



Sermon Transcript January 27, 2019

Seeking God in the Secret Place An Outward Heart of Generosity Matthew 6:1-4, 19-24

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 27, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text:
Matthew 6:1-4, 19-24

¹“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Introduction

We have been looking at what Jesus has to say about practicing our faith in the “secret place” of our lives. The secret place is the place that no one sees but God. It is the place where the “real you” lives. And so if our faith is showing up in the “secret place” it is becoming more than just a way of belief. It is actually becoming “a way of life.”

Three times we hear Jesus say in Matthew 6, “*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” This assures us that God is fully present in “the secret place.” We are calling this sermon series, “Seeking God in the Secret Place.” The good news about this is that you don’t have to work hard at finding God there. He is already there. I love the promise of Jeremiah 29:13. It is a promise that applies to “the secret place.” “*You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart.*” God is waiting for you.

Often when we think of spiritual disciplines, we think of arduous tasks that we must do. We often reduce them down to a list of rules. But I hope you are finding “the secret place” to be an inviting place. It is a place of invitation. It is a place where God is waiting for you. So when he invites us into the secret place of prayer, he is saying to us, “I want to meet with you.” When he invites us to humble ourselves by fasting or repenting of our sins, he is saying to us, I want to assure you that “*I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.*” (Isaiah 43:1) This morning we are going to look at the third angle of this triangle—a heart of generosity. Jesus introduces this discipline by saying in verse 3, “*But when you give to the needy.*” In this invitation, God is saying that he wants to right what is wrong in this world through us.

Lately, I have been meditating on Isaiah 41:10. It is a verse that ought to cause us to run to “the secret place.” God says, “*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*” That is a promise from God who is with us in the secret place. And when we meet him there, he is ready to strengthen us, to help us and to uphold us so that we can stand. We need to see the “secret place” as an inviting place to be.

As I just mentioned, this morning we come to the third angle of the triangle. It is the angle of generosity. We have been using the image of the triangle to illustrate how the disciplines of prayer, repentance and generosity are the secret practices that give shape to our faith. I hope you are discovering that these three disciplines are not isolated disciplines. Rather, they are intertwined with each other. They are interdependent. If one of them is missing, it effects the others. This is illustrated for us in Isaiah 58. These worshipers were fasting. They were praying. But a spirit of generosity was missing. After fasting, they fought with each other and neglected the needy. And so God called into question whether or not their fast was indeed a “true fast.” In fact, he responds to their complaint by saying, “*Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness . . . to share your bread with the hungry.*” In other words, without the third angle of the triangle, the other two angles—prayer and fasting—are incomplete. These disciplines of “the secret place” are intertwined with each other.

Now it is at this point in the sermon series where I am questioning myself. I am calling into question why I felt the liberty to change the order in which we talked about these three interdependent disciplines of the faith. In Matthew 6, Jesus starts with generosity, moves from there to talk about prayer and wraps it up with fasting. I chose to start with prayer, go to fasting and then conclude with generosity. It seemed like a logical progression to me. Start with the “upward” heart for God. Move to the “inward” heart

of repentance and fasting. And then, from that position of humility, move to the “outward” heart of generosity. Upward—Inward—Outward! I still think it makes logical sense. In no way do I mean to critique the “Master Teacher.” And furthermore, I am left to ponder, “Why did Jesus begin with the discipline of generosity?”

I want us to think about that this morning. What is Jesus communicating to us by first telling us to work the angle of generosity? The first thing he calls us to do is “*to give to the needy.*” And what does that even mean? What is the scope of this discipline? What does this tell us about the heart of God? And furthermore, what about our hearts? Clearly the “heart” or the motive behind how we “*give to the needy*” is important to God. That is the whole point of the words of Jesus. Jesus says, “*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. 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.*” Which leaves us asking the question, how do I even develop a heart for those in need?

So let’s boil it down to three questions.

What does it mean to give to the needy?

What does this tell us about the heart of God?

How do we develop a heart for the one in need?

My prayer is that what is “primary” on the heart of God, would be “primary” on my heart. And it is my prayer that it would also be primary on our collective heart.

What does it mean to give to the needy?

Perhaps it even seems silly to ask such a question. On the surface it seems rather obvious and simple what Jesus is referring to here. For starters, money is a focal point of application in this passage. Our passage concludes with the reminder that money can easily become something that we worship in the place of God. Jesus says, “*No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and money.*” Consequently, we can keep a tight fist around what we have and neglect to freely give of our resources to help others. So the activity that comes to light in this passage is the “giving of alms.” Or in our context, we would call it charitable giving. In fact, in many of the resources I consulted to try to understand this passage, the word “charity” was a word used to summarize what Jesus is referring to here in this passage.

