns designed to create momentum of an entire group to become givers. People can respond by giving to serve their own need of avoiding the dishonor or pressure of not participating.

Conclusion

The way we adhere to Jesus' words "let your giving be in secret" is to value the reward. This motivation is real because Jesus presents our reward as being the reason why our giving should be done in secret. There is nothing selfish about desiring reward in the future since Jesus teaches this is what we ought to do. *"But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal"* (Matthew 6:20).

The primary issue is trust. Do we trust that Jesus is right when He teaches us not to give to be honored by men? Will we, in faith, refrain from seeking to be noticed by men and resist attempts to publicize our giving practices? Do we have the faith to act in confidence that when we give in secret, our Father who sees in secret will reward us?

If we have faith in Jesus, we will seek to follow His teaching about giving. We will seek to be giving people as we serve the Lord. We will also avoid any self-exaltation that comes from being honored by men. We will likewise refrain from the temptation to rob others of their reward by publicizing their giving and tempting them to be honored by men.