

## THE SECRET GIFT

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Matthew 6:1-4 - "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 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 honored by men. I tell you the truth; they have received the 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."

Ginger and I had told no one of our need. During those first months of marriage we used the local washateria down the street to do our weekly wash. Going to seminary and setting up a household was tough enough financially without the extra drain on our monthly budget for payments on a washer and dryer. Though sometimes even quarters were hard to come by, we always found enough to feed the machine on the corner. But we had a plan. In fact, both of us had already shopped for the best buy on a washer and dryer combination and even picked out the right color to go with our washroom. White isn't too hard to match. Trusting God to supply the money, we prayed and waited. Then one Saturday it happened. An early morning knock on the door of our home summoned my wife to the living room. "Is this 3822 Academy, Ma'am?" the deliveryman said. "Why, yes it is," she replied. "Well then, we're at the right place. We've got a package for you. Where do you want us to put it?" "Put what?" she responded in amazement. "The washer and dryer you ordered, Ma'am. You're the Dodd family aren't

you?" he inquired. "Yes, but..." "Then, this is the right place," he said hurriedly. "Bring it in, George! "

She watched as they unloaded a brand-new washer and dryer in our washroom. And it was even the right color, style and brand we had previously decided upon! Seriously, no one knew for we had kept our desire a secret. Apparently, God did and used one of his servants to secretly bless our lives. Even to this day we do not know who gave us the gift. But God does!

Ever since that day, I have found myself enamored with the joy of secret giving. It's an exciting area of growth for every believer who desires to celebrate the joy of others. Well, how do you get started?

### **DECIDE TO BE A GODLY GIVER**

In Matthew 6:1, Jesus laid the foundational presupposition that all secret givers hold within. However, the concern for many of us must first be a volitional choice to actually give. What and how we offer is not yet a concern. The action of letting loose the energy to give is.

Sadly, we live our lives happily detached from others. Or at least for a while. It is in these dark moments of pain that we wish that we had been a better friend to others, especially when we need one ourselves.

These "acts of righteousness" to which Jesus referred were in the areas of giving to the poor, prayer and fasting. For our discussion, the issue of giving is where our focus will end. To the Jew of Jesus' day, these works were considered to be the great foundations of religious living. But still again, this wasn't Jesus' concern. The motive for giving was.

It is too bad, but it is true that often in life the good works of men become tainted in motive. Giving to others, regardless of the kind of help given, is sometimes darkly colored by selfish glory. "Look at me and all the good that I'm doing" becomes the underlying theme of many charitable actions.

The fund-raisers of today know how vulnerable the flesh really is and use it daily for their projects. Plaques commemorating the benevolence of the gracious are placed in conspicuous places of honor. Whether it is on a church pew or college walkway, many have succumbed to false humility in their zeal for philanthropic causes. The flesh loves it when it is allowed to twinkle in front of our pews.

Regardless of the temptation, we are encouraged by the Lord to be givers. Instead of following the world's plan of service with its immediate gratification, we are told to be careful about how we give. The primary word is...GIVE to others.

Before you get me wrong, please notice the generic context of giving which I think is important here. We're talking about more than just pouring financial blessings upon

others. This principle is for all types of gifts we may present to others. It may be time, or literal physical work, maybe even an anonymous letter of cheer.

Decide to be one who gives but gives like God gives. When our Lord gave, there were no premeditated calculations of what He would receive from those He served. Remember, as He washed the feet of His disciples, He washed the dirty feet of one who would betray Him, another who would deny Him and the rest who would go “undercover” for awhile. But still, He gave.

When God gives, there is no pride involved. Jesus came and became one of us. The Kenosis passage of Philippians 2 speaks of His humility in this vane of which we should seek to heed in practice. Service was done to us on our level. When we hold onto the fallacious attitude of “better than they are” when we help someone in need, it is evident that we have missed both His mind and blessing. “Helping the little people” is an attitude that is neither godly nor becoming to the servant of God. The old saying that “the ground is level at the cross” is apropos here.

How does God give? Romans 5:8 says, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Our giving should be expressed in the same way. Meeting the needs of others, from a pure standpoint of spirituality should not take a guilt-laden speech to motivate one into service. Instead, when a need is witnessed, loving care should be freely given.

## **DETERMINE YOUR TARGET**

During Jesus' discourse on secret giving, He spoke of the needy. But who are they? Certainly, it doesn't take an extensive look to uncover those who are truly indigent. They are within the inner city or "across the tracks" on the poor side of town. Ministry to them should and must take place. However, if the truth would be legitimately revealed, the average middle class or upper middle class Christian only thinks about them during the holidays. How tragic!

Why don't we minister to others more who are obviously in need? Simply and sadly, we are not sensitive to "others way out there" because we have been desensitized to the bruised in daily view. There is probably not one of us who has a totally "healed" neighborhood. We don't even have to find a name on a church benevolence file, they live around us.

Thousands of families lay wounded from self-inflicted wounds of drug and alcohol abuse. Many are reeling around us from the after shocks of an unstable economy. Some are barely standing their ground because a divorce or death has dealt them a decisive blow. For everyone financially "down and out" there are many who are "up and out." Money is not their problem. Pain, loneliness, and a lack of direction follow them daily like a plague. Their children cry out to us for attention and their wives smile at us with hollowness that beckons for just a loving ear of concern.

The needy line the halls of our offices. They may include a boss who is having trouble handling the pressure of performance or a secretary whose marriage is on the rocks. Too proud to yell or even hint for help, they walk through our lives so quickly. We often find ourselves saying, "If only they had said something to me, I could have helped." But deep within, we know it's just our excuse. We knew of their pain and desperation but instead of risking involvement, we waited.

