

LIVING THE GENEROUS LIFE

Known or Secret Giving: Letting Your Left Hand Know What Your Right Hand is Doing

Jesus' message about giving is both clear and simple. 1. Give. 2. Give purely. 3. Give purely to glorify God and motivate others. Rather than concern yourself with who knows about your giving, instead focus on who will be glorified by your giving and who you might inspire to join you in your giving adventures.

One of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount when He discusses giving. Here is what He actually says.

Matthew 6:1-4, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

What Jesus is teaching here has led many believers to conclude that unless your giving is entirely anonymous, you will receive no reward from the Lord for your gifts. Once a gentleman who was sharing his giving testimony acknowledge to the audience that by sharing what his giving story, he would now be losing his reward.

Is this what Jesus is teaching? Not at all. In fact, we will have missed Jesus' point entirely if that is what we conclude. It is good to remember that chapters 5-7 are one sermon. We must not ignore the rest of what Jesus says. Context is key here. There are very three important lessons about giving that we can draw from Jesus' sermon.

He Teaches Us to Give

We must not overlook the obvious. Jesus tells us "when you give" – He does not say *if* you give. Giving is an expected and commanded part of being a follower of Jesus. His teaching here begins with the assumption that every follower of Jesus will be giving. He then addresses the dangers and pitfalls we must avoid when we do our giving.

Sadly, many immature and "non-giving" believers (and there are a huge number of them) use this passage as a way to *not* give and keep their non-giving a secret. If ever confronted with what they are giving, they can hide behind this passage that their giving is a secret.

He Teaches Us to Give Purely

The point Jesus is really trying to make here is about our giving motives. He says that we should never do our giving, "*in order to be seen by them*" and subsequently to be "*praised by others.*" In other words, we do not want to give *because* of what we might get from it – like others having elevated thoughts of us, or making complimentary comments about us or us receiving some special treatment because of our giving. Jesus is saying that if your motive for giving is to draw attention to yourself and you accomplish that, you received the reward you

wanted. It is not so important whether your giving is known by others, it is more important to know how and why your giving was made known to others.

If you study Jesus' entire sermon, you will see the progression of His message. In the last half of chapter five (verses 21-48), He emphasizes inner moral righteousness, providing us six specific illustrations of murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love. In the first eighteen verses of this sixth chapter He emphasizes outward formal righteousness and gives us three representative illustrations of typical religious activities – that being giving, praying and fasting. These three activities are all connected in the flow of His message.

Notice, Jesus also teaches us to go into our *closet* (6:6, KJV) to pray and not to do it publically. Isn't it interesting that we stringently believe our giving ought to be the ultimate private act, yet, we do not apply the "secrecy doctrine" to prayer even though Jesus' teaching on both of these practices are almost identical? He even adds one additional common religious practice of that day when He tells us that your "*fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you*" (6:18).

Do you see the repetitiveness in each of these three illustrations? Do something with pure motives and do not seek to be seen and admired by others. Then God, who knows the true motives of your heart, will reward you in your giving, praying and fasting. Why do we put giving in a different category from the other two practices? We say *giving* needs to be private, yet we don't hesitate to ask people to audibly pray and be heard by others?

Additionally, if giving was meant to be a secret, why are we told about the many believers who gave in Acts 2:45 and also Barnabas and others who gave recorded in Acts 4:32- 37? All this was public knowledge and even recorded by Luke for all future believers to know about. You see, it is not about *secrecy*, it is about *motive*. We should be motivated to give as an act of personal worship and not so we might be praised and honored by others for what we have given. If that is the motive, then that person has "*received [his] reward.*"

He Teaches Us to Give Purely to Glorify God and Motivate Others

Jesus' sermon also teaches us what the proper motivation for our giving and good works should be. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus says, "*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*"

If we keep our giving and good works under a bushel (5:15 – a secret) thinking this is what Jesus wants, how can we obey this part of His sermon? We are told here to let our light (our giving and good works) "*shine before others so they may see your good works.*" Taken at face value it seems that Jesus is contradicting Himself. We must understand that Jesus is addressing the giver's motive (i.e. to "*give glory to your Father who is in heaven*") and not who knows about the good gift.

If in our giving and doing good we always seek to deflect the praise and glory for giving from ourselves (6:1-4) to God (5:16), acknowledging that, "*every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...*" (James 1:17), we are being obedient to both passages. If we readily seek to deflect the praise from our known giving to the Father, then

we will always be safe from others ever thinking more highly of us than they should (Romans 12:3).

There is a second healthy motivation for actually making your giving known. Hebrews 10:24 tells us, *“let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds...”* There is no more compelling reason to make our giving known to others than in so doing to challenge other believers to step up their level of generosity and experience the joy and the blessing that comes from increased, obedient giving.

Just think how much poorer we would all be if the likes of J. C. Penny and R. G. Letourneau who both gave away 90% of their massive incomes during their lifetimes would have never let us know what they were doing. Or, what about Stanley Tam (who wrote the book, *God Owns My Business*) and Alan Barnhart who both have given their entire companies away to the Lord, choosing to live on modest salaries and annually funneling millions of dollars of company profits to Kingdom causes worldwide? What about all the Bible characters who fill the pages of Scripture who inspire and challenge us to greater levels of sacrificial giving? What if they would have all kept it a secret? What a loss for us!

Jesus' message about giving is both clear and simple. 1. Give. 2. Give purely. 3. Give purely to glorify God and motivate others. Rather than concern yourself with who knows about your giving, instead focus on who will be glorified by your giving and who you might inspire to join you in your giving adventures. So, if your motives are pure – go ahead and let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. The more who are blessed and inspired by your giving, the better!

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. What is your initial reaction to the message of this lesson?
2. What have you been taught about anonymous giving in the past?
3. What are some situations where anonymous giving might be appropriate?
4. What are some healthy reasons for making your giving known?
5. What are some poor motives for anonymous giving?
6. In what ways can “known” giving bring honor to God and even encourage and motivate others to give more also?
7. Discuss a person you know who gives openly. How has knowing about how and what they are giving motivated you to be a more obedient courier?
8. How can we better check our motives so we can give the way God intended?
9. What guards can you set up to make sure your “public” giving is done properly, bringing glory and honor to God and not you?
10. Share a story of when you gave to help another and they knew about it. How did you handle their response of gratefulness to you?
11. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?