

Secret Virtues: Giving to the Poor

Matthew 6:1-4

We each have a “secret life.” We all have things in our lives that nobody else knows about, right? When we think of hidden things/secrets, we tend to think about hidden sins and weaknesses – things that would bring us embarrassment or shame if they were revealed.

But today we are going to look at a passage of Scripture that casts a different vision for our “secret life.” What if your secrets – things that nobody else knows about – were great virtues? What if your secrets were such that if they were revealed you would look good instead of bad? What if the best parts of your life were those that nobody else knows about? If the hidden parts of our lives were like that, think about what the visible parts of our lives would be like!

Today we return to our sermon series on discipleship. A disciple is one who is apprenticed to another to learn a trade or a way of life. A disciple of Jesus is someone who is apprenticed to Him to learn how to live as He lived. In this sermon series we aren’t so much seeking to pile up information about how to live; we are actually wanting Jesus to teach us how to live. We are taking the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 as the core curriculum of discipleship. In this sermon that amazed those who heard, Jesus taught about a type of righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees. His disciples are able to have a type of righteousness that is broader and deeper than the most religious people of Jesus’ day.

Last fall we taught through Matthew 5. Today we launch into Matthew 6 where Jesus suggests that our secret life should be a life of virtues. In Matthew 6:1-4 Jesus talks about how “giving to the poor” should be an integral part of our secret life. In verse 1 Jesus will give the principle that will guide His teaching on giving to the poor in secret, praying in secret, and fasting in secret. In verses 2-4 He will apply the principle to giving to the poor.

Principle: When we “practice our righteousness” to impress others, we forfeit the reward God would have given. (6:1) Verse 1 is a warning really:

6:1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus understands people. Jesus understands how we all crave affirmation from other people. So much so that we have a tendency to do good things with impure motives. We don’t stay up late at night trying to figure out how to do this; we do this naturally without even thinking about it. It’s second nature for most of us. Specifically, we have the tendency to practice our righteousness in order to be noticed by other people. It feels so good when people notice when we’ve done something right that we start doing good things to be noticed by people. Personally I fight this tendency all the time. I fight the tendency to slip a comment into a conversation that lets people know all the amazing, wonderful things I’ve done recently;) Do you find yourself in situations where you just can’t avoid the temptation to impress others with your insight or your diligence or your generosity?

Jesus’ comment is that when you do this “. . . you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” Jesus is cluing us in to the fact that there’s something deeper at stake here. There is the reality that our Father in heaven loves to reward His children for our righteous behavior (such as

giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting). He really does. In a few minutes I'll have some comments about the nature of these rewards, but it's important to understand that there are rewards from God that are forfeited when we try to impress others with our righteousness. There are rewards that we don't experience because we have grabbed the reward of being honored by other people.

The Principle Applied: Therefore we should give to the poor "in secret." Our Father who sees in secret will reward us. (6:2-4)

2 "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.

Notice that Jesus says *when* you give to the poor, not *if* you give to the poor. Similarly, Jesus will say *when* you pray and *when* you fast. For Jews giving to the poor was a basic responsibility. Jesus wasn't challenging or exhorting His disciples to give; He assumed that they would give. And I think we can safely say that He assumes that we will give to the poor. There are certainly plenty of Scriptures that command us to give to the poor (see Deut. 15:11, Psalm 41:1, Proverbs 19:17, James 2:14-17, etc.). But here it is assumed that we will.

We can give to the poor in many different ways. Some people give directly to the poor – either money or clothes or other resources. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, you might encounter someone in the context of your everyday life and be led to help meet their needs. Or you might give to an organization such as Shepherd's Crossing, a ministry that pools money from churches in Manhattan to help people with rent and utilities. Or you might give to our Compassion Fund here at Faith; we respond to needs both in our congregation and in the community. Or you might sponsor a child through Compassion International. We heard about Compassion through Stephen Miller last month. Of course we can give to the relief efforts in Haiti. My point is that there are many different ways to give to the poor. Jesus presupposes that His followers give to the poor. It's worth considering whether or not this is our habit.

Jesus' concern here in the SoM is with our *motivation* for giving to the poor. Listen to verse 2 again:

2 "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.

Jesus probably had in mind the Pharisees with this example. Read Matthew 23 when you get the chance. Jesus says this of the Pharisees: "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by man . . ." (Matthew 23:5). When they gave to the poor, they mainly cared about being noticed. They weren't filled with compassion to help meet the needs of people with very little. It's hard to say whether or not they literally "sounded a trumpet" as they made their way into the synagogue to give their offerings. At times trumpets were sounded to gather the people for some event; trumpets may have been blown when there were urgent financial needs. D. A. Carson mentions that, "The opportunity for ostentation under such circumstances is quite unmatched – the trumpets sound, and I quickly close my shop and hasten down the street. Everyone knows where I'm going, and the speed at which I'm moving not only draws attention to my direction but attests to my zeal." (*The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 56) And people are impressed.

Jesus calls those who do this type of thing hypocrites. The term was used of an actor in a Greek play who wore a mask. The actor assumed a role/identity that wasn't his; he impersonated someone else to the best of his ability. Good actors do this convincingly. When we give to the poor to enhance our own reputations, we are being hypocrites. We are merely impersonating compassionate, generous people. We aren't actually compassionate and generous people.

Jesus' comment is that "They have their reward in full." This is a refrain we'll see again in verses 5 and 16. Jesus will also say that you can pray in order to impress others, but if you do, you have your reward in full. And you can fast – go without food – in order to impress other people, but if you do, you have your reward in full. It's as if God in heaven is saying, "The choice is yours: you can receive the reward that other people will give you or you can receive the reward that I will give you. But you can't have both." It's as if God says, "I won't play that game."

