

Generous Giving in Secret
Matthew 6:1-4
Rev. Doug Christgau, Valley-Avon - July 16-17, 2022

If the Pharisees had hit a home run in baseball, they would have stared with admiration as the ball disappeared into the bleachers before flipping their bat and starting their celebratory home run trot around the bases.

If the Sadducees had played football, their touchdown festivities would have been penalized for being excessive. They would have rivaled the "Giddy Dance" that NFL rookie wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase made famous last season.

The fact is the manner in which the Pharisees and Sadducees gave their offerings at the temple would have fit right into the trend of contemporary athletes drawing attention to themselves when they hit home runs in baseball and catch touchdown passes in football. Now, how you feel about bat flips and end-zone dances is strictly up to you. My concern is the manner and motivation of our giving as addressed in this week's section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6 speaks to three key religious activities of godly people: giving, praying, and fasting. The basic point is that while it's assumed Christians will practice each of these, they need to be motivated by a desire to honor God and advance his kingdom rather than drawing attention to themselves.

Let's start by dealing with the word "reward," which is mentioned three times in the first four verses of Matthew 6. In all of Scripture, there are over 100 uses of words meaning "reward," so it is worth spending time to understand them. I discovered some good information from my mentor Charles Swindoll who wrote with his typical clarity on this subject.

BODY

1. What are biblical rewards?

1 Corinthians 3:10-14 makes it clear that rewards are: **a. Blessings received mainly in heaven rather than on earth. (1 Corinthians 3:13-14)** In Matthew 6:1-4 it is obvious that the religious leaders were giving in such a way that they were sure to be noticed by people at the temple. Jesus makes it clear that we should be private about our giving, and that our motive should be to glorify God. It's possible that our giving **may be noticed** by others but being noticed by others should not be the motive of our gift.

In 2017, Valley-Avon did a congregational survey of the church ministries. The integrity and confidentiality of how finances were managed were recognized as one the strongest ministries of this church. So, Valley manages the gifts it receives with the spirit expressed in Matthew 6. At Valley Simsbury, where I spend most of my volunteer church time, it is

understood that our Pastor Mark will not handle the weekly offering or know anything about donation specifics except the total giving vs. our budget.

These are the protocols that our church has put in place to apply the giving principles of Matthew 6. I hope you have similar constraints in your personal giving to Valley and elsewhere.

We should also understand that rewards are ...

b. Based on quality, not quantity. (1 Corinthians 3:13)

This means that all giving is important to God. The amount is not nearly as significant as your attitude in giving the gift. I know the middle of July is not a great time to talk about giving. Typically, church giving declines in summer, and catches up in the fall. However, this section of the Sermon on the Mount speaks about giving so it is appropriate for me to address it now. I've described righteous giving as "generous" because that word sums up all New Testament teaching on giving.

The fact is, I **volunteered** to speak on this passage because God has revealed himself to Christine and me through giving many times throughout our lives. This has happened so often that giving has become a foundational part of our spiritual story, a building block of our faith. It's a part of our relationship with God through which He has shown His faithfulness many times.

How important is giving in your relationship to God? Do you give with joy and generosity, or do you give from duty and obligation? Or do you give at all? About 20% of Christians give nothing to their church. That completely violates the spirit of this passage.

Can one sermon on giving change your life? Christine and I were serving at Wheaton Bible Church in Illinois about 25 years ago. During a sermon on giving, I sensed the Lord telling me to greatly increase our financial investment in His work though it was already at a high level. I shared my conviction with Christine, and we took that big step together. God was faithful to meet our needs regardless. We made that decision in private. No one knew. I share our story now only to encourage you to think carefully about what God wants you to do with regard to giving. My hope is that all of you would experience the joy of generous giving that glorifies God and deepens your relationship with him.

Swindoll also speaks of rewards when he says that if a Christian serves only for God's glory, God promises to give back. This is a reference to receiving rewards in heaven, not on earth. Furthermore, generous giving is not necessarily going to be rewarded by God in a financial way.

