



An Audience of One

Part 1 – Giving (Matthew 6:1-4)

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Good morning and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! We are glad you are here, and if you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us as well. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

In terms of our schedule as a congregation, we are starting a new study of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in our Wednesday evening class (on YouTube and on the phone). This is a continuation of our study of Genesis and Exodus, but if you have not been joining us lately, this would be a great time to jump in. And our plan is to move rather quickly through this. We will not be getting bogged down in the details of the Law, but we plan on doing more of an overview of some of the major feast days, and sacrifices, we'll be hitting the highlights of the Law, and then we plan on looking at some major events as God's people travel through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. But we hope you can join us for this study starting this Wednesday evening at 7 o'clock (and then available at any time after that throughout the week as well). You can find us on YouTube under "fourlakeschurch" (and you can subscribe to be notified when new classes are released), or if you do not have internet access (or would rather listen instead of watch), you can simply call in at 833-364-1524, and the livestream on the phone also gives you the option to subscribe where that number will automatically call you whenever a new class goes live.

We are here this morning to honor God as we preach the good news that God loves us and sent his only Son to this earth to die for us; he was buried, and he was then raised up on the third day. This is the gospel, or the good news. We obey this good news by believing the message, by turning away from sin, by publicly stating our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by being buried with him in baptism. And we do have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from Richard Libby, who's been preaching somewhere in Ghana this week. Twenty one have obeyed the gospel so far, including the young man on the wall up here. They also shared some pictures of their crew cleaning and filling the baptistery, but good news from Ghana this week.

This next one comes from Madison, Alabama, where they say, "We rejoice with Maya and her family today for her decision to have her sins washed away! Her father had the honor of baptizing her into Christ. All glory and

honor to God for salvation that is found in Christ!" And there were others, but we share these as a reminder and as our invitation to you to obey the gospel just as they have. If you would like to study God's plan for your life, if you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch using the contact information on the wall up here (or on your screen at home). If you are joining us on the phone, you can send a text or give me a call at 608-224-0274.

Back in the summer of 2021, some of you might remember how we covered a passage near the end of Matthew 5 (in the Sermon on the Mount) as the result of a sermon request. Someone had asked a question, so we studied it, and then we studied the verses around it and leading up to it in a series of lessons that we titled, "Jesus on the Law." Then, starting in the summer of 2022, we returned to the Sermon on the Mount by studying a series of "Kingdom Attitudes," commonly known as the "beatitudes," a series of blessings. So, in a sense, we almost studied backwards until we had covered all of Matthew 5. And I've put the main images from those lessons on the wall up here, in hopes that it might jog your memory at least a little bit. In hindsight, I have some regrets about doing it that way (studying the last half of the chapter, followed by the first), but this morning I want us to continue in that study by actually moving FORWARD into the first half of Matthew 6. And I'd like to arrange the next several lessons under the idea that when we do good we are performing for "an audience of one," with that "one," of course, being God himself.

To put this in context, back in Matthew 5:20, Jesus had said to the people, ***"...that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."*** To most people, this would have seemed impossible, because the Pharisees appeared to be extremely righteous. But as we've learned over the past several years, the Pharisees, for the most part, only appeared to be righteous. So, in the first part of Jesus' sermon, he addresses attitudes and the Law and what it means to truly be righteous. Well, today, as we move into the rest of Jesus' sermon, we come to a series of religious acts, where Jesus now emphasizes the MOTIVES behind what we do. And we will learn over the next several weeks that motive matters! For our righteousness to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, we not only need to DO the right thing, but we must do it for the right REASON.

This brings us to a transition statement in Matthew 6:1, where Jesus says, ***"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."*** This is the warning, and he will then continue with a series of three examples. We'll look at one of those examples this morning, but first, we have the warning. He starts with the word ***"beware."*** And so, there is a danger here. So we have a warning, and Jesus is warning about the danger of practicing our righteousness before men ***"to be noticed by them."*** The word that we have translated here as ***"noticed"*** is a word that we might recognize in our English word "theater." It refers to being "seen." An actor on a stage wants to be seen. This is the purpose of acting. Without being seen, there is no point to acting! But here, the danger is that we practice acts of righteousness to be seen by those around us. And if we do good just to be seen by those around us, Jesus says that we will ***"...have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."*** So, we must choose: Either we impress those around us, or we do good for an audience of One (with that "one" being our Father in heaven), because we cannot do both.

