

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 8: Anonymity and Generosity
March 29th & 30th

We've been spending the first part of this year walking through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7.

I've told you along the way that it's very easy, if you're reading the Sermon for the first time, to conclude that Jesus is simply giving a list of ethical teachings or moral standards for us to live up to. And we imagine that when Jesus concludes his sermon, He looks at us and says, *'Good luck.'*

But the Sermon on the Mount is so much more than that!

In His sermon, Jesus is saying... "This is how you must live. It's how you were created to live. But on your own, you'll never do it. Only when you walk in a relationship with me, and I fill your life, will you be able to do it!"

And we'll see this very clearly in chapter six where Jesus' primary focus is our relationship with our Heavenly Father. In this chapter alone, Jesus uses the word 'Father' twelve times.

He knows that when we are in a growing and vibrant relationship with our Heavenly Father that it will have a transforming effect on our lives. And if we don't have a growing relationship with our Father, we can follow all of the rules and do all of the right things, have impeccable church attendance, and become very religious so that when people see our moral goodness they say 'wow!' But God will not be pleased, because it's not what He's after!

God is not trying to make you religious! God is after a relationship that will transform your life inside and out!

In chapter six, Jesus addresses what were three fundamental acts of Jewish piety...generosity, prayer, and fasting. These practices were originally given to Israel by God as a way to deepen their relationship with Him, and to express their love for him!

But some very religious people had started to distort these relationship-building practices by turning them into self-serving, self-promoting tools. So, on one hand, Jesus warns us not to do the same...and on the other hand, He teaches us the true purpose of generosity, prayer, and fasting is that they become a means of knowing and loving God with our whole lives!

Read with me...beginning in Matthew 6:1.

"Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in

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need, don't do as the hypocrites do – blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get.” Matthew 6:1-2

Jesus says... *“When you do good...make sure you're not doing it to gain the attention and approval of others! When you give to someone in need...don't toot your own horn so that people look at you and say, 'wow...you are one generous person.'”*

Illustration: Before Beth and I started to date, I was smitten with her, and she not so much with me, so I spent the first several weeks trying to figure out how to gain her attention. One Sunday afternoon, we went out with some friends on a non-date...and I decided that I was going to win her with my generosity! So...when we played mini-golf, I paid. Then, when we went out for dinner, I paid again. And it was all going very well and according to plan until Beth took me back to my car that afternoon and asked me this question. *“How much do I owe you?”* And I said... *“No...you don't owe me anything.”* Thinking, the indicator of a legitimate date is when the guy pays...and if I can get away with paying...my foot is in the door! So, Beth looks at me and says, *“No...how much do I owe you.”* And this went back and forth...until it became very clear that Beth was not impressed with my lame attempts at generosity. Fortunately for me, Beth is a woman of great mercy and humor...

The problem...and Beth saw right through it...was that my generosity was smothered in ulterior motives! I wasn't simply being kind...I was being kind to get something!

And this is apparently what the Pharisees were doing. They were turning their acts of kindness and generosity into a self-serving parade! A means of boosting their image and reputation!

Jesus takes off their masks and shows that their moral goodness was completely synthetic, and that underneath the surface, their hearts were filled with self-centeredness and self-righteousness.

Now...many of us are going to read this and say, *“I'm not like that! I would never give and then blow the trumpet! I would never do something kind and look around to see if anyone else was watching! Who are these people?”*

Let me do my very best to bring this home, because I think that Jesus' words are incredibly relevant for us! To see what He is saying, you must look at what He tells us not to do, but you must also see what He tells us to do!

Look at verse 3...

“But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” Matthew 6:3-4

Here, Jesus is calling us to an incredibly high standard of giving! It’s a kind of radical giving that is very uncommon in our world today, and yet we see it all through the Scriptures!

Let me take the next few moments to explain what our lives will look like when Jesus’ words go to work in our hearts!

I’ll give you three words to form a very simple definition of Jesus-like giving.

Secretive. Whimsical. Generosity.

First: Secretive

When Jesus says, *“Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,”* He is actually using humor here, which might take some of us by surprise!

Ask yourself: “Is it even possible not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?”

Jesus’ point is simple! When you give to someone in need or do something good toward your neighbor, do so without focusing on yourself. Do it so secretly that no one else is going to take notice...and even if they do, you won’t notice that they notice!

Do you know how difficult this to do?

