TRANSFORMATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

BETTER WAY GIVING SERIES

STUDY GUIDE

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Lesson Five
A SELFLESS GIVER

At first blush the idea of selfless giving seems pretty safe and nonthreatening. But the truth is that this selfless giving characteristic may be the most challenging and dangerous of them all. As you will see, depending on where people choose to "stand" when they do their giving may cause them to exchange their *eternal* reward for a *temporal* one.

Many believers have falsely concluded that the "safest" place to stand when giving is behind closed doors where no one can see who is actually doing the giving. However, finding a safe and effective place to stand when doing our giving is just not that absolute, simple or clean cut.

We need to understand that the key to personally embracing this selfless giver characteristic is not about knowing *where* to stand, it is about knowing *who* is doing the giving. To flesh this out further, let's consider what Jesus and the New Testament actually teach us about selfless giving.

A Selfless Giver Intentionally ***Avoids*** Praise

Let me begin by saying there is a huge difference between avoiding any *praise* for our giving and avoiding any *knowledge* of our giving. Many, I fear, have entirely missed the primary point Jesus was making when He told His audience how to give in Matthew 6:2-4. Here is what He actually said in His Sermon on the Mount:

> *"So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."*

Jesus, here, is not addressing the *method* of our giving (known vs. secret). He is addressing the *motive* for our giving (self-praised vs. God-praised). He is telling us here that when we give, we need to avoid at all costs getting praised for it. He does suggest here the most obvious way to avoid receiving any praise, that being keeping our giving a complete secret from everyone. And in some situations that may actually be the best way to ensure we avoid inappropriately accepting misdirected praise rightfully belonging to God.

Jesus, here, wants to make sure that when we give, we are standing out of the way of any praise and thanksgiving that *inevitably* comes as a result of giving. When a gift is made, someone is going to want to say, "Thank you." He is warning us to avoid the "*honor of men*" when we give. Any praise from our giving is to be directed towards *Him*, not towards *us*.

Here are a couple biblical examples of this idea of avoiding praise. Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:8-18 healed a lame man right in front of a huge crowd. Notice, Paul did not try to keep his gracious gift to this lame man a secret. However, when the crowd saw what happened they started *worshipping* Paul and Barnabas and when that happened they came "unglued!" They cried out to the crowds, "*Men, what are you doing? We are men just like you*!" Paul realized the crowd had wrongly positioned them to be the recipients of the praise and glory for what had been done and he did all he could to avoid it.

Barnabas and several others in Acts 4:32-37 did some pretty substantial giving that everyone knew about. Everything was fine with these publicly known gifts because God was getting all the glory. Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 also wanted to be included in the same company with Barnabas and these other big givers. However, because their giving was motivated by getting recognition (praise) instead of motivated by meeting needs, it ended up costing them their lives. Standing in the wrong place in their giving was, for them, deadly.

Understanding this distinction between a gift being made known and who gets the praise for it is very clear in an earlier statement Jesus makes in this same sermon in Matthew 5:16. He tells the same audience, "*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.*" You see, here Jesus is telling us to let our light shine, to do our giving and good works to be seen by men. Is He contradicting Himself in Matthew 5 and 6? I think not. We must look at the content of His entire sermon to clearly understand His primary point on giving – that being that our generous giving should compel people to give praise and "*glory to [*our] *Father who is in heaven*" and not to us here on earth.

Paul reinforces this same point in II Corinthians 9:13 when he writes about the Corinthians' giving to the poor, "*Because of the proof given by this ministry [of helping the poor], they <u>will glorify God</u> for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and <u>for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all</u>*." The *Corinthians* will do the giving and *God* will get the glory!

As selfless givers, our greatest desire should be to receive praise and honor for our obedient giving from our *heavenly Father* and not from our *fellow man*. We should most want to hear from Him, "*Well done*."

A Selfless Giver Never ***<u>Expects</u>*** Praise

As selfless givers we must be so focused on our role of obediently deploying God's funds for God's purposes that we find ourselves being quite surprised when anyone would even think about praising us for what God had done. For selfless givers, we might ask with some degree of surprise, "What's the big deal? I didn't do anything."

Jesus illustrates this selfless attitude so clearly in Luke 17:7-10 when he offers us a hypothetical scenario:

> *Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come immediately and sit down to eat"? But will he not say to him, "Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you*

> *may eat and drink"? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, "We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done."*

This is the attitude of selfless givers. "*We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.*"

Let me illustrate this point with my own hypothetical scenario. Imagine a very rich man decides to give his nephew $1,000,000 in cash. He calls his nephew and informs him that he is mailing him a certified letter with a cashier's check in it for $1,000,000 and the check will be arriving tomorrow. The next day the door bell rings and there before the nephew stands the postman. The nephew can barely contain himself as the postman asks him to sign for the letter. The postman then hands the young man the envelope. The young man immediately bursts forward grabbing the postman in an enthusiastic embrace, gushing with thanks at how generous he is and how much the nephew appreciates his kindness for giving him such a generous gift. He repeats over and over again, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, you are just so generous!"