Now, at this point, before we move into the first of three examples, we need to address what may appear to be a contradiction. Back in Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus had just said, ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."*** So, which is it? Do we do good for an audience of One, or do we let our light shine? It all goes back to motive. Why do we do what we do? If I do good because I love God, and if the world happens to see it, great! However, if I do something good to try impress the people

around me, then God is offended by that. The difference is motive. Going back to Matthew 6:1, the danger comes when we do something good ***“to be noticed by men.”*** If that is our motive, then we ***“have no reward with our Father who is in heaven.”*** By the way, I appreciate Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this passage, where he says, ***“Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding.”***

Well, it always helps to have a good example, and today we’ll start with the first of three. Over the next 18 verses, Jesus illustrates this warning with the examples of giving, and prayer, and fasting. I know we may warn our kids about a lot of things these days, but have we ever warned our kids about the danger of worship? “Hey kids, be careful while you’re giving!” Or, “Be careful while you’re praying.” Or, “Be careful while you’re fasting!” And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does here, ***“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”*** The word ***“beware,”*** by the way is in the present tense, which means that the warning here is ongoing. This isn’t a one-time danger, but this is a danger that continues. In fact, the longer we follow the Lord, the more good we may do, and so there is a sense in which this temptation may actually get more and more intense over time.

And again, as we dig into what comes next, we have some examples here, and each of these warnings will follow a similar pattern: Jesus will describe the act, he will address the motive behind the act, and then he will explain the result – so, the act, the motive, the result – both negative and positive, both the good and the bad – for all three of these. So, we have the warning, and now we jump into it this morning with the first example as Jesus warns about the danger of giving to the poor. He says (in verses 2-4),

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

I. Again, we have the good and the bad, and we start with the **BAD** part of this example (up in verse 2).

And as he gives the warning, Jesus refers to something they are already doing, ***“When you give to the poor.”*** And if we could separate it from what comes next, that right there is good! God has commanded this from ancient times. We have instruction on taking care of the poor way back in Deuteronomy 15:11. We have a blessing on those who care for the poor in Psalm 41. We have a large number of Proverbs that address taking care of the poor. I’ve actually been shocked by this as I’ve prepared our lessons from Proverbs (we will get to those in due time). We have many warnings scattered throughout the prophets as well, as God condemned his people for not taking care of the poor (for ignoring the law), calling them back to obedience. And then we have so much in the New Covenant as well. We think of the passage from Romans 12 that Silas read for us earlier. The apostle Paul was all about taking care of the poor. We think of Paul as a missionary, and he was, but some of Paul’s journeys were actually Paul bringing gifts from one group of people to another, and he would preach along the way. So, God certainly expects his people to care for the poor. I remember my grandfather, my mom’s dad, often praying for “those who are less fortunate.” And I know that was not an empty prayer. He and my grandmother (granny and pap) were active in helping those in need. So, caring for the poor is good.

And I would also point out that this is separate from the giving done in the temple. And today also, giving to the poor is above and beyond what we set apart on a weekly basis for the Lord’s work. This is personal. Giving to an organization is relatively easy. We check a box, we write a check, we round up at the checkout. By the

way, for maybe 30 years or so, we have collected the change in our family for our kids' college fund. I have an extra large baked bean can from Aldi on my dresser, and that's where our change goes. One bean can full of coins gets cashed in for about \$96, give or take. But over the past few years, places always want us to round up for this or that. Well, when I do that, I no longer have change for the bean can. So, one time, I beat the Goodwill lady to it. As she rang it up, I asked her, "Would you like to round down for my kids' college fund?" No sense of humor at all these days! My point is: It's easy to give to an organization, but what the Lord is describing here is giving directly to the poor. I see a human being in need of help, and I help. I see a hungry person, and I buy this person groceries or take them out for a meal, and so on. This is messy, and time-consuming, and difficult. But this is good. In fact, this is assumed. He doesn't say, "First of all, you need to give to the poor, and when you do, do it like this." No, giving to the poor is assumed. Giving to the poor is expected. After all, even the hypocrites are giving (we'll get to that a moment), but the idea here is that giving to the poor is good. However, this reference to giving to the poor comes in the form of a warning.

