

Should Giving Always Be Kept Secret?



Over the last ten years, I've been suggesting that we learn how to share testimonies about giving in order to help the body of Christ grow in the grace of giving.

I once objected to this type of disclosure—as many still do—because Jesus 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” ([Matthew 6:3-4](#)).

When one man received an automated tax receipt from his church indicating he'd given no money the previous year, he was outraged. He said he was obeying Scripture by not letting his left hand know what his right hand had given. *Giving was to be so secret, he thought, that even he shouldn't know how much he was giving.* (Apparently he didn't know he hadn't given anything.)

A closer look at this passage, and the rest of Scripture, demonstrates this is not a valid interpretation.

In Matthew 6, Jesus deals with motives, something the religious elite often failed to examine. He starts with the broad category of “acts of righteousness,” then moves to three such acts—giving, prayer, and fasting. This is not an exhaustive list. In their teaching, rabbis often spoke in groups of threes. Jesus could have added Bible reading, feeding the poor, or raising children. Today, we might include going on mission trips or attending a particular college or church. The idea is that any “act of righteousness” (or badge of spirituality) can accord us spiritual status in the eyes of others.

The most important verse, the one that sets up the entire passage, is the first: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them” (Matthew 6:1). The operative phrase is “to be seen by them.” This is not a prohibition against others becoming aware of our giving, prayers, fasting, Bible study, feeding the poor, missions work, or church attendance. Rather, it’s a command not to do these things in order to receive the recognition of men. Jesus continues, “If you do [that is, if you do good things to win human approval], you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” The problem isn’t doing good things with reward in mind—*it’s looking for the reward from men rather than from God.*



Then Jesus says, “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” (Matthew 6:2). Trumpet blowing may seem silly. There’s no record that this was actually done. It seems to be satirical or humorous, a caricature of less obvious (to us anyway) things we do to get attention. But Christ’s focus is the reason for which hypocrites draw attention to what they’ve done: “to be honored by men.” Again, Christ’s argument is not that our giving should never be seen, but only that we should never divulge it *in order to get human recognition*. When that happens, “I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matthew 6:5).

If we give in order to get men’s praises, we’ll get what we seek—college wings named after us, dinner invitations from heads of ministries, our names inscribed on pews or bricks, appointment to boards, or seeing our names on a plaque and in the newspaper. But in getting what we seek, we will lose what we should have sought—God’s approval.

Let’s look at the verses we started with: “So 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”
([Matthew 6:3-4](#)).

This is a figure of speech. It’s hyperbole, a deliberate overstatement, which would have been immediately clear to the hearers. That Christ’s command cannot be literal is self-evident, because a hand lacks the ability to *know* anything, and besides the person’s brain would know what both the right hand and the left hand were doing. There is no center of intelligence in one hand as opposed to the other, nor is there an ability for the brain to withhold information from one hand while disclosing it to the other. We aren’t able to throw a switch so that we don’t know we’re giving or that we have given.

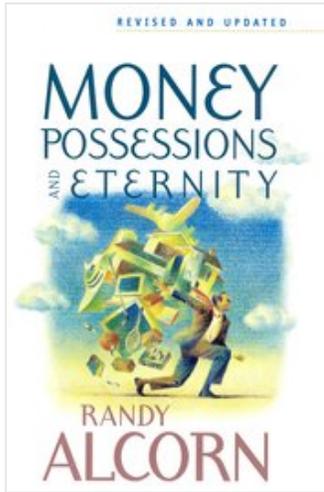
So what’s Christ’s point? Do your giving quietly, unobtrusively. Don’t cough loudly just as you’re giving. Don’t slam-dunk your offering in the plate. Drop your check in the offering or send it in the mail without drawing attention to yourself. Fold the check. Keep the envelope sealed. Give in a spirit of humility and simplicity, as an act of worship. Don’t give in order to get your name on a list. Don’t give in a spirit of self-congratulation. Don’t dwell on your gift, fixating on it, building a mental shrine to yourself. In other words, don’t make a big production out of it, either in view of others or in the privacy of your own heart.

