

Pride

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- [0:00] Now, turn back with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 6. We're going to focus on this short section that I read this short while ago.
- We spent a bit of time looking at Matthew chapter 5, and we've reached chapter 6. And the focus of the passage tonight is, as it says, at the start of your chapter, they're giving, giving to the needy.
- And so, as I mentioned again, Jesus, in much of what he speaks about in this sermon, is dealing with ethics or behavior, the way that we behave and the way that we conduct ourselves. And so our focus tonight is on giving.
- Now, giving is wonderful, isn't it? We love to get stuff, but we should love to be able to give to people. Isn't that a wonderful opportunity when you know that you're able to help somebody?
- So I want to just say that giving is great, but I also want to say this, that giving is potentially deadly. And what I mean by that is, being able to give, being able to support others or be generous, give alms, as it talks about in this passage here, or in loads of different ways, we can give in many different ways than many different types of people, many different circumstances.
- [1:19] Can be, okay, can be, if you like, at the epicenter of our potential to feel self-righteous. And down the road from that is works righteousness.
- So that's why I say it's potentially deadly. Giving is wonderful, and we should give. We're called to give. We're called to be generous givers. And in the way that we act and serve others, that's what we're to do.
- But it has huge potential for us to think, I gave so much this month, aren't I so wonderful and so generous and such a good Christian or a good human being?
- God must surely love me more than other people. So that's just something to outline right at the start, because it's behind what Jesus is talking about here.
- Jesus is talking to the people who are listening to him, and if you like the wider culture, as he introduces in verse one about what he calls acts of righteousness, and giving is one of these acts of righteousness.
- [2:21] So there are three things that he goes on to talk about in the whole chapter. Obviously, we're just looking at the first little section here. Three things that were, if you like, kind of traditional religious activities.
- And the first one, as we were going to talk about, is giving, and then he goes on to talk about prayer, and then he goes on to talk about fasting. Okay, so these are three things that he talks about, three ways of behaving. That Jesus wants to address, and he affirms them.
- So he doesn't come and say, yeah, this is of the old covenant, now I want to teach you a new way of living, not at all. Giving is hugely important. Praying and fasting likewise.
- So Jesus affirms these things. What Jesus is concerned with is the motivation behind the way that people are giving. And that's what we've seen so much of in this sermon, isn't it?

This lurking in people's hearts that motivates them in what they do, or how they speak, or how they behave towards one another. So what we can say, really in sort of summarizing what Jesus says in this passage, is he moves, he wants people to think in terms of their giving.

- [3:28] He wants to move it from the public to the private sphere, because people were doing it very ostentatiously to show off. So he moves that to the private sphere. Now if we're thinking about it being in terms of heart motivation, it's always a heart issue, whether you do it publicly or privately.

Because that's the issue, isn't it? You could do something privately, because you want to be just thankful and do something quietly. But even if you do something very publicly and ostentatiously, that's a heart issue also, because maybe the root of what's going on in your heart is pride.

So he's dealing with the heart of the people that he's speaking to, and so it calls us tonight to think as we apply this and as we go through this short passage and think about it for ourselves, our own hearts.

That's where we have to go tonight. We have to think about our own hearts and the way that we act in situations like this.

So I want to, just looking at verse two, just in starting off here, just thinking about the way that Jesus describes what he sees and what's happening. I want to think about giving maybe more broadly, and particularly the whole area of philanthropy.

- [4:41] So philanthropy, the potential of people to be really good humans and love other humans, really lavishly, and in a really great way, give lots of money, set up foundations, all these kind of things.

I think that's a wonderful thing to do, and nothing I'm going to say tonight is going to be against anything like that. But again, going back to what I said about the potential for giving to lead us down a dangerous path, surely to be a philanthropist, particularly a public, well-known celebrity philanthropist, must be even more difficult to deal with as a sinful human being.

It came up a bit this week. Maybe it was because I was thinking about this anyway, but I was reading the news a few times. It came up with regard to the Mark Zuckerberg thing, the guy who owns Facebook.

He had the blessing of knowing the birth of his first child this week, and he and his wife decided to give away lots of money, which is good. But it was really interesting the way that the media responded.

There was lots of debate about the good and the bad of it. And then a particular newspaper I was reading, there was actually a kind of debate between two columnists as to whether what he was doing was good or not.

