

Should giving always be kept secret?

By Randy Alcorn

Over the last ten years, I've been suggesting that we learn how to share testimonies about giving in order to help the body of Christ grow in the grace of giving. I once objected to this type of disclosure – as many still do – because Jesus says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:3-4).

In Matthew 6, Jesus is dealing with motives, something the religious elite often failed to examine. He starts with the broad category of “acts of righteousness,” then moves to three such acts – giving, prayer, and fasting. This is not an exhaustive list. The idea is that any “act of righteousness” (or badge of spirituality) can accord us spiritual status in the eyes of others.

The most important verse, the one that sets up the entire passage, is the first: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them” (Matthew 6:1). The operative phrase is “to be seen by them.” This is *not* a prohibition against others becoming aware of our giving, prayers, fasting, Bible study, feeding the poor, missions work, or church attendance. Rather, it's a command not to do these things in order to receive the recognition of men. Jesus continues, “If you do [that is, if you do good things to win human approval], you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” The problem isn't doing good things with reward in mind – it's looking for the reward from men rather than from God.

Let's look at the verses we started with: “So when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (Matthew 6:3-4). This verse cannot mean that we should- or even that we can – be unaware of our own giving. Any more than we could be unaware of our praying, fasting, Bible reading, or evangelism. To suggest that it does would remove the discerning, thoughtful elements of giving, praying, fasting, and all other spiritual disciplines. This is a figure of speech. It's hyperbole, a deliberate overstatement, which would have been immediately clear to the hearers. That Christ's command cannot be literal is self evident, because a hand lacks the ability to know anything, and besides the person's brain would know what both the right hand and the left hand were doing.

So what's Christ's point? Do your giving quietly, unobtrusively. Don't cough loudly just as you're giving. Drop your check in the offering or send it in the mail without drawing attention to yourself. Give in a spirit of humility and simplicity, as an act of worship. Don't give in order to get your name on a list. Don't dwell on your gift, fixating on it. Building a mental shrine to yourself. In other words, don't make a big production out of it, either in view of others or in the privacy of your own heart.

But can this verse mean it's always wrong for others to know that we've given? No. Acts 2:45 tells of Christians selling possessions and giving to the needy. These people knew each other. If you no longer had your prize camels, coat, or oxcart, and Caleb ben Judah did, people would figure it out. Acts 4:32-35 tells us about more people liquidating assets. Most names, which would mean nothing to us, aren't recorded, but they were surely known at the time.

But some givers were named even for our benefit. Acts 4:36-37 tells us that Barnabas sold a field and brought the money to the feet of the apostles. If Barnabas was looking for status and prestige, his motive was wrong. But it's certainly false to say that it was wrong for others to be made aware of his

gift, because Scripture itself reveals it! Barnabas's act of generosity was commonly known among the believers and was publicly and permanently recorded in Acts. This was good and right, and did *not* violate Matthew 6's warning about bad motives.

Did public recognition tempt others to give for the wrong motives? Absolutely, as we see in the very next passage (Acts 5:1-11). Ananias and Sapphira gave for the wrong reasons. Then they lied to make their gift look better than it was. But the possible abuse of something doesn't nullify its legitimacy. The body of Christ can benefit from seeing open models of generous giving such as Barnabas's. The world can benefit from seeing the generosity of the Church as an attractive witness to the grace of Christ. The risks of disclosing a person's giving are sometimes outweighed by the benefits of disclosure.

If Christ established a principle in Matthew 6: 2-4 that other people should never know what someone gives, then the members of the early Church violated it in Acts 4:36-37. There's no way around it. Numbers 7 lists the names of donors to the tabernacle. 1 Chronicles 29 tells exactly how much the leaders of Israel gave to build the temple, then it says, "The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord" (1 Chronicles 29:9). Philemon 1:7 is likely a reference to Philemon's generous giving, and 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 is definitely a reference to the Macedonian's generous giving. As we seek to understand the meaning of Matthew 6:2-4, we must consider the full counsel of Scripture.

Earlier in the same sermon in which he warns against flaunting your giving and prayers and fasting, Jesus says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Here we are *commanded* to let men see our good deeds – and not to hide them. Giving is a good deed, isn't it? This passage and Matthew 6 balance each other. There's a time for giving to be seen, but only at the right time and for the right reasons.

The body of Christ needs to let its light shine before men, and we need models of every spiritual discipline. We dare not let the risk of our pride keep us from faithfully disclosing God's work in this area of our lives. And if we must be silent to avoid our own pride, we should support others who can humbly testify to Christ's faithfulness in their giving. The church has plenty of examples of consumers – we need to see examples of givers. Hebrews 10:24 tells us to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." We can only be spurred on by what we can see.

R. G. LeTourneau was a great inspiration to me. He gave away 90% of his income, motivating me to raise the bar of my giving. I'm eternally grateful that he told his giving story.

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