

November 19, 2017 Sermon  
"The Reward of Secrecy" by David Eikelboom  
Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18

### Text Background

In Jewish culture, there were three acts of piety.

- These were prayer, fasting, and giving alms.
- These were important parts of Mosaic Law and tradition, but had evolved into a means by which a certain "social capital" could be obtained.

In the above verses, a model is outlined.

1. Warning against doing the acts of piety for the sake of human recognition
2. Assurance that if human recognition is the goal, it will be achieved, but that no other reward will be gained.
3. Instruction on how to perform the act secretly
4. The assurance of recognition and reward from God

### Giving to the poor

- It was assumed that the disciples would give to the poor.
- Outside of the Gospel, there is other Rabbinic writing that speaks about these topics, and warns against pretention during giving – which suggests how common this was.
- The notion of "announcing with trumpets" – some believe this refers to the practice of blowing trumpets at the time of collecting alms in the Temple, though this is not unanimous.
  - o Another suggestion is that public fasts were proclaimed by the sounding of trumpets - and there would be associated giving of alms.
- So giving is to be done in secret/quietly.

### Fasting

- There was only one day under Mosaic Law that required a fast – that was the Day of Atonement, though during the exile, numerous fasts were introduced.
- In addition to this, many personal and group fasts were performed, which had a variety of purposes
  - o Especially to indicate and foster self-humiliation before God, often in connection with confession of sins.
- Even early in the Old Testament it is heavily criticized for being a "formal act" rather than one done in the true spirit of the action.

One key point: Reward

- The sense of “Reward” from verse 2 is different from that in verse 4. It is best understood through the quote – “The reward is not something that is simply tacked on to the activity for which it is given – rather, it is the activity itself in consummation”

- 1. What are the “Giving of alms” and “fasting” of today?**
- 2. Why is it a problem if we desire human recognition?**
- 3. What are the consequences we experience because of need for recognition?**
- 4. How can we resist this? What can we do?**

### The Giving of Alms & Fasting of Today

The real question here is one of what are the things for which we seek credit and recognition?

- Some may be “spiritual” acts, but others may be ordinary acts.
- Charitable giving (I think especially of this done at the corporate level)
  - o Why is it called the “CIBC Run for the Cure”
- Running a marathon? – or some other fitness / health behavior.
- Playing music in Church, Participating in Serve
- Supporting a Syrian Family?

### Consequences of External vs Secret Focus

- Increased reliance on social identity -> loss of intrinsic joy of activities
- Value of an action is determined by the degree of social response to it.
  - o Studies show dopaminergic response to “like” button – addictive!
  - o Highly fluid, unstable.
  - o Can cause emptiness if recognition is not received.
  - o Huge increase in teen depression/suicide.
- By using a secret focus, it creates intentionality by taking away the extrinsic reward.
- Shift in behavior from “response driven” to “value driven”

### Main Problem – Loss of appreciation of Grace

- If we did something, obviously “we” did it – it was our agency/action.
  - o This fails to appreciate our daily reliance on grace, and that “every good and perfect thing comes from above”

- A consequence of pride is “proud giving” – demonstrative behaviours.

Many scripture verses disagree with this approach

- - Proverbs 16:9 – In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.
- Psalm 127: 1-2 – If the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless; if the Lord does not protect the city, it is useless for the sentries to stand guard.
- 1 Chronicles 29:14 – But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand”

Secret Giving – takes away the “Feedback mechanism” that continues to fuel our pride.

- Helps us to more easily embrace humility.
- Secret giving will be a consequence of embracing this attitude of humility – we will see the way that social praise and recognition is misplaced – because it was in fact not “us” who made this possible.
- We will experience God’s grace more fully, as we will acknowledge it regularly.

### Creation of Expectations

When we give from a perspective of our own agency, not recognizing grace, a common consequence will be the creation of expectations of those who both witness and receive our gifts.

- “The Ungrateful Refugee”
  - “There were unspoken conditions to our acceptance, and that was the secret we were meant to glean on our own; we had to be grateful... As refugees, we owed them our previous identity. We had to lay it at their door like an offering, and gleefully deny it to earn our place in this new country”
  - “The problem was that they wanted our salvation story as a talisman, no more”. No one asked what our house in Iran looked like, what fruits we grew in our yard, what books we read, what music we loved”
  - “But isn’t glorifying the refugees who thrive according to Western standards just another way to endorse this gratitude politics”?

This can create bitterness, when our expectations are not met.

Secret Giving

- Frees us from this resentment because we are no longer tied to the response to our giving, and are rather connected more fully with our motivating factors.

- Because we enjoy the activity, or value the cause.
- We will experience the joy of koinonea – collective, goal driven, kingdom focused behavior.
  
- There is no debt to repay, no creditors at the door. There is just the rest of life, with all the messy, greedy, ordinary days that are theirs to squander”

### So what do we do?

1. Consider ways to remove ourselves from praise for actions or giving.
2. Guard our hearts against praise when received – don’t ruminate on it.
3. Acknowledge, daily, the sustaining grace of God
  - a. “Name your blessings”
  - b. Recognize the things over which we have no control, but allow us to live the lives we do and experience the joys we experience.

### Challenge

1. Do we pray for success, or for humility? Do we pray for aptitude, or attitude?
2. Do we believe that the recognition of the world is outweighed by the reward of God, experienced through daily reliance on him?