- [5:56] It was really interesting the way people responded to this very high-profile act of generosity. All kinds of motives were called into question. And I read this about Taylor Swift, who's a singer, in case you didn't know.

Apparently she's given some money away recently. And the newspaper article said this about her. Taylor Swift has continued, now the language is really interesting here. Taylor Swift has continued her campaign to be named POP's most generous person with a donation of \$50,000 to the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

So she gave money away, and the way that it was interpreted was, a campaign to be named POP's most generous person. And then it goes on, Swift has been generous with her money before, earning a reputation as POP's most high-profile philanthropist.

Now, I have no desire to question Taylor Swift's motives. What she did in giving money away is a good thing. But isn't it interesting that immediately there's a kind of slant put on, anybody's very public act of generosity like that.

Does she really want to be seen as a high-profile philanthropist? Imagine yourself, just for a minute, being the person with a huge bank account, huge bank account, and being the one standing in front of the photographers with one of those ridiculous, massive checks, and you get to write on it your name to X Foundation, half a million dollars.

[7:28] And everybody's taking your photo, everybody can see how much you've given, and it's reported in lots of different broadsheets and in lots of different media sites.

How hard must that be not to start to feel good about yourself? And at some level, in some way, to receive praise and thanks and a claim for a good deed, which should be done, but when giving like that is done very publicly, and where lots of people know about it, it just, when we're sinful and our tendency so often is to seek praise and approval and a claim and to be justified for our lives and in front of our fellow human beings, how hard must that be?

Having said that, that's probably not your life, is it? But not many of us here are multimillionaires holding huge checks for charity. So what we need to do tonight is think, okay, there is that situation possible where people can give lots of money, and potentially what we're going to look at in just a minute, in this passage, people were being very ostentatious and they may have been very wealthy, they may have been able to give away lots of money, but how does it affect you, giving, being generous?

We need to think more broadly than just this being about money and big money and charity donations. In what areas of your life are you able to give financially or just practically or serving people or showing the love or showing hospitality, which is an act of giving and an act of being generous to other people?

And in what way are those areas specific to you, what ways do they have the potential to make you feel proud? You see there's always a way in which what we do and the way in which we can act and live ethically can potentially lead us to feel big about ourselves.

[9:25] And you see that it's important to think, you may think, oh that's just nitpicking, it's important surely just to give, just focus on the giving or the serving or the hospitality, absolutely. And we're never going to say don't do it because you might get caught out feeling proud.

But we have to be aware of the way that our hearts can lead us astray. And because it's so distracting, isn't it? It's so distracting.

Any kind of temptation that makes us look at ourselves and feel good and feel better than other people and think that God will think we're more impressive this week than last week and so we were more accepted than we were last week is dangerous.

And being aware of that is important. And we see that as, turn to the passage into verse 2, as Jesus describes these people, these hypocrites. So he's very harsh with them.

Jesus is describing people perhaps who'd kind of lost it ethically. And the way they were describing was just, they were behaving, was deliberately proud.

[10:31] So verse 2, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues. So they were arranging their own press conferences if you like.

If these were the people who were able to give lots of money to the poor, they loved it. They loved the cameras. They said, yeah, we'll stand here, you ever get this on the biggest news channels? Everybody look at us, we are so wealthy and so good.

And it was rotten, really, the way that they were behaving and the state of their hearts. And they may have been doing it thinking that they were very good religious people, but Jesus exposes them as hypocrites.

So hypocrites, the word comes from kind of the world of theater, those who wear masks. They wanted to appear one thing, but underneath they were just another thing altogether. They wanted to appear so generous and so good religiously, but they were anything but.

And so Jesus exposes these people and criticizes the behavior and says, be very, very careful of living that way.

[11:37] Because what are they doing? See, when we think about it, what happens when they give in this way? They're giving, but they're taking at the same time.

They're saying, here, have all this money and give me lots of attention and praise. And so they're giving, but they're accruing exactly the same time. I guess you could think about it as being like any good chancellor will do at budget time.

You know, when the budget comes along, what does the chancellor want to do? He wants to make cuts and he wants to appear generous at the same time. And what he wants or she wants to happen in terms of the news and the media is for the good news to get out there and for nobody really to notice the bad news and all the cuts that they're making.

