

"Give"

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 6? Matthew chapter 6, that's page 761 in the Pew Bible. We're continuing our series in the Sermon on the Mount today.

We're going to focus in chapter 6 on verses 1 through 4, but to get the context, I want to read all the way to verse 21, actually. So let me pray for us, and then I will read.

Father, we ask that as we come now to your word, your spirit would do his work to help us to see Christ and to see how our union with him continues to cleanse us, shape us, transform us into the kind of people that you've created and redeemed us to be.

Would we see his beauty and his majesty and his glory and in beholding him become more and more like him? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right, Matthew chapter 6, 1 through 21. Jesus says this, 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.

[1:33] Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when 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. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

[2:46] But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who sees in secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Well, if you're a basketball fan, you probably know that the college basketball season begins when? Tomorrow.

[3:52] Right? Monday, November 4th. Of course, if you're a UConn fan, you have to wait till a little later in the week. The women play their first game on Thursday. I think they have like a scrimmage today or some off-season game today.

But the men's team will begin their season on Wednesday. Either way, all across the country, pretty soon, these athletes are going to take the court and find out what they're made of. Now, if you're like me, you'll watch them, and honestly, you'll think that they make it look so easy.

Right? As they drive and pass and shoot, as they bury shot after shot from 22, 23, 24 feet away behind the three-point line, it all just seems natural, right?

It seems easy. It seems like anybody could do it when you watch them. Until, that is, you actually try it yourself.

Right? Until you actually try to dribble and shoot and pass, you realize it's not as easy as it looks. So what is it? How do these young women and men get so good, so natural, at something that quite honestly is really, really difficult?

[5:03] One word. Practice. Hours and hours and hours of practice.

And that's not just true of basketball, right? Or athletics in general. Think of the hours of intentional practice represented by a great musician, or a great artist, or a great writer.

You've probably heard this statistic popularized by Malcolm Gladwell that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in something, right? Of course, people have taken issue with that exact number. But the point is well made.

The key is deliberate practice. Now, in Matthew chapter 5, in chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel that we've spent nearly all of the fall studying so far, Jesus has described a way of being in the world that does not come naturally.

He's described a way of complete and costly faithfulness and of utter truthfulness, a way of being in the world where we respond to evil with good, a way where we love not just our family or our neighbors, but we love even our enemies.

[6:29] So how do we become that sort of people? How does this unnatural, difficult way that Jesus describes become more natural, more instinctual, in us, His followers?

Well, on the one hand, of course, it's God's work in us and through us through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that causes us to be spiritually regenerated through faith in Jesus, the same Spirit that causes us to be brought from death to life spiritually, continues His work to make us more like Jesus throughout our life.

life. But if you ask any mature Christian, any mature Christian will tell you that the Holy Spirit's work doesn't happen automatically.

It takes practice. And that's what this next section of the Sermon on the Mount is all about. Practice.

You see, you won't become the person of chapter 5 without taking up the practices of chapter 6 and the other practices that are described in the New Testament.

[7:46] So, with that in mind, I want to consider three things today in light of this passage. First, the necessity of these spiritual practices, and then second, we're going to look at the danger of them, and then third, we'll look at the reward of spiritual practices.

So, first, think about the necessity of spiritual practices. In verse 1, Jesus talks about practicing your righteousness, right? Doing things to put it into motion, to get it going, to do it, to perform it.

And of course, right away in verse 1, he brings up the danger and the reward, and we'll get to those soon enough, but first, we have to see this important point, that Jesus is assuming that we will be doing these things.

He lists three very common practices here, giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. And notice, Jesus doesn't say to his disciples, if you do these things, he says, when, when you do these things, when you give, when you pray, when you fast.

Now, there's a big difference, right? There's a big difference if you say to your teenager, when you clean your room, be sure to change the sheets on your bed. There's a difference between saying that and, if you clean your room, be sure to change the sheets on your bed.

