

Main Idea: According to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:1-4, when it comes to righteousness, motives matter.

- I. Jesus gives a warning concerning motives (1).
 - A. We can do righteous actions for people’s recognition.
 - B. If we do, we will not receive the Father’s reward.
- II. Jesus gives instructions concerning giving (2-4).
 - A. When you give, don’t do it for the praise of others (2).
 1. This is what hypocrites do.
 2. This results in a reward that is temporary.
 - B. When you give, don’t do it for self-praise (3).
 - C. When you give, do it for the Father’s praise (4).
 1. He sees what we do in secret.
 2. He rewards what we do in secret.

The Bottom Line: “Just two choices on the shelf, pleasing God, or pleasing self.”

1. Did I give this week?
2. Did I give in secret this week?
3. Did I give in secret for the pleasure of the Father this week?

This morning we move into a second chapter in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. In Matthew 5 we have learned that righteousness is important. Jesus says we are to hunger for it (5:6), and then by grace receive it. In verse 20, Jesus warns that we are not to settle for the outward righteousness of the Pharisees, or we’ll miss heaven; and then in the rest of the chapter demonstrates the difference between self-righteousness and saving righteousness with six examples.

But as we turn the page into Matthew 6, we learn from Jesus that as vital as righteousness is, it can turn sour. Right action alone is not enough. I’ve entitled today’s message, “*When It Comes to Righteousness, Motives Matter.*”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:1-4

Back in 2003 Ed Welch wrote a helpful mini-book called *Motives: Why Do I Do the Things I Do?* It’s very helpful. He explains:

A list of possible motivations would be endless, but the most common can be reduced to a dozen or so. To discover your motives, ask yourself these questions: *What motivates me? Why do I do what I do?* Even better, ask, *What do I really want? If I don’t have _____, I am miserable.* Here are some typical answers.

Pleasure	Freedom/Autonomy
Power	Peace
Love/Intimacy	Happiness
Comfort	Significance/Reputation
Meaning	Respect/Admiration
Control	Success

You have probably been motivated by all of these at one time or another, but some people have specialties.

- The man who is always late and unavailable when there is work to be done might be motivated by comfort.

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the series preached at WBC in 1988.

- The wife who is mortified that a surprise visitor saw her messy house is motivated by reputation.
- The father whose children are fearful and whose wife is cautious wants power.
- The teen who chafes at any curfew wants freedom.
- The mother who never lets her children stay with a babysitter wants control.²

Have you ever spent time driving a car with standard transmission? What happened when you switched cars and moved to an automatic transmission? Did you have a tendency to hit the floorboard with your right foot in search of the clutch? Why did you do that? Because it was routine. You did it because that's the way you always did it. Until you stopped to think about it.

Why do we come to church? Why do we serve God? Why do we read our Bibles and give our money? Why do we do our acts of righteousness? This is a motive question, and Jesus is going to address our motives today.

According to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:1-4, when it comes to righteousness, motives matter. Jesus gives a basic warning in verse 1. Then in the verses that follow, He applies this warning to three specific acts of piety, or three areas of Christian living. First, to alms/giving (2-4). Then to prayer (5-15). And then to fasting (16-18).

These were the three great pillars of Jewish life.³ In fact, they're also included in the five pillars of Islam. These three acts of piety put belief into practice in three directions: to our fellow mankind (alms/giving); to God (prayer), to ourselves (fasting).

These are good activities. Jesus expects His disciples to be involved in giving, praying, and fasting (notice the "when", not "if" in verses 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 16, 17). But there is a serious danger. Each of these activities lend themselves to wrong motives. And so Jesus warns us.

I. Jesus gives a warning concerning motives (1).

Verse 1 begins, "Beware." If you live an unrighteous life, you are in trouble, for the judgement of God is coming. But you may live *righteous* life and be in trouble too. Beware, says Jesus. Of what?

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Wait a minute. Did not Jesus tell us we are to let our light shine before people so they will see our good works? Yes He did, back in Matthew 5:16. But now He says we should beware of doing good deeds so others can see them. Is this a contradiction? No, not at all. We are to let people see our good deeds, but when they do, they shouldn't see us.