And the warning is, ***"...when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men."*** What in the world is going on with the trumpet? Who does that? We have a few possibilities here, starting with the theory that the containers for giving in the temple were actually shaped like trumpets. In my mind, I'm picturing something almost like a large spittoon. And if that's the case, then maybe Jesus is talking about those who would drop their coins in that container for maximum effect. I'm thinking of those large yellow whirlpool type contraptions for coin donations that you might find in a mall back in the 1980's. We had one at the Crystal Point Mall down in Crystal Lake back then, and you would drop your coin down a ramp, and it would go around and around and around until it finally dropped down the hole. So, if you wanted to make a big deal out of your giving, you might bring attention to it in that way. But notice: This isn't happening in the temple, is it? No, Jesus talks about this happening ***"in the synagogues and in the streets."*** So, others have suggested literal trumpets, or maybe something like an ice cream truck. The wealthy, then, might literally blow horns, "If you are poor, come and get it," and the wealthy would then give stuff away very publicly. And maybe that's it, and if it is, Jesus can see right through it. But there's also the possibility that Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. I think my grandmother might have warned about "tooting your own horn." I would probably lean in this direction, the idea that Jesus has a sense of humor, and that he is painting the picture for us, the picture of a man who blows a trumpet before demonstrating how awesome he is. Today, I think of those oversize checks. And there may be a place for that, but I'm just saying that these people would have loved that – presenting some starving man with a 5-foot long ceremonial meal voucher. I want full credit for feeding this guy! I want my picture in the news. I want my name engraved on a brick somewhere. The key here is the motivation. They are giving in this way ***"so that they may be honored by men."*** Being honored is not a byproduct; no, being honored is the point of it. Being honored is their motivation.

Well, this brings us back to Jesus accusing these people of being ***"hypocrites."*** This is a Greek word that most of us know! It's a word that refers to an actor, to someone who plays a part, to someone who wears a mask. Back in ancient times, instead of having dozens of actors, they would often have just a few who come on stage wearing different masks. And from ancient times, the masks are pretty much the universal symbol of drama and acting. They would pretend to be different people. That's fine if we're acting in a play, but not so much if we're trying to make ourselves appear more generous than we really are, or if we are trying to make ourselves appear to be super spiritual, or if we are using the outward appearance of generosity to try to cover up some dark and sinful behavior. A hypocrite is a faker. These people were making a big deal out of their giving, when their hearts were far from God, and God is not impressed.

In fact, Jesus ends the "bad" part of this passage by suggesting that if we give to be ***"honored by men,"*** then we already have our ***"reward in full."*** And this ***"reward in full"*** is apparently a term that was used in

accounting, "Paid in Full." This is what they would write (or stamp) on an invoice, "Paid in full." In other words, in terms of a reward, that's it! We might expect Jesus to say that we will have "no reward," but instead, he says that what we were hoping for, being honored by men, is our reward. In other words, we get what we are looking for, but that's it. We may get a brief round of applause, we may get a few hundred likes or shares on social media, we may get an engraved brick in the wall of a new library somewhere, but if we give only to impress others, that is it. And the recognition may not even last more than a brief moment. Ultimately, people don't really care, which is rather ironic. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You wouldn't worry what other people think of you if you knew how seldom they do." So, if we give to impress, that's our reward, and in return, we get no recognition from the Father, even though we might have done something very good. We give up the approval of heaven in exchange for the approval of people who really don't care about us. And this is the "bad" part of this. This is the warning.

II. Well, this brings us to the GOOD part of this passage.

And basically here, we are told to do the exact opposite of blowing a trumpet when we give to the poor! In fact, Jesus says, ***"...do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret."*** Some have suggested it's the equivalent of not even telling our best friends (those on our right and on our left). Now obviously, those of us who are married need to communicate what we're doing. In our family, when we check in with each other on something like this, I think the answer has almost always been "yes, let's do it." For one, we certainly don't need to be keeping financial secrets from each other; and secondly, there is joy in sharing those opportunities with each other; and obviously, we aren't bragging to each other about something we were able to do. But generally speaking (when dealing with those outside the family), the goal needs to be: Let's keep this as quiet as possible. Let's keep this between us.

But it's a strange picture, isn't it? Years ago, I actually preached on this passage all by itself in response to a question from one of the children of the congregation. She had turned in a card asking the question, "Do we really have to hide our left hand of what our right hand does?" That was her question, and it was a very good question! That little kid, by the way, is now working as an accountant down in Tennessee!

But when we think about not letting the left hand know what our right hand is doing, it's obviously a figure of speech. I hope we get that. Jesus isn't telling our right hand to reach in our pocket real quick and give something randomly before our left hand finds out about it. Our hands do not have brains of their own! Most of us, though are right handed, and I believe this has been true throughout history. So if we think about it, the right hand (for most people) is the hand that gets stuff done. It's natural. When I go to mow the lawn, I don't have to say, "Okay, right hand, prepare to pull the thing!" No, it just happens. So also, as the right hand is out there helping people, the left hand needs to just mind its own business! And if we think about it like this, I think we understand that another aspect of what Jesus says here is that not only should we not be blowing a trumpet when we give to the poor, but we probably shouldn't even be congratulating ourselves on what we've done! The goal, then, is to do good and move on. Because, if we're honest, it is so easy to start thinking about how good we are, "Man, I am one of the most generous people I know! The Lord sure is lucky to have a guy like me on his side," "That thing I did sure was righteous," and so on. Do we see how dangerous that can be?