This verse cannot mean that we should—or even that we can—be unaware of our own giving, any more than we could be unaware of our praying, fasting, Bible reading, or evangelism. To suggest that it does would remove the discerning, thoughtful elements of giving, praying, fasting, and all other spiritual disciplines.

But can this verse mean it’s always wrong for others to know that we’ve given? No. [Acts 2:45](#) tells of Christians selling possessions and giving to the needy. Did other people know who had done this? In many cases, the answer would be obvious. These people knew each other. If you no longer had your prize camels, coat, or oxcart, and Caleb ben Judah did, people would figure it out. [Acts 4:32-35](#) tells us about more people liquidating assets. Most names, which would mean nothing to us, aren’t recorded, but they were surely known at the time.

But some givers were named even for our benefit. [Acts 4:36-37](#) tells us that Barnabas

sold a field and brought the money to the feet of the apostles. If Barnabas was looking for status and prestige, his motive was wrong. But it's certainly false to say that it was wrong for others to be made aware of his gift, because Scripture itself reveals it! Barnabas's act of generosity was commonly known among the believers and was publicly and permanently recorded in Acts. This was good and right, and did not violate Matthew 6's warning about bad motives.



Did public recognition tempt others to give for the wrong motives? Absolutely, as we see in the very next passage ([Acts 5:1-11](#)).

Ananias and Sapphira gave for the wrong reasons. Then they lied to make their gift look better than it was. But the possible abuse of something doesn't nullify its legitimacy. The body of Christ can benefit from seeing open models of generous giving such as Barnabas's. The world can benefit from seeing the generosity of the Church as an attractive witness to the grace of Christ. The risks of disclosing a person's giving are sometimes outweighed by the

benefits of disclosure.

Earlier in the same sermon in which he warns against flaunting your giving and prayers and fasting, Jesus says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" ([Matthew 5:16](#)). Here we are *commanded* to let men see our good deeds—and not to hide them. Giving is a good deed, isn't it? This passage and Matthew 6 balance each other. There's a time for giving to be seen, but only at the right time and for the right reasons.

We need to stop putting giving in a class by itself. If I give a message on evangelism, biblical interpretation, or parenting, I run the risk of pride. But it may still be God's will for me to share with the church what God has taught me in these areas.

Paul speaks of himself as a model: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). I could write books and do public speaking for the wrong reasons. I could send e-mails with wrong motives, to seek man's approval, not God's. But I write books and speak and send e-mails anyway, partly because if we were to refrain from doing everything we could do with a wrong motive, we'd never do anything at all.

(If your pastor only preached when there was no temptation to pride, he'd never preach.)

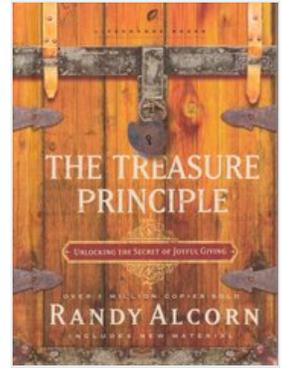
If Christ established a principle in [Matthew 6:2-4](#) that other people should never know what someone gives, then the members of the early Church violated it in [Acts 4:36-37](#). There's no way around it. Numbers 7 lists the names of donors to the tabernacle. First Chronicles 29 tells exactly how much the leaders of Israel gave to build the temple, then it says, "The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord" ([1 Chronicles 29:9](#)). [Philemon 1:7](#) is likely a reference to Philemon's generous giving, and [2 Corinthians 8:2-3](#) is definitely a reference to the Macedonians' generous giving. As we seek to understand the meaning of [Matthew 6:2-4](#), we must consider the full counsel of Scripture.

