

Matthew 6:1-4 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
"When You Give..."

When I was in West Virginia my church tried to handle it's giving in a way that modeled how we would like our congregants to give. We gave ten percent of our budget to the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s version of Presbyterian's Sharing. We budgeted an amount equal to half of that ten percent for assisting people and we made sure we gave it. We also had a habit of disbursing huge chunks of our endowment for disaster relief particularly if it involved flooding. The town we were in had been flooded under six feet of water three times since 1985.

When we gave money to the poor, it would be a set amount of seventy-five dollars. It was per request and myself and an elder who knew the community fairly well made the decision. We learned a few lessons doing this. There were people who would take advantage of us. It also gave us the opportunity to meet and help some really admirable people doing the best they could with what they had. Nevertheless, after about two years we had to set some guidelines as to who would be eligible for help. I felt uncomfortable about this because it did leave us having to judge a person's worthiness to receive "from the hand of God", a God who is known for loving-kindness. But love can be a tough thing sometimes. Rule number one in helping the needy is that helping sometimes just enables a destructive pattern of living and the best thing to do is to let them hit rock bottom and then come alongside. I mention this because I think as a church we did a pretty good job of being responsible with the money we had been entrusted with. In fact it was truly a blessing to me to be the minister to such generous people. As you folks are as well.

As I consider the entirety of the Bible's teaching about giving I can generalize and say that it is motivated by thanksgiving and compassion. Giving is not optional. In fact, thanks and giving are our way of life. Thankfulness and generosity are two of the fruits that the Holy Spirit creates in us. Giving must be both planned as well as spontaneous. In the Marlinton church, we tithed to the denomination. We gave an amount equal to half of the tithe for almsgiving. We were not afraid of dipping generously into the savings to help those who had lost everything because of disaster. In this way of doing things one can see that over fifteen percent of the budget was given away. The challenge to them was not to stop at fifteen percent but go further. Yet, in order to do that the individuals in the congregation would have to come to understand thankful giving as a way of life rather than as meeting an obligation. I think that shift in understanding is the biggest challenge we face with respect to financial stewardship in the church.

The Bible makes clear that part of our relationship to God includes regular giving to support the ministry of the congregation we attend. This is called tithing. The Old Testament said bring the first ten percent and give it to the

priests for support of them and the temple bursaries. No questions asked. Not doing so according to the prophet Malachi (3:8-12) was robbing God. The New Testament gives no guidance on the tithe other than to indicate that there was regular support given to widows, orphans, and pastors and that had to come from somewhere. For the first four centuries of the church they did not have buildings to look after. If they did, things like handicap access ramps and pew cushions would have come from tithes not from special donations or bequests.

Tithing is a problematic topic. If we all started to do it, this church would suddenly be inundated with more money than we would know what to do with may that someday be the case. Indeed, if the church globally started to tithe, we could eradicate poverty at least within the bounds of Christianity. Another problem we would face is that there are those in our midst who cannot afford to tithe. If they did they would have to live either on credit cards or receive help back from the church or another institution. My advice on tithing is: one, giving to the work of the church is not optional; two, begin by setting a percentage of your income that you can afford to give, and each year increase that percentage disciplining yourself to live on less; three, given the example Jesus set with his life, we should not stop at ten percent, but ten percent is certainly enough to give to a particular congregation. If you can afford it, support a worthwhile Christian ministry, also. Finally, don't be selfish with your savings.

This program of tithing is idealistic maybe, but the reality of congregational funding across North America is that a handful of faithful and understanding “big-givers” ensure that congregational ministry continues while everybody else “himselves”. Across North America the average per household tithe is twenty dollars a week. According to the tithe that means your average Presbyterian household is bringing home only \$820 a month/ \$9,240 a year. It's a wonder we aren't all starving. When we compare how much we spend on eating out, the LCBO, and buying toys, and compare that to our giving, and weigh it all within the consideration that one third of the world - most of them children - eats a dishful of gruel a day...well, enough said except that this way of giving not only applies to money. We should examine our use of time as well.

In our reading today Jesus is talking about giving that goes beyond planned giving. He's speaking of almsgiving, helping the needy, or doing acts of loving kindness for the needy. The expectation is that we will do this kind of giving too, but of a more spontaneous nature, meaning as an expression of the kingdom of heaven. It will cause us to live sacrificially as well because it goes beyond tithing. This sort of giving arises out of the compassion or loving-kindness that the Father is causing to well up in us by his work in us through Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is a movement from the heart in response to an opportunity that the Father presents to us. It is not an act of duty and certainly not something done to gain favor in someone's eyes. Nor is it an act of magic as is so often presented by the TV preachers...that give and God will bless you ten-fold stuff. It is giving that is a manifestation of the behind-the-scenes righteous reign of God. It is the Father extending his mercy or righteous reign of loving-kindness through us to those in need.

In verse one Jesus says be careful how you act with respect to your righteousness meaning be on guard with how you live within the reign of God. Do not let yourself be drawn into hypocrisy. He tells us to keep these merciful acts in the reign of God hidden or anonymous. I think this is so that they remain acts of the invisible reign of God. Jesus has a multi-dimensional view of reality. There is the visible dimension in which we see and act. There is a hidden dimension which we cannot see but has effect on the visible. Our minds and hearts are part of the hidden dimension and so is the working of the Holy Spirit. Then there is the dimension of heaven, which is utterly invisible to us and is where God's reign and acts come from. Part of what it means for the kingdom of heaven to be at hand is God by means of his Spirit is opening us up in our hidden parts to see and to understand his ways and to act in them. God acts in the invisible realm of heaven upon the hidden dimension of our hearts and minds so that our actions result in his kingdom being manifest visibly. If it is the invisible Father who is doing these things through us from heaven, then we, who are his image-bearers must look like him and therefore remain anonymous.

What this all looks like is that God from time to time will present you with an opportunity and move you with compassion to act with loving-kindness on his behalf. You must choose to respond or not. If you do let nobody know you've done it or as few people as possible so that it is evident that God has done it. When the opportunity comes do it and cherish the fact that God is using you in secret. The same I think is true for tithing as well. You will find that the more you let him move through you to give, the more loving-kind you will become. That is the reward Jesus speaks of. Moreover, you will find that he will use you more often because you've been faithful in a little. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.” The Father rewards with an ever deepening knowing of his loving-kind self those in his kingdom who yield to his extending his loving-kind reign through them and he uses them more and more. “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.”