

WHEN OUR GIVING GOES WRONG

According to Jesus, our giving goes wrong, not only when we fail to give, but when we give with the wrong motive. Verse two describes one of the many ways our giving can go wrong.

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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*

1. How had giving gone wrong in Jesus’ day?
2. What are some other ways our giving can go wrong?
3. The word Jesus uses for “to be honored by others” is the same word he uses in chapter five to describe “glorifying your Father in heaven.” What happens when we seek glory for ourselves rather than glorifying our Father in heaven?
4. The word for “reward” refers to a typical business transaction. It means “paid in full.” What happens when we treat our giving (or other acts of righteousness) as a mere transaction?
5. What kind of reward can we expect when we give with mixed motives?

HOW TO MAKE IT RIGHT

While there are a hundred ways our giving can go wrong, there is only one way to make it right, Jesus tells us our giving needs to come from a secret place with a secret desire—to please God and God alone. Our Father always notices and rewards our faithfulness.

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

1. How does secrecy protect us from wrong motives?
2. What is the highest and best motive for giving?
3. While the word for reward in verse 2 describes a business transaction, the word for reward in verse 4 refers to a gift. We do not ear God’s pleasure; he gives it to us freely as a gift. What are some of the ways God rewards those who are faithful to him?
4. What is the one reward we should long for more than anything else?

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Tim Keller was invited to do a series of talks for a Manhattan business gathering. He decided to build each of his talks around one of the seven deadly sins. He was particularly excited about his talk on “greed.” The men and women he would be addressing were deeply entrenched in the world of high finance. Their entire existence revolved around the highs and lows of Wall Street. He was sure, more than anyone else, they would be grappling with the question, “How much is enough?”

“Don’t get too excited,” his wife Kathy warned him. “I’ll bet the week you speak on greed will be your smallest crowd.” True to Kathy’s prediction, everyone turned out for the talk on “lust.” The room was packed for “pride.” They even turned out for “anger,” but the crowd was much leaner for the talk on “greed.”

On the way back to the office, he called Kathy, “How did you know?”

“People never realize the grip money has on them,” she replied.

Reflecting on the experience, Keller wrote, “Everyone tends to live in a particular socioeconomic bracket. Once you are able to afford to live in a particular neighborhood, send your children to its schools, and participate in its social life, you will find yourself surrounded by quite a number of people who have more money than you.” We all tell ourselves, “I don’t live as well as him or her or them. My means are modest compared to theirs. You can reason and think like that no matter how lavishly you are living... But when people visit here from other parts of the globe, they are staggered to see the level of materialistic comfort that the majority of Americans have come to view as a necessity (Tim Keller, “Counterfeit Gods”).”

So what do we do with our wealth and affluence? From the Bible’s perspective, we should give a lot of it away. In fact, Jesus told one particularly affluent young man that he would not be happy until he gave it all away.

Given the Bible's view of wealth, we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus challenges our approach to giving in the Sermon on the Mount. He is mainly concerned with our giving to the poor.

OUR GIVING IN GENERAL

In the Old Testament, God's people were instructed to give the first 10% of their livestock and produce to support those who ministered on their behalf in the tabernacle. Every third year the tithe was devoted to the care of the poor. In addition to tithes and offerings, the people were challenged to be personally involved in caring for the poor. They were to leave grain in the fields, fruit on the trees, and share bread with the hungry.

Although our giving serves the practical purposes of supporting those who minister on our behalf and caring for the poor, there is a far more profound reason for giving. Our giving is, first and foremost, an act of worship. Proverbs 3 captures the spirit of giving.

⁹ Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Proverbs 3:9-10).

1. How does giving honor God?
2. How does our giving demonstrate faith in God?
3. What do you think it means to approach giving as an act of worship?
4. What happens when we are more concerned about the need around us than we are in honoring God with the gifts he has so freely given us?

OUR GIFTS TO THE POOR

Jesus' concern in the Sermon on the Mount is not with the money we place in the offering box on Sundays or the gifts we give online. He is concerned with our giving to the poor.

If we are not careful, we can turn a deaf ear to the Bible's pleas for social justice. We are all too quick to dismiss anything that smacks of a "social gospel" or people we describe as "social justice warriors." While the idea of "social justice" can carry a lot of baggage, it is an idea born in Scripture. It is hard to read either the Hebrew Bible or the Gospels without being deeply impressed with God's heart for the poor.

Deuteronomy captures God's heart for the poor in the Old Testament:

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the

year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

The Gospel of Luke captures Jesus' heart for the poor in the New Testament. When Mary rejoices over God's grace in her life, one of the things she is deeply grateful for is that *"He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant...He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:48, 53)."*

When John the Baptist calls on people to repent and prepare for the coming kingdom, he challenges them to *"produce fruit in keeping with repentance."* When his hearers ask him what that looks like, John replies, *"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same (Luke 3:8-11)."*

When Jesus goes public with his ministry, he reads from the Isaiah Scroll,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19)."

Throughout the remainder of his gospel, Luke goes out of his way to demonstrate our Lord's relentless pursuit of the poor and disenfranchised. In chapter 12, Jesus calls us to do the same.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail... (Luke 12:32-34).

1. After reading Deuteronomy 15 (above) and the passages from Luke, how would you describe God's heart for the poor?
2. In Deuteronomy 15, we are told: "do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward [the poor]." Why are we often hardhearted and tightfisted?"
3. What might it look like if we shared God's heart for the poor and disenfranchised?