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Letting Your Left Hand Know What Your Right Hand is Doing

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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:

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.

—Matthew 6:1-4, ESV

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. I once heard a man tell an audience that by sharing his giving story with them, 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 of Matthew are one sermon. We must not ignore the rest of what Jesus says. Context is key. We can draw three very important lessons about giving from Jesus' sermon.

First, He Teaches Us to Give.

We must not overlook the obvious. [Jesus says 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 one of His followers will be giving. He then addresses the dangers and pitfalls

we must avoid when we carry out our giving. Sadly, many immature and “non-giving” believers use this passage as a way to *not* give and keep their non-giving a secret. If ever asked about their giving, they hide behind this passage, justifying that their giving is to be kept a secret.

Second, He Teaches Us to Give *Purely*.

Jesus is really making a point here about our motives for giving. He says that we should never do our giving *in order to be seen by*, 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 thinking more highly of us or paying us compliments, or to receive some special treatment because of our giving. Jesus is saying that if your motive for giving is to draw attention to yourself, then you are trading an eternal reward for a temporal one. It is not as important whether others know about your giving. It is important, however, to examine the motives behind why you made your giving 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 18 verses of the sixth chapter, He emphasizes *outward* formal righteousness and gives us three illustrations of typical religious activities: 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* (Matthew 6:6, KJV) to pray and not to do it publicly. 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 adds another 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.* (Matthew 6:18, ESV)

Do you see the repetition 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 for your giving, praying and fasting. Why do we put giving in a different category from the other two practices? Why do 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 giving of Barnabas and many other believers recorded in Acts 2:45 and Acts 4:32-37? All this was public knowledge and even recorded by Luke for all future believers to know. 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. If the admiration of others is the motive, then that person has received *[his] reward*.

Third, 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 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/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 (Matthew 6:1-4) to God (Matthew 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, NASB), 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 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. Penney and R. G. Letourneau, who both gave away 90% of their massive incomes during their lifetimes, had never let us know what they were doing. Or what about Stanley Tam (author of the book, *God Owns My Business*) and Alan Barnhart, who have both given their entire companies away to the Lord, choosing to live on modest salaries while 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 had kept it a secret? What a loss for us!

Jesus' message about giving is both clear and simple: (1) Give, (2) Give purely, and (3) Give purely to glorify God and motivate others. Rather than concerning yourself with who will know about your giving, focus on who will be glorified by your giving and inspired to join you in giving adventures. 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!

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