

## **Secret Generosity**

John Ortberg was sitting after dinner with his six-year-old daughter when she noticed a Band-Aid on his arm and asked what happened. John said he had gotten a medical exam that day to get insurance. She asked, "What's insurance?" He said, "Well, Daddy loves you so much and loves his family so much, that he got this thing called insurance so that if anything ever happened to Daddy (which of course it won't, but if it did), the insurance company would provide \$250,000."

John said his six-year-old daughter's eyes got really big. She looked up at John and said, "A piece?" John says, "I thought, 'I'm not sure the right lesson is being communicated.'" <sup>i</sup>

In our Scripture today, Jesus is teaching a lesson on generosity that we might find unexpected as well. What He has to say is really quite pointed and it's pretty much the opposite of what our culture practices today. So, let's begin by examining:

### **I. The Danger of Publicized Generosity**

Jesus' teaching here in Matthew 6 is part of His famous Sermon on the Mount. He's talking here about three forms of "righteousness" or right living, living that God approves of. In chapter 6, He's talking about three basic behaviors of right living; giving, praying and fasting. In all three, He's urging us to do them "in secret." When you give, He says, "*...do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" When you pray, don't do it on the street corner, but *...go into your room, close the door and pray...* When you fast, *...wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen...* So, Jesus isn't just talking about being generous secretly but to pray in secret and fast in secret as well. Why? What's the danger He's trying to warn us about?

Our culture today considers self-love a characteristic of emotional health. Self-confidence is promoted at every level. Self-doubt is seen as a sign of weakness. Self-assurance is viewed as a necessary ingredient for success and self-doubt is seen as a symptom of failure. So, many of our schools openly list as a goal that all students would have "high self-esteem," believing that self-esteem is a critical ingredient to academic success or success in life in general.

But in recent international math-achievement tests, students were asked before they took the test how good they were at math. The American students ranked #1 in self-confidence in their own mathematical ability. The Korean students had the lowest self-confidence. So, who actually did better on the test? Not the Americans; they were actually last of eight countries. It was the Korean students, those with rock-bottom math "self-esteem," who took the top prize.

There have been thousands of studies done about the impact of self-esteem. Dr. Paul Vitz, professor emeritus of psychology at New York University writes:

*...no reliable evidence supports self-esteem scores as meaning much at all. There is no evidence that high self-esteem reliably causes anything. Indeed, a lot of people with little of it have achieved a great deal in one kind of activity*

or the other... Today, self-esteem has become very important because it is thought to be essential to happiness. Unless you love yourself you will not be happy. But to assume that we must love ourselves, that God will not love us as much as we need to be loved is a form of practical atheism.

...the whole focus on ourselves feeds unrealistic self-love. What psychologists often call narcissism... This narcissistic emphasis in American society... is a disguised form of self-worship... If such idolatry were not socially so dangerous, it would be embarrassing, even pathetic. Let's hope common sense makes something of a comeback. <sup>ii</sup>

Professor Vitz doesn't hold back, does he? Well, neither does Jesus! Jesus says that if we ignore His warning about publicizing our generosity, there will be an interesting outcome. He says:

**If you do (your generous acts before men), you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matt. 6:1b)**

What Jesus is specifically condemning is not just that you do something publicly but that you do it in such a way that YOU are "glorified," YOU are honored for doing it. Obviously, all generous acts can't be done secretly where no one will see them but if you bring a camera crew along with you, if you take fifty 'selfies' while you're serving at the homeless shelter, Jesus says, "That's it! No reward for you!" Why?

**...I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matt. 6:2b)**

Bible commentators, Davies and Allison, put it this way:

"They were not giving, but *buying*. They wanted the praise of men, they paid for it." <sup>iii</sup>

The danger of publicizing our generous acts is that doing so is evidence of the deadly sin of pride. Pride is usually considered the worst of sins because it is the sin that got Satan thrown out of heaven by God. Ezekiel 28:16-17 describes it:

**So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,  
And I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones.  
Your heart became proud on account of your beauty,  
And you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor.**

If this thing called pride is the reason Lucifer was thrown out of heaven, then isn't it something we should avoid at all costs? Isn't it something we should reject in all forms? I think that's exactly what Jesus is warning us about and, as odd as it may seem, even when people are doing a good thing like being generous to a needy person, the sin of pride can be present. This is what Jesus is describing in v.2:

**So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. (Matt. 6:2)**

There is grave danger, deadly danger in publicly broadcasting our giving. Secondly, we must see...

## **II. What Secret Generosity Accomplishes.**

Jesus isn't only issuing a warning, He's also announcing a blessing. It doesn't matter if Jesus is talking about giving to the needy, or praying or fasting; in all three teachings, Jesus uses exactly the same phrase to describe what will happen if you do any of them "in secret." The phrase is this: (Matt. 6: 4, 6, 18)

**...your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**

The first important truth here is that there's no such thing as keeping anything secret from God. We can hide things from people, but not from God. We can trick people into thinking our motives are right and pure, but we can't trick God. And on the positive side, you might think that no one saw you do that act of kindness – and perhaps no person saw you; but God saw you. And Jesus promises:

**...Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**

(Matt. 6:4)

So, the first important truth is that all we do is seen by God.

