

Giving is a Matter of the Heart - Matthew 6.1-4

We continue with our look at the Sermon on the Mount. Today we start with Matthew 6 where Jesus shifts the focus from relationship with others to spiritual or religious practices. Matthew 6.1 acts as an introduction to the rest of the chapter which covers giving, prayer and fasting. In our message today we will explore the first section on giving.

Jesus opens this section by saying that his disciples are “*not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.*” This phrase “practice your righteousness” has been translated in various ways. In Hebrew and Greek the word ‘righteousness’ includes the idea of justice. The context of the verses to come suggests the focus here is those acts which were considered right and just before God – giving, praying and fasting were three of those right and just acts. However, as we have seen before while Jesus considers the outward action, he then zooms in on the inner attitude or motive for those actions. That is the key focus here - right attitude and motives in doing the acts.

So, what does Jesus teach on giving when in verse 2 he moves on to the specific practices that he wants to highlight?

Jesus instructs his disciples saying, “*when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do.*” It is important to identify the type of giving that Jesus refers to here – specifically it is giving to those who are in need. While the verses are not directly about giving tithes and offerings for the temple, the principle of generosity in giving Jesus teaches here is applicable to that as well.

In Jesus’ day there were regular opportunities to give at the temple or in the synagogue to the needy who might include the poor, the widow, the orphan. Jesus follows the clear instructions in the law that care for the poor and needy is important and that it is right and just for the people of God to reflect God’s own generosity towards them. Deuteronomy 15.7 says: “*If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, **do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward them.***” A part of loving God is loving our neighbour and a part of loving our neighbour is caring for the poor and needy – this is both right and just as it reflects God’s own character and action towards us. Psalm 146 reveals that this is indeed God’s heart. Jesus reinforces the rightness of this with his disciples – that an important aspect of being right with God was caring for those in need.

How is this giving to be done?

Giving is not to be done with great fanfare to attract the attention of others. At the time there were different ways of giving to the poor and needy either at the temple or in their local synagogue. Giving

could be monetary, or could be in kind – grain, produce, or other practical items like that. Giving was also associated with particular festivals, especially the Day of Atonement and Purim. Monetary giving in the temple or the synagogue was often done publicly via a charity box.

It would appear that some givers who wanted to draw attention to themselves would make a show of it as they placed their gift in the charity boxes. For a modern equivalent we could think of posting on social media indicating that we have given or putting announcing it in the church bulletin. For such people it was more important to look like they were doing the right thing than actually caring for the poor and needy. It was also a show to others of their wealth. Jesus in his teaching highlights this hypocrisy challenging the outward display of righteousness which masked a heart that was all about self-promotion. Instead, Jesus says the giving is to be done a way that the left doesn't know what the right hand is doing – this is hyperbole for giving in secret or giving in a quiet and humble way. The genuine giver receives their reward from God, not others.

So, what do we learn for ourselves from Jesus' teaching here:

1. Give with right motives

- A part of our response to God is to give out of a heart motivated by love for God and others – we give to please God, to express our thankfulness to God and to bless those in need – that is reward enough in itself
- The apostle Paul notes in his letter to the Corinthians that those who gave to his collection for the poor in Jerusalem first gave themselves to God (8.5) – giving came out of their heart which was turned towards God
- Giving alms was something done out of a motive of love for God and love for others – not as an act of self-glorification – for those who gave out of false motives, those who gave to impress others and gain favour received their reward by being noticed by others – those who gave with a motive to express their love for God and others received their reward from our all loving and powerful God
- Jesus makes it clear that God looks to the heart not just the outward act

2. Cultivate a generous heart

- The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians in 8.9 that God has given to us generously out of love, that Jesus gave his whole self for us including going to the Cross, and then blessed us with the gift of the Holy Spirit – we are the recipients of God's generous and gracious gifts

- In our own giving we are to reflect the character of our generous God – Father, Son and Spirit and God – we are to be generous at the very core of who we are just as our God is
- In my life as a full time Christian worker I have been the recipient of the generous giving and hospitality of others - I have sat in a hut in Cambodia, in a small shack in Armenia and in the empty room of a recently arrived refugee here in The Netherlands and been welcomed with generous hospitality – their generosity humbles and challenges me – it challenges me to have that same generous, open heart towards others. A heart that looks to those in need and gives generously in ways that are appropriate

3. Faith in God not in possessions

- As we give, we also demonstrate our trust in God as opposed to trusting in our possessions
- In 2 Corinthians 8.2 Paul writes, *In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity*
- Psalm 146.3-5 says *“do not trust in nobles, in man who cannot save...happy is the one whose help is God, whose hope is in the Lord.”*
- The apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 6.17-19 that Christians were: **not to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, and to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.**
- This is a hard one for me and I guess many others – what do I put my trust in and who do I rely on?
- There is always the ‘what if’ question – what if I don’t have enough?
- The challenge Scripture presents us with, especially as followers of Jesus, is that when we grow and mature in faith, we shift our focus from self-reliance to trust in God, from trusting material possessions to God’s provision – one way we can grow in this maturity is through giving both in our regular giving and to those in need – it is an act of faith, which says to God I trust you
- It is a question that I am challenged by - do I live with a scarcity mentality or out of a generous heart towards others and a trusting heart towards God? This is a tension that I and I suspect many others live with and have to work out

4. In giving we partner with and reflect our God

- Psalm 146 presents us with an image of God as the defender and provider for the poor, the hungry, the widows and orphans, the stranger – those in need – this is who God is, and what God does reflecting this generous heart

- Since God is loving, righteous and just God acts in ways consistent with that – we see that also clearly in the life and teaching of Jesus – we are called to reflect God to become more like Jesus in both who we are and what we do
- 2 Cor 8.1-15 – focuses on God’s people giving to help one another – Paul weaves this idea of partnership right through his letters –
- We partner with God not only through our service in ministry but also through our giving as well – in acting rightly towards those in need we not only reflect our God but we also partner with God in bringing about the good that God seeks to bring about
- It’s important to note that giving can be done in a whole range of appropriate and creative ways
 - we can give financially to the church and the regular charitable giving, or to another program that we support
 - we can give through giving of our time and talent by voluntary service to others, by praying sacrificially for those in need, we can also share our knowledge, skills and resources to those who are in need, we can provide hospitality to others
- So let’s be creative and reflect our creative God who is generous to us in numerous ways

So to finish we come back to the passage in Matthew 6 - Jesus gets to the heart of the matter by teaching that giving, just like prayer and fasting is an act of righteousness – it is acting rightly before God and towards others. Giving is about cultivating a generous heart motivated by a love for God and others that results in action that cares for and seeks the best for those in need.

John Harris, August 2021