

Reading: Matthew 6:1-4 (NT pages 970)

Sermon

Why is Jesus criticizing people who are good givers? Surely, there can be nothing wrong by giving to others.

When we study the text and its background a different picture comes to life. Matthew is writing his gospel through the eyes of a typical Jew from the Ancient Mediterranean world. It was part of the Jewish religious observance to look after the poor. It was apart from sacrifice among the Jews regarded as the first of religious duties which came from the idea that almsgiving is implied as an expression of compassion in the presence of God. It had a two-fold development: (a) The Mosaic legislation looked on compassion as a feeling to be cherished in ideal conduct and (b) The prophets considered almsgiving as a right which the needy might justly claim. Righteousness and almsgiving were at times regarded as synonymous terms. If you were generous with your giving's you were regarded as "righteous" in the eyes of God.

In every city there were collectors who distributed donations of two kinds, namely money collected in the synagogue chest every Sabbath for the poor of the city, and food and money received in a dish. There was even a law which said: 'Therefore no disciple should live in a city where there is no alms-box' (*Sanhedrin* 17b).

The Mosaic law contains many suggestions to treat the poor justly and humanely. Important among them is Deuteronomy 15:7–11, which, while recognizing the inevitable existence of poverty, commands Israel to take strong action. Thus, every seventh year all fields and gardens were to remain unharvested for the benefit of the poor and disadvantaged. Every third year one-tenth of all produce had to be given to the Levites (a Hebrew tribe that had no property), the foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows.

Forgotten sheaves and the leftovers from grain fields at each harvest were left for the needy and the stranger; from every vineyard and olive grove, any fallen fruit and the imperfect and topmost clusters were reserved for them. Likewise, festival pilgrims were expected to share food with those in need.

Judaism stressed that one should not perform deeds for the sake of reward but nonetheless promised reward, as Jesus does here; this reward is rendered at the day of judgment, as in Judaism. Prayer, fasting and gifts to the poor were basic components of Jewish piety and many rabbis listed qualities in sets of three.

Greeks and Romans did not support personal charity; wealthy contributions to public projects or to poorer clients were meant to secure the giver's popularity. In contrast, charity was central to Jewish piety; some writers even said that it saved a person, although later Jewish laws technically did not permit one to give over 20 percent above his tenth giving.

The reference to the trumpet sounding is hyperbolic. Also the referral to not letting one's left hand know about the right hand's gift is clearly hyperbole. The language of "having" a reward "in full" is the language of repayment in ancient business receipts.

Jesus does not reject almsgiving *per se* but stressed the necessity to give with the right motive, or attitude. He emphasized the joy of giving without expecting something back. He criticized the "shows of giving to the poor" of his day. He was criticizing giving as a duty or part of "piety". Giving must come from the heart...

So what does it mean to us?

Well exactly the same applies to us too. When we give, we must give because we realize that we have received the greatest gift on this earth. There is no gift greater than what we received from God our Father. He gave us His Only Son to die for our sins on a cross. He overpowered and destroyed death for ever and gave us the hope of everlasting life. He also gave us His Holy Spirit to guide a us in our faith, strengthen the hope that is living in us and motivating us to love God and our neighbors like we love ourselves.

So when we give, we can only give because of what we received from God. If we give without even thinking about God's gift to us, then it is just a show of the "I" or the "WE" and a worthless act of pleasing our ego's and campaigning to others for other rewards like better social standing, higher social status and fame in the eyes of other humans. If we give from the knowledge of God's love, then indeed it will be giving where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing! If we give because of what we receive from God on a daily basis then indeed our giving's will be different and have meaning to other and ourselves.

It is like receiving a life changing organ such as a kidney or a liver like Betty Taylor from our congregation did. She does not know the person's personal background who donated her kidney and liver. She has never met that person in her life. But that person decided to give – without any inclination for any reward or return. And in the end it made a huge difference and impact not only on Betty's life but everyone in her family and everyone in our fellowship who has been praying for this miracle of life. In her case one person's giving gave her the chance of a new quality of life. Likewise can we change the lives of others through our giving.

But there are all kinds of giving – giving of our time and talents to the Lord, giving financial contributions, giving of ourselves to

improve the life of others, greeting people on the streets, helping someone in need, giving a hand to someone, smiling and welcoming a stranger. But the essence is all the same. When we give - we need to have the right motive and intention. We can only give because God gave us so much. If you are sitting in this church this morning and you feel that there is nothing that you can give, just go out of this building and say good afternoon to a stranger or if you cannot speak, just smile. You will see the difference in the other person. You will also feel the presence of God's Holy Spirit who will make your heart glow with peace and love.

Our congregation are going to focus in October on the essence of giving in all its forms. May we prepare ourselves by always asking ourselves, why are we giving our time, talents and money. Are we doing it to receive more or are we giving simply because we have a grateful heart to the Lord God who give us so much!

Amen