[9:05] If you say, when, then you're assuming they're going to clean the room. You're sort of telling them, clean the room. If you say, if you clean your room, then you know that the room will probably stay dirty for an indefinite period of time, right?

So, Jesus isn't saying here that giving to the poor or praying or fasting are optional. We can just take them or leave them.

No, he's assuming that his disciples will indeed do these things when you give. So, this underscores our first point. These practices are necessary.

We might say that discipleship requires some discipline, some structure. as Paul will say in 1 Timothy 4, 7, train yourself for godliness.

I think a lot of us take what we might call the Allen Iverson approach to Christianity. Do you remember the infamous interview with Allen Iverson, right? I'm supposed to be the franchise player and we're talking about practice, right?

[10:14] Not a game, not the game I go out there and die for, but we're talking about practice. Do you remember that clip? Right? Some of you are like, I thought that was from Ted Lasso. No, it's from Allen Iverson. YouTube it. Go figure it out. Right?

You know, but the point is this. Some of us take the approach that when the moment comes, when it's game time, when we're in a situation and we need to live the way that Jesus calls us to live, the way of Matthew 5, the way of forsaking bitterness and anger, the way of living with complete purity of heart, the way of loving our enemies, the way of renouncing revenge, the way of acting with truthfulness and integrity and faithfulness, we think that in the moment when the game is on, it'll just happen automatically.

But it doesn't. We lust and we lie and we curse our enemies rather than bless them. And then, in the aftermath, seeing our failures, we think, wait, I thought God's grace was supposed to make me a new person.

I thought the Holy Spirit living inside of me was going to make me more like Christ from the inside out. and then you get discouraged. And maybe you even start to doubt whether the promises of Christianity are even true.

Maybe this whole thing about a new life is just vain, ephemeral. But the reality is we've been skipping practice.

[11:42] Jesus doesn't say if, he says when. When you give to the poor, when you pray, when you fast. Have you been practicing your righteousness in these biblical ways?

Consider the discipline of giving that Jesus highlights in verses 1 through 4. You see, the regular practice of giving, generously and sacrificially, especially to the poor, this practice is something that the Holy Spirit uses by his grace to shape our hearts, to shape our habits into Christlikeness.

How so? Well, think of it this way. First, when we give, when we give generously and sacrificially, especially to the poor, we're acknowledging in that giving that everything that we own ultimately belongs to God.

When it comes to our material possessions, we can often think, can't we, that I earned this and I can do it, do with it as I please, right? This is mine.

But it's not, actually. You and I are creatures. Everything that we have is a gift from our Creator. All the gifts and talents, all the pathways and open doors that we've experienced in our life, they're all gifts.

[13:06] And the practice of giving works that reality into our hearts. What you and I have is not ours by rights.

It's in our hands as a gift. But it's not just a gift. It's an undeserved gift, actually. You see, the truth about us as humans is not just that we're creatures made in the image of God.

The truth is also that we're sinners, that we've rebelled against God, that we've not loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, that we've not kept His Word as we should.

Instead, we've created and we've loved idols of our own choosing. So we don't deserve God's good gifts. We deserve the opposite, actually. We deserve God's wrath.

But in Christ, God doesn't give us what we deserve. He gives us what we don't deserve. He gives us His grace. Earlier in the service, we read this from the Apostle Paul.

[14:19] 2 Corinthians 8-9. Paul says, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you, by His poverty, might become rich.

You see, every time we give sacrificially, especially to the poor, we're reminding ourselves of the gospel of grace. When we give, especially to those who cannot repay, right?

And we do that. We give, especially to those who cannot repay, because we've been given an undeserved gift that we could never repay.

So you see what's happening. This practice of giving is working into us the truths of the gospel. We're creatures who've received everything as a gift, and we're sinners who've received grace in Christ.

