



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Investing in God's Kingdom

St. Matthew 6:1-4

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Despite the fact that the average Canadian household gives less than \$300 to charitable causes each year, charity is a common thing in our society. And if you talk to people about it – especially non-Christians – the general attitude about it is that “charity” is just what good people do; that charity is widespread because men and women are basically benevolent. That’s why we give to good causes – or as is more often the case today, that’s why we’re happy to hand over half of our earning to the government so that they can engage in charity, whether that’s running schools, operating a food pantry, or providing medical services to the poor. We do it because people are basically good. That’s the answer most people give.

But that’s the wrong answer. True charity came into the world through Christianity and through the Church. Whether you’re looking at the Red Cross or the United way, public hospitals or food stamps, those things are the by-product of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That’s not to say that some pre-Christian pagans didn’t throw the occasional coin to a beggar on the street, but ancient writers tell us that that kind of charity was uncommon, and that when it did happen it was done by men who wanted others to see them as magnanimous. Before Jesus Christ there were no orphanages or hospitals. Before Jesus Christ there was a world of hard work and poverty. Unwanted children were left exposed to die (and so were the elderly as I described a couple of weeks ago). Slavery was widespread. People starved where just a short distance away others lived very affluently. But when Christ came he created a sacrificial and loving people. It didn’t take long for them to start caring for the poor and the sick. St. Joseph’s Hospital wasn’t built by pagans. It was built as a ministry to reach out to those in need in our community. It was Christians who brought in labour laws to keep people

from being exploited and laws that abolished slavery. It is the Church that takes the Gospel to other lands and as witness of the love of Christ builds hospitals and schools.

This Christian love for others was something that even the ancient pagans acknowledged. The Greek philosopher Aristides defended the Christians when he wrote to the Emperor Hadrian:

“They do not commit adultery nor fornication, they do not bear false witness, they do not deny a deposit, nor covet what is not theirs: they honour father and mother; they do good to those who are their neighbours....They love one another: and from the widows they do not turn away their countenance: and they rescue the orphan from him who does him violence: and he who has gives to him who had not, without grudging....When one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. If there is among them a man that is poor or needy, and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.”

That was the amazing witness of the Body of Christ to the world. This was supposed to have been the witness of Israel to the world too. Throughout the Old Testament we see God’s command to care for those in need, and yet his people were more often condemned for trampling on the poor, the widow, and the orphan. When charity did happen in Israel, it was more often than not done to attract the attention of other men. And so Jesus came into the world and changed all of that. In the power of the Holy Spirit charity flowed from a divine love that welled up in God’s people.

Here as we start Chapter Six we see this new spirit of charity for the first time:

**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. 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. (Matthew 6:1-4)**

Verse 3 really stands out and makes Jesus’ point clear: “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” For the Christian there is to be no show, no ostentation, when we give – and not just before men, but even before our own selves. That’s the kind of charity that’s inspired by the presence of the Lord Jesus in our hearts! And it’s in that spirit that the early Christians gave and won a reputation for charity. It’s in that spirit that Christians have, ever since, been caring for those who are in need.

But here’s the thing: this kind of love for others can never exist in a heart that hasn’t been given over and surrendered to God. I see two main points in what Jesus says here, and that’s the first one: true charity comes from a life that has first been surrendered to God. Jesus says that we are to give, not before men, but before God, looking for only *his* approval.

A good example of this is the church at Philippi. We talked a little bit about them in our study last Sunday evening. They were known for being outstanding examples of Christian giving. They gave first to St. Paul, because he was their father in the faith. They loved him, and when he left and was gone for a while, they eventually sent messengers to look for him and to find out how he was. When they found out that he was at Thessalonica and was in financial need, they took up a collection and had it sent to him. They did the same thing a second time too. The Apostle wrote to them saying, “Even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs” (Philippians 4:16 NASB). Even when he was in prison in Rome at the end of his life they continued to send him their gifts.

But the Philippians weren’t generous with St. Paul alone. Things were bad in Jerusalem and the Christians there were in desperate need. We’re told that things got so bad there that the members of the church had to pool their resources to survive. When the first Church council met at Jerusalem, the council asked Paul to go to the Gentile churches for help.

And that's exactly what Paul did. In the book of Galatians he tells the people there about the council, but he also made his appeal for help: "They only asked us to remember the poor — the very thing I also was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). We know he made a similar appeal to the Philippians. They'd never met any of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, but their response was overwhelming — the Christians at Philippi actually fought over who would have the privilege of giving. You see, they had learned to give to St. Paul when he was in need and now they were ready to give even more liberally to the church at Jerusalem.

We know all of this because the Apostle Paul held up the Philippians as an example of real Christian charity a few years later when he wrote to the church at Corinth:

**We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia [that's the Philippian Church], for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)**

What Paul tells us is really amazing, because here we have a description of a bunch of people, who only a few years before knew nothing more than the values of the Greco-Roman world. They had known absolutely nothing of charity, and yet here we see them now competing beyond their actual resources to give to their brothers and sisters in a distant part of the empire where there was great need. These weren't wealthy people. St. Paul says that they were poor too. What made the difference? Look at 2 Corinthians 8:5. Paul tells us in that last phrase: they didn't do "as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." The key was that they had first given themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That leads us to the second principle in Jesus' words about giving: In our stewardship, the Christian is to look for *spiritual* rewards. When we give we have two options. Either we give to please men and to make a show to others or we give how God leads us for the pleasure of pleasing our Lord. And Jesus tells us that if we do the first — if we give to be seen before men — then we have our reward. It might be short and fleeting, but we will have the praise of men. But he also says that if we give to please God, we will receive a spiritual reward. Jesus said, "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."

