

GIVE IN SECRET

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen*

Introduction

“When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Be like the widow in the temple, who gave all that she had.”

It’s not uncommon to read or hear a message like this among Christians. Take a few moments to think about where you’ve heard something similar, or when you’ve spoken these words, yourself. Were you at church? With children? In a small group in your congregation?

(Time for reflection)

Giving money is an important topic for Christians to consider. All congregations need money to pay pastors, care for buildings, and support ministries. All people need encouragement and guidance about their relationship to money. Few things affect our daily life more. It seems appropriate that the Bible gives so much attention to money and giving.

Yet, it’s too common to see Bible passages taken out of context, turned into catchy slogans, and enforced as rules that Christians should follow. Take, for instance, that message above: “When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Think of the widow in the temple. She gave all that she had.”

If it sounds a little strange, it should. It’s made up of ideas from three different Bible passages. Yet, it sounds like a lot of stewardship messages that take

verses out of context to make a point about how Christians should give. Typically, the point of the message is something like: “Give more and feel good about it.”

Yet, when we combine biblical ideas about giving into catchy slogans, we fail to take each message seriously. In this summer Bible study, we’ll take a deeper look at three Scripture passages that are frequently used to reinforce certain “rules” about giving. We’ll consider why these passages don’t provide the neat, catchy rules that many of us have been told to follow. When we look deeper into each, we’ll see how they can give us far more insight into how and why our giving matters.

As you prepare

Materials you may want

Bible, open to Matthew 6:2–4

Note pad for yourself

One easel or large board for the group, to take notes during the group discussion (optional)

Hymn

This Little Light of Mine (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 677)

Focus verses

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know

what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

In this first session, we turn our attention to these three verses tucked into the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

READ MATTHEW 6:2–4 ALOUD.

Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you're a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow five minutes for discussion.

1. **What "rule" about giving emerges from this passage?**
2. **How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?**

In my experience, this passage is used to encourage two rules about giving.

- Give in secret. Don't talk about your giving.
- Let others give in secret. Don't ask about their giving.

Did anyone come up with other giving rules that come from this passage? If so, share them with the group now.

We can agree that these verses have inspired many expectations—and sermons—about giving. Yet, when we zoom out and put these verses in context, we'll see that Jesus has a lot more to say than "give in secret" and that, in fact, he may not say that at all.

A famous sermon

Matthew records these verses in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Spanning three chapters (Matthew 5–7), it is the first and longest sermon by Jesus recorded in the Bible. After the adult Jesus is baptized (3:13–17) and spends time in the wilderness (4:1–11), he makes

his home by the Sea of Galilee. He recruits his first disciples and starts healing and teaching throughout the area. "His fame spread," Matthew writes, and he attracts large crowds wherever he goes (4:23–25).

One day, the crowds follow him up a mountain. According to Matthew, it's here that Jesus preaches some of his most memorable lines, including the Beatitudes (5:3–12), the Lord's Prayer (6:9–15), the verse about storing up treasures in heaven (5:19), the Golden Rule (7:12), and the passage about the lilies of the field (6:28). This long speech has become known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Alms, prayer, and fasting

Matthew 6:2–4 comes in the middle of the sermon, in a section that begins with these words: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). With this introduction, Jesus then offers advice about three religious practices that would have been familiar to his audience—giving alms, prayer, and fasting.

REPEAT MATTHEW 6:2–4. Then read out loud the next two biblical selections about prayer (6:5–6) and fasting (6:16–18).

Almsgiving

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

Prayer in Matthew 6:5–6

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;

for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Fasting 6:16–18

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Talk about it

3. Compare each set of verses. What similarities do you notice between how Jesus addresses almsgiving, prayer, and fasting? What phrases appear in all three sections?

The structure of each passage is similar. It goes something like this:

1. Don't be like the hypocrites.
2. The hypocrites do this practice to get noticed by others.
3. That's the only reward they'll get.
4. Instead, do your practice in secret.
5. God will see you and reward you.