And it's through the practice of giving that's one of the ways that we internalize this more and more deeply. And you know, if through that practice of giving you come to internalize more and more that deep reality of the gospel, then when someone asks something of you, like Jesus mentions in Matthew 5, 42, right?

[15:44] He says, give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. If you've already been in the practice, then you can step to the free-for-line and you can make the shot.

Now, press a little deeper. If through giving your heart has been trained to be generous because you see more and more that everything you have is an undeserved gift, then what about when someone wrongs you?

The proverbial slap on the cheek, right? How will we respond to offense? Will we suddenly grip our rights and demand repayment, an eye for an eye?

Or will our hearts have the habit already ingrained to respond with generosity, even sacrificially so, even to those who may not deserve it and who can't repay us in the right way?

Is not my reputation also a gift from God, an undeserved gift? Isn't that the very truth of the gospel, that we get a reputation from Christ that's not our own, that we don't deserve?

[17:03] So even to the offense, we can respond with generosity, turning the other cheek, giving something that's undeserved.

We become the people of chapter 5 through practice. Now here's the hopeful thing. Here's the hopeful thing. Whereas, turning the other cheek and giving to the one who asks us are really hard and they don't come naturally, right?

This practice of giving is actually doable. It's not necessarily simple or easy, but it's doable for those who have the Holy Spirit.

You see, spiritual practices are things we can do that the Holy Spirit uses to shape us into the sort of people who can then go and do the things we didn't think we could do. So this is the first point then, the necessity of spiritual practices.

And I think the question is, are you and I, are we practicing? Now this leads to the second point, the danger of spiritual practices. Beware, Jesus says in verse 1.

[18:20] Beware. There's a danger here and the danger is this. He says, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. You see, because of indwelling and remaining sin in our hearts, we can take a good thing like sacrificial giving, especially to those in need, and we can twist it as a means to exalt our own ego.

Right? The danger is always present that we will become, as Jesus says in verse 2, like the hypocrites. Now the word hypocrite originally meant an actor, someone who wore a costume and a mask and performed a part in a drama.

And what do actors do? Actors get on a stage and a crowd gathers and they perform their role for the purpose of human applause. Now just to be clear, Jesus isn't condemning the theatrical arts, right?

If you're a theater major, wonderful, right? Go for it. We need Christians who are salt and light in the world of theater. Jesus is obviously making a spiritual point here. If we do engage in our spiritual practices like an actor on the stage, then that's a serious problem.

That's a serious problem. After all, who are the actors when the crowd leaves the theater and the lights go down? When no one is there to see and applaud and they take off the costume and they take off the mask, who are they?

[20:00] They're their old self. They're not the person they were performing. They're just themselves. You see, if we do spiritual practices in order to be seen by others, Jesus says, then that's it.

You have your reward. Your reward. Your reward is simply the fleeting, empty praise of humans, but you, you remain your old self. This is why seemingly godly Christians and seemingly godly Christian leaders, even those with all the right theology, even those with all the right external actions, can sin so spectacularly.

Because for years and years, their spiritual practices were done primarily like an actor on the stage. They did it to be seen by others, to be seen as godly, to be seen as spiritual, to be seen as wise.

But when the crowds go away and the lights went down, they took off the costume, they took off the mask, they took off the makeup, and they were unchanged. They were still their old self.

Essentially, they did nothing but build up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. It was all done to be seen by others. Did you know that hypocrisy is one of the greatest reasons why people leave the church?

[21:39] Just time and time again, statistics show that. It's easy to point the finger at others, isn't it? What about us?

When we give, are we blowing a trumpet so that others see? Of course, it's never that obvious, is it, right? Jesus isn't literally saying like there were people when the offering plate came around, they were like, boop, boop, boop, boop.

You know, so. And we don't do that either, right? You're not sort of opening your wallet and sort of letting everyone see you put it in.

You know, it's more likely a casual comment dropped here or there in a conversation about the charity work we did or the cause that we give to, you know. Nothing wrong with sharing what you do.

