

## Spiritually Authentic Giving

As a minister, I've made it a habit to not know what people give. I never ask those who count the offering, "Who put in the most today?" I don't talk to the treasurer who gives what in a year." I wouldn't want any knowledge of that to affect what I do as a minister or for anyone to think that it did.

But there was a time when I inadvertently discovered what someone gave. We'd had a congregational meeting where we decided take out the old wooden church pews and replace them with stackable chairs so that we could have fellowship space. Until then, we could never share meals or have activities in one space.

At the end of the meeting, there was one lady who was so mad, that she said to her husband loud enough for everyone to overhear, "If they do this, they won't get one more penny from us. In fact, if they do it, we'll quit coming and so will all our family."

Now, this was a rather substantial threat because we had several families in the church who were a part of this woman's extended family. If they all left, it would be a big hit.

Well, we did indeed do it, and several weeks went by, and this couple kept coming. I imagine it had something to do with the fact that she couldn't get any her family to leave with her. I also noticed, simply because they sat in front of us, that she continued to put her little blue offering envelope in the collection tray every week.

I charitably thought she had reconsidered. After some time to think about it she realized it was a good idea. Maybe the rest of the family talked to her, but bottom line I was happy they were sticking around and wasn't following through on her threat to not give another penny.

Later, I was having a conversation with church treasurer. She was amazed that this lady was still attending our church, and I said, not only that, but she's still giving. I didn't think I was saying anything out of line, because as the treasurer she would already know about her giving. But the treasurer looked at me with a confused expression, "Giving, what do you mean?"

Well, they put an offering envelope in the tray every week.

I could almost see the light bulb brighten over her head. "OOOOOHHHHH! So that's where the empty envelope comes from." Every week, someone had been putting an empty envelope in the offering.

This lady had turned offering into a sham. It was all a show. What was meant to be an act of worship, she had turned into pure hypocrisy and blasphemy. I mean, she could have quit giving, but they went through the motions to make everyone think they still gave. They put on the appearance of giving. She was trying to punish the leadership, but the leadership had no idea what she was doing. I wondered if she ever read the story of Ananias and Saphira.

We live in a world of photoshop, CGI, filters, fake news, reality shows that aren't real and carefully curated online personas. That picture on our friend's timeline has slimmed down by 20 pounds. The skin tone, the teeth, the hair, the lighting have all been adjusted. The balance, the temperature, and the exposure have all been tweaked. What you see is not what you get. Much of what we see on the big screen has been computer generated, and we expect the politician to say that he didn't say what his opponent said he said, and even if he did say it he didn't mean what his opponent said he said meant. You got that?

It isn't just the world around us that is full of filters and facades. People are often not what they seem. Ulterior motives, hypocrisy, and hidden agendas are simply a part of our daily lives. Fakes, frauds and phonies are a part of life.

Sadly, we even find them in the church masquerading as devoted believers, but in reality it's all pretense, posturing, and posing. In Matthew 6, Jesus warns us to be on guard against being spiritual fakes, of doing righteousness acts for earthly rewards, and doing good works in such a way that glorifies ourselves instead of God.

Our Savior wants us to be people of spiritual authenticity. He wants us not only to do the right thing, but also for the right reason and the right audience. Here's what Jesus says in Matt. 6:1-4

**(2 Slides) 6:1** *"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

**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.*

**(Slide 2) 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. NIV*

With these verses comes a shift in the Sermon on the Mount. For the last 28 verses, Jesus has been talking about true righteousness versus the false righteousness. Now he's taking that idea in a new direction. You could say that this is Jesus 2nd point in Jesus outline. First, it's not just the letter of the law that matters. The spirit of the law is essential.

Now Jesus shows us that God doesn't just want us to do the right thing. He wants us to do it for the right reason. We are to be spiritually authentic. What we do on the outside needs to match what who we are on the inside. This morning we want to look at this on three levels: what, why, and who. What do we do? Why do we do it? And Who is our audience?

### **I. What**

The first level is what. What we do. What we should do. What God wants us to do—what Jesus calls *"practicing your righteousness."*

Jesus introduces this new section with verse 1, *“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*

Jesus wants us to pay very careful attention so that we don't do spiritual things so as to impress other people. This is the theme for the next 17 verses and Jesus gives us three examples of what he means. Verses 2-4 talk about giving to the needy. Verses 5-15 talk about praying, and verses 16-18 talk about fasting. Giving, praying, and fasting are the what.

