

MESSAGES FROM THE MOUNT – *A Secret Society*

Continuing in our series which I'm calling "*Messages from the Mount*" we'll be taking a closer look at **Matthew 6:1-21** today. I've entitled this lesson "**A Secret Society of Saints.**" I will be reading through a section at a time, focusing on some specific verses within them. First, Jesus addresses **GIVING...**

¹ Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you'll have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² So 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. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Verse 3 has been given a bad rap. Every time I hear it quoted, it's not only taken out of context, but it's given a completely different spin. Jesus presents the idea in a positive light, not as a failure to communicate within an organization or company. **It's not about random dysfunction, but purposeful discretion.** At face value, it may seem my appearances on TV to promote our Give-Away were in direct violation of His teaching. And what about writing personal checks and/or using offering envelopes or Give-lify seeking tax credit for our tithes? Isn't Jesus instructing that our giving has to be done anonymously? He uses the word "*secret*" which is the Greek word for "*cryptic*" and to me that sure implies "*covert*" benevolence. And then He applies this same theme to our **PRAYER LIFE...**

⁵ And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. ⁹ This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' ¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Perhaps you were tempted to say "*The Lords' Prayer*" with me just then, and though it may be appropriate from time to time, context is clear that if Jesus ever meant for us to repeat it word for word, it would be **better prayed in our closets than in our churches.** And what of "*saying grace*" in restaurants or having a "*Pastoral Prayer*" in our assembly?

Not much “*secrecy*” there. When I’ve prayed over people in hospitals or prayed for at weddings and funerals? And what of the times when I’ve gathered with others to lead a prayer on the **National Day of Prayer**? Did I cross the line? I mean people saw me pray on each occasion – and oft times I knew they would. I not only didn’t **try to hide** what I was doing, on those occasions I made sure people knew exactly what I was doing – and spoke so they could hear every word I said so they could add their “*amen*” to my petitions.

Finally, Jesus makes the application to my favorite topic, ‘**FASTING**’ - I jest. I’d prefer to talk about feasting rather than fasting, but Jesus says. ¹⁶ **When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.** ¹⁷ **But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,** ¹⁸ **so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**

So, there’s this unbroken thread of secrecy throughout the text. ***Our personal sacrifices of repentance and devotion are to be kept private.*** If people know I’m doing it, then there may be a problem. But, what of those times in the Bible when the whole nation of Israel was called to fast? Or when the church collectively fasted and prayed before installing elders or ordaining missionaries? Those must’ve been public. And what about when our stomach growls or we fast long enough that someone notices we’ve shed a few pounds? I mean, you can hardly skip a meal without someone asking what’s wrong. What are we supposed to say? How can we “*keep fasting a secret?*”

It’s important to note that in this and every other instance Jesus mentions, He’s exposing the hypocrisy of those Scribes and Pharisees whose righteousness He said we are to surpass if we expect to enter the kingdom of God. Their religion was for show – to receive praise from men and recognition for themselves. He says don’t be like them. And in the previous chapter He had said, ¹⁴ **“You’re the light of the world. A city on a hill can’t be hidden.** ¹⁵ **Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.** ¹⁶ **In the same way, let your light shine before men, so they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** So, which is it? Are my “*acts of righteousness*” to be in secret – or to be on display? Yes!

The message from the mount is this: ***It’s not so much about method as motive; and more to do with intent than content.*** It’s true ***we may be seen... but, we’re not to make a scene.*** That’s what they did. And Jesus also said, not just once, but **3** times, that since they were seeking the praise of men that’s all they were going to get. Yet, He assures “*the secret society of saints*” that their **Heavenly Father sees what is done in secret, and He will reward them.** In fact, in the next couple verses He sums that idea up this way:

¹⁹ **Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.** ²⁰ **But, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust don't destroy, and where thieves don't break in and steal.** ²¹ **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** Though these verses are almost exclusively applied to money – and Jesus does tell us we can't serve both God and money a few verses later in **6:24** - the context is much broader than that, isn't it? I wonder how many rewards we will miss out on in heaven because of our insistence on chasing after rewards on earth - and what rewards might they be?

I cannot say with certainty, but there are more than just hints throughout the Scripture that there are degrees of reward in heaven. In the book of **Matthew** alone, Jesus differentiates between **"a prophet's reward"** and that of one who merely **"gives a cup of cold water in His name."** (**10:6**) And He clearly says God will **"recompense everyone"** for what they do. (**16:27**) He also teaches about **"compensation for all sacrifices made for the kingdom."** (**19:29**)

I promise to address this topic more in future, but for now I accept by faith that God is faithful and He does not miss a trick. He will reward us - providing we keep our pride in check and make sure that whatever we do, it's **for His glory, not ours**; for His renown, not for our reputation. Let's pray.