

“Be Secretly Good”

Matthew 6:1-4

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The movie *Chocolat* tells the story about a woman named Vianne and her small daughter who show up in a small French village one day in 1959 and open a chocolate shop on the first day of Lent. Some townspeople look down their noses at her, because she seems too much of a gypsy and she associates with the wrong kind of people. The town's mayor is a kind of self-appointed spiritual policeman; he disapproves because nobody is supposed to eat sweets during Lent. But with her warm personality and magical concoctions, more and more people go over to Vianne's side. Some people do it openly, and others sneak chocolate when no one's looking. They love her candies, hot cocoa, chocolate angels, and other delicacies.

As for the mayor, everything he does is in order to keep up appearances: going to church, saying the right prayers, fasting every Friday, and not eating sweets during Lent. The more people break tradition, the unhappier he becomes. But he can't keep up the image any more. He sneaks into the shop on Easter eve to destroy the chocolate, but before he knows what's happening he starts devouring the sweets himself. The owner of the shop finds him in a kind of sugar-induced coma the next morning, face covered with chocolate.

How did he ever get to that point? He followed the rules, but forgot why. Giving up something for Lent is supposed to help us get closer to God, not to either please or to judge other people.

Jesus expects us to put faith into practice. (Matthew 6:1, 2, 5, 16)

Jesus begins in verse one with a theme statement that applies to the whole chapter. Jesus tells us,

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (6:1)

What Jesus calls “acts of righteousness,” or, as some translations have it “acts of charity,” means doing good. That applies to three more statements that serve as examples of acts of righteousness. They are,

- Giving to the needy (verse 2)
- Praying (verse 5)
- Fasting (verse 16)

It's clear Jesus assumes his hearers are doing those acts of righteousness as components of our spiritual discipline. It's not a question of whether we do these things. Instead, he's teaching here just how we are to do them in a manner pleasing to God.

Generosity is a sign we belong to God and it's a way we serve him. It's why the Proverbs said,

He who is kind to the poor *lends to the Lord*, and he will reward him for what he has done. (Proverbs 19:17)

That reminds us of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25, when he teaches that when we serve those in need we are in some way *really serving him*. He said,

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

So, as with all the spiritual disciplines of chapter six, Jesus expects us to be doing it. Certainly doing the practical act of giving fits into that. It should mark our lives as believers, because it's one of the ways we serve God.

Jesus wants the right kind of giving. (Matthew 6:1-4)

Five times in chapter five, Jesus uses the word "righteousness" or "righteous." He ends it with the words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (verse 48). Then, chapter six opens with "your acts of righteousness." The chapter concludes with the words,

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33)

Do you see how concerned he is with living in the way of the kingdom? God's reign brings in a different kind of living. It means not just any works are good enough, because they have to be the kind of things that show Jesus to the world.

That's one of the reasons we handle finances like we do in the church. We exercise careful stewardship of what's entrusted to us with the premise it doesn't belong to us, but to God, and our purpose is to be a sign of the kingdom to the world. On another note, the elders and I don't know what your pledges are. I know we're a generous congregation. But none of us knows how much anyone else gives, and I don't want to know. What we give as followers of Jesus is, in the end, between each of us and God. As a church, then, we try to remove the pressure of worrying what others think of our giving.

And as we grow in our giving, we eventually see the fruit of the lives of people who know Jesus and are serving him. That's a memorial that's going to last into eternity. As the Apostle Paul wrote in to the Corinthians,

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:3)

Left on our own, we do the kinds of works that show *us* to the world. Without the right kind of attitude, giving could be done by an atheist rather than a follower of Jesus. The right kind of giving is done to please God and to show Jesus to the world. That leads to the next thing:

Since Jesus wants the right kind of giving, he expects us to watch our motives. (Matthew 6:1-4)

The right motives are what shape right practice. Jesus tells us clearly,

"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 men."  
(Matthew 6:2)

And he goes on,

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. (Matthew 6:3-4)

When we give, then, we need to check our natural tendency to put on a show. There's always a temptation to do something not because we want to please God, but because we want to impress people. Jesus tells us that's a wrong motivation: we're supposed to serve people and to love people, but to worry only about pleasing God.

