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Matthew 6:1 - 6:4



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg focuses on Matthew 6:1-4 and the importance of giving to the poor without seeking recognition or admiration. Jesus warns against performing charitable deeds for the sake of others' opinions, as this will result in no reward from God. He emphasizes the need for giving generously without self-consciousness, as the ultimate goal should be to love and serve God and others, rather than acquiring a reputation or status within a community.

Transcript

We're turning now to Matthew 6, and I would like to read verses 1-4. Alright, well, Jesus is talking about giving to the poor, for the most part. Charitable deeds are when you're helping the poor with some financial assistance, and Jesus said there's more than one way to do that.

But one thing is very clear, Jesus made it clear, you are supposed to do that. He did not say, if you think about giving charitable deeds, then do it in this way. He said, when you do your charitable deeds.

He's talking to his disciples, and obviously he is assuming that that is exactly what they will be doing. The question is, will they be doing it rightly? Will they be doing it with the right spirit and in a way that pleases God? That is what the teaching of Jesus is there to ascertain. But Jesus does not have any question in his mind at all, whether the disciples will be giving to the poor.

It's a given, as it were, that Christians will give to the poor. This was not only commanded in the Old Testament, but even more so in the New. In the Old Testament, the law itself required the Jews to be generous to the poor.

In Deuteronomy 15, in verses 7 through 11, Moses said, If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates of your land which the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Then it says, in verse 10, You shall surely give to him that your heart

should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land.

Therefore I commend you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and to your needy in your land. So Moses told the Jewish people that although he didn't say how much they were to give or to which poor they were supposed to give, he just said it was very important to care for the poor. And that if you have that with which you can benefit a poor man, then you should do so.

And if you don't, then you are grieving God. And if you do the right thing, then you will have a reward from God. Now Jesus said that too.

Jesus said if you give your alms in the proper way, then your father who sees in secret will himself reward you openly. He does not say what the nature of the reward will be, and that's not really the issue. The issue is that there is a reward in being generous.

There is a reward in giving. In Matthew chapter 19, in verse 21, Jesus was speaking to the rich young ruler and said to him, If you would be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me. Now Jesus said to this man, go and sell what you have and give to the poor.

That's doing a charitable deed. He also said you will have treasure in heaven. Giving to the poor, according to Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament, is a way of laying up a treasure for oneself in heaven.

Now Jesus later on in Matthew chapter 6, we will find actually saying, Do not lay up treasures for yourself on earth, but lay up treasure in heaven. And we now see how this is done. This is done by giving to the poor.

Now in Matthew 6.1, he says, When you do your charitable deeds before men, don't do them to be seen by men, otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So there is a reward from God to those who are generous, but if you are simply putting on a show of generosity, and you're not really generous, and your heart doesn't really pity the poor, but you're doing it because it's a religious duty or because you want to have the reputation of being a generous person, a philanthropist or whatever, then there will be no reward from God in that. But if you do it in the way in which God prescribes, and with a right heart and with sincerity, then he makes it very clear there is a reward to be had in heaven.

Now giving, therefore, is part of the Christian's obligation. Giving in order to be seen by men is absolutely forbidden. The Pharisees, or the hypocrites of which he speaks here, he said they sound a trumpet before them in the synagogues and the streets before they give a gift.

This is generally understood to mean that the Pharisees, when they were about ready to give to a poor man or to put some money in the temple treasury, would actually have a trumpeter sound a reveille or something to get people's attention. And when people turned around to see what the noise was all about, he would then drop his money in so that every eye would see him. And then he had what he wanted, that is the reputation among men of being generous.

Now Jesus said that men who did this are hypocrites. That's the word he used in verse 2. Don't do this like the hypocrites do. The word hypocrite is actually just a transliteration of the Greek word, which is something like hypocrites, and it means an actor in a play.

Now when we talk about persons being religious hypocrites, of course we're using a very common and familiar term. In fact, it's so common that some people simply think of the word hypocrite as always applying to people who are religious. But the word was not a religious word in Jesus' usage.

He used it, he applied it to religious people. But in the language that Matthew wrote in in Greek, the word hypocrite was not a word that usually applied to religious things. It was a word from the play, from the stage.

It was a word for an actor in a drama. If somebody is a professional actor in a Greek drama and you called him a hypocrite, you would not be insulting him. You're simply using the name for what he does.

That's what he is. A hypocrite was an actor in a play. It had no negative connotations unless plays had negative connotations.

Now of course there were times when the Greek plays were so corrupt that among Christians, just the very going to a drama or playing in a drama would suggest that a person was corrupt. But among those who were in the dramas, hypocrite was simply the title for what they did. It was not an insult.

However, when you talk to a person who is not making his living as a professional actor and is putting on airs as being a very religious man and you call him a play actor, you call him a hypocrite, that of course is a very confrontational thing to do. Because what you are saying is that this man who is in not any sense representing himself as an actor is every bit as much an actor as if he was playing in a play. Now what do we know about people who play in a drama? Well, a drama is generally speaking a story, made up or real, where persons who are someone in real life play the role of someone else.