There's nothing wrong, as Jesus says early in the Sermon on the Mount, with others seeing your good deeds and glorifying our Father in heaven. But sometimes we share those things in order to be seen by others, don't we?

[22 : 43] It's hoping, right? It's hoping that others will see you as a good person or a generous person or hoping that others will see you and know that you're not like those other kind of people who are selfish and stingy and don't care about economic justice like you do, right?

But let's push a little deeper even. when we give, does our giving make us feel solidarity or superiority?

Is our giving done because we know, we know we aren't any better than the ones that we give to and this is a way to express and forge that solidarity?

Is that how we give? Or is it done as an act of superiority? Well, how do you know you're doing it as an act of superiority?

How do you feel when someone doesn't say thank you? If you give sacrificially, generously, and the gift isn't acknowledged, no card, no thank you, how do you feel?

[23 : 52] How do you feel? How do you feel? It's easier, it's much easier to be a hypocrite than we think. And it's much more dangerous than we realize.

Beware, Jesus says, lest our spiritual practices like giving be more about bolstering our own ego instead of humbling and transforming our hearts.

So what's the answer? How do we counteract the actor, the hypocrite that's in all of our hearts? Jesus says this, he says, when you give to the needy, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret.

This is something Jesus will say again and again in this passage. When you give, when you pray, when you fast, do it in secret, do it so that no one else sees. Give so anonymously, so discreetly, it's as if not even your right hand knows what your left hand's doing.

What if no one ever knew, what if no one ever would know how much you gave? That's the challenge. That's the invitation that Jesus puts before us. Give in such a way that no one will see and no one will know.

[25 : 17] Then your practice will start to become more about transforming your heart and not stoking your pride. God. Now this leads on to our last point.

Again, Jesus has shown us the necessity of these spiritual practices and he's pointed out the danger of doing them for the wrong reasons. And third and last, he talks about the reward of them. Let's pick up again in verse 3.

He says, 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. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

When no one else sees and no one else knows, Jesus says, your heavenly Father sees and knows. Nothing is hidden from him.

Nothing is secret from him. There's an old catechism that we used to do with our kids. One of the questions early on was, you know, can you see God? And the answer was, no, I cannot see God, but he always sees me.

[26 : 23] You know, it's great. But what a wonderful truth that the things we do away from the eyes of others in secret, God sees and God knows.

You see, when we practice giving quietly, anonymously, when we don't draw attention to ourselves, what we're doing is that we're weaning our hearts from human praise.

We're getting off that addiction to human praise, and we're training our hearts to desire the approval of God alone. We're training our hearts to want to please God, not people.

And in so doing, Jesus says, there's a great reward. You know, it's interesting that for Jesus it's not a question of whether or not a human will be motivated by a reward, right?

It's interesting. Both the actor, both the hypocrite, and the genuine disciple in Jesus' thinking are after a reward. It's just a question of which reward do they treasure more?

[27 : 33] Will you go after the reward of human praise and approval? If so, Jesus says, okay, then you'll have it. You got what you're after.

Praise and adoration. But does it last? And does it satisfy? Of course not. But notice then, Jesus doesn't turn around and say, well, the problem is you shouldn't do things for a reward at all.

You should just do them because it's the right thing to do. It's interesting. Jesus is much more wise, much wiser than that. He knows that the human heart always does something for a reason, for a goal, for a telos, for a reward.

Every deed is done because the heart treasures something. The question is, what do you want to treasure? What is it you prize? Your heavenly Father, Jesus says, rewards those who give not for the praise of people but simply for the gaze of God.

And what is that reward? What is the reward that Jesus talks about here? Well, I think it's safe to say that it's certainly not a material reward.

[28 : 54] It's not as if Jesus is saying that God promises us masses of earthly wealth and health if we give to the needy, right? Well, if that's not it, then what is it?

Well, one of the rewards that we mentioned we've already talked about in the first point, right? One of the rewards is being forged more and more into genuine Christ-like character.