But we should also understand that some rewards are earthly. **Here are two earthly rewards we receive:**

2. Earthly Rewards

a. Awareness that Christ's life is being modeled.

You may know I was a mission pastor for a long time, including sixteen years at this church. My wife, Christine, participated in many mission trips herself. Christine's first mission trip occurred in the early '90s in Bridgeport, CT. We were serving at Black Rock Church in Fairfield at the time. Bridgeport was just five miles but many cultural dimensions away from where we lived near the church. Christine spent one week at a women's drug rehabilitation facility led by Christians. Many of the clients had never been married, though most were mothers. Most of the women did not know anyone that had been married very long. When the women discovered Christine had been married for 25 years, they were astounded. More than once the women asked in amazement, "Why did you come here?" They couldn't believe that a happily married woman would come from the suburbs just to hear their stories and pray with them. In that situation, Christine received the reward of knowing that she had modeled the life of Christ to these women.

Have you had an experience like this? If not, I'd be glad to point you in the right direction. In fact, MAD week—Make A Difference Week—starting July 25 is a great way to begin modeling Christ to the community. People in our area need to see Jesus through the lives we live. That's especially true in light of the recent events in our country that seem to have pitted Bible-believing Christians against secular people. Here's an ad I saw a few weeks ago in the Hartford Courant.

I was surprised and a bit frightened by this full-page ad. It's not an ad for a specific candidate. It's posted by an atheist to encourage signing up for membership in the group called the Freedom From Religion Foundation. I treasure **freedom of religion** in our country, but this is an effort to involve people with **Freedom From** Religion. I was aware that the ranks of atheists, people with no religious affiliation, are growing in the U.S. They are called "Nones," since they have no religious affiliation. The ad claims that 29% of people in the U.S. are now "nones," compared to just 17% in 2009, based on another source I checked. These numbers suggest that atheism is the fastest growing "belief system," if you will, in our country. I didn't realize atheists were launching marketing campaigns to motivate people to officially join their ranks. There are 23 local chapters around the U.S. of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The group will have a national convention in Texas this October. They list such accomplishments as stopping commencement prayers at a Big Ten college as indicators of their effectiveness.

What is the best counter to this blatant attempt to dissuade people from a faith-based approach to life? We must model the life of Christ before them and let them ask us why we are doing what we're doing, just like the rehab clients asked Christine in Bridgeport. I'll speak a bit more about this later in the message.

The second earthly reward we can receive is...

b. Stimulating a thankful spirit

Since leaving Valley Church, my primary commitment has been working with MedSend, an organization that pays the educational loans of health-care professionals serving in long-term missions. A great benefit of MedSend's involvement is hearing from Grant Recipients who can serve in missions only because MedSend is paying their student loans. Countless times I have heard medical missionaries say, "I could not be serving as a missionary if MedSend weren't paying for my loans. Thanks so much for making this possible." That thankful spirit is all I need to be motivated to do the work involved in evaluating Grant Recipients and raising funds to make it possible for MedSend to make loan payments for 100 health-care missionaries all at the same time.

While it's easy to relate to these earthly rewards, eternal rewards are hard to imagine.

Biblical descriptions of heaven are almost beyond our comprehension. Regardless, we should know that, sometime in the future we will stand before the throne of God and receive heavenly rewards. Eight times in the Bible these rewards are referred to as crowns, an image all the stranger to us since Americans don't live in a monarchy. The last truth to understand about rewards is:

3. Eternal rewards are returned to God as an act of praise.

There is no human illustration that does justice to this heavenly scene. We simply must accept on the authority of God's Word that it will be part of what will happen when we enter eternity, and it will be joyous.

We also need to recognize that whether or not we are comfortable with it, generous giving done in secret will lead to eternal rewards.

Besides speaking about rewards, I also want to recognize the power of hyperbole in the Sermon on the Mount.

4. The power of hyperbole.

By this point in the Sermon, it is clear that Jesus sometimes uses exaggeration to make a point. Certainly, that is true when he says, "the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing" regarding giving. So, if we are not to take this statement literally, why did Jesus include it in his sermon? If we take this statement literally, we can assume the right hand, the dominant hand for most people, is the hand that is writing the check or pulling the cash out of the wallet. The left hand would represent the rest of the body, our heart and mind that should not be tempted towards pride in making the gift.

