

Preaching Series: The Wisdom of Jesus
Sermon Title: Practicing Righteousness

Text: Matthew 6:1-4 -- 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. 2 "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. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Introduction: We've been studying the wisdom of Jesus for the last seven weeks. We've looked at the importance of removing the log from our own eyes before pointing out the speck in someone else; building our lives on the solid foundation of God's Word; loving those who do not return our love; dealing with the anxiety by trusting God to meet our needs; giving to God the things that are God's – namely our souls; displaying the heart of a servant; and being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Today, I want to look at another passage that exposes a sinful tendency in all of us – seeking the approval of others rather than God.

Jesus knows a phony when He sees one. He knows when someone does the right thing, but for all the wrong reasons. For example, **a person can say something nice to his or her boss**, but only to butter him up to get a raise. THAT'S NOT VERY SINCERE IS IT? **Or someone could confess a sinful action**, but only because others have already discovered the truth and plan to share it. THAT DOESN'T SEEM TO DEMONSTRATE A CONTRITE HEART! **Or a student could turn in some classmates for cheating on a test** because it's a way to get even for some hurt previously suffered. REVENGE ISN'T OURS TO TAKE. **Most of us understand that morality, from God's perspective, is not only about choosing the right course of action but, even more importantly, about being energized by the right motive.** Throughout the course of human history, INSECURE PEOPLE (a phrase which describes all of us at one time or another) have been tempted to do things, not for the sake of blessing others, but to satisfy a deep longing shared by every son and daughter of Adam ... THE APPROVAL OF OTHERS. Take the Japanese composer **Mamoru Samuragochi for example**. At one time he was hailed as the "**Japanese Beethoven**" for creating hit symphonies despite his deafness. He claimed to rely on his perfect pitch to compose his musical scores after losing his hearing. In an interview with **TIME** magazine he said, "**If you trust your inner sense of sound, you create something that is truer. It is like communicating from the heart.**"

Losing my hearing was a gift from God." But a few years ago, the national hero was exposed as a fraud after confessing that another musician wrote his most acclaimed works. And in a surprise twist, the man who says he was the ghost-writer of the works, **Takashi Niigaki**, claimed that the popular composer isn't even deaf. He told reporters in Tokyo that over the past 18 years he had been paid about 7 million yen (or \$69,000) to write more than 20 pieces for Samuragochi. The real composer said, ***"At first he acted ... as if he had suffered hearing loss, but he stopped doing so eventually."*** After awhile the two men started carrying on normal conversations. And even more bizarre, it turns out that **Samuragochi** can't even write musical scores. Eventually **Niigaki** tired of the deception and told the imposter he wanted out. **Samuragochi** threatened to commit suicide, but **Niigaki** said he was duping the public and wanted to come clean. He said, ***"I am an accomplice, because I continued composing just as he demanded, although I knew he was deceiving people. I can't fool the people anymore."***

Sadly, Christians are not immune to this kind of thing either. ***The only difference is that we often mask our sinful motives in the pursuit of spiritual achievements.*** That's what Jesus is addressing here in **Matthew 6**. In the first century, there were three chief acts of Jewish righteousness which were regularly performed for a motive other than love. They involved *giving alms to the poor, prayer and fasting*. This morning, we'll look more closely at the first one, giving, and what our Lord had to say about the hypocrisy He observed in some of the Jews. They were wealthy and in a good position to give gifts to help care for the needy, yet their motives for doing so were not right. **THEY WERE PRACTICING THIS ACT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS NOT OUT OF LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS, BUT TO BE SEEN BY MEN.** Before we get into it, let me say this: **Jesus was not questioning whether his followers ought to engage in giving to the poor. He assumed they would. His intention in our passage was to teach them WHY and HOW to do so.**