But as I studied this passage, I chose to stay away from the word “charity” because of what I think comes to mind when we hear that word. When we hear the word “charity” perhaps what comes to mind is a charitable event that benefits some worthy cause. Or, perhaps we think of charitable giving that also gives aid to some worthy cause. No doubt, these things would be included in what Jesus is saying here. Yes, these activities are ways we can *give to the needy*. But I want to suggest to you that Jesus is talking about something far bigger than just parting with a few dollars to help a worthy cause. In fact, I think it can be easy to participate in charitable giving and still miss the heart of what Jesus is talking about in this verse.

So what then is the big picture Jesus has in mind here in this passage? One of the things we have to wrestle with is what the word *righteousness* means in verse 1. We’ve been using verse one as a heading that sits over these three “*practices of righteousness*.” So when Jesus tells us to “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them*” we saw it as a heading to introduce three “*practices of righteousness*”: namely—giving to the needy, prayer and fasting—three *practices of righteousness*. Beware how you go about giving to the needy. Beware that you don’t pray like the hypocrites pray. Beware that you don’t fast to be seen by others. Many commentators view verse one as we have been taking it. And that is what these three practices are: spiritual disciplines or *practices of righteousness*.” I feel fine using verse one as a fitting heading to Matthew 6:1-18.

The Greek word used here in verse one is the word for *righteousness*. But the question we need to ask is what did this word mean in the Jewish context where Jesus used the word. For example, in the previous sermon on fasting, I shared with you that in the Jewish mind, the word “fasting” was synonymous with “repentance.” Likewise, in the Jewish mind the word *righteousness* had come to mean “deeds of charity.” And so perhaps this verse isn’t so much a heading for the “three angles of the triangle”, but it is the beginning of what Jesus wants to tell us about “giving to the needy.” In fact, the NKJV translates this verse this way, “*Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them.*” In the NKJV they translated the word *righteousness* with “charitable deeds.” The NLT does something similar by translating the word *righteousness* with “*good deeds.*” In his commentary, Tasker writes, “almsgiving was so essential a part of ‘righteousness’ as the Jews had come to understand it, that the words had almost become synonymous.”¹ In other words, when they would hear Jesus say, “*Beware of practicing your righteousness . . .*” they would automatically assume that Jesus was talking about acts of charity.

But this begs the question as to how the word *righteousness* is used throughout the Bible. What is its fuller meaning? It became equivalent to the giving of alms or to charitable giving because it was a word that had in mind caring for the needy. But what is the bigger picture here? What does it mean when Jesus calls us to *practice our righteousness* and to *give to the needy*?

I think back to the series we did this past fall on Isaiah 56-66. This third section of Isaiah begins with this command. “*Thus says the LORD, Keep justice and do righteousness.*” You also find this phrase in Genesis 18:19. Here God is reminding Abraham of the covenant he made with Abraham to bless him and to form a nation from him that will be a source of blessing for the world. How were they to be a blessing to the world? He says to Abraham, “*For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.*” This is how God’s chosen covenant people would be a blessing to the world . . . *by doing righteousness and justice.* In these two verses we see that *righteousness* is something that “we do” and it is coupled with this word “*justice.*” This is a major theme throughout Scripture. It means far more than just giving some dollars to a worthy cause.

What does it mean? What does it mean to “*practice righteousness?*”? At the core of our understanding of *righteousness* and *justice* is the recognition that we were created in the image of God. Therefore, every person has the right to be treated with fairness, no matter who they are. There is no person of more value than another. And yet we know we live in a world where that is not the case. Whether on a personal level, or in families, or in our communities or among nations; oppression abounds. People are not treated with fairness and we live in a world where our default setting is to seek out our own advantage at the expense of others. Two examples of this kind of injustice in our own culture were highlighted this week. This past week we celebrated Martin Luther King Day, honoring a man who stood against the injustice that African Americans have systemically endured throughout our history as a country. And then on Tuesday we marked the anniversary of Roe v. Wade and we are reminded of the blight of 60 million babies aborted since 1973. I was horrified this week that not only did the state of New York pass legislation that allowed for abortion of a baby right up until the due date, but the passage of the bill was celebrated with a standing ovation from the senate floor. This is the stuff of *righteousness* and *justice.*

So this is where the biblical words *righteousness* and *justice* help us understand our passage this morning. Simply put, *righteousness* means “right relationship between

people.” It is where we treat people with the dignity they deserve simply because they are created in the image of God. It is a good thing to remind yourself of whenever you are dealing with another person. This person is of value because he or she bears the image of God. That gives me guidance as to how I am to treat this person. How can I treat them with the honor they deserve? It actually compels me to be proactive in treating others with dignity and affirming that dignity in them.