Diapers: I run the risk of doing the very opposite of what Jesus is saying by sharing this story, but it establishes my point! Several years ago, Beth and I had friends with a newborn who were in real financial need, so we decided to buy diapers and leave them on their doorstep, ring the doorbell and run...you know the drill! So we did just that...I placed them on the porch and hid around the corner of the house...Beth parked down the street, and when everything was clear I met up with her (very Mission Impossible-like)! Now...that’s great...except that when I saw our friends in the days ahead it took everything in me not to claim the gift!

I found it very difficult to let a gift be a gift without taking credit or receiving attention from it!

You might say... *"It can't be that difficult, can it?"*

Action: This week, plan to do one thing that is kind or generous toward another person every day. Do this for someone in your family, a neighbor or colleague, even a stranger. Write it into your calendar...create a to-do on your iPhone. But here's the catch. Determine in advance that you're not going to tell anyone else about it. Determine that that you're going to do it so secretively that the person you're being generous toward doesn't know that it is from you!

Try doing that for a week...and see what you discover about your own heart. See whether or not you look for recognition when you do something good...or if you want others to affirm and celebrate your goodness. I'll guarantee you that it's much more difficult than you think, especially if you haven't developed a habit of giving secretly...

We have an insatiable desire to be accepted and to feel important! Which is why we, like the Pharisees, will hi-jack giving, which was intended to cultivate a deeper affection for God and a deeper love for our neighbor, and we'll use it for self-advancing purposes.

Jesus says, *"Give without needing to take the credit! Give without looking for recognition or the applause of men. Give for no other reason than that you love me and you love your neighbor."*

When you give and you don't take the credit, guess who gets the credit? God does...he's honored!

So...the kind of giving that pleases and honors God is first of all secret giving...

Second: Whimsical

The simple definition of the word *Whimsical* is **Playful. Spontaneous. Joyful.**

When Jesus says, *"Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,"*
He's describing a whimsical giver...

Elise: My daughter Elise is a whimsical giver! Several times a week she will write notes to Beth and me, and in them she'll describe with great detail how much she loves us and how special we are to her. She does this freely, unprovoked...and it brings her so much joy!

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The reality is that when many of us give...there's a grave seriousness about our giving! Most of us don't open our checkbooks and laugh...ok...maybe you're laughing today, but most of us don't! We open the checkbook and sigh or groan. And when it comes to giving, we do the same thing!

Some of us have a tendency to calculate our giving so much that we squeeze the heart out of it! Now...hear me. I'm not saying that you shouldn't be wise and prayerful in your giving.

Jesus is saying...don't calculate your giving to the degree that you squeeze the heart out of it! We do this when we think things like...

I think that God is pressing me to give here, but I'm not sure how this is going to affect my lifestyle. Back and forth!

If I give this money away, I'm not sure what this person or organization is going to do with it. Back and forth!

I want to do this for my neighbor, but I don't know how they would perceive my gift! Back and forth!

If I give, what will I get in return? Back and forth!

You see...the more that we keep our hands on our giving, the smaller our hearts and our gift typically becomes!

Whereas Jesus says... "Give in such a way that you're not constantly calculating what you give. Give whimsically!"

Now...this isn't going to happen to us overnight or by a sheer act of the will. God-honoring giving is a habit that is cultivated over time...

Oswald Chambers writes this...

"Do good until it is an unconscious habit of the life and you do not know you are doing it...Get into the habit of having such a relationship to God that you do good without knowing you do it; then you will no longer trust your own impulse or your own judgment. You will trust only the inspiration of the Spirit of God...When you are rightly related to God, He will use you as a channel through which His disposition will flow."

Oswald Chambers

I want that kind of heart. The whimsical heart of my daughter. Surprising. Playful. Uncalculating. Spontaneous.

So...God honoring giving is secretive. It's whimsical.

Finally: Generosity

I've tried to use the word 'giving' instead of 'generosity' thus far, because I want you to see the difference between giving, in the modern sense of the word, and generosity when it comes to the true and biblical sense of the word!

At the end of the day...Jesus is calling us to a radical lifestyle of generosity!

There is an assumption in Jesus' words that is found all through this text, and that is that His followers are givers!

In verses 2 and 3, Jesus says, "When you give...give this way!"

The Scriptures are full of examples that show us what kind of generosity God desires from his people! And what our generosity will look like when God sits on the throne of our hearts!

And occasionally, the Scriptures celebrate the story of ordinary people who give in radically generous ways!