I think of this illustration as a counter to the description Jesus gives of Jewish leaders giving in the temple. **If the religious leaders were brash enough to sound a horn when making their gifts at the temple, Jesus could figuratively insist that parts of a believer's body were to be kept ignorant when giving took place.** Commentators agree that there was no specific tradition at the temple of giving to the sound of trumpets. It's a figure of speech. Likewise, Jesus is overstating when He says that the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing.

The Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that our motivation in religious acts like giving is important. If you practice generosity privately and with the right spirit, you are going to see God's care in your financial life. While we certainly are not "giving to get," we often will be motivated to give more as we see God working through our gift and in our lives.

Finally, I want to speak about...

5. A "lamp on a stand" vs. a "candle in a closet."

I want to account for the fact that in the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount this verse is included: **"... let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)**

On the other hand, in chapter 6 we read:

"... when you give to the needy ... [let it be in secret.] ..." (Matthew 6:3-4)

These statements may seem contradictory, but we must recognize that there are different ministry objectives in focus in each verse with the goal of both being the glory of God. We just talked about giving secretly in Matthew 6, but Matthew 5 says that the world outside the church should know that we love and care for them because we follow Jesus Christ. A.B. Bruce was a Scottish theologian who succinctly states the complimentary nature of the Matthew 5 and Matthew 6 verses:

**We are to show when we are tempted to hide
We are to hide when we are tempted to show.**

A.B. Bruce

A frequent caricature of the Church by the world is that we are a closed community. This perspective communicates that the Church is a small, exclusive group that is primarily concerned with preserving its beliefs and traditions, despite what is going on in the world around them. It is certainly true that the Church has beliefs that it wants to communicate and protect. It is also true, as Matthew 5:16 says, that God wants people in the world to know that He loves them. I was amazed several times during my service at Valley that people outside the church would ask me if it were OK for them to attend a specific program or meeting. These outsiders innocently perceived us as a **closed** community, while as outreach pastor I wanted them to see us as a very **open** community.

A wonderful example of having our light shine locally is Valley's participation in the Gifts of Love food bank in Avon. Our church is a very significant contributor to Gifts of Love, and we give the food with no strings attached. In fact, last November's food collection, part of Valley's Make a Difference Month, was the largest single donation from any organization ever, according to information shared by the Gifts of Love program manager.

Over the years I was missions pastor at Valley I received several letters of commendation from groups like the South Park Inn homeless shelter. We never wore T-Shirts to advertise that we were from Valley when we served there, but the impact of our volunteer efforts became known just by people asking us who we were and why we were helping.

Remember the Freedom From Religion Foundation ad? Their membership fees include a special student rate, encouraging Next Generation participants as well as mature adults to be members. This sends an important message to every one of us who follows Jesus. We might get tongue-tied and embarrassed when **verbalizing** our faith, but **every one of us** should step up when it comes to **modeling** our faith and showing the love of Jesus by our actions. The U.S. is becoming increasingly secular, especially young adults. One of our best counters as a church is to shine God's loving good works before others while keeping our giving secret.

This message started with a general baseball illustration about hitting home runs, but I want to end it with a specific observation about a Yankee pitching great named Mariano Rivera. Even Red Sox fans admit he was a pretty good pitcher. Rivera, who also happens to be a follower of Jesus, pitched for the Yankees for 19 seasons and was the greatest relief pitcher of all time. He was the only player in history to be voted unanimously into the baseball Hall of Fame. How did Rivera model appropriate humility?

When Mariano pitched well, which was most of the time, he said very little about himself. When he pitched poorly, which happened every so often, I heard him admit each time, "I didn't do my job."

What's our job in response to this message To give generously in secret while letting the light of Jesus shine through our lives to a watching world. Let's do our jobs as followers of Jesus and accept the rewards that reflect his favor.