So what's the alternative in terms of how should we give to the poor?

3 "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Jesus is using a metaphor for secrecy when He says that we shouldn't let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Some even understand Jesus to be saying that in addition to hiding our giving from others, we hide our giving from ourselves. We don't inwardly dwell on how generous and compassionate we are. Rather we give with the conviction that it's enough that God sees and God rewards. There's no need to get weird and paranoid about giving in secret. We certainly aren't expected to deceive people in order to give in secret. The idea is simply that we avoid blowing our own horn; we give quietly, out of the spotlight.

The irony is that those who have a secret life of generosity are eventually found out. Back in chapter 5 we read where Jesus said, "You are a city on a hill – a city that cannot be hidden." A person with a secret life that is rich in virtues will ultimately be exposed. That type of life simply can't be hidden.

We are told so very much in this last statement of verse 4: *and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you*. When you give to the poor (in any way that He leads), your Father is the One who notices. It's not some remote, detached deity who is simply aware of everything that happens everywhere. It is your **Father** who sees. Later in the SoM (in 7:7-11) Jesus will stress that our Father in heaven loves to give good gifts to His children. Every father worthy of the name loves to catch his children doing something right. Your heavenly Father loves to catch you in the act – red-handed – giving to the poor. Jesus makes clear that your Father doesn't miss a thing: He *sees what is done in secret*.

As I mentioned earlier, this statement tends to make us think, "Oh no, God sees all the **sinful** things I do in secret." That's true and worth pondering. How our lives would be different if we believed this! But Jesus' point is that "Our Father doesn't miss a single **good** thing I do."

Our Father who sees our secret acts of generosity and compassion *will reward us*. A lot of people have a problem with the idea of God giving rewards for the good things that we do. For some it seems too much like a pay-off – like we’ve somehow earned rewards by our good deeds. But I don’t think that rewards are ever earned; they’re always freely given – an expression of grace. I just think that we have to acknowledge that God has full freedom to give anybody any reward He wants. He doesn’t have to give everybody the same reward in the same proportion. One of the many perks of being God is that you can do things that others don’t understand. It is clear from many Scriptures that God gives rewards. We don’t have to be able to identify the cause and effect relationship between acts of righteousness and rewards; I think we shouldn’t be that self-conscious about it all. But there needs to be a place in our thinking about God that He does give rewards.

And it’s equally clear that it’s good for us to be motivated by the prospect of God’s rewards. Jesus presupposes as much here in Matthew 6 when He mentions God seeing our giving in secret and rewarding us.

In his essay “Weight of Glory” C. S. Lewis gives a helpful understanding of rewards. He points out that there are appropriate rewards and inappropriate rewards. Money, for example, is not an appropriate reward for love. Almost everyone would say that it’s wrong to love someone because you want to enjoy his/her money. That’s an inappropriate motivation and inappropriate reward for love. Marriage, on the other hand, is a very appropriate reward for love; we encourage people who love each other to get married. Lewis concludes:

“The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.” (cited in Stott, Sermon on the Mount, p. 132)

If a proper reward has a natural connection to the activity itself, what might be the reward God gives the person who gives to the poor in secret? One reward would be the satisfaction of seeing the needs of the poor met, seeing burdens lifted from people who are weighed down, giving hope to people who are distressed and downcast. If you are giving for the right reasons – out of compassion and generosity – this will be a very satisfying reward.

Other Scriptures speak of the reward of being generous to others. Proverbs 11:25 (NIV) tells us:

25 A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

Being refreshed is a natural reward for refreshing others. In the context of giving to the poor, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:10-11:

10 Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; 11 you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.

The idea there is that if we give generously/liberally, God will entrust us with more in the future so that we can continue to be generous. Of course some people misuse and misapply this principle, saying that God is obligated to make you wealthy if you give. Nevertheless, we

shouldn't ignore the many Scriptures that promise reward for generosity to the poor: being able to continue to be generous to the poor.

My simple challenge today is to take Jesus at His word and try giving to the poor in secret. This shouldn't be a mindless activity – just giving because you're supposed to give. Seek God on this. Ask God, "Would you open my eyes to the needs that You want to meet through me?" A biblical understanding of giving acknowledges that everything we have has been given to us by God. Think of everything you have – all your possessions, your investments, your savings, etc. Even if you've worked hard for what you have, it's not really yours; it belongs to God. He has entrusted it to you to use wisely to honor Him in this world. One of the many ways we honor God is by giving to the poor. This understanding of "stewardship" prompts us to ask the question, "God, would You open my eyes to the needs You want to meet through me?"

Once you identify a need, you simply give with the knowledge that God notices and that God rewards. Your act of compassion is "a little secret" between you and God. When you have a close relationship with another person, there are times when you share secrets – secrets that really shouldn't be shared with anybody else. Sometimes you compromise a relationship by talking about what you've experienced with that person. In the same way, there are some things that God wants to keep secret – just between you and Him. And He wants you to find the same satisfaction in that shared experience as He does.

Quite often people tell me that they feel like hypocrites – that they're not the person they appear to be; quite often I feel like a hypocrite. The promise of the new covenant in Jesus' blood is that we don't have to settle for being hypocrites – people who impersonate compassion and generosity toward those who have very little. By the blood of Jesus and the continual grace of God, we can actually be compassionate, generous people who give to the poor with pure motivation. We can be people who find deep satisfaction in secretly meeting the needs of the poor. We can be people whose secret life brings joy to the heart of God.