

FAITH AND TREASURE
(3) HOW TO GIVE IT BACK TO GOD

Matthew 6:1-6

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(with material from Jacob Armstrong, used by permission)

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SCRIPTURE

¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:1-6 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

We've been talking this month about our "treasure" and how to invest our time, energy, and money in the things that really matter. This week the Scripture reading gives us a gentle warning from Jesus to be careful when we do good. We shouldn't parade it in front of others or try to impress God. Jesus tells us that by finding quiet times to pray and be still before God, the focus will begin to shift from us to God. Being part of a God-celebration (when God gets the credit) is better than when we celebrate ourselves!

1. SOMETHING BIGGER

It is important to learn where we are spending our time, energy, and money so we can invest them in the things of God. One hope is that we might be able to use our treasure to serve God's children who are in need. The traditional term for this is "alms" or "mercy giving." Jesus says:

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others” (6:2a).

Joel Green makes this observation:

Care for the needy is grounded in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod 22:25, Lev 25:35-37; Deut 14:27-29) and has a strong tradition in Judaism in the time of Jesus. With the use of the word whenever, Jesus assumes that his followers will give to the poor. The only question is whether they will do so faithfully.¹

Sometimes you'll get the chance to be part of something bigger than yourself. Your name may not be mentioned, and you may not hoist the trophy on the stage; but as the confetti falls (or whatever), you will know that you played a role. It won't matter that you're not getting the glory; the glory is knowing that you were a part of it.

I felt that way recently when our congregation made voluntary contributions totaling \$6,949 to disaster assistance for those stricken by hurricanes this past season. Our contribution was significant to me and my wife, but it wasn't very big when compared with the total money raised. Perhaps you felt the same. But here's the thing – In spite of that, we were a part of it, and that should make us feel good. It's a powerful thing to know that my life can play a role in something bigger than me. You can play a role in something bigger than you.

2. JESUS' WAY TO GIVE

Jesus also says:

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6:5-6).

Praying, fasting, and giving should lead us to focus on God, not on ourselves. Likewise, when we pray, fast, and give, it should lead others to focus on God, not on us. Everyone likes to be noticed, but in this week's Scripture, Jesus warns about practicing our religion in such a way that it garners attention from others.

Jesus warns that when you are trying to do good, be sure that you don't make a performance of it. Your actions might be a good show, but God won't be cheering. When

¹From *The CEB Study Bible*, edited by Joel B. Green (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2013), page NT15.

you do things for someone else, don't call attention to yourself. Jesus begins his warning with the term “beware” that can just as easily be translated as "be careful." Most of the time, we use that phrase because we think there's a good chance that someone could get hurt. When my kids were growing up if I told them to be careful, it was usually because it appeared the thing I was warning against would happen soon. I warned them because I cared about what happened to them.

Jesus gives this warning because he cares about us – he cares about our hearts. He knows that if we seek credit for the good we do—if our actions become a performance—then our hearts will suffer. If we start thinking it's all about us, then we miss out on God's amazing benefits of being and doing good. Yes, we will get our credit, but it pales in comparison with what we receive when we give humbly before God. We will miss out on being a part of something bigger than ourselves, which is much better than anything we can achieve on our own.

Jesus links giving to the poor and spending time with God. If we truly want to be generous givers and experience life more fully, we have to be people of prayer. We will never give in extravagant and sacrificial ways if we are not abiding with God. We need secret places where God can speak to our hearts. No one gives in amazing ways just because there is a great need; extravagant, sacrificial givers do so because their hearts have been changed by spending time with God.

If we want to experience life more fully, we must respond to all that God has done for us by seeking to participate in what God is doing in the world. We have considered how we are investing our lives. Our goal should be to invest our time, money, and energy in the things of God, things that are so much bigger than what one or two of us can do on our own. We get to be a part of things that only God can do. We stand in the confetti, finding joy and meaning in the knowledge that we played a part. God is calling us to sacrificial giving.

People talk about sacrificial efforts in the life of faith. And we think we have some idea of what that means. A chicken and a pig were walking down a sidewalk. They came across a sign in front of a church that said, “Ham and Egg Breakfast to Raise Money for Missions.” The chicken turned to her friend and said, “C’mon, let’s do our part.” The pig replied, “That’s easy for you to say, yours would only be a donation but mine would be a sacrifice!”

What motivates people to give sacrificially? Legalistic giving may reach certain levels, but only grace giving can touch the level of sacrifice. Hearts that spend time with God are changed hearts. And changed hearts are generous hearts.