Giving to the poor

Recall how Jesus introduces this section in Matthew 6:1.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

During Jesus' time, Jews adopted at least these three prominent ways to “practice your piety,” which

is another way of saying “practice righteousness” or “make yourself right with God.” Though sinners, they had access to three rituals—alms, prayer, and fasting—to persuade God to intervene for their well-being in this life and to ensure their place with God after this life. When Jesus preached on the mountain, his audience would have been familiar with all three practices. Notice that Jesus doesn't take time to explain these practices. He says “when” you give alms, fast, and pray, not “if” you do.

The phrase “give alms” is sometimes translated “give to the poor.” It referred to a direct donation from the giver to the person in need. Beggars were an accepted part of the social structure in Jesus' time. Alms were the primary means of assisting the poor. For Jesus' audience, hearing about “alms” or “giving to the needy” would have brought to mind this kind of direct interaction between the giver and the receiver.

It's important to remember what image these words would have conjured for Jesus' audience, because it may be different from what comes to mind when we hear these words today.

Talk about it

4. In pairs, share what images come to mind when you think about giving to the poor.

Different time. Different charity.

The very concept of charity has changed significantly since Jesus preached about alms on a hillside in Galilee. Today, much of our charitable giving goes to organizations. Giving to the poor usually means giving to a church or another organization that carries out programs to benefit the poor.

Only a portion of our donation will end up in the hands of someone who is poor. We're okay with that because we think organized programs are more effective at helping people deal with poverty or get out of poverty.

We usually frown on giving to beggars in the street, preferring that those who are poor seek help from the organizations we support.

Today, we tend to “give to the poor” by donating time or money to organizations that do one of three things:

- give away immediate assistance, like food, clothing, utility assistance or medical care.
- help people find jobs or otherwise become self-sufficient.
- advocate for government to spend more of our shared tax resources on programs to help the poor, and to pass other laws that benefit those who live in poverty.

When we compare this type of charity to almsgiving, two significant differences appear.

Less contact with the poor

Today, our ways of giving to the poor involve less direct interaction with the people who are poor. Almsgiving, on the other hand, was specifically a way for the donor to interact with the recipient. In fact, the interaction was the primary focus of almsgiving. Jews in Jesus’ time understood that God was present, or incarnate, among the poor. To interact with the poor was to interact with God. The importance of this act was so great that, by Jesus’ time, many Jewish texts considered almsgiving to be of equal or greater value than sacrifices made in the Temple.

Through alms, individual Jews interacted with those who were poor and thereby interacted with God. Observant Jews would have seen beggars as an opportunity to carry out an important ritual: giving alms.

According to Matthew’s gospel, this understanding of alms was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus tells his disciples that they will ultimately be judged on the basis of one factor—whether

they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, gave drink to the thirsty, and visited the prisoner. If not, he says, God will say, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:45). Then, he says that God will send them “away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (46).

For Jesus, there was something important and unique about interacting with those who receive our gifts. We should take note of this. If our giving does not include interactions with those who are poor, we may be missing something that was vital to Jesus’ understanding of how people interact with God.

More focus on change

The second difference between almsgiving and modern charity is the goal of the gift. Much of our charity today is aimed at change. We try to change an individual’s situation by supporting programs that give him food during a period of unemployment or help her get education to become more self-sufficient.

We try to bring change to many by reducing poverty in entire communities and nations. We have different ideas about how to do this (Improve our schools? Increase wages? Build affordable housing? End wars? Strengthen the social safety net?) but the goal is the same: to eliminate the factors that perpetuate poverty. Often, we speak of “ending the cycle of poverty.”

Almsgiving was not used as a way to end poverty for anyone. In his book titled *Charity*, theologian Gary Anderson says that this would have been unthinkable for Jesus and his followers: “To think of poverty as a social problem that could be solved was not really imaginable in the mindset of pre-modern man.”

In a society with no instinct to end or reduce poverty, almsgiving provided a socially acceptable way for society’s most vulnerable to have their basic needs met. In that time and place, family networks determined one’s social status, way of earning a living, and access

to resources. Those who received alms, such as widows and orphans, were typically estranged from these familial networks or without them altogether. Almsgiving was an acceptable way for the society to deal with their need.

Our ideas about charity have changed. For the past 2,000 years, Jesus' concern for the poor has inspired Christians to organize new ways of responding to poverty. From shared community treasuries among the early Christians to hospitals and orphanages in the Middle Ages to advocacy networks and social enterprise today, Christians have expanded their imagination of what is possible and responded to poverty in new ways.