If we look again at St. Paul's epistles we can see how what Jesus teaches here works out in our Christian life. In Galatians Paul talks about reaping what we sow. Turn in your Bibles to Galatians 6:6-10:

**One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches** [this is why churches have an obligation to support their ministers]. **Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption** [that is, if he blows his time, talent, and treasure on fleshly pursuits, all those things will be gone, but not only that: the body doesn't last and the unbeliever has no eternal reward to show for it — only eternal damnation!], **but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life** [that is, if he gives of his time, talent, and treasure for spiritual causes, for God's causes, the Spirit of God will see that he receives a great reward in heaven]. **And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity** [that is, as God chooses to bless us with resources], **let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.**

St. Paul teaches a great principle here. We can choose to invest in this life or we can choose to invest in the next. To some extent we have to invest in this life just to survive — we do need food and shelter. But remember that what we invest *for* this life has no lasting fruit for eternity. But,

giving of our time, talents, and treasure in obedience to the Lord, to the spread of the Gospel, and to meet the needs of those who are poor and suffering (especially when they are our brothers and sisters in Christ), will have results not only in this life, but also in eternity.

St. Paul says something else in these verses that we shouldn't forget. He tells us not to be weary in well-doing. We here aren't a very large congregation and we don't get a lot of requests for help. Churches like St. George's United downtown get numerous requests for help every day. Being part of the local ministerial association I hear about the needs that are so often brought to the churches in the Valley, and sometimes it just feels like there's no end to the need. Sometimes meeting the needs and requests that are made can feel like a burden. I think that we're all prone to feeling this way as we respond to the needs of the local church, of the ministries in the community, and to the appeals we see for help on TV. St. Paul understood this and it's exactly what he's addressing. And yet he's telling us: Don't complain. There's always going to be one more cause for an offering, but let us give as we are able. Let us not become weary. Let us take confidence in the promise that we will one day reap what we sow — so don't lose heart.

As I said, there were two principles that Jesus explicitly makes about giving in the Sermon on the Mount. I want to suggest that there's a third principle that isn't explicit. We need to understand it because Jesus teaches it elsewhere and because it flows from his character. That's the principle of *sacrificial* giving. We see this illustrated in Scripture by St. Paul. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:9, 11:

**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich....So now finish doing it as well** [he's still talking here about the offering that was taken up for the saints in Jerusalem], **so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.**

Maybe you've never given sacrificially, but have you felt the Lord asking you to do so — maybe even asking you to give from what you don't already have? Let

me conclude with how Dr. Oswald J. Smith learned to give sacrificially. He was the pastor of the famous People's Church from 1915 until 1959. Just after starting his ministry there, he was sitting on the platform of the church during their annual missionary convention. He was unaware of their normal procedure, and he was somewhat surprised to see the ushers going up and down the aisles handing out envelopes. Surprised turned to amazement and amazement to horror, however, when one of the ushers had the "audacity," as he said, to walk up the aisle and hand him an envelope. He read on it, "In dependence upon God I will endeavour to give toward the missionary work of the church \$\_\_\_\_\_ during the coming year."

He had never seen anything like that before. He had a wife and a child to take care of and at the time was only earning twenty-five dollars a week. He had never given more than five dollars to missions at any one time in the past, and that was only once. He started to pray, "Lord God, I can't do anything. You know I have nothing. I haven't a cent in the bank. I haven't anything in my pocket. Everything is sky-high in price." It was true. This was in the middle of World War I – but for that matter, his situation doesn't sound very different from our own today.

But, he said, the Lord seemed to say, "I know all that. I know you are getting only twenty-five dollars a week. I know you have nothing in your pocket and nothing in the bank."

"Well, then," he said, "that settles it."

"Oh, no, it doesn't," the Lord answered. "I am not asking you for what you have. I am asking you for a faith offering. How much can you trust me for?"

"Oh, Lord," said Dr. Smith, "that's different. How much can I trust you for?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!" he exclaimed. "Why, that's two week's salary. How can I ever get fifty dollars?" If we converted that to today's dollar it would be about \$2000. But again the Lord spoke, and with a trembling hand Oswald Smith signed his name and put the amount of fifty dollars

on the envelope. Smith wrote later that he didn't know how he paid it. He had to pray each month for four dollars, but each month God sent it. And at the end of the year, not only had he paid the whole amount, he had himself received such a blessing that he raised the amount to one hundred dollars during the next year's missionary conference. He went on to give much more later and to lead his church into an ever-expanding and ever more effective programme of home and world missions.

Friends, that is real sacrificial giving and it was born solely out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you're concerned about your giving (and if you are a Christian you should be), then start by yielding yourself to the Lord, look for spiritual causes, and ask the Lord to lead you in his own pattern of giving.

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, you promise to care for each one of us, to provide our daily bread and to care for us just as you care for the birds and the flower of the field, and yet we show our lack of faith in you when it comes to our giving. Rather than put our faith in your promise to provide, we tighten our fists in fear that we might lose what little we already have. Father, strengthen our weak faith and give us a desire to serve and care for others the way your Son served us. Let us not only be generous with what you have given to us, but let us be generous, as Oswald Smith was, with what we trust in faith that you will provide, and all the time giving not to win the approval of men, but to please you, our Father. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.