But there's a second important truth here as well. It is this: when we give secretly, the recipient's heart will be focused on God, not us. Now, this might be because you do your act of generosity so anonymously that you're physically invisible – you drop off a dinner for someone when they're not home, for example. But it also might be that you are physically present, they physically see you, so you're not invisible, but you are transparent. They see through you and focus on Jesus.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this about our Christmas drama *The Gift*, but there's no bulletin. There's no listing of the names of anybody on stage. Why? Because while it's impossible for them to be invisible and do the play, they still want to be TRANSPARENT!!! They want you and everyone who comes to see the real Peter, the real Mary, the real Jesus!! All the cast members in *The Gift*, though they are standing in the middle of a spotlight, are still giving of themselves "in secret," so that only Christ is visible. That's what really is accomplished when we give "in secret." People see Jesus more clearly. Finally...

### **III. Secret Generosity Produces Something Good in Us.**

Secret generosity loosens our grip on that which is not ours. (repeat) What do I mean by that?

I read about a man this week who was at a baseball game with his young daughter and she was getting bored with the pace of baseball, so she said to her dad, "Can I have some money to get something to eat?"

He said, "Sure," and thinking she was meaning like a hotdog, he gave her five dollars. She was gone a few minutes and came back with five dollars worth of Skittles! At first, her dad was kind of disgusted by that much candy but as his daughter started to chow down, it started looking pretty good. So, he said, "Hey, honey, can I have a few?"

To his great surprise, she said, "No, they're mine!"

Now, let's think about this for a minute. Jesus came into this world disguised as one of us. He was, in fact, the Creator of the world which means He owned it. But He put on flesh like a coat to disguise Himself. John 1: 1, 3, 14:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... The Word (Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**

But we, who were made by Him, told Him to "get lost. This world, this life is mine!" Have you ever made anything and then it rejected you? Can you imagine

making a chair that won't let you sit in it? How would you feel? What would you do to that chair? How did Jesus react to our rejection of Him? Watch this! Phil. 2:5-8:

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness,  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself and became obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!**

Wow! WOW!!! What do we call that? That's real humility!

At a recent high-profile event in Washington, D.C., a dinner guest mistook Four-Star Army General Peter Chiarelli for one of the waiters. Chiarelli, the No. 2-ranking general in the U.S. Army hierarchy, was in full dress uniform. Apparently, the guest, who was seated, only saw his striped pants and assumed he was a waiter so she asked him to get her a glass of wine. Rather than take offense, he went off, got a glass of wine and returned and served her. When she looked up and saw who it was, she was mortified and apologized profusely. Then, showing even more class, General Chiarelli invited her to his family's home for dinner. <sup>iv</sup>

What is it that secret generosity does in us? It humbles us, it loosens our grip on that which is not really ours to begin with. And when we are humble, we start looking a lot like Jesus Christ. But let me be clear about something. Though you are looking more and more like Christ to Christ, it might not appear that way to other people. In other words, there might be some instances where your secret generosity doesn't look like generosity at all to others.

Charles Spurgeon, the great nineteenth-century Baptist preacher, and his wife used to sell eggs from their chickens. They would sell them but refused to give any of them away, not even to close relatives. They would say, "You may have them if you pay for them." Well, as you can imagine, this gave them quite a reputation for being greedy and stingy. They accepted the criticism without defending themselves and it was only after Mrs. Spurgeon's death that the full story came out: All the profits from the sale of the eggs went to two elderly widows whom they were "secretly" supporting. Because the Spurgeons wanted the widows to thank God and not them, they endured the attacks for decades in silence. <sup>v</sup>

Yes, in all three categories of righteous behavior listed here in Matthew 6 – giving, prayer and fasting – in all three it says that the Father will reward you. And yes, as we saw last week, the Father says that He will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing so great you won't be able to hold it. But you know what I think? I think the best blessing of secret generosity is that when we practice it, it has the power to turn one more heart toward God. That's the greatest blessing.

So, will you do it? Will you join hundreds of people last week who said, "Yes!" to our call to give generously to our Grace and Mercy Campaign, so that our first multisite campus can be launched in a community where tens of thousands of people need God's grace and mercy? Today, we have another way you can get involved in secret generosity. We have Free Gift cards. Do you know what those are? They're cards like this which you can use to secretly pay for someone's coffee at

Dunkin' Donut, or fill an expired parking meter, or if you know of a family that's struggling financially, drop off a grocery gift card. You just include this Free Gift card with your generosity and it will point them to the Grace and Mercy of Christ. This card says:

***THIS IS A FREE GIFT***

*There are no strings attached. I am a follower of Jesus Christ. Because God has been so generous to me, I want to share that generosity with others. God really does care about what's happening in your life. I hope this brightens your day!*

Please take one of these cards on your way out and pray about how you might use it sometime before the end of the year. Just think about that; what if we all did one secret act of generosity? That would be 2,000 signposts pointing people in our region to the Grace and Mercy of God. Who knows how God might use that in someone's life?

And what about right here, in this room? Is there anyone here today who hasn't entered into a personal friendship with Jesus Christ like Melissa was talking about in the video earlier? If you haven't, you could today. You do that in four steps:

1. Repent – Stop the direction you're going in life.
2. Confess – Agree with God that you have rebelled and done many unrighteous things.
3. Ask to be Forgiven - This is the key! I John 1:9 *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*
4. Receive – Receive the Helper from Heaven, the Holy Spirit Jesus promised. John 20:22 *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*

That's how anyone can become a forgiven friend of Jesus Christ. If you've never done it, why not do it now? Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> John Ortberg, "The Ten Financial Commandments," PreachingToday.com 9/02/2013

<sup>ii</sup> Prof. Paul C. Vitz, "The Problem with Self-Esteem." A talk given in New Westminster, British Columbia on Sept. 29, 1995.

<sup>iii</sup> W. D. Davies, D. C. Allison, Jr.; *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 582

<sup>iv</sup> PreachingToday.com "News That Illustrates: March 14, 2011"