The Father will make us by the Holy Spirit more and more like Christ, more and more like the sort of people that Jesus describes in Matthew 5. You see, when the actors have no one around, when the crowds go home and the lights go down, when they take off their mask and their costume, who are they?

They're their old self, right? But for the genuine disciple, when the crowds go home and the lights go off, who are they? They're becoming something new.

not their old self, but their true self, you see. Right there, whether people are watching or not watching, they're like a new tree pushing up through the dirt with roots that are sinking down deeper and deeper and their branches are spreading and their leaves are evergreen and they're bearing fruit in season and out of season.

[30 : 13] That's what's happening. And you know, unlike the fleeting praise of people, this reward, it never fades.

This is the treasure that doesn't rust and doesn't decay and that thieves can never break in and steal it. It will extend into eternity, into the new heavens and new earth. In fact, becoming your true self in Christ, it is that coming new creation right now sprouting forth in the present.

We're becoming partakers of the divine nature, as Peter says in his second letter. But you know, I think there's another sense to this reward that Jesus talks about and in some sense it's much simpler and it's much more straightforward, but it's no less profound.

As we look at this passage, you know, compare it, right? If the reward for the actors, for the hypocrites, is human praise and approval, if it's glory in the eyes of other people, then what's the reward of the genuine disciple?

Not the praise or approval of humans, but the praise and approval of God. The fatherly word of assurance. The simple smile of God upon his daughters and sons, saying, I'm yours and you're mine.

[31 : 51] Well done, good and faithful servant. Tolkien wrote this beautiful line in the Lord of the Rings. He said, the praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards.

To know that God sees and God knows and he is pleased, is there any greater reward? the one who created the stars and the planets and all their brilliance, the mountains, the seas, the one whose glory shines forth with every rising sun and every winter frost, the God who is so unbelievably good and holy and beautiful, the God who is surrounded in unending praise for all eternity, right?

This God whom just a glimpse, just a glimpse of this God would be either total terror for the unforgiven or total ravishing delight for those whose sins have been forgiven.

That God looks upon us as his children in Christ and says, that's my son, that's my daughter, with them I'm well pleased.

Christ. The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards. The question is, are you in Christ?

[33 : 31] Are you in this kind of relationship with God as your heavenly Father? You see, we've talked a lot about practices this morning, but the truth is you don't become a forgiven son or daughter of God through practice.

That's not how you get into the family. That's not what makes you a Christian in the first place. You can't give your way into God's forgiveness and you can't purchase it or buy it or earn it.

You can only receive it. Go back again to the words of Paul, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.

Why? So that you, by his poverty, could become rich. That's the exchange that makes someone a Christian, that brings them into this saving relationship with God as their heavenly Father.

And when did Christ become poor? Well, at the cross, when he emptied himself and died in the place of sinners. When every debt of sin that we had accrued throughout our whole life, Christ willingly took upon himself.

[34 : 41] And how does Christ becoming poor in that way make us rich? Because as he takes all of our debt, he gives us in exchange his righteous record, his perfect life.

All the wealth that he has merited through his perfect life is credited to us simply through faith. To all those who admit that they're spiritually bankrupt before God and receive Christ, his record's credited to you.

And you have no lack. Friend, is that true of you this morning? If not, then take Christ by faith.

Let him take your debts and receive from him that massive wealth of his grace and favor and know God as your heavenly Father.

And if that is true of you, if you are in that saving relationship with Christ, then practice these things. Put them into practice and grow in this grace that you've been given.

[36 : 01] Exercise it into every area of your life. And Jesus promises that as you do, your reward will be very great. Let's pray together.

Father, as we turn to the Lord's Supper now, we ask that you would take these things by your Holy Spirit and make them real to our hearts. God, help us to take off our masks, heal us of our desire and our longing for the praise of people and give us hearts that live for your praise alone.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.