In Matthew 6, it's clear that whatever's true of giving is also true of praying and fasting. Jesus says in verse 6, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." He's swinging the pendulum away from the self-conscious, self-serving, image-enhancing prayers for which the Pharisees were notorious. But did he mean that all prayer must be private? No. Scripture has many examples of public and corporate prayer. Every time a pastor or worship leader prays in church, every time parents pray with their children, or husbands pray with wives, or families pray before dinner, or someone prays with the person being led to Christ, it demonstrates the falseness of the notion that it's always wrong to be seen or heard by others when you pray.

Jesus tells us to pray in secret, and God will reward us ([Matthew 6:6](#)). Yet gathering for group prayer is certainly important ([Matthew 18:19-20](#)). God wants us to pray secretly sometimes but not others. And so it follows that he wants us to give secretly sometimes but not others. It all comes down to the motives of our hearts and the purpose of disclosure.

Just as [Matthew 6:6](#) doesn't mean it's always wrong to let others hear you pray, [Matthew 6:3-4](#) doesn't mean it's always wrong to let others be aware of your giving. Because Jesus groups giving, praying, and fasting as the three acts of righteousness in this passage, whatever applies to one applies to the others.

When the poor widow gave, she gave publicly—Jesus could actually see the two coins. He used her as a public illustration ([Luke 21:1-4](#)). So, it was right that she gave in public, and it was right that people were told the exact amount of her gift. Her motives were right. The public disclosure did nothing to nullify her good heart.



Though confidentiality in giving records makes sense, it creates another temptation. Many believers take advantage of the veil of privacy by using it as a cloak for their disobedience in not giving. With all of today’s talk about accountability, what are we doing in churches to hold each other accountable to generous giving? People may notice if you don’t obey the command in [Hebrews 10:25](#) to attend church, but how will they notice if you fail to give? How will they be able to help you grow in this vital area?

The body of Christ needs to let its light shine before men, and we need models of every spiritual discipline. We dare not let the risk of our pride keep us from faithfully disclosing God’s work in this area of our lives. And if we must be silent to avoid our own pride, we should support others who can humbly testify to Christ’s faithfulness in their giving.

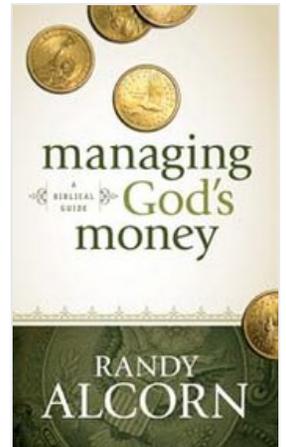
God looks at the heart. He alone knows the real motives for our giving ([1 Corinthians 4:5](#)). Scripture never says that a giver receives no eternal reward simply because others know about his gift. Donors could be known yet still have given to please God not men.

Our motive for *not* talking about our giving is not always humility. Sometimes it’s fear, doubt and, yes, even pride. To vulnerably express to others where we are on our pilgrimage to generous giving can be an act of humility. We must always check our motives, but it certainly doesn’t have to be an act of pride.

We shouldn't brag about our Bible study, prayer, evangelism, parenting, or giving, but neither should we cover it up. It's easier for people to follow footprints (what we do) than commands (what we say). If we aren't willing to openly and humbly discuss our giving, how can we expect to raise up givers? The church has plenty of examples of consumers—we need to see examples of givers. [Hebrews 10:24](#) tells us to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” We can only be spurred on by what we can see.

R. G. LeTourneau was a great inspiration to me. He gave away 90% of his income, motivating me to raise the bar of my giving. I'm eternally grateful that he told his giving story.

For more information on the subject of money and possessions, see Randy Alcorn's 2011 book, concise and inexpensive, *Managing God's Money*. See also *Money, Possessions and Eternity* and *The Treasure Principle*.



To receive daily thoughts from Randy, and great quotes from others, follow him on his [Facebook](#) and/or [Twitter](#).