He starts with a word of Caution (**Matthew 6:2a – 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**). ***The giving of alms was meant to aid the poor and needy.*** When Christians engage in charity it is to be a reflection of the love that God has put in our hearts for mankind. **But** generosity by itself is not enough. **THAT'S WHY PAUL SAYS 1 CORINTHIANS 13:3 ... If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing**). The Apostle's point is that when we are generous with others, it must come from a heart of love directed toward those in need. **Here Jesus warns that giving to the poor in order to be seen by men is an act of hypocrisy.** That's why He warns His

followers not to seek the praise of men. **This was one of the great sins of the Pharisees.** They loved to perform their acts of righteousness so that they could be noticed by others. Jesus rebuked them for turning everything into some sort of stunt to increase their own approval ratings. In these verses He pictures a wealthy Jew proceeding to the Temple to put his money in a special box to meet an urgent need. In front of him go the trumpeters playing their instruments to draw a crowd so they can take notice of the generosity of the giver. Jesus calls them hypocrites because they are only pretending to care about the poor and needy. In reality, they care much more for their public image.

While it is easy to take a few shots at the hypocrisy people who do this, modern day Christian hypocrisy is equally disturbing. We may not have trumpeters going before us to call attention to our acts of righteousness, but **anytime we call attention to our charitable deeds or do them to be seen by men we are still blowing our own trumpets.** Major Ian Thomas, the founder of Torchbearers International, warns, **“Make sure it is God’s trumpet you’re blowing. If it is only yours, it won’t wake the dead. It will simply disturb the neighbors.”** THAT’S WHY JESUS GIVES US THIS WORD OF CAUTION TO KEEP OUR GIVING TO OURSELVES, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COME TO CARING FOR THE POOR. OTHERWISE, IT’S JUST AN ACT OF HYPOCRISY (Review: A word of caution)

Then Jesus points out a Consequence (Matthew 6:2b – **Truly I say to you they have their reward**). The word translated “have” in this verse was used as a technical term in business transactions. **It meant to receive a sum in full and give a receipt for it.** Christ was saying that the Pharisees and others like them will receive a reward for any act of charity not born out of self-sacrificing love but impure motives. And what will it be? **They will be seen by men.** That will be their payment in full. Nothing else will come to them, except, of course, judgment on the last day. They are just like those of whom the Psalmist (17:14) says, **“they are men of this world whose portion is in this life.”** They do not (1) think about eternity despite the fact that God has set it in their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11 -- or (2) seek to bless their fellow man, but only better their positions and status in the community. To these Jesus warns, **“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? For what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (Matthew 16:25-26). Do not miss what He’s saying. ANYONE WHO ROUTINELY PUTS HIMSELF FIRST IS IN DANGER OF FORFEITING HIS SOUL. Instead, we would do well to follow the example of people like **Charles Spurgeon and his wife, Susanna.** According to a story in **The Chaplain** magazine,

they would sell, but refused to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, "You may have them if you pay for them." As a result, some people labeled the Charles and Susanna greedy and self-centered. They accepted the criticisms without defending themselves, and only after Mrs. Spurgeon died was the full story revealed: All the profits from the sale of eggs went to support two elderly widows. Because the Surgeons were not giving to be seen by men, they cared not what others thought.

Finally, Jesus issues a Command (Matthew 6:3-4 – But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you). To avoid hypocrisy, we would be wise to heed Christ's command ... let not your left hand know what your right is doing. AS SOON AS WE GIVE A GIFT, FORGET WE EVER GAVE IT! Since the right hand is normally the active hand (*at least for right-handed people*), we must be careful to make sure that our left hand takes no notice. In other words, not only are we to avoid telling others about our Christian charity, but we're not even to tell ourselves. **As John Stott says, "Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation."** This is very difficult to do because of the subtlety of the sinful human heart. We can keep it from others, and still choose to dwell on it until it becomes a source of pride. Giving, after all, is a real course of action that blesses real people in real need. It alleviates human suffering and should rightly flow from a heart of mercy. **But even an act of mercy can turn into an act of vanity.** To keep us from this, Jesus urges us to **keep our giving a secret from everyone, including ourselves.** The only way I can see us doing this is by forgetting it ... knowing that God will not. The Apostle Paul said, **"Whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what he is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Corinthians 5:9-10)."**

Applications: If you're wondering how you can incorporate this wise yet difficult teaching from our Lord into your life, I would suggest that it begins with a biblical theology of giving. Here's what I have in mind:

- **We give first to the glory of God.** Some people see Christ's words to give alms secretly and not for personal recognition as a contradiction to **Matthew 5:16 – "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven."** **In one case, we're told to be careful not to draw attention to ourselves (i.e., in showing mercy to the poor) and in the other to perform good works so that they can be seen by men.** Which is it? To

discover the answer, we have to keep in mind that Jesus is addressing different sins. He tells us to let our light shine because we are **prone to cowardice**. And then He tells us to beware of practicing our righteousness before men because we are **prone to vanity**. Both of these are overcome when we forget ourselves and ***seek the glory of God***. Then we will let our light shine for His glory and keep our giving in secret so that only He gets the glory.