The word *justice* can mean several things. On one hand, *justice* can refer to a retributive justice. It is associated with the word punishment. Because of evil in our world, we need a judicial system that seeks to make sure justice is carried out when a crime is committed. But at the same time, *justice* in the Bible can be restorative. This is the way the word is used most often in the Bible. In this use of the word, we are seeking out vulnerable people who are being taken advantage of and we are helping them. We advocate for them. We seek to fix societal structures that work against them. This is far more than “charity.” This is a radical selfless way of life.

As evangelicals, when we see the biblical words *righteousness* and *justice* I think we see words of status. Since the fall of man, humanity has not “*kept justice and done righteousness.*” Not even Israel, who was called by God to represent God in this world by “*doing righteousness and justice*”, did these things. And so Jesus came and did them. When he went to the cross he atoned for our sin and through faith made us *just and righteous* in the eyes of God. That is our “status” when we come to Jesus by faith. But these words are not just a “status” we are given. They are also a power that compels us to act in new ways towards others. It is a power that compels us to go and seek these things for others. It is a radical way of life. It is not convenient. It requires courage. The most concise phrase I can think of that defines what it means to “*keep righteousness and do justice*” goes like this: “It is making other people’s problems, our problems.” That is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

So what does it mean when Jesus talks about “*practicing your righteousness*”? What does it mean when Jesus talks about “giving to the needy?” Sure financial gifts—charitable contributions—are part of it. But it is far more than that. At the core of it, it means that we are compelled to disadvantage ourselves for the advantage of others. That means a lot more than giving money. It is advocating for the oppressed. It is giving of your time for the one in need. It is taking on structures that oppress others. Often, it means sticking your neck out and being misunderstood.

In her book *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Fleming

Rutledge said this. “If when we see an injustice, our blood does not boil at some point, we have not yet understood the depths of God. It depends, though, on what outrages us. To be outraged on behalf of oneself or one’s own group is to be human, but it is not to participate in Christ. To be outraged and take action on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed, however, is to do the work of God.”² That is a powerful insight as to what it means for us to “*Keep justice and do righteousness.*”

What does this tell us about God?

The fact that this lifestyle of generosity—*righteousness* and *justice*—is listed ahead of prayer and fasting, tells me that this is not some side issue to God. This is primary to the heart of God. And furthermore, it is where a true heart of prayer and a humble heart of fasting and repentance leads us. It leads us to an outward heart of generosity. Just think of what God’s response was to our broken world. His solution was to give us a person—Jesus. He came and welcomed the poor and the broken. He got on his knees and washed our feet. Then he died for us. In doing so, through faith he makes us righteous and just. But to what end? “So that when we die we can go to heaven?” Is that it? No, we have been given a new power that changes our lives. “If God declared us to be righteous when we don’t deserve it, the only reasonable response is to go and seek righteousness and justice for others.”³

So Jesus says in Matthew 6:19-21, “*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.*” We often use this verse to encourage you to give to the work of the church. I sure don’t want to discourage that, and I think it can apply. But it is interesting to look at Jewish writings that use similar language and to see how they apply these words we hear from Jesus.

How one stewards their finances was a point of teaching among the Rabbis. They would often tell a famous fable about a famished fox who slipped into a vineyard through a narrow path. After feasting sumptuously, the fox was too fat to exit the way he entered. He couldn’t leave until he became lean again.⁴ The point being made is that as we slip in and out of this world we are stewards of what God has given us and not owners of it. And so the wisdom we find in Proverbs 19:17 reads like this, “*Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.*” It is “*laying up treasures in heaven.*” Because this is what God treasures.

In case you question whether or not “*helping the needy*” is something that is primary in the heart of God, just listen to these words from Scripture. Proverbs 31:8-9 calls us “*to open our mouths for those who can’t speak for themselves . . . defend the rights of the poor and the needy.*” The Prophet Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 22:3 that we are “*to do justice and righteousness.*” What is that according to the prophet? We are to rescue the disadvantaged and we are not to tolerate oppression or violence against the immigrant, the orphan or the widow.” In fact God’s heart for the poor and the needy is in clear view in Psalm 146:7-9. “*Who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD opens the eyes of the blind . . . watches over the sojourners . . . upholds the widow and the fatherless.*” This is the heart of God. When we give ourselves to this end, we are being good stewards of what God has given us and we are “laying up treasures in heaven.”

That is how this phrase “*laying up treasures in heaven*” was used in the Jewish context during the time of Christ. The Rabbis tell a wonderful story that took place during the first century. There was a famine in the land, possibly the famine Luke mentions in Acts 11. In fact, the response to the famine in Acts 11:29 was that the *disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.*” But the story the Rabbis tell about this same famine is about a Queen in Northern Mesopotamia and her son who had converted to Judaism. And so when the famine took place, they purchased a large amount of supplies and sent them to help those who were suffering from the famine. Some of their relatives were upset with them because of the great sum of money that was spent to feed the starving residents of Jerusalem. In response to this criticism, her son made this comment: “My fathers hoarded their treasures in store houses here on earth, but I am depositing them in storehouses in heaven.”⁵ Don’t misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting we can earn heaven by what we do on earth. Rather, I am getting you to see that when Jesus is talking about *laying up treasures in heaven* in this Jewish context, caring for the poor would have been what his hearers would have heard.

