

Did you ever wonder about the tactics of some gift givers?

- Look at Duracell, they donate batteries for their matching gift program. You know why? The batteries are a free of charge.
- The Coca Cola recycling plant stopped its giving program. You see it was soda-pressing.
- I was asked this past winter if February would March for Dimes? I said No, but April May.
- Why should you never trust ladder-up donation messages? They are always up to something.
- What do you call a gift giver with no body and no nose? Nobody knows.

Now, I'm sure you all looked at the sermon title today and said. Oh boy, another stewardship message. Well, you can all breathe. Although giving is in the title of the sermon, this is not a stewardship message. That comes next month. And no you can't skip church next month.

Also, I'm happy to report that we made it through all of the antitheses. Boy those were toughies, weren't they? Today we move on in our sermon on the mount series to things Jesus had to say about the right kind of piety. Jesus kicks off this topic in verse 1 saying, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

The Greek word used for righteousness here is Dikaiosyne (di-ka-o -see-na). Matthew uses this term several times throughout his gospel.

He first uses it back in chapter 3:15. This is when John first meets Jesus. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Used in Matthew 5:6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled. The resonating theme of the Beatitudes is the emphasis on humility and

interdependence. To not lord it over others. Here, the focus is taken off of the individual...the me and places it where it belongs...the we.

Diakaiosyne (di-ka-o -see-na) makes one more appearance in the Beatitudes in 5:10. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The same term is used in Matthew 5:20 Jesus tells his listeners this. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Here Jesus is setting a high bar. Be more righteous than those who are, in popular view, talking the talk and walking the walk.

Finally, Diakaiosyne appears towards the end of Matthew 6 when Jesus says this, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

To be righteous, to practice the correct type of piety. Jesus is telling us that this is like having one foot in the kingdom of heaven. In our passage today Jesus is telling us that righteousness should not be practiced for personal promotion.

But it’s a balancing act, right? Earlier in this sermon Jesus said that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, we will not experience the kingdom of heaven. So if we are to practice good acts, if we are to show acts of righteousness and justice. How can we not do these publicly?

You see, it’s not a matter of the practice itself. It depends on our focus for the practice. When we practice piety for the sake of justice, for the sake of righteousness, this is just fine and dandy. But when we do good acts for the sake of self-interest. For the sake of being “seen by others”, this is not practicing piety righteously. This is not piety that offers us a foothold into the kingdom of heaven.

In the antitheses, Jesus was putting fences around the law. In this part of the Sermon, Jesus is looking at motives behind actions. When our motives and actions work in harmony. When our heads are aligned with our hearts, then we can and do move toward the goal of “completion” or as John Wesley called it, perfection.

The first topic of piety that Jesus tackles for improper motives is the giving of alms. Charitable giving. He starts with a vivid example of practicing almsgiving for the wrong motives. 6:2. “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.”

Being charitable was not the problem. In fact, it was mandated in Deuteronomy 15:11. “Since there will never cease to be someone in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’”.

Care of the poor was central to the Jewish faith. So much so that the same Hebrew root word “Tzadik” is used for the words righteousness and almsgiving. If we wanted to make a linguistic echo, we would say “the one who gives support to others is righteous. Is Tzedakah.

But wait Pastor Amy, you said the word for righteousness was dikaiosyne? (di-ka-o -see-na) Yes. And the Greek translation for Tzedakah is dikaiosyne. Thus ends your Greek and Hebrew lesson for the day.

Here's what was happening. Those who were more fortunate would give alms. What was collected would be distributed to the poor. When men with large fortunes would come to Jerusalem, they would go to the most public spots in the city to practice their almsgiving. Before they gave what they had to offer, they would have trumpets played loudly. What they said was that this was a chance to alert the poor that there was money to be distributed. Do you believe that? Jesus didn't either. He saw right through them. Right to the part that really just wanted the praise of men.

Does this mean we should never acknowledge generous people and generous gifts? Absolutely not. We have a tree of life out in our narthex that acknowledges generous people and generous gifts. There's nothing wrong with generosity, there's nothing wrong with thanking generous people.

You see, Jesus is raising a different question. He's asking about the heart of why someone gives. He then talks about how giving alms should happen. Vs 3-4. "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." In the economy that Jesus is describing, the greater blessing is to hear God say. "Well done, good and faithful servant."

We may never get to see the full outcome of any of our gifts, let alone the gifts given in secret. But let me share a story with you of what one anonymous giver found out about his simple gift.

You see, a pastor stopped at a convenience store to get a cup of coffee before his next visit. He noticed a family standing in front of him. They did not have enough money to pay for their few items. The pastor tapped the man on the shoulder and said, "You don't need to turn around, but please accept this money." The man took the money without ever seeing the pastor.

Years later, the same pastor was invited to speak at a church in a town nearby. Afterwards, a man walked up to the pastor to share his story. "Several years ago, my wife and our child were destitute. We had lost everything, no jobs, no money. We were living in our car. We lost all hope, and agreed to a suicide pact, including our child. However, we decided to first give our son some food. We drove to a convenience store to buy him some food and milk."

"While we were standing in line at that store, we realized that we did not have enough money to pay for these items. But a man behind us asked us to please take the money from his hand and not look at him. The man then told us 'Jesus loves you.

“We left that store and drove to our designated suicide site. We wept for hours. We couldn’t go through with it, so we drove away. As we drove, we noticed a church with a sign out front. The sign said, ‘Jesus love you.’ We went to that church the very next Sunday, and both my wife and I were saved that day.”

He then told the pastor, “The minute you began speaking this morning, I knew immediately. You were the man who gave us that money.” How did he know? The pastor was from South Africa and had a very distinct accent. The man added, “Your act of kindness was much more than a simple good deed. Three people are alive today because of it.

When you are moved with compassion to practice piety, just say yes to justice, just say yes to helping the poor. Don’t worry if your left hand doesn’t know what your right hand is doing. God does and God will use those gifts in the best possible way.