

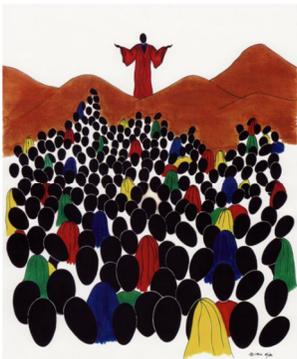
The Secret Giver (Sermon on the Mount #8)  
Matthew 2:9-12, 6:1-4  
January 3, 2016  
Pastor Dave Carver

My first foray into cultural or political activism came at the tender age of 8, when I wrote a letter to those mean people at ABC who had cancelled my favorite television



series, *Batman*. My little brother and I savored each episode that had an odd mixture of campy humor, kitschy fight scenes, and not-so-subtle moral lessons about the importance of wearing seatbelts or drinking milk.

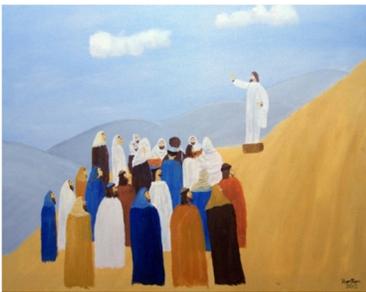
When *Batman* aired, there were two episodes a week. On Wednesday nights, the dynamic duo would be left in a very difficult situation, and on Thursdays, they'd find a way out of it (or at least they did until those knuckleheads at ABC did what the Joker and the Riddler couldn't do – they stopped Batman...). One of the devices that the series used was a dramatic narrator who would intone phrases such as, "Meanwhile, back at stately Wayne Manor". There had been an interruption in the story, and now we were returning to the scene where we'd had some action previously.



So meanwhile, before Advent interrupted us, we were working our way through the most important ethical teaching in the history of words, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You may recall that Matthew 5 starts with the Beatitudes, which we considered to be the "ground rules" for life in the Christian community. The pronouncement of blessing upon the meek, the mourners, and the pure in heart is not an attempt to convince anyone to live that way – it's simply a description of the kinds of fruit that faithful living produces.

From there we moved on to an examination of the Law and its demands in daily life. Perhaps you'll recall the series of passages that all began by saying, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." As we looked at those, we noted that Jesus calls his followers to a "higher righteousness". In Greek, the word is *perisson* – the "something more" that is expected of those who bear the mark of the Christ on our lives. And chapter 5 ends with Jesus' command to "be perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, a call to live lives of integrity and completeness – to follow Jesus wholeheartedly in every area of life. Does any of that sound familiar? Are you caught up on the action?

## ΠΕΡΙΣΣΟΝ



Today we return, not to stately Wayne Manor, but to the Sermon on the Mount, and begin our reading of chapter six as we listen to Jesus' description of what faithful living looks like in the religious arena. In particular, he holds up the spiritual practices of giving alms to the poor, prayer, and fasting. In what ways does this *perisson* – the "something more" affect the way that we engage in religious practice?

Jesus starts this section of the sermon by warning his followers to "beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them...", and that sounds reasonable enough until we remember that less than one page ago, Jesus said, "let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Which is it, Jesus? Are we supposed to stand up tall and proud as we follow you? Or be secretive about it? Both. There's not really a contradiction here – Jesus is simply warning us about different sins. There are some places where we are tempted to fear and cowardice as we

follow the Lord, and in those instances, Jesus would have us follow him with courage and confidence, not worrying about what others might think of us. In other places, though, we are seduced by our own pride and vanity. In that case, Jesus says, remember that we follow him because it is right, and not because we want people to think how holy we are. John Stott suggests a good rule of thumb: when it comes to practicing our faith, we ought to display our faith when we are tempted by cowardice and hide our actions when we are convinced that everyone should know exactly what we're doing.<sup>1</sup> In any and every case, the reason that we act is so that people can see God at work – not us.

As Jesus discusses the spiritual practices of giving to the poor, praying, and fasting, he uses a very important four-letter word. In Greek, it is *otan*. In English we say “when”. Followers of Jesus do not have the burden of deciding “if” or “whether” we are givers, prayers, or fasters. *When* you give, do it like this.

