

# Matthew 6.1–4, 19–24

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## *How can I live generously?*

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A generous life (3)

### **Hymns**

An American pastor once explained to his congregation that the church was in need of some extra money, so he asked them to consider being more generous. He said that whoever gave the most would be able to pick three hymns for the next service.

After the offering plates were passed around, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had graciously offered a \$100 bill. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to thank the person who placed the money in the plate.

A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady at the back of the church shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front, so she slowly she made her way towards him.

The pastor told her how wonderful it was that she had given so much, and in thanks he asked her to pick out three hymns.

Her eyes bright as she looked over the congregation, she pointed to the three most handsome men in the church and said, 'I'll take him and him and him.'

¶ Today we are halfway through our mini-series looking at 'a generous life'. As an introduction we thought about a healthy vision for our church family; last week we thought about giving thanks; this week we are thinking about living generously.

If you were here last week, I ended that sermon with a question – how might we respond to God in thanks for the gift of life he gives us in Jesus? I hope some of you thought about that last week.

I also hope that some of you connected that question with the 'Six Steps of Christian Giving' leaflet that we handed out two weeks ago. If you missed that sermon, there are still some leaflets at the back of church, and it is available online for you to listen to (again).

¶ Briefly, these are the six steps: survival, supermarket, support, subscription, submission and sacrifice. The leaflet describes each in more detail, and my hope is that, together, we think about which step we are on now, and which step God might be calling us to.

¶ I'm not going to apologise for repeating this: giving is *not* about 'the church needs cash'. When a church family thinks about money and giving, many people see it as *fundraising* – ¶ but it isn't. It *truly* isn't. Instead, it is ¶ *faithraising*.

My hope is that more and more of us in our church family feel able to move to steps five and six, where giving becomes not about the needs of the church, but *part of our response to God's love for us*.

Jesus said ¶,

'Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*'

*Matthew 6.20-21 (NIV)*

These words of Jesus are the words I'd like us all to take home with us ¶: **'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'** (21). As our attitude towards Christian giving becomes more and more healthy, so giving becomes less about *funds*, and more about our *faith*, more about our *heart*.

# Motive

Do any of you like to watch murder mystery shows on TV? I love a good whodunnit – one of my favourites is *Death in Paradise*. As they hunt for the killer, the police look for three things, don't they: means, motive and opportunity. And of the three, often it is the motive that's hardest to pin down.

And I think that's true of all of us, most of the time – not simply murder suspects in a contrived situation on a TV programme – our motives are often mixed.

Here, in a block of teaching in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays bare a classic human motive: the praise of others. He says (verse 1),

‘Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.’

*Matthew 6.1 (NIV)*

Notice the key little phrase in there: **to be seen by them**. We are not to live in secret (after all, in 5.16 Jesus says, **‘let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven’**).

This isn't about *what* we do, or *where* we do it – it's about *why* we do it. When we pray out loud, do we pile up words upon words so people think we are extra connected to God? When we clean the church, do we make sure we tell everyone we see what we've been doing? Do we like other people to see us put our envelopes on the collection plate? When we give up something for Lent, do we spend seven weeks moaning about how much we miss chocolate, cups of tea, or glasses of wine?

Do you see how easily good things become spoiled by the wrong motive? In our current series we are thinking specifically about how we give financially, but the principle applies to all areas of our Christian life and walk with God. Listen to what Jesus says:

‘So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.’

*Matthew 6.2-4 (NIV)*

It is highly unlikely that anyone *actually* employed a trumpeter to go ahead of them announcing their generosity – Jesus is probably exaggerating to make a point.

¶ Do you ever wonder about the enormous charity cheques you see on TV when it comes to *Children in Need* or *Comic Relief*? I am sure that the businesses genuinely want to support those in need – but it certainly doesn't do their reputation any harm to be seen handing over an enormous cheque to Pudsey on TV under a picture of their logo – and, large though the cheques may be, they are a tiny fraction of most marketing budgets. ¶ The BBC even advertises the 'exposure' a giant cheque can give a business.

The Pharisees gave openly and ostentatiously because, deep down, they valued human praise *more* than God's praise.

It sounds like a ridiculous thing – to prefer the admiration and praise of other people *more* than God's gracious love – but let's be honest, how many times is that at least part of *our* motive, too? How often do *we* like to be noticed and praised?