Huh? That's right. Lloyd-Jones says it well. "The Christian at one and the same time is to be attracting attention to himself, and yet not attracting attention to himself."⁴

That's not double-talk. Lloyd-Jones explains, "This balance is a fine and delicate one; so often we tend to go to one extreme or the other. Christian people tend either to be guilty of great ostentation or else to become monks and hermits."⁵

² <https://cfcjax.com/mt-content/uploads/2017/06/motives-why-do-i-do-the-things-i-do.pdf>

³ See D. A. Carson

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, p. 13.

But Jesus won't allow us to be either the showboat or the monk. Let your light shine, absolutely. But beware when you do. "Take heed," says the AV. Look out! Be on your guard! For what?

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them," says the NIV. The KJV uses the word "alms," as in, "that ye do not your alms before men." But it's literally the word "righteousness," the same word Jesus used back in Matthew 5:20. The ESV simply says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people."

Jesus warns us of *theatrical-righteousness*. What's that? It's when we do good in a way that is dramatically noticeable. It's when we crave the attention and applause of people, and then do good deeds to obtain that applause and attention.

But here's where motive enters. It's good to live a godly life that others can see. It's not good to live to live a godly life so that others will see *us*. The Lord commands the former, but condemns the latter.

And here's the challenge. By nature, we want attention. One of the characteristic remarks of a child is "Watch me!" As we grow up, we don't say it as often, but we still desire it, and expect it. We want to be noticed.

I remember participating in a special prayer group at Cedarville College back in the early 80s. Some of us student leaders were concerned about spiritual apathy we perceived in the student body, so we started getting up early and meeting in the chapel at 6:30 AM to pray. Prayer is a good thing. But I noticed something happen in my own life, and in others. We had a tendency to want to impress others with a "good prayer". We wanted others to recognize and notice our spiritual "maturity".

What happens when we do good deeds out of wrong motives? Listen again to Jesus' answer at the end of verse 1 (AV), "Ye have no reward of your Father who is in heaven." So there's a serious outcome when what we do comes from a heart that is driven by wrong motives. That's frightening. And notice that Jesus never denounces the deed itself. It's still a "good deed", an "act of righteousness". But the eternal reward is lost when the motive is tainted.

So this is Jesus' warning in verse 1. Beware!

A. We can do righteous actions for people's recognition.

B. If we do, we will not receive the Father's reward.

By the way, turn that around and you'll find a powerful motivation for righteous living. If you do live a righteous life, for the right motive, you will receive a reward for it. Your Heavenly Father will give it to you. When? When you see Him. Where? In heaven. Now that's incentive for right living! More about that a little later.

Notice what Jesus does next. First, He gives the general warning. Then He applies it to three specific areas of life, and He starts with this one. *Giving*.

II. Jesus gives instructions concerning giving (2-4).

Verse 2 (in the AV), "Therefore, when thou doest alms." I wanted you to hear the old English because it uses a pronoun we don't use today, the second person, singular, "thou." We don't see the change in the contemporary translations, but Jesus switches from the second person plural "you" in verse 1, to the second person singular "thou" and "thee" in verse 2.

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, p. 13.

What's happening? Jesus is getting specific, because that's where change occurs, not by talking in generalities, but by getting personal and specific. And the first specific has to do with what we do when we see a need. Jesus assumes we will give, for that's what His people are to do. Be givers. But how do we give? Jesus gives us three very concrete instructions that have to do with our motivation when we give. In the first two He tells us what *not* to do, and in the third, what we should do.

To put it another way, Jesus is showing us three possible motivations for every good deed we do. I can do it for you to notice, or for me to notice, or for our Father to notice. For you, for me, or for Him. Why am I doing what I am doing?

A. When you give, don't do it for the praise of others (2). "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

Notice the specific words. *When*—Jesus assumes we will give. To refuse to give is an indication that we don't belong to Him. He is a Giver, and when He enters our lives He gives us a new nature that delights in giving.

When *you*—again, this is second person singular. This is personal. Jesus is talking to you and me as individuals. When *thou* givest. He shifts from plural to singular because every individual must come to grips with his or her motive, every time he or she does the following.

When you *give to the needy*—the KJV says, "When thou doest alms." An alm is a deed of mercy or pity. Specifically, it refers to giving money to help the poor. But generally speaking, an alm is any good deed intended to serve others. So we "do alms" when we decide to do something tangible to help someone else. It may involve money, time, or labor.