It's important for us to hear that little word and to consider its importance. Too many times I have been in situations where someone – maybe me, maybe another person – has said, “Wow, I wish I could help, but I just can't right now.” And surely there are times and places where we can't help *more*, or *in that place, too*. But I am here to tell you that I have tried to walk in Jesus' footsteps for more than four decades, and in all that time and in all the places I have been, I have never seen anyone who was so poor that they could not give something. I've seen people give money, and lots of it. I've seen people give eggs and bananas and chickens. I've seen people give time and energy and respect. The life of the disciple is one of giving and sharing, of offering and receiving. Jesus does not prescribe what his

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<sup>1</sup> *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Intervarsity, 1978) p. 127.

followers will give, but he surely assumes *that* they are givers.

In the next sentence, he returns to the theme of secrecy. *When* we give, he says, we are to be so attentive to both the needs that are in front of us as well as the God who calls us to join him in giving that we don't bother telling the left hand what the right hand is doing. I would say that it's important to plan our giving and to know what we have available and where and when is best to share it – but that we do so without a trace of self-consciousness or self-centeredness. Just as he warned against giving to impress other people, such as the hypocrites were doing, here Jesus cautions us against being overly impressed with ourselves or our own religious observances.

And when we get it right, Jesus says – when we are a people who give with humility and passion, with freedom and joy, focused on the Giver of all good gifts and those who can benefit from what has been entrusted to us – then we are rewarded.

As we read verse 4: “...and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you”, let me speak deliberately against the heresy known as “the prosperity gospel”. A whole lot of preachers have made big piles of money by telling their people that God's intentions for us include material wealth, and the best and surest way to fatten up the old bank account is to send a “love offering” their way. In this line of thought, God sees the so-called righteous act of giving to the Lord's work and God rewards that act with a monetary windfall.

One advocate of this theology was preaching in a crowded church. It was well known that this man was worth millions of dollars, and he had the suits and the cars to prove

it. He stood before the congregation and he thundered, “I didn’t always have it this good, brothers and sisters. There was a time when I was down on my luck. In fact, I was down to a single \$10 bill when I went to church, and I heard the Lord ask me for everything. I didn’t know where I was going to get my next meal, but I knew then that I had to give my all to Jesus. So when the ushers came around with the plate, I did it. I gave it all to the Lord, and I trusted him for tomorrow. That day, I put all the money I had into the offering plate, and look where that has brought me today!”

The church was quiet for a few moments until an elderly woman in the second row piped up: “Amen, brother. Go ahead now. I dare you to do it again!”

The “prosperity gospel” is a lie. I am here to tell you that God does reward those who give, but rarely financially. The reward of which Jesus speaks here is the sense of joy and satisfaction that one receives when one who has ached because of a need is privileged to see that need addressed.



I know that almost all of you have seen this photo before. If I get hit by a truck this afternoon, you can tell anyone that this is the single greatest photo I’ve ever taken in my life – because it documents the kind of reward of which Jesus speaks here in Matthew 6. Our friends in Malawi had faced an incredible famine, and we were in a position to help.

People around Pittsburgh and across the country rallied, in large part behind this congregation, and I was privileged to be a part of the “launch” of a campaign wherein hungry families would receive monthly allotments of food until their gardens came in. This young mother has just received the food that will keep her and her child alive, and now she is walking back to her home to celebrate God’s provision.

Although we had spoken briefly, she is not looking at me – because I do not matter to her. She had a profound need. Through people like you, God addressed that need. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, watching and celebrating how God’s people are privileged to share in the love of God. As she became smaller and smaller in my sight, walking towards her home, I wept that God should include me in that great gift.



In a few moments we will celebrate our Epiphany Communion. We will remember the day when some un-named strangers showed up in the home of a poor family and showered them with gifts. When that baby had grown to be a man, his friends understood that the gifts that he received that day merely pointed to the supreme love that lay behind the Gift that he himself was – the Word becoming flesh and living among us. May we join the Magi in being people who are eager to share what we’ve received in ways that bring blessing to those around us, and may all our gifts point, not to ourselves, but to the one from whom we’ve received everything. Thanks be to God! Amen.