When our motive is *that*, our treasure – the thing we value most – is not God, it is human praise: ¶ **'for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'** (21).

Helpful and practical as always, Jesus teaches us a way of giving our money that helps guard against this motive. § **‘When you give,’** he says – notice he says *when* not *if*–

‘When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.’

*Matthew 6.3-4 (NIV)*

In the act of Christian giving, secrecy helps guard against impure motives. If no-one else knows how much we are giving, we can’t be doing it to receive human praise. Instead, Jesus says § (4), **‘your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.’** We’ll come back to what that reward might be, in a moment.

Two weeks ago, I told you that I don’t know, and I don’t want to know how much all of you give to our church family. We work hard to keep those figures anonymous and secret. The only people who know what most of you give are Geoff and Jan Wyatt, who need to know because they arrange the Gift Aid tax reclaim for us.

And in fact there are ways of giving to the church, so that even *they* don’t need to know – which is how Jess and I give. Next week I will run through some of the different ways of giving regularly, and show how we can give in secret, as Jesus tells us to.

# Reward

Did you hear about the man who wrote to HMRC after hearing a sermon about lying and cheating? He wrote, ‘I can’t sleep knowing I’ve cheated on my income return, so I enclose a cheque for £150. And if I still can’t sleep, I’ll send the rest.’

I’d like to spend a few moments exploring what Jesus meant when he said, **‘your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you’** (4).

We need to be careful here. It might at first look or sound like Jesus is saying we can *buy* a reward from God, by giving loads of money to the church. Some people teach this in churches – but it is a false teaching, called the ‘prosperity gospel’. It treats God like an investment account – the more money we give to him, the more he gives us back. It turns our relationship with God into a transaction.

But that isn’t what Jesus meant at all.

§ Have a look in v2:

‘When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, § they have received their reward in full.’

*Matthew 6.2 (NIV)*

The word here is a commercial term, used to describe an invoice that has been paid off in full – there’s nothing more to receive. We might also call this reward ‘wages’ – due payment for work done. This is a transaction – show-off generosity receives human praise.

Now have a look in v3:

‘When *you* give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. § Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.’

*Matthew 6.3-4 (NIV)*

This is a different word, and is more like a lavish gift. Jesus puts the emphasis not on the reward, but on the giver, on the Father, who pours out his grace on his people, far out of all proportion, far more than all we could ever deserve or earn.

Think about it like this.

Sometimes when children are playing with lots of toys, they can't decide which toy they want to play with, so they grab one, and then another, and then another, until they're holding everything so tightly they can't actually play with any of them? Sometimes they do that to stop *other* children playing with any of their toys.

But as they grip onto the toys like that, they miss the point, don't they: to enjoy themselves playing.

When we grip on tightly *grip fists tightly* to what we have, we miss the point – how can we receive the things God wants to give us?

Instead, as we turn to God and *slowly open hands* let go of the stuff that is only temporary anyway, so we open ourselves in gratitude to receive what God *has already lavished upon us*.

§ The key word there is gratitude. Last week we saw how Jesus healed *ten* lepers, but only *one* of them came back to say thank you. He showed his faith, not by going, *but by coming back*. And by coming back he alone of the ten received the *true* gift Jesus was giving: not healing, but salvation. **'Rise and go,'** Jesus said to him, **'Your faith has saved you'** (Luke 17.19).

This is the true **treasure** of **heaven** – are you storing it up?

Christian giving is not about fundraising, and nor is it about buying God's favour. Instead, it is one of the ways in which we turn to our Father and open ourselves to him, to receive the gift of life, the true **treasure** of **heaven**, the reward that Jesus earned, but which he gives freely to all who believe in him.

## **Mammon**

I will finish with a brief word about Mammon. Someone once said that money is like sea water: the more you drink, the thirstier you become.

Friends, money and possessions are not neutral things. They can be used for good, but they are also dangerous for our hearts. They call to us, they seduce us – whether we have lots and want more, or whether we have little and long for more.

Seductive they may be, but what lasts is far better. Receiving God's gift of salvation and building a godly character of gratitude and generosity may not be quite the same as a house full of lovely things – but it is the only truly valuable **treasure**, because it lasts for ever.

Friends, may we be people of open hands and open hearts – **I** may we be people who know what it means to live generously.