Look down through the next several verses and see how Jesus refers to these various activities. Verse 2, *“**When** you give to the needy...”* Verse 5, *“**when** you pray...”* Verse 16, *“**when** you fast...”* Jesus' assumes that we will do these things. These things should be a natural part of our lives. He doesn't command or urge us to do these things. He doesn't say, “Make sure you give to the needy. Don't forget to pray,” or “It's really important that you fast.” He just says *when*. These are things that Christians just do. They are a part of who we are. They aren't optional. He doesn't say “If you give to the needy...if you pray...if you fast...” These are things that should simply be a part of our lives.

Another thing about these three examples is that they are just random examples that Jesus pulls out of thin air. Jesus used three very specific examples that represent three different focuses of our spiritual activity, or as Jesus calls them, “acts of righteousness.” Notice the three directions.

1. Giving to the needy represents our duty to others
2. Prayer represents our duty to God.
3. Fasting represents our duty to ourselves.

All of our spiritual activities are focused in one of these three directions, and we have responsibilities in all three areas. What Jesus says here applies to any spiritual activity no matter what area it falls in.

That's the what, and it's important, but it's a mistake to put all the focus there- what's the right thing to do? What's the right way? What are the right words? We can't stop there. That's where the Pharisees stopped. But Jesus wants us to look further and go deeper, because God wants more than just for us to do the right thing. He wants us to go to the 2nd level- the WHY.

## **II. Why**

There's what we do, and then there's WHY we do it. It's like the mother who can only get her child to behave at the store if she promises to buy him toys and candy. The child may behave himself, but ultimately he's not learning to behave himself for the right reason. If God just wanted us to do the right thing, he could buy us off. If you are kind and patient with one another I promise to make you all skinny and healthy, or if you tithe 10% each Sunday, I will make sure you get a 10% raise every year, or if you pray to me every day, I promise to answer

at least one daily prayer request in the exact way you imagine it within five minutes of your praying.

Now imagine that. If that were the case, we'd all have our calculators out every Sunday to make sure we were giving enough. We'd throw in a few more dollars just to be sure. We'd all have holes in our pants because we'd be down on our knees everyday praying. We'd be doing the right thing, but would it be for the right reasons? Well the truth is there are lots of wrong reasons for doing the right thing.

Giving, praying and fasting are not unique to Christianity. Many religions practice these things. One of the things that separates Christianity from other faiths though is WHY we do these things.

I read about a Hindu holy man all dressed in tatters and covered in ashes. He sat on a prominent street corner doing his meditation and devotion. Tourists would want to take their picture with him and he would arrange his tatters just so, and sprinkle more ashes for dramatic effect, and then pose with the proper demeanor. It's not just that we give to the needy, or pray or fast, it's why we do them.

In these first four verses Jesus focuses on WHY we give. As Christians we are just as capable as anyone of giving for the wrong reason. A mom writing in Today's Christian Woman told about how the Sunday before Christmas, their church had a Sunday school class gift exchange. Everyone brought their gifts, and her little girl presented a package and innocently said, "Here, someone gave this to my mommy and she didn't want it."

Here are some questions to help you diagnose the why of your giving.

- Do you give to others so you will be thought of as generous?
- Do you give so that others will be indebted to you? So that they will owe you?
- Are you more likely to give if others know if you're giving, than if not?
- If you help someone and no one knows, do you go out of your way to mention it to others. "I gave an anonymous gift..."
- Do you always make sure a donation is tax deductible before you give?
- Do you give publicly when you could just as easily do so privately?
- Do you give in public, but not in private?

'Yes' answers to these questions should be a warning sign. Allow the Holy Spirit to search your heart with those questions.

In these verses, Jesus is poking, prodding and probing why we give, why we help those in need. I suppose there are lots of wrong reasons to give. We might give because we felt pressured to. We might give because we fear that God might zap us in some way if we don't, but Jesus doesn't talk about those wrong reasons for giving.

Jesus is concerned here about one specific wrong reason. It is when we give to be noticed by others. This is giving as good P.R., helping the needy as a rung on the social ladder. This sort of giving turns an act of mercy into an act of vanity. “Hey, look at me. Look at what I’m doing. Look at how generous and spiritual I am.” This kind of giving isn’t about love, or generosity, or mercy. It’s about using people to further your own agenda. So this brings us to the third level- WHO.

### **III. Who**

Who is your audience? When you give, who are you hoping notices? Jesus says we are to do our good works for an audience of one. Spiritual authenticity means that we practice our righteousness for God’s eyes. He’s our audience. No one else.

Being spiritual for the sake of impressing others is not spiritual at all. John Ortberg once quipped tongue firmly in cheek, “I know I’m supposed to be humble, but what if no one notices?” If that is our attitude toward giving, or any spiritual act, we have missed the point.