When you *give, sound no trumpet before you*—In other words, don't blow your own horn! We're not sure exactly what Jesus had in mind here. Did the Pharisees actually have "Donor Recognition Days" in the synagogues where certain contributors were honored for their generous acts of piety? Were trumpets actually blown to capture the attention of the crowd, and put the focus on the honored individual? Or is Jesus speaking figuratively?

You say, "What would Jesus say about giving campaigns today, and putting donor names on plaques, and having recognition services for workers? Does this passage prohibit that?"

Not necessarily. The Bible says more than what this passage says about giving. For instance, Romans 13:7 says we are to give "honor to whom honor is due." Also, in 2 Corinthians 8:1 we see Paul publicly commending the churches of Macedonia for their generous giving. In both cases, it's not the giver who initiates the honor, but others.

In Jesus' example, it's the giver who initiates the trumpet blowing. If you give and others recognize it, that's one thing. But if you give and *expect* to be recognized, that's another. And that's what Jesus is forbidding.

Who does such a thing? Jesus tells us.

...as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets—What is a hypocrite? It's a term from the theatre of the Roman world. "Hypocrite" comes from the Greek word referring to one who wears a mask and performs before an audience, a play-actor.

Jesus says they're not just in the theater. They can be in synagogues too, and in churches. Service is their stage, and they look good too, as they give in all kinds of ways. But they're wearing masks to hide their true intentions. They may deceive even themselves into thinking that they're acting for the best interests of God and man.

...that they may be praised by others – that's what they're really after as they give their money and time and service. Praise from others. Glory of men, as the KJV puts it.

When we give, we must not do it for the praise of others.

1. *This is what hypocrites do.* Spurgeon said, "To stand with a penny in one hand, and a trumpet in the other is the posture of hypocrisy."

What does Jesus say is the hypocrite's reward for his or her good deed? We may be surprised at Jesus' answer. He doesn't say, as we might expect, that they'll receive "no reward at all." Rather He says, "*Truly, I say to you, Verily, verily I say to you. Amen, amen I say to you. They have received their reward.*" What kind of reward?

2. *This results in a reward that is temporary.* And it's past tense. "They have received their reward." Jesus uses a commercial term that first century businessmen might use to culminate a transaction. Payment received in full.

So there IS reward for good deeds, even when the motive is wrong. If you give to the needy to demonstrate how generous you are, your reward is that people will admire you, congratulate you, applaud you, write social media posts about you, why they might even put you on leadership boards of those organizations who benefitted from your gifts.

That's not insignificant. Many people live for such rewards.

Take social media, for example. Everything gets posted these days. So a man gives a young lady a ring. Did he do that for *her*? Well, sure he did. But did the anticipated applause from others who will see the video enter his mind as he carefully staged the event?

A few weeks ago I posted a picture of our new church sign. Why? Was it so people could celebrate what God has done at WBC? I hope. But I know there's also that desire for my pastor friends to recognize what I'm doing.

Let's be honest. We all struggle with mixed motives. Thankfully, because of the gospel, we're totally accepted by God because of Jesus. He took our sin on the cross, and that includes every selfish action *and motive*, and paid the penalty in full. So we can now be honest with ourselves.

And here's the tragic reality. There is a reward for play-acting, yes, but it's temporary. That's *all* they will receive, says Jesus. There's nothing more to anticipate. They have forfeited the true reward, the eternal reward. They have nothing more to look forward to than seeing their name in the headlines. They have received the reward of men, and forfeited the reward of God.

So don't do this, says our Master. When you give, and we should be giving, don't sound a trumpet so others notice you.

You say, "How can you tell if someone is giving so that others notice them?"

The answer is, it's not always easy to tell. I learned that a long time ago when I was the leader of a college ministry team at Cedarville called the Swordbearers. Interesting things happened on the van on the way to the churches, and schools where we were invited to minister. We could have a personality conflict on the van, even harsh words and hurt feelings, but when we got to the church, it was show-time. The smiles lit up our faces. The voices sang beautifully. The dramas. The preaching. The trumpets.

And people truly were encouraged, and said so. “That song was inspiring. That sermon was just what I needed. Thank you so much for giving to us this evening!”