They play the role of one of the characters in the drama. And even if the drama is about people who really live, usually the people who act in the role of those people are not the same person. The person who is an actor is assuming a persona that is not his own.

He is putting on an identity that isn't really him. Now this is not really in itself said to be

wrong in scripture for a man to do this as a role, because an actor, although he is faking, that is, he is pretending that he is someone else, he knows that his entire audience realizes this is what he is doing. They are at a show, they are at a play, they don't expect the actor to be the person he really is in real life, they expect him to be in character.

And therefore, although he is, as it were, living a lie on the stage, he is not really trying to deceive anybody. He is pretending to be someone that he is not, but everybody knows he is pretending and a good time is had by all. The problem is when you take a person who is a religious leader like the Pharisees and say you are doing the very same thing.

You simply have put on a persona that is not who you really are. You have a stage character that you play when you are in public, and that character is you are religious, you are generous, you pray, you are exact in religious duties. You are playing a role of a religious man, but you are not religious in your heart.

In your real life, and your family probably knows this because they live with you in your real life, you are simply as corrupt as everybody else. And when you act so holy, you are simply putting on airs. Now, for Jesus to say that to the predominant religious rulers of his day was quite a startling thing to say.

I am sure it was one of those things that got him in trouble with them for which he later got crucified. But he is saying that if you are trying to get attention for your giving, then you are not really generous at all. You are trying to milk it for something for yourself, namely accolades from man.

Now, Jesus turns around and says to his disciples, when you give to the poor, don't do that. In fact, he says don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Now, of course, there is no literalness in this idiom, because your left hand doesn't know anything anyway.

You don't have to conceal anything from your hand, since your hand doesn't have any power of perception or of knowing anything. What Jesus is using is sort of a figure of speech, a hyperbole, which basically is saying be so secretive that those nearest you would not even necessarily know that you gave. Even other parts of your body wouldn't know what you've done.

Now, of course, as I say, that's an exaggeration, but the point is to make an emphasis on the way in which this is done without any ostentation at all. Now, there are some today who read this passage, and they are very scrupulous about it. And they feel that, well, when I give to the poor or when I give to the church, I'd better be totally secretive.

I mean, that certainly seems to be what Jesus says. And therefore, I will never let anyone know what I am giving. In order to do that, they often will adopt a policy of never giving a check. They'll only give cash.

And the reason, of course, is because the check would have their name on it, and everyone would know, at least those who handle the checks and the offering or whatever, would know where the gift came from. And that being so, they feel would violate this whole issue of secrecy and privacy in giving that Jesus speaks about. Now, I have nothing critical to say about those who take this position.

If people want to give anonymously and feel that that's how they can best fulfill what Jesus said here, that is fine. In fact, it may be necessary for some people to do it in order to avoid the errors that Jesus is trying to steer his disciples beyond. That is, the error of being self-conscious about giving and wondering if anyone was impressed by how much I gave and so forth.

If those things are in your mind, then to be absolutely secretive would be entirely right. However, it should be made clear that Jesus did not imply that you have sinned if your gift is not entirely secret. The real issue here is your motivation for giving.

Jesus said in verse 1, Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them. Now, that phrase, to be seen by them, tells your motive. Did you give this money so people would see it? Did you give this gift so people would admire you? Well, then you violated this.

But if you gave a gift, and let's say there was no way to keep it a secret, or it was just something that was spontaneous and you were not alone and other people happened to know you did it, but you in no sense were motivated by a desire to be seen by men, then you have not violated this. Jesus simply gives an extreme example of not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing, as if to say, do it in such a way that no one could ever know. But this is not a standard that the Bible commands in all respects, nor that Jesus would.

Jesus gave himself for us, and he didn't do that in a totally secret way. He did it publicly on the cross. In the New Testament, in the book of Acts, there were many people who gave to the poor.

There were quite a few poor in the church of Jerusalem. And people who had houses and lands would sell what they had, and they'd bring it and lay it at the apostles' feet. Obviously, this would make it very evident to the apostles, at least, who was giving.

One man in particular in the book of Acts, in chapter 4, is named Barnabas. We're specifically told that he sold some property and brought it and gave it to the poor of the church. Now, obviously, that wasn't a total secret.

The early church knew about it. It went on record. Now, was this wrong? No.

What Jesus is talking about here is motives. It is not so much that Jesus is dictating or legislating methods as he is revealing motives. Now, that doesn't mean that what he

says about method is absolutely unimportant, because in many cases, you cannot give with the right motive purely unless you do it secretly.

But maybe that's not always the case. If you happen to just be a generous person, you may be giving right and left all the time, and you can't just keep it a secret all the time because you're not always alone, and you shouldn't feel awkward about that. The point is, though, that many times, at least in the minds of some persons who give, if you give a generous gift and you know others will think, oh my, that was a generous thing he did, then it's hard to do so without being self-conscious about what other people are thinking.

And if you can't do so without being self-conscious about what other people are thinking, then be as secretive as you can. And then you certainly won't be thinking about what other people think, because they won't know. And that's what Jesus, I think, is saying here.