Yet, all of this came later, after Jesus preached on the hillside in Galilee about giving your alms in secret.

Beware of your motivations

READ AGAIN MATTHEW 6:2–4.

We've concluded that Jesus was not talking about the type of charity we do today. Instead, he's talking about a spiritual practice called almsgiving. It's a practice that we don't do today, at least not in the same way that Jesus and his followers did.

If we turn Matthew 6:2–4 into a catchy slogan about giving to charity in secret, then we miss the rule that Jesus was trying to convey. This rule was about much more than giving. It is summed up in the verse that introduces this section of the sermon: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Remember that practicing piety refers to the acts you do to strengthen your relationship with God. Today, we may no longer emphasize alms, prayer, and fasting, but we still believe in the idea that we can and should take action to grow in faith and reorient our lives to God.

No matter what the act is, the rule is the same:

Beware of your motivations. Don't do these acts in order to be seen by others.

Activity

5. In 1 to 3 words, write down something you do as a spiritual practice. It could be alms, prayer, or fasting, but it might also be journaling, a morning run, or something else entirely.
6. Return to Matthew 6:2–4. Replace the words "give alms" with the words you wrote. See how Jesus' advice can apply to other practices.

Does "secret" mean "secret"?

Doing things in secret is one way to avoid the temptation of unhealthy motivations. But did Jesus mean that we should always do all spiritual practices in secret? That's the catchy slogan that has emerged from this verse: Don't tell anyone about your giving. Don't ask about their giving.

Yet, if we take Jesus literally about giving only in secret, then wouldn't we also need to take him literally in verses 5–6 and avoid all forms of public prayer?

If praying in secret is a rule, we violate it every time we worship.

When we consider that Jesus is warning against unhealthy motivations, against doing spiritual practices *in order to be seen*, we can see that he may be using exaggeration to make his point. Take, for instance, the line "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

To follow that advice is physically impossible, but the image is evocative of the unhealthy motivations he is warning against. If you are worried about your right hand impressing your left, how much more will you be concerned about impressing other people.

Let your light shine

If we use Matthew 6:2–4 to justify secretive giving, then we also ignore an equally important message from

the same Sermon on the Mount. If you sang the hymn at the beginning, you know this verse well.

READ MATTHEW 5:14–16. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

According to these verses, we are to let others see our good works. If charitable giving is a good work (and Jesus seems to think it is) then shouldn't others see it?

Christians treat giving as a spiritual act, a way of practicing our piety and reorienting our lives to God. We believe that everything we have comes from God and God calls us to share these gifts by giving to our churches and other worthy causes.

There are many ways in which sharing your giving experience can inspire others to give more and grow in their relationship with God. Think of all the Christian finance experts who share their giving experiences through radio, videos, and books.

Has your congregation ever hosted a workshop about financial and estate planning? This could be a great benefit to members who are burdened with worry about how to care for themselves and their family. (See “Live Generously,” p. 10.)

Likewise, many churches invite personal testimonies about giving during worship to inspire others in the congregation to support the church's important ministries. These are all ways in which talking about your giving can inspire others to give glory to God.

We get a much better set of rules when we read these two passages together.

The call to let your light shine in Matthew 5:14–16 does not dampen the warning that comes later, in Matthew 6:2–4. Rather, it makes the warning all the more necessary.

Doing good works and letting your light shine are crucial parts of a Christian life. However, Jesus cautions, there's a risk that comes with letting your light shine to glorify God.

The risk is that you'll start expecting others to shine their light on you. When you do good works, it's likely that you will be seen by others, and it will be tempting to let their approval become your motivation. Beware of this. If you want to progress spiritually, find a way to get your original motivation back.

Talk about it

7. In pairs, respond to this question: Has there been a time when you realized that you were giving to charity for the wrong reason? How did it affect you? Did you make any changes to get your motivations in check?

Prayer

Pray the prayer that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:9–13.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
Amen.

Further reading

Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition by Gary Anderson, 2013, Yale University Press. 🌿

Emma Crossen is the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.