But here’s the lesson. When a gift is given, the approval of men does not guarantee the approval of God. Because motives matter.

You say, “So if I see an opportunity to give and meet a need, and I just do it without blowing any trumpets, I’m okay then, right? God is pleased, right?”

Maybe. Maybe not. Even when we don’t sound the trumpet, motives matter. This brings us to Jesus’ second example of giving that misses the mark.

B. When you give, don’t do it for self-praise (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.”

So you don’t sound the trumpet when you give? That’s good, says our Savior. But something else is needed. Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That’s hard to do! What’s He talking about?

Self praise. Don’t give so others will applaud you. That’s verse 2. But don’t give so you can praise yourself either. That’s verse 3.

We struggle with this, don’t we? I think the longer we walk with Christ, the more we struggle with it. We learn quickly that trumpet-blowing is unattractive, so we stop blowing the trumpet *out loud*. We just blow it softly, so only one person hears it.

Me. I don’t need you to tell me how important my gift was. I’ll tell myself. The conversation goes something like this.

“Hey, Left Hand, did you see what I just did?” says Right Hand.

“No, Right Hand, what did you do?” says Left Hand.

“Seriously? You didn’t see it?” says Right Hand. “I thought you were more observant than that.”

“Why? What did you do? Come on, tell me!” says Left Hand.

“Well, okay, okay. It really wasn’t that big of a deal. I just _____,” explains Right Hand as he recounts the good deed.

“Oh, wow!” says Left Hand. “People sure are fortunate to have you around!”

“Ah, come on now,” blushes Right Hand. “Do you really think so? It wasn’t that big of a thing, was it?”

“Why, sure it was, Right Hand! If only people knew what you just did. They’d be impressed!” says Left Hand.

“Well, maybe,” says Right Hand. “But let’s just keep this between ourselves.”

That’s self-praise, and it’s just as hypocritical as seeking the praise of others, according to Jesus. So what should we seek? Jesus tells us in verse 4.

Secrecy. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing “that your giving may be in secret.”

I believe it was Warren Wiersbe who once commented on the question, “What makes a good leader?” He answered, “A good leader doesn’t pay attention to his own press clippings, whether good or bad.”

Christians are to be known for their giving instincts. Jesus assumes this. “When you give.” But as we give, we are “not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing.” The right hand is normally the active hand, the hand responsible for the good deed. So what does this mean? For a Jesus-follower, giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice, then self-forgetfulness, but *not* self-congratulation.

Do you keep a mental record of the good deeds you do for others? Do you ever use this record to try and get a pay-back people ("You owe me one")? Do you use this record to bolster your view of yourself ("I don't need people's applause. I know I'm a good person, and that's all that matters.")?

Brothers and sisters, not only are we not to try to impress others with our deeds of charity, but we're not to impress ourselves either. Don't let the left hand know.

"So just be passive when we give? Is that what Jesus is saying? Don't do it for praise?" No, actually, it's not what Jesus is saying. This isn't stoicism. We *are* after praise. That's right. But it's not people's praise, nor self-praise. Then whose?

C. When you give, do it for the Father's praise (4). "...so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Jesus refocuses our attention and puts in the Father. He tells us two things about our Father here.

1. *He sees what we do in secret.* "Your Father who sees in secret." You don't need people's praise. You don't even need self praise. The Father sees that gift you just gave. In fact, He sees *everything* that happens in secret.

I encourage you to begin your day with this reminder. Everything I do today will be in the presence of God. He will see every action, hear every word, perceive perfectly every motivation. He will be with me at the office, and in the lunchroom. He will see what no one else sees, and what no one else seems to appreciate. Every diaper I change. Every prayer I offer in behalf of my church family. Every cup of water to someone who is thirsty. He will see it all. So with this in mind, Lord, I will live this day for You, an audience of One.

But according to Jesus, He doesn't just *see*.

2. *He rewards what we do in secret.*

The first funeral I ever did as your pastor was for a man named Raymond who took this to heart. Of course, I didn't find that out until after he died when his wife, Mary, told me that when her husband gave, he never wanted anyone to know the source, citing this verse, "not letting the right hand know what the left hand was doing."