One of Martin Luther King’s favorite passages was Amos 5:21-24. Much like in Isaiah 58, God says to the worshipers, “I am tired of your religious services. In fact, your singing is like noise to me and I can’t even listen to you sing.” Why? Because doing justice and righteousness are missing. He says in verse 24, “*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.*” In Montgomery, Alabama there is a memorial to the civil rights movement. It is a waterfall cascading over a stone slab and Amos 5:24 is inscribed on it. And all around the pool are the names of those who lost their lives as they stood for justice and righteousness.

That is what Jesus is getting after when he calls us to “*give to the needy.*” It is not a charitable act here or there. It is to be a cascade—justice rolling down like waters, an ever flowing stream—from his people who reflect his heart. That is why this is listed first among the three practices. If this is missing, our prayers are but a noise and our fasting and repentance is of little consequence. James says the same thing in James 1:27. “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*” May *righteousness and justice* flow down and cascade from us.

How do we develop a generous heart?

The question, “how do we develop a generous heart?” assumes that our natural default is to neglect the poor and to close our eyes to injustice. We can actually become somewhat blind to it. Instead of other people’s problems becoming our problem, it is easy to slip into a spirit of indifference. Quoting Jeffery Smith in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, one observer wrote: “modern-day Americans keep trying to convince ourselves that happiness is the natural state of our species.”⁶ We live in a culture that has a boundless optimism in the goodness of man. The downside of this view is that it distorts reality. It fails to see that something is terribly wrong with our world and it cries out to be put right. Consequently, not enough of us are willing to share the burden of others.

So how do we develop a generous heart? Jesus says in verse 22, “*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*” Michael Wilkins says that this is about where our eyes are focused. He says, “Jesus now indicates that when the eye focuses on something of value, it becomes the conduit that fills the heart with what has been focused upon.”⁷ So, what are your eyes focused on? Our eyes need to see God for who he is. Our eyes need to see the brokenness of this world for what it is. Our eyes need to see that we are stewards of what God has given us and that all we have belongs to God. Our eyes need to see the face of God in the suffering of those around us. Proverbs 22:9 says, “*A good eye will be blessed, because it has given of its bread to the poor.*”

I think of the final song in *Les Miserables*. The main character is on his death bed and he is “making his final confession.” With the grown orphan he took care of since she was a little girl, standing at this bedside he says these words as he slips into eternity. He says, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” What is that cause? Who

is that person? What is that opportunity God is calling you to step into and extend generosity? You don't have to change the world. But you can change the world for someone. Start giving yourself in some way to the one in need and see what God does with that. In doing so, you will see the face of God.

Conclusion

I want to close with a verse often quoted. It is a verse that summarizes all of Matthew 6:1-18. This verse reminds me how pervasive the practices of generosity and prayer and fasting are throughout the Scriptures. It reminds me how this call to *keep justice and do righteousness* is one continual theme throughout the Scriptures. So here it is. It is Micah 6:8. Let it speak for itself. *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* *“To do justice”* is to practice an outward heart of generosity. *“To love kindness”* is born from an inward humble heart of repentance. *“To walk humbly with your God”* is found in the upward heart of prayer. May this describe life in the secret place of our lives.

¹R. V. G. Tasker *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 71

²Fleming Rutledge: *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)

³The Bible Project Video on “Justice” <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/justice/>

⁴Brad Young *Meet the Rabbis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) 18

⁵*Ibid.*, 18-19

⁶Rutledge, 122

⁷Micahel J. Wilkens *Matthew, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 295

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**COMMUNITY
GROUPS**

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What makes you laugh? What makes you angry?
2. When you think of the command to “keep justice and do righteousness” what current issues in our world come to your mind?
3. What is one thing that stuck out to you from the sermon this past week?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Matthew 6:1-4. Why do you think God rewards those who come to the aid of the needy? What does it look like to make other people’s problems your problem?
5. Read Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:8. What do you observe in these passages? In practical terms, what do you think it looks like to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream?”
6. Read Matthew 6:19-21 and Proverbs 19:17. As a group, identify practical and doable ways you can “keep justice and do righteousness.” What does it look like to be a wise steward of what God has given you?
7. Read Matthew 6:22-24. What “do you see” when your eyes are off of God and focused on yourself? What “do you see” when your eyes are focused on God? How can you keep your eyes focused on God?

Taking It Home

8. Share what God is calling you to do this week to “give to the needy.”
9. Discuss whether or not there is something you could do together as a group to reach out to the someone in need or to assist in some cause that addresses a need.