The general principle, then, is (as Jesus says) that giving (especially giving to the poor) is to be ***"in secret."*** And this is something that may be personal with me, but generally speaking I don't know what people give to the church, and I really don't want to know. Now, I may see something from time to time, or somebody may ask me a question about giving occasionally, but in general I stay about as far away as possible from the finances

of the congregation. I don't want the temptation to be thinking about people in terms of their contribution. I don't need the drama.

But here's a special question: Is it actually a sin to ever know or to tell? Is that what Jesus is saying here? Years ago, someone asked a very good question based on this verse: Is it a sin to give by check (since somebody's gonna know)? On one hand, if you are giving by check (as opposed to cash) so that somebody notices, then that is a problem. By the way, in that lesson on this text from many years ago, I said that some give by cash, others by coin, and others by check, and then I said that personally, "I wish the church took debit cards." And now we do! And I personally think that the box in the entryway and the other ways we have for giving are actually better than passing the baskets in this regard (all four options we have now are more private than in the past). But on the question concerning whether it's ever a sin for somebody to know, I don't think it's inherently a sin, because in the next few verses Jesus will say almost the same thing about PRAYING in secret as he says about GIVING in secret. And yet, as a congregation, we will often pray quite publicly, won't we? By the time we leave today, we will have prayed publicly at least four times. But that's not what Jesus is condemning here. What he's warning about is those who give in a way ***"so that they may be honored by men."*** So, I think it's definitely alright to share or to learn as long as the motivation is pure. That's why we have Jesus and his disciples sitting in the temple watching people give and even learning a lesson from the widow who put in those two small copper coins. She certainly was not showing off, and Jesus was not sinning by noticing. The motives were pure. So also Paul could praise the Macedonians for their generosity in 2 Corinthians 8. He knew how much they gave, and he could even share that as an encouragement to others. The motives were pure.

But here's something else to consider: I can give in secret and still have a bad attitude about it! Chrysostom was a preacher from back in the early days of the church, and this is what he once said, "You may do good deeds before men, and yet not seek human praise; you may do them in secret, and yet in your heart wish that they may become known to gain that praise." Very interesting! Or here's another danger: I might be proud of how secretive I am in my giving. It's a sick twist, but humans can have twisted motives for just about everything. Or here's another danger: What if I don't give because nobody WILL notice. I thought about this the other morning at Firefly Coffee down in Oregon. Normally, if I drop something or see some piece of litter within my range of influence, I'll pick it up. Well, I ripped the top off of eight sugars for my coffee, I tossed all of that in the trash, and in the corner of my eye I saw one of those ripped off tops had missed the can. For a split second, I thought to myself, "If I leave that there, nobody will know that I am the one who did not pick it up." It's like the opposite of what we're talking about. But, if somebody had been standing there watching me, the course of action would have been more obvious. And that's a problem! Think about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, would the priest and Levite have passed by on the other side if they had known that someone was watching? How would an audience have changed that story? I think the priest and the Levite might have stopped to help the man. That's a problem! As it is, the Samaritan comes along and is the only one to help, even though he was out there in the middle of nowhere, and even though nobody was watching. The point is: Give, but don't be giving for the purpose of being honored. Don't worry about it. Give, and move on. Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases this in *The Message*, ***"When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it – quietly and unobtrusively."*** And all of this, by the way, applies equally to gifts that are large and to gifts that are small. The amount isn't the issue here; motivation is.

And the ideal motivation comes at the end. As Jesus encourages giving in secret, he says, ***"and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."*** Or, to put it another way, we give for an audience of One! And God our Father is that One. It is completely fine, by the way (according to Jesus) to be motivated by a reward. We just need to make sure that we are motivated by the proper reward.

Conclusion:

This morning, we have looked at the danger of giving to help the poor. “Beware,” Jesus says. We are to give, not to be honored, but we are to give in secret, for an audience of One. As we apply this passage to our lives this week, I’d like to suggest a challenge, and that is: Let’s go into the world this week looking for some need that needs to be met, and then, let’s meet that need – somebody we can encourage, somebody we can serve quietly, some opportunity to give in a way that helps. And let’s do it quickly, but generously, and also secretly, motivated by knowing that God alone is watching. And even if nobody on this earth ever figures it out, if we have done it for the right reason, God has seen it, and God will not forget it.

As we close this part of our service, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We come to you this morning in worship, knowing that you are a God who sees our hearts. Your word is sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing between soul and spirit. You judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Everything we say, and do, and even think is open before you. And so we ask that you keep us from secret sin, especially those sins that we may be tempted to commit as we do good. Forgive us for any hypocrisy in the past, and we pray today that our motives will always be pure from this point forward. You are the one we worship. We want you to have all the glory and praise.

We come to you this morning in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com