What would motivate that kind of selfless giving? This would. Knowing that your Father sees and rewards what we do in secret.

Think of it this way. Our God is invisible, and our invisible God likes invisible deeds! And what's more, He is impressed by the unimpressive, and places value on secrecy. There's a sharp contrast. The hypocrite announces his good deed to the world, with the sounding of trumpets. His ambition is clear. He wants the glory of men. Jesus' disciples, however, are to do their good deed in secrecy. There's no need for anyone else to know. And what's more, they are to have poor memories. They're not to keep track of all they've done for others. They don't need to. God will. The Father sees all that's done in secret. And God does not forget.

Jesus talked about this in Matthew 25. "When was I in prison, and you visited me? When was I thirsty, and you gave me something to drink?" When did I do that, Lord? I don't remember.

But I do remember, says the Lord. I saw it, and had it recorded in the Books.

Listen to this observation by Lloyd-Jones, and be encouraged by it. "Every detail of all you have done to the glory of God will be announced and proclaimed and you will

be given the credit and honor and glory. I will reward you openly, and I will say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant...enter thou into the joy of thy lord.'"⁶

Yes, when we stand before God, He will reward us for those unsung deeds of kindness, every time we shared the gospel with someone, every stranger we brought into our homes and gave a good meal, a drink of water, and a change of clothes. God does not forget. And what He sees, He rewards, when it's done for Him.

Your Father will reward you. We're wired to be noticed. Jesus, unlike Buddha, does not cancel our human instinct to be noticed. He redirects it, toward our Heavenly Father. He tells us not to seek the praise and applause of men, which lasts but a few minutes and is gone forever, nor our own praise, which is idolatry and produces an ugly self-righteousness. Do it for your Father, Jesus says. He sees, and He will reward.

So Jesus has shown us that there are three possible motivations for every good deed we do. I can do it for your applause, or for my applause, or for His applause. For you, for me, or for Him. Why am I doing what I am doing?

The Bottom Line: "Just two choices on the shelf, pleasing God, or pleasing self."

Jesus has challenged us today concerning our motives for ministry. Motive is something which is between you and God. I can't evaluate your motives. You can't evaluate mine. But God can, and He does.

Please allow God's Spirit to shine His searchlight on your heart as I move through the following motive checklist:

-Why do I preach? What is my motive? Do I love the feeling of power that comes when people listen to my voice? Do I thrive on being in the spotlight? Or do I truly want to please God? Do I want to be faithful to Him?

-Why do I teach SS?

-Why do I participate in music ministry? Am I desiring the applause of people? Or to please the Lord, by focusing all the attention on Him, so that He is worshipped?

-Why do I give money to the church? For a tax deduction? Because it makes me feel good to know I'm really committed?

-Why do I witness? Do I love to hear people say, "What a faithful Christian you are!" Or do I want to please God by obeying His command?

Each of these are good deeds. God is not asking anyone necessarily to quit preaching, teaching, singing, giving, or witnessing. In fact, if we're not doing these good deeds, we may have another problem on our hands, which God's Word addresses elsewhere. But the question is always motives. Why do I do what I do? For your applause, for my own applause, or for His applause?

Since He's specifically addressed giving, let's ask ourselves these three questions.

1. *Did I give this week?*

2. *Did I give in secret this week?*

3. *Did I give in secret for the pleasure of the Father this week?*

Closing Hymn: #390 "May the Mind of Christ, My Savior"

Community Group Discussion:

⁶ Lloyd-Jones, p. 20.

1. This morning's message from the Sermon on the Mount was entitled, "*When It Comes to Righteousness, Motives Matter.*" Take time as a group to re-read Matthew 6:1-4. What's your first impression when you hear these words from Jesus?
2. It's possible to do a "good deed," yet miss God's approval. How so, according to verse 1. How can you tell if you are doing something to be "seen by people"?
3. It's good to give, but in verses 2-4 Jesus identifies some guidelines for our giving. What are these guidelines? According to verse 2? According to verse 3? According to verse 4?
4. What is true of God according to verse 4? How does this motivate you as a follower of Jesus?
5. What is the gospel, and why is it important to remind ourselves of the gospel when we study a passage like this? After discussing, spend some time as a group in prayer, asking for help to apply what we have learned.