What is wrong with this scenario? The truth is the postman did *indeed* give the nephew a cashier's check for $1,000,000. What is wrong is that the postman is getting all the credit and praise for making a gift that he merely delivered for someone else. I would guess the postman might have even been quite surprised by the nephew's overflowing gratitude for simply making a normal delivery as part of his routine duties.

A selfless giver is so selfless in his giving – so "it is not about me" – that he doesn't even *expect* to be praised for having done that which he ought to have done – that being faithfully delivering the directed gift for the One True Giver.

A Selfless Giver Gladly ***Deflects*** Praise

God has called us as selfless givers to be both *reflectors* and *deflectors* – *reflecting* the glory of God and *deflecting* the praise of man. Succeeding in consistently living out either of these is a daunting task. Doing them both simultaneously *and* regularly, in my judgment, is clearly hopeless apart from the enabling power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

We must keep in mind that we live in a fallen world with fallen people who simply do not understand that there is only one Generous Giver in the entire universe and it isn't you or me. James 1:17 expresses this plainly, "*Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow*" – not *some* gifts, but every single "good and perfect gift" comes from the same Source.

So, when we give we need to *reflect* God's glory and His image to those around us. We also need to simultaneously be ready to *deflect* man's praise for whatever we may do which does reflect God's goodness, grace and glory – what has come *through* us. And that is the key – it has only come *through* us, it has not come *from* us. We need to deflect all praise and thanksgiving back to the One who is the real giver of the gift.

Our joy and satisfaction will come in knowing that we have been *attentive* to the voice of the Holy Spirit and we have been faithful to deliver what He directed when and where He wanted it to go. In doing so, we have been good and *faithful* stewards! This profound joy and satisfaction ought to replace any desire on our part to be praised or recognized for some minor part we played in the gift being delivered.

So, if our thinking is right and our hearts are right, it really doesn't matter if people know that we are the ones who actually delivered the gift. And even more, we don't care if anyone knows or not, because it is simply not about us. We are so singularly focused on the One who is *making* the gift and the one who was *receiving* the gift, who is *delivering* the gift is entirely irrelevant.

Our singular objective should be to use every giving occasion we can as an opportunity to reflect the glory of God to a world (and even a church) that so desperately needs to see His love and His grace and His generosity. And to actually see it reflected in someone who has compassionate eyes, willing hands, and a loving heart. This will never happen if we choose to do all our giving secretly from behind closed doors. However, when His gifts are known, the recipient gets to see not just a reflection of God, they will actually get to see God "*with skin on.*" What a sacred privilege.

So, to be a selfless giver, we need to do all we can to avoid any praise for gifts God directs us to deploy. And on those occasions when man's praise is inappropriately directed towards us, we need to gladly deflect it to the rightful Recipient of all praise. If we will choose to become a selfless giver, it will make us a very useful reflector in the hand of the "*Father of lights.*"

Discussion Questions

1. What is your initial reaction to this lesson?
2. Read Matthew 6:2-4 and pay attention to why Jesus told the crowd to keep their giving a secret. Is He addressing the method of our giving or the motive for our giving? Why is this so important to understand the difference between these two?
3. Why was it okay for Barnabas (Acts 4:32-37) to do his giving so that everyone in the church knew about it, but it was not okay for Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) to do their giving publicly?
4. What do you find most surprising about the idea that we should never even be expecting praise for the giving we do for the Lord? How do churches and especially ministries wrongly position us to be praised for our giving?
5. What was your reaction to the hypothetical story of the nephew and the postman?
6. Practically speaking, how are we to be both reflectors and deflectors – reflecting the glory of God and deflecting the praise of man?
7. Discuss James 1:17 and why keeping this verse in mind can be a spiritual safety net helping us keep a proper perspective on who is really doing the giving.
8. Discuss how focusing on the One doing the giving (God) and the one who is doing the receiving helps us avoid getting over focused on the minor role we play in having simply delivered His gift.
9. What is gained when we get personally involved in giving instead of hiding behind a closed door and doing it anonymously? How does our personal involvement greatly enhance the impact of the gift on the receiver?
10. Discuss why seeking our praise from the Owner for our part in the giving is such an important focus for us?
11. What is going to change in your thinking and your giving because of what you have learned in this lesson?