And so really, and quite obviously, because this is politics, the priority is what makes the news. They're seeking to make announcements about the budget, perhaps make some cuts that aren't so well known about why so that the news, so that the acclaim or the approval that they get is good.

These people were making announcements about their giving and they were performing their giving in order to get, in order to get status, so that the people in their society would rank them high, so that they would feel ranked high and so that they would feel more justified.

[13:11] And that's the danger of this way of acting. So Jesus exposes this, you see that at the end of verse two. Don't do this in the synagogues and in the streets that they may be praised by others.

That's what they want. They want to be praised. So there's the warning and the exposure that Jesus gives to this faulty way of acting and giving.

What does Jesus say that should happen? Verse three. Jesus says, but when you give to the needy, so do give to the needy, you know, he says when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

So that's quite a famous phrase. You probably, even if you're maybe somebody tonight who doesn't go to church very often, you've maybe heard that before. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

In other words, give discreetly. Give quietly. Don't trumpet it so that everybody can see. Now immediately I think, you take a step back from that just for a minute and think about it.

[14:21] And again, think about the way in which you are faced with situations where you do want to give and we should give, but the subtle pull on our hearts is to receive a claim.

The question is how not to seek a claim, how not to give, even subtly in a kind of ostentatious way, how to be able to give without feeling that grasping sense, that craving for approval that we often, they can often kind of know away at us so subtly.

How do we do that? Well, I think behind what Jesus is saying, and when we really think about the way that the gospel changes our lives and those, and being those who are followers of Jesus, changes our lives, always considering how the gospel changes our lives, is recognizing, first of all, that we're so often tempted to seek or to have the approval of others.

That's just a fact, I think. Maybe some of us are tempted by that more than others or in different ways, but we're so often tempted to receive the approval of others, even before we seek approval from God.

But if we think about what Jesus is saying here, and this thinking this through just for a minute helps us think about how we can deal with this. Jesus says, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people.

[15:46] Now that sounds on the surface, doesn't it, like something that we would do to earn points from God. It sounds like talking about kind of works righteousness situation, your works of righteousness.

But actually the way, and that's actually the way that many philosophies, religions work, isn't it? A religion will say to its followers, prove yourself by your ethics.

Depending on how much goodness you've accrued over the course of your life, equals your results in your final destiny. The Gospel says something very different, because we know that the Gospel says, where Jesus is going in his mission in life, is the cross.

And so the Gospel says very differently, Jesus says, I have done it. That fulfillment of righteousness, Jesus says, I have done it. So Christians then, you and I are people who trust in another's righteousness.

We trust in Jesus' finished righteousness. We trust in his finished work. So it can't be then about us accruing acts of righteousness, because that contradicts the Gospel.

[16:55] It can't be about us being as impressive as we can be, because that's contrary to what the Gospel teaches us. And so our acts of righteousness are to live as Jesus wants us to do, are to follow him and are to behave in a certain way.

But their acts of faith, having trusted in all that Jesus has done for us, having come to the point where we recognize that we can't save ourselves and we trust in Jesus Christ to be our Savior, we then follow him because he is the Savior, out of thankfulness and out of faith.

And so as we go about our ways and go into our different areas of life and we do our acts of righteousness, we pray and we fast and we give and all kinds of different things, we do so in faith.

We do so as those who follow Jesus. And so our acts are acts of righteousness because they're pleasing to God because he asks us to live by faith.

And he asks us to follow him as those who recognize his salvation first and foremost, and who then seek to follow him in response. So we don't live, if you like, to do Jesus's work for him.

[18:11] We live in response to what he has done. So the Gospel changes the way. The Gospel helps us to be those who say, thank you Jesus, you have done it all.

And now I want to live for you. It helps us to not constantly seek a claim. If we give, to go back to the example again of giving, if we give to seek status from other people, we won't really be able to give.

We'll always feel the need at some level to get back that grasping sense of clawing back a claim for ourselves. But if you believe the Gospel, for people who know the Gospel and have it fresh in our hearts, what Christ has done for us and how he set us free and given us the greatest gift, if we have that fresh, then we already know that we have the ultimate status, if you like, where sons and daughters of a king, where kingdom people, and where those who simply follow him.

And so because of that, because we have that awareness, we're able to give thankfully. And we're able to give quietly, discreetly, if you like, as Jesus is talking about in this passage here.