In Mark 12, the gospel-writer Mark tells the story of a poor old widow who walked into the temple and gave an offering! It just so happened on this day that Jesus was watching...and it just so happened that at the same time the widow gave her offering, many rich people were also giving very impressive amounts of money!

Mark writes that when Jesus saw this widow drop her offering into the collection box, he called his disciples over and he said to them...

"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on." Mark 12:43-44

Jesus looked at his disciples...and He looks at us...and says, "I want you to be like her."

What was it about this widow that made such an impression on Jesus?

While the crowds gave what they could afford, this woman gave everything that she had! They gave what was comfortable, but she gave in a way that cut into her life and lifestyle! When the crowds gave, it didn't truly cost them, but when she gave, it cost her greatly!

And Jesus says, "I want you to be like her."

It's interesting that when Jesus gives us a model for God-honoring generosity, He doesn't give us the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. He doesn't give us a well-known philanthropist! He doesn't even give us a person who year after year gives away a calculated 10%...the amount required by all Jews during that time. He gives us an impoverished widow who loved God to the degree that she was willing to honor Him with her very best!

We've got to ask the question, how do our lives compare to hers? Can we truly say that we have a generous spirit when it comes to our economic lives? When it comes to our time? Are we generous in the way we share our lives with others?

How do we get there? Let me give you two questions to ask!

#1 – Am I talking and praying regularly about generosity with people who know me well? Are you getting together with a group of friends, or with your spouse and talking about what it looks like to honor God with your resources? Are you asking God to show you how to honor Him with your economic life? I find that most of the time we don't do this...because we're terrified of the answer, or because we've calculated our giving so much that we press God out of the equation!

In 2 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul writes this...

"You must each decide in your own heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." 2 Corinthians 9:7

It starts here. Prayer leads to cheerful, whimsical giving.

#2 – Do I look honestly and prayerfully at my budget?

Are you looking at your budget with your spouse or family to determine where generosity fits into your economic life?

The whole principle of tithing in the Old Testament is that of percentage giving...setting aside the best of what I have to give back to God and purposes close to His heart! In the New Testament, the practice changes from tithing to generosity...but the principle does not!

One of the simplest and yet most profound ways to honor God and invite him into your finances is to set aside part of your budget for generosity!

I think we have to be honest and ask ourselves questions like... *"If generosity is in my budget today, how does it compare to things like cable TV and entertainment. To my transportation? To my wardrobe?"*

Radical generosity will always cut into our lifestyle!

We've got to begin by asking the honest, difficult questions. Because there's not a single one of us who is going to slide into a secretive, whimsical generosity!

Gospel – In fact...Jesus' words are so far out of reach for every one of us unless our hearts are first transformed by His radical mercy! You see...Jesus is simply calling us to live in such a way that reflects God's radical generosity toward us!

God did not calculate His grace... He didn't hold it in his hand to determine whether we were worthy. He sent His Son who stretched out his hands in an ultimate act of grace and died the death we deserved to die to give us life! Had God calculated his grace based upon our worthiness or goodness...we'd never be here!

When Jesus died, He didn't pander to the crowds looking for their approval! When He died, the crowds who had celebrated his arrival days before shouted "Crucify." And Jesus didn't fight back. He didn't cling to His rights. He didn't jockey for the approval of the crowds! He died a criminal's death so that we could be called sons and daughters of the King!

When you see this...that Jesus gave you everything when you had nothing to give Him in return...it will change your heart! And you will become a radically generous person!

And Jesus says in verse 1 & 4, the Father who sees everything, will reward you!

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If you and I give to gain the approval of others, Jesus says that the approval of others is all you'll get. For most of us, no one is going to notice our generosity! For a few of us, we'll get a plaque with our name on it. They may even name a building after you. But it's all fleeting. Here today and gone tomorrow! It will never satisfy the insatiable desire you have for approval!

But there is a reward that will not go away that only your Heavenly Father can give you! And here it is! You will become more and more like Him. Your affection for Him will grow as you learn to trust Him and honor Him with everything you have. You'll begin to love your neighbors with a contagious love. And as you do, your heart will be filled with an unspeakable joy.

You will begin to live and give with freedom and whimsy...and you will wake up one day to realize that you are becoming the person God created us to be, inside and out!
Can you imagine if we were to cultivate a habit of giving this way? Secretively. Whimsically. Generously?

God would be honored...our neighbors would see the goodness of Christ in our lives. The church would explode with effect for Jesus' name...

Pray...