That God wants us to give not because other people will then be impressed that we give, but he wants us to give because the persons who are in need are in fact in need, and because we love them. You see, all of the Sermon on the Mount simply boils down to one thing, and that is love God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, and your neighbors yourself. Love is the whole of the teaching of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount is simply an expansion on that. Not addition to it, but an explanation of it. What does it mean to love? What does it mean to love God with all your heart? What does it mean to love your neighbors yourself? Well, for example, when you give to the poor, you do it because you love them, and because you love God, not because you love the approval and the impressed state of things that people will hold you in honor, and so forth.

And so your love is pure toward God and toward man, and it's not just another way to indulge your self-love, and your love of attention, and your love of fame, and your love of people's admiration. You see, self-love is a very, very deceptive thing. And it is not good.

No matter what anyone tells you about your need to love yourself, the Bible does not teach that people need to love themselves. The Bible teaches that people do love themselves. They do by nature, and that is not necessarily to their credit.

That people love themselves is a result, very largely, of the fall. And so we always tend to look out for ourselves naturally. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians chapter 5, said, No man yet ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.

A man loves himself, and no one has ever really hated himself. Now, sometimes people have been disappointed with themselves, but that's a different issue. You don't get disappointed with someone that you don't have high hopes for.

It's because you love yourself so much that you're disappointed that you don't measure

up to what you think you should, and you don't attain to what you wished you had attained. Anyway, that could get us off onto a tangent. The point I'm making is that there are two ways to live.

One is loving self, and the other is loving God and others. Now, loving God and others is really what the whole law and the prophets and the whole teaching of Jesus is about. You should do whatever you do because you love God and because you love others.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbors yourself. This is all there is of true religion as far as God is concerned. There are only two religions in the world.

There is this one where you love God completely and love your neighbors, you love yourself. And there's the other one. Now, what is the other one? The other is self-love, and all religion that is not pure is self-love.

If you do religious things or ostensibly generous things or other kinds of good deeds, and you do so to be seen by people, then it is out of self-love that you do it. You're serving a religion other than that of Christ. And what you're doing essentially is seeking to get brownie points maybe before God but also before men.

And what you're hoping is to acquire for yourself a reputation and status in the community. And this is because you love yourself. You're serving yourself.

What Jesus is saying to the disciples is that the hypocrites of his day, the Pharisees, they were very religious, but their religion was self-serving. They simply used religion as a means of bolstering their own reputation and their own fan club, as it were. Now, if a person did what Jesus said, let us say you gave a great deal to the poor, but you never let anyone know it in any way at all.

You know, you wouldn't have much of a fan club about that. Because the people who you gave to didn't know who gave it, so they can't appreciate you for it. And your friends in church don't know you did it, so they can't hold you up as an example of a great saint and ask you to come give your testimony to encourage others to give to the church and so forth.

You simply would, only you and God would know about it. Now, there wouldn't be much reward from man in that. In fact, the very people that you helped, because they don't know it was you that helped them, they might not even like you.

And you might even be in a relationship with people that you have done a great deal to help, but they don't know it, and they don't like you, and they're unkind to you, and so forth and so on. And little do they know how much you've benefited them. Obviously, that would take great humility and great love of others rather than love of self to maintain that kind of a walk where you're showing generosity to persons who don't even

know that you're helping them, and no one else knows it either, and the only person who knows it, and the only one who could possibly appreciate you for it is God.

Now, you see, what Jesus is teaching is the only kind of religious activity that matters to God is the kind that is done through a motive that only God matters. That is, only God's approval matters. If your religion is done with any motivation that includes, well, if my religious friends appreciate me or think well of me, then that's a religion that doesn't matter to God.

It's the hypocrite's religion. You see, there's two religions. There's a religion of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, and your neighbor as yourself, and then there's the religion of loving yourself.

And all other religion but that which Christ taught and that which his spirit inspires in the believer, all other religion is simply a species of self-love, which is that religion which is contrary to God. So it's interesting, ironic really, that a person could give what looks like a very generous gift to the poor and yet be anything but generous. They can be doing so only to enrich themselves in the eyes of men with the commodity many people want.

Some people are motivated by one wrong motivation and some by another, but there are a great many whose motivation is to be liked, to be admired, to be influential, to be popular, even to be famous. This kind of motivation, a man will not enter the kingdom of God with this kind of motivation. The one thing that Jesus said you must have is a desire to please your Father, which is in heaven, and he's watching.

And sometimes the only way to make sure your heart is that pure is to be just as secretive as Jesus said here and make sure that no one even knows what you've done, because that's the only way sometimes that you can know for sure that your heart has the right motivation and that you're not doing it to be seen of men. At the same time, it would be wrong, I think, to press this so far as to condemn all giving that was not totally secret, because it is the motive that Jesus is talking about here. And there were examples in Scripture of giving that was not entirely secret, but the motivation is what Jesus is talking about here.

The Pharisees had one motivation. The true follower of Jesus has to have the opposite, or else his righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Next time we'll talk about Jesus' teaching in the next section on prayer.