Some people do good things, not because they are devoted to God, but because they want to look good in front of other people. Check your motives—when you give, make sure you're doing it for God and not to put on a show for the people around you.

I have to watch this in my own life, because I'd like to be known as a person who does what's right. I see that motivation in my heart, and I fight it with the discipline of secrecy. I think this is a huge spiritual danger for us, and it's an occupational hazard for a pastor or anyone else in full time Christian service, because our calling has us doing what we do in the public eye. But certain disciplines like prayer, giving, and fasting we do without trumpeting the fact we're doing it. It's our way of working on the heart issue and keeping motivations in check.

Jesus promises us a reward for doing good. (1, 2b, 4)

This whole passage in verses one to four is structured around "reward."

- Verse one mentions "acts of righteousness" that are seen, and no "reward from your Father."
- Verse four mentions secret giving, and reward from "your Father, who sees what is done in secret."
- The center says, "They have received their reward in full."

One commentator says that phrase was marked by merchants on a receipt that said, "Received their reward in full" when nothing else was owed.<sup>1</sup> If you got that receipt, you wouldn't be looking for any further payment.

Now, Jesus is not saying that you have done wrong if people know about a gift or a generous thing you did. He's not even saying it's wrong if people are impressed by your

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<sup>1</sup> Keener, Craig S. *Matthew: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 136.

gift. In chapter five, Jesus indicated even when we know a righteous act will draw attention, it isn't wrong when our motives are to bring glory to God and not ourselves. He said,

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

What he's saying is that it's wrong to give for the purpose of impressing people. He's saying this is a subtle and spiritually dangerous subject for us. It's all about your motive. Why did you do it? To impress people, or to please God? If we're being like the French mayor, just concerned about impressing others or maybe putting others in their place, we're hypocrites just like actors who play a role but hide their real identity.

The Gospel of John tells about a controversy between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders because he healed a man on the Sabbath. Jesus responded to them by insisting he had the authority of God to do that, and he asked why they were more concerned with human opinion than with what God thinks. He said,

How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)

It's a pointed question, isn't it? If we say we're followers of God, then we ought to make every effort of our life to obtain the praise that comes from him. And what a reward he promises us if we trust him and put him first! It's what the writer of Hebrews saw when they wrote,

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

It's remarkable that Jesus doesn't expect us to work for nothing. He just wants us working for the right reward. The thing is, none of our work in itself earns anything from God. Everything we receive is a gift of pure grace. Still, one of his gifts when we trust in him is work that really gains us something. That's why the Apostle wrote,

Whoever sows generously will also reap generously. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. (2 Corinthians 9:6, 11)

This promise of a heavenly reward comes through the Bible in countless places. In a remarkable passage, Jesus and his disciples have been talking about the sacrifice demanded in following Jesus. Then the disciple Peter blurts out,

"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:27-29)

Some of the freest, happiest, boldest, and most generous people I know also are people who have the least in our circles. I know a family who had very little, and they served as missionaries. Someone in their extended family died and left them some money, and this family turned around and gave \$1000 to another family who needed their help.

It's happened to us, too. Once, the church business administrator in my former church came into my office and told me, "A person has given thirty thousand dollars so you can do your doctorate." Well, I never did hear who that was. All I ever saw besides the money was an unsigned note that said, "From someone who believes in your ministry."

And still another time, Evelyne and I were starting out as a young couple. We were so poor we didn't have any money to celebrate Christmas. And we got home one day, and found at the front door a box filled with presents—with food, bottles of sparkling cider, chocolates, some plush toys, and most importantly, a pound of *Seattle's Best Coffee*. It did a great deal to bring us joy, and Jesus says that kind of giving assures a great reward for the ones who do it.

Remember Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness"? That verse ends with the promise,

and all these things will be given to you as well (6:33b)

Jesus wants us to be at work for the kingdom, doing the things that matter for the kind of return that matters. After all, the greatest reward we can have is not money or fame or a plaque on the wall. It's the approval of God. Ultimately, we're working for no other reward than to one day hear the words,

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"  
(Matthew 25:21)