So the Gospel really does change the way that we're to give. That's what Jesus wants us to consider. Now, I want to just point out a couple of things in the passage that may have struck you.

[19:46] For example, they may have struck me, they may have struck you, as we read through it together, or as you may have thought about this passage before, two things that come up in the passage. And the first is Jesus' language of reward.

So we're just going to spend a couple of minutes thinking about the way that he speaks about reward. And then also briefly, whether or not what Jesus says is a contradiction.

So Jesus says, I think he uses the word reward three times in this passage. Verse one, he says, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people, for then you will have no reward from your Father.

He mentions it one other time, and then he says in verse four, so that you're giving maybe in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

You may be a bit uncomfortable with that language, or unsure of what to do it, because we talk about the Gospel as Christians as a gift. And so to speak about reward may seem a bit incongruous.

[20:43] I think we learn a few things. We should consider a few things when we think about the language of reward, because the Bible actually, in the New Testament, speaks, does speak quite a lot about reward. It speaks about the way that we are lived, so as to get the reward or the prize, different ways it phrases it.

A few things just to bear in mind when we speak about the reward that Jesus talks of. First of all, again, this goes back in many ways to what we've already been saying. The reward we get as people comes from God and not from men and women.

So isn't that the problem? Again, so often we're often thinking, what other people will do for us in terms of their acclaim or in terms of what they'll give back to us, or in terms of the leverage we might get from them if we do X, Y, or Z.

Forget that. The reward that we need is from God, the one who made us and who knows us, and who watches over us, and who watches over our lives.

And this passage affirms that. The second thing, just to mention briefly, is that the reward that we get from God isn't all now. So that's another temptation for us so often, isn't it?

[21:51] That we want what we want now in life, because that's what we think about. We think about what's happening, and we think about tomorrow, and we think about whatever, and we think about the things that distract us, good or bad.

So much in the sermon broadly is about the now and not yet of the kingdom. So Jesus is saying that he has come as the king, and those who follow him are blessed.

But they will be more blessed, if you like. They will receive the blessing when he comes again and ushers them into his final kingdom when he will renew all things.

And at that point only will they know full peace. And it speaks in revelation of the fact that every tear will be wiped away. And many other things that we learn that the Christian has to look forward to.

So bear that in mind when thinking about reward, is that being a Christian is to know God and to know his presence. Again, we were thinking about that this morning. It doesn't mean we get stuff, it means we get God.

[22:57] His salvation and his presence so that we can be those knowing him who give praise to him. That is a fulfilled life. That's a blessing.

And there is so much more to look forward to. So there is that aspect of now and not yet when we speak about reward. And fundamentally also we should say that reward that we seek from God is ultimately, it's not temporal, physical, but it's spiritual.

So the Bible does not promise, and we just restate this and affirm it again, the Bible does not promise us things that we want, the lifestyle that we want, the personality that we want, whatever, whatever way that you may be are tempted to go wider than the mark with this as we so often are.

And so if we can put it this way, a reward for holiness, for seeking Christ and for living in such a way as to follow him. A reward for holiness is not a house, for example.

A reward for holiness is holiness. As we are those who follow Christ, again, what do we get?

[24:10] We get Christ. It is our blessing and our benefit to know the Holy Spirit's help in living for him so that we seek to live more holy lives, which should be a joy to us.

Isn't it paradoxical if we think living a holy life is boring or it holds us back in some way so we get holiness in the way we live and in the one that we follow?

And of course that, to dwell with the King is our ultimate, the ultimate thing that we look forward to in the new heavens and the new earth. So think about reward not in terms of the stuff you get, but in terms of the spiritual blessing.

And that contrast, just finally, in terms of reward, contrast doesn't it with what he says in verse, the end of verse two? He's talking about these hypocrites who stand up and who do things that they think are really impressive and he says in the end of verse two, truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

Now I think that really refers to the fact that often show-offs get acclaimed. Maybe it is that the people that he's referring to, alluding to in this chapter, received a lot of acclaim, people held them up as really worthy people.

[25:22] But you know, if that's the extent of the reward that they seek and get, then isn't that a poor reward to live your life looking for the acclaim of other people when you could have the reward of being a son or a daughter in the kingdom of heaven?