Who are the needy? You know them when your heart is pricked as you listen to a prayer request in a Sunday school class. God has placed them on our hearts even without our permission. Why? Because they are already on His heart and He's just waiting for you to express His love.

It is very easy to bless someone who has blessed you. But what about someone who can't return the favor? Who is going to touch them? The needy ones in our lives are usually those who cannot give back to us in the same quantity or kind that is given to them.

Perhaps even reading these last few lines, God has placed a name or face of someone upon your heart. Guess what? They may be your next target of concern.

## **DETOUR FROM THE LIMELIGHT**

Secret giving can be one of the most satisfying experiences of life. It can be, that is, if you choose to detour from the spotlight of credit. I don't mind telling you that I find myself nauseated at the thought of publicly parading good works for great causes. It bothers me that many fund-raising companies are hired by local churches that use the "limelight" approach. Exciting folks to almost bid for places for leadership in stewardship campaign smacks of Pharisaical religion. Telltale offerings of any kind for any reason may be a way to fleshly motivate financial giving, but according to our Lord it doesn't honor Him.

It's hard not to want the credit when you deserve it. There was a need. You saw it and took care of it. Great! But the rub comes when we want the recognition for that act of righteousness. Jesus spoke harshly of the hypocrites who made their offerings public enough so all could both see and hear their giving records. When we do so, we forfeit the Father's reward, opting for the fleeting approval of men. The former has eternal consequences but the latter only temporal feelings attached.

Jesus said it like this: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." That's secret giving...even to yourself. He is saying to us that we are not to make our giving a big deal to anyone, not even to ourselves. Just do the act of love, quickly, selflessly and get on with your life, not looking back to see if they noticed what was done for them or even who did it.

Secret giving is kind of like being a spiritual Lone Ranger. Do you remember that man who rode a white horse on television? Assisted by Tonto, his Indian guide, he rode through the West fighting against injustice and defending the oppressed. Inevitably, after the situation was righted, he slipped off into the sunset without receiving a word of gratitude. The helped parties, basking in their moment of victory, finally stopped and asked each other where he had gone. As the musical finale began to rise in volume, we would watch a solitary figure cling to his rearing horse as he cried, "Hi Ho Silver, Away!" Someone always knew who he was when asked, "Who was that masked man?" "Why," they replied, "He's the Lone Ranger."

The secret giver doesn't try to mask himself because often, that too, causes the helped party to search out his identity. He just does it, quietly and slips away.

I relate a private story of several who wish to remain anonymous--and appropriately so--that serves to illustrate the lure of the limelight. Several weeks ago, a family decided to mow the yard of their neighbors. Quickly and with much excitement, the giving family members, mowed their neighbors yard, swept the driveway and sidewalks. They even put their newspaper on the porch for convenience.

The children were excited at their first opportunity to do something as a family for another. After cleaning up from their quest of service, the father called the family together and read them this passage. "This is our secret," he said. "No one is supposed to know. Do you understand kids?" he inquired.

"Uh-oh," said one. "I guess I can't give them this." Handing his father the letter, his countenance fell. It read: "Dear \_\_\_\_\_. Today we, 1) mowed your grass, 2) swept your drive, 3) rolled your garden hoses up, 4) put your paper on the porch. We wanted you to know. Signed \_\_\_\_\_."

"That's right," the father said, "It's supposed to be secret--a secret gift."

"Aw, shucks," came the reply. "They really need to know."

Do they? Do the people who we reach out and touch really need to know or do we just love the limelight? Secret giving can be an easy thing to do but often it's a hard fact to keep quiet.

### **DELIGHT IN THE JOY**

Jesus said that as we give to others in secret, our Father who sees will reward us. What a wonderful promise! It's a statement that you can take to your spiritual bank. God does keep His promises and yes, He does reward His children.

In the area of financial accountability, Malachi gives us a glimpse of God's reward when we tithe.

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. "Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will

prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.”

Malachi 3:10-12

But we must not limit our sights on just a monetary return for “acts of righteousness.” The principle of Luke 6:38, “Give, and it shall be given unto you” is true in every area of life. Whatever you give, somehow God always gives back in like kind.

But is there another reward that the Father also gives to secret givers? Sure, there is. It’s within! Words just fall short to appropriately describe that inner sense of pure joy that pumps within the heart of someone who gives in secret. Call it spiritual ecstasy or a rush of righteousness, if you will, but it comes to those who cherish their good works as private events of love. No feeling in the world comes close to the joy that is released inside an individual when they give like that!

I’m almost sure that if we could hear with spiritual ears bent heavenward, we could hear the roar of the crowd of witnesses described in Hebrews 11 when anonymous acts of care are personally released.

Why is it so hard for us to step into silence? Perhaps the words of the apostle John hold the key.

“Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.”

John 12:42-43

"They loved the praise from men more than praise from God." Doesn't that just pierce your heart like a knife? Some of the Pharisees believed in Him but would not confess their faith because their position of status was the greatest possession to them in the eyes of others and their own than words can describe. "I'm somebody special to them" was the driving force for their religion. Conversely, to be somebody in the eyes of men means to be a nobody with God. The bottom line is this: Whom do you desire to please? God or man? It's a personal choice, one that we make every time an opportunity arises to meet someone else's need.

Herschel Hobbs described it well when he said, "The world measures a man's greatness by the number who serve him. Heaven's yardstick measures a man by the number who are served by him."

Secret giving...Have you done any lately?