- ***We give second to the needs of others.*** John the Apostle certainly would have supported this notion. In **1 John 3:17-18** he says, **“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in Him? Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.”** We give to address real need. James, the half brother of Jesus saw it the same way: **“If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”** (James 2:15-16). Giving as a self-sacrificial act to meet a legitimate need is thoroughly biblical. And since we, as Christians, are under the authority of God’s Word, we have no other course of action.
- ***We give third to the benefit of self.*** There are believers that struggle with the idea that God promises a reward to those who act out of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. They would say that we should neither want nor expect any recognition. **In fact, a few have even argued that God is inconsistent in rewarding the giver at all. He forbids us to act to receive praise from people, they say, yet encourages us to act to receive praise from Him.** For them, this is simply exchanging one form of egotism for another. **Isn’t it enough just to give for the sake of loving the one who receives the gift?** Not apparently to God! The problem for some is that they understand Jesus to be ***contrasting a secret gift and a public reward***. But that’s not what He’s talking about. He is ***contrasting*** a secret gift that **no man** sees or rewards with a **God who does both!** That’s why it is okay to **lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven** (Matthew 6:20).

Conclusion: So, if you want to live wisely, it would be good to remember our Lord’s caution – DON’T GIVE TO RECEIVE PRAISE FROM OTHERS; the consequence for those who do – THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD IN FULL; and the command TO GIVE IN SECRET and you’re your Heavenly Father reward you. When we maintain a biblical perspective on charity, it seems to work pretty well. **Pastor and author Kevin Miller** shares this story of the transformation God brought about in the life of his father, a man he thought might be incapable of self-sacrificing love: My dad ... spent most of his life working really hard to make money. But then he made a

tactical error. My mom and I were going to an Episcopal Church service, and he decided to come along. The priest was full of old-time religion, and he gave an altar call. Something connected with my dad that day, and he went forward and began to follow Jesus. He was 60-years-old. He began to read a small, blue King James Bible, and for the first time in his life, he began giving with real interest. He told me, in what was a rare sharing of his personal life, "***Kevin, I've started to tithe, and it's been a great adventure.***" My dad suffered a heart attack at age 70. He lay in a hospital bed for 5 days, and then he died. At the funeral home, they laid him in a casket with his navy blazer and a Lands' End tie. A woman I'd never seen came up to me and said, "***You don't know me, but I was in a bad marriage; my husband was beating me, and I needed to get out to save my life. But I didn't know what I would do to support myself. Your dad paid for me to go to junior college and get a degree, so I could be a dental hygienist. He paid for the whole thing, and nobody else knew about it. Now I have a job, and I'm making it. Your dad literally saved my life.***" This is the kind of giving that God blesses. Secret giving motivated by love that only He remembers and rewards.

CONNECTION GROUP DISCUSSION

Preparation: As the facilitator, you should read through the message thoughtfully and prayerfully. Ask the Lord to give you understanding of His Word so that you can lead a fruitful discussion.

Open the Group in Prayer

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Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean in your opinion to "practice your righteousness before other men"?
- Why do people sometimes feel compelled to do this? What is it that they are hoping to gain from it?

- Is it wrong to do good works in order to be seen by men? What about what Jesus says in Matthew 5:16 – that we should let our light shine before men in such a way that they may see our good works? Why does Jesus say it's okay in one circumstance and not in another?
- What did Jesus say was the reward for those who do righteous things in order to be seen by men?
- What does it mean to give so that your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing?
- What does God say He will do for those who follow this principle? Is it wrong to be motivated to give based on what you will receive in heaven? Why or why not?

Close in Prayer