What others think about what we do is irrelevant. What they think about us because of our good works doesn’t matter. Those things don’t enter into the equation in deciding whether we help someone, or not; whether we give, or don’t. What God thinks is all that matters.

Unfortunately, some people use giving and charity as a personal marketing strategy. As Mark Twain once jested, “A man only needs so much money. The rest is for showing off!”

Years ago Ted Turner sold CNN to Time Warner. As a result of the sale, he made several billion dollars in stock profits. So Turner decided to donate a billion dollars to the United Nations, which he designated for helping the extremely poor with food, clothing, and shelter. Now that’s a good thing to do. But Turner didn’t just make the donation. First, he called talk-show host Larry King to make a big splash. Turner then made his formal announcement in a New York ballroom filled with celebrities, politicians, and influential people, and of course lots and lots of reporters all in their tuxedos and evening gowns. Soon Ted’s generosity was generating lead stories and headlines around the world. That’s one way to give

This last summer, a popular TikToker went viral with a video that was viewed more than 60 million times. Harrison Pawluk shares random acts of kindness videos. That sounds like a good thing for an influencer to be doing, right. In this video, Harrison is seen giving a bouquet of flowers to an older woman by the name of Maree. This video’s caption reads, “I hope this made her day better.”

The problem is that Maree had no idea that she was on hidden camera. She didn’t know that this supposed random act of kindness would be viewed by millions of people. It wasn’t random at all, but carefully calculated to go viral, and generate ad revenue and attract high paying sponsors.

When Maree found out the true intention behind the act, she felt dehumanized by the experience. She felt like she was used as “clickbait.” That’s one way to give.

In verse 2, Jesus calls this kind of giving “*to be honored by others*,” and our Savior uses a very interesting word to describe it. In the original Greek it comes from the word from which we get theater. It’s a performance. It’s a spectacle- to put on a show. It’s not an authentic gesture of the heart. It’s acting to make an impression.

Jesus says that people who make performances out of their giving are hypocrites. This was another word borrowed from Greek theater. The Greek word for hypocrite was an actor in a play that wore a mask and gave an exaggerated performance for the role. No wonder Jesus calls them hypocrites. They aren’t giving. They are wearing a mask and performing a role.

Jesus calls us to another kind of giving. Jesus says in verses 3 and 4, “*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.*” The left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing is an ancient proverb, a figure of speech that meant to do something spontaneously without calculation or show. The right hand was considered to be the hand of action, the primary hand. No offense to lefties. In everyday life the right hand would do many things that did not involve the left hand.

Giving and helping the needy is simply to be normal activity of the Christian. We are not to be self-conscious in our giving. Don’t sit and calculate how generous you are. How much you gave. Just do it and forget about it. If we are constantly dwelling in our minds on how much we gave in a spirit of self-congratulation, then our reasons are wrong. That wrong focus will eventually spill out. Self-consciousness will deteriorate into self-righteousness.

It doesn’t take a big show, a big announcement, or big effort. We don’t make a big deal about normal things that we just simply do. “Hey everyone, I just want you all to know that this morning I successfully made coffee.” “Hey, did you hear what happened? Did you hear what I did? I don’t want to make a big deal about it, but on the way to work I made a left turn.” Jesus is saying that for a Christian to make a show out of their giving is kind of like that.

We don’t blow literal trumpets but we still find ways to toot our own horn. We want our name printed prominently on the list of donors. We look for our name on the brass plaque on the wall. We want some public recognition. If we don’t get it, if we don’t find our name listed, we feel slighted. We’re offended. We’re unappreciated.

But Jesus says if that’s what we’re giving for, then we’re giving for the wrong rewards. Why do good things for earthly trinkets, when God promises to reward us for heavenly treasure?

Tim Keller compares it to two guys in a room who are given an assignment of folding papers for 12 hours straight. The first guy quits after three hours. He says, “I can’t stand this. This is driving me crazy!” But the second guy is delighted. He keeps working saying, “This is the greatest day

of my life! This is a joy!” He folds paper for 12 hours straight. What’s the difference? The first guy was working for minimum wage. The second guy was promised a million dollars if he stayed. That’s the difference between giving for an earthly audience and an earthly reward, and giving for a heavenly audience and a God-given reward.

**Conclusion:**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, a Christian philosopher, Aristedes, wrote to the Roman emperor Hadrian about Christians and their attitude toward giving.

*“He who has gives to him who has not without grudging. When one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they will deliver him. If there is among them a man that is poor or needy and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.”*