And so sometimes what we need to do is actually take our eyes off the things that we think are so valuable and so special and are going to make us so happy and be reminded of the gospel reward that is ours in Christ.

So reward, just a few things about what Jesus says about reward and what he's talking about here. Finally, briefly, we're talking Jesus has been encouraging those who are his followers to give discreetly and privately.

To do their good works, we broaden it from just the act of giving alms. Their good works so that people can't see so that it's quiet and hidden. But you might be thinking, well, that surely isn't that a bit contradictory because the Bible also speaks and Jesus speaks about the importance of being public Christians.

For example, only back in chapter 5, verse 16, it says, Jesus says, let your light shine before men. So that's an encouragement, isn't it, to be those who have the gospel and who let that gospel be seen to other people.

[26:45] And to be those who live in such a way that others see their lives and the good that they do. But it's important to read the whole verse.

If we read the rest of that verse, we get the point and we get the distinction here because the verse goes on to say, let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

And that really, I would say, is one of the kind of key pivotal points of this whole thing when we're thinking about our ethics and the way we behave and the temptation we have so often to seek praise from others is what does that do?

It stops us giving praise to the one who deserves it ultimately, who is God. So our lives are to be to the praise of His glory.

That's why we're made and that's our ultimate joy. So any crazy feeling or desire we have to gather the acclaim to ourselves is mad for a start because we're really, when we are truthful with ourselves, we don't deserve it.

[27:54] But it's so wrong because it denies God of the acclaim that is due to Him. The way that we live is to be a reflection of thanks for what He has done for us and is to point people to Him, not to point people to us.

Jesus has changed my life and now look at me, I'm so good and aren't I wonderful now that Jesus has changed my life? Is the wrong way to think.

And so the key is to recognize that we are to be those whose lives shine for Jesus, to let the gospel shine out from us.

Catholic acts of good are unavoidable and they're a great blessing. The point is where do we want the glory to go?

Where do we want the blessing to go? The reason I read from the passage and act, you remember what the healing that was done there, the person who was not able to walk was healed and he stood up and walked and he leapt into the temple praising God.

[28:56] That's the point, praising God. And that was the desire of the apostles that when they healed him, he would give praise to God and that should always be our desire.

I read this statement from John Piper this week. He speaking about ethical living. He says, the greatest ethical challenge is so to live, the men and women don't glorify you for living that way but God.

So there's the challenge and the call for us when we think about ethics, Christian ethics, living, daily life, however it is that you will be given opportunity and challenged this week.

And as we finish and as we move towards our time of communion where we can celebrate the Lord's Supper together. When we think about this feast, communion and this Lord's Supper, this feast that we can celebrate together, I want to say it's very different from one example of giving that our society often throws up and that is the kind of, if you think about a kind of celebrity charity ball or whatever, which again are good.

I don't want to criticize or question people's motives at all but you know what I mean, these great occasions where a ballroom is hired out and lots of people arrive and it's for a good cause and maybe the way that people give is by auction and they bid for certain things or maybe they just make donations, all good.

[30:31] But the tension I think with an evening like that is the temptation for it to be about the givers.

And so people arrive in limos and they walk up a red carpet and they come obviously wealthy and they look great in all their finery and then they give away their money, which is good.

We don't come to this feast, this Lord's Supper, as those who bear their own righteousness and their goodness and their worthiness and to impress each other.

We come as those who have received and this I think goes back again to the whole way in which we change our thinking about how we give. We come as those who have to recognize that they're poor.

So they're spiritually, we're spiritually poor but we have received the greatest gift. And because of that we give thanks and we remember our Savior Jesus and all that He has done for us and then in turn we allow Him to change the way that we are motivated and we desire to serve others and to give and to share out of thankfulness and quietly.

[31:49] So there's no room for pride. We're the recipients of God's grace and that's good news for us tonight as we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight. The words of that hymn I think are relevant, nothing of myself I bring simply to the cross I claim.

So I pray that would be our prayer together as we move towards this time of communion. Amen. Let me just pray and then we'll move on.

Father, we ask just now that you would bless your word to us, to pray that your spirit would do the work that is necessary to apply it properly to us, that you would help us to move on in our Christian lives and to learn and to grow.

Lord we do pray that we would give you all the praise. Help us to do that now in Jesus' name. Amen.