

Matthew 6:1-4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 August 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Social media is awash with the ice bucket challenge. Now, for the uninitiated, and there's no shame if you count yourselves among the uninitiated, this involves the rather bizarre ritual of having ice-cold water poured on your head, committing to make a donation to charity, and then nominating three others to do the same. And the craze began, as so many of these things do, across the Atlantic, and it began to benefit a particular charity. But as it's crossed the Atlantic and indeed circled the globe, it has diversified, and I think any charity will do.

And the numbers involved are spectacular in terms of how many people are doing it, but also in terms of the funds or the monies that are being raised. And of course, these spectacular numbers are due to a potent mixture of the power of exponential mathematics, arithmetic, or whatever the right word to describe it would be, the capacity of social media to carry the message quickly and efficiently, and I suspect that the power of peer pressure and our reluctance to be viewed as a party pooper. So, when you combine all of these things, it really has just taken flight and mushroomed globally.

Now, as with anything like this that is very much in the public eye, anything that goes viral, people have opinions. And as you would expect, there are dissenting voices emerging. I think I made reference in a measure to that in the editorial in the intimation sheet. And from a Christian perspective, some are suggesting that this craze epitomizes everything that Christian giving should not be.

It's all about, it is argued, a self-promotion. You video yourself and you upload it onto Facebook so everybody can see you and see what you've done and see how you're giving to charity. And consequently, given that that's what it's about, it's argued seemingly quite cogently that this is the very antithesis of what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly in the verses that we'll be focusing on this evening where there is such a stress on doing our acts of mercy, of giving to the needy in secret, that our right hand wouldn't know what our left hand is doing. And the emphasis seems so clearly to be so different to what we're witnessing and maybe even participating in, as already mentioned.

Now, to be honest, I think anybody who aggressively beats that particular drum, that this is the antithesis of Christian giving, maybe need to lighten up just a little bit. But in addition to that, I do detect a delicious irony in at one and the same time decrying self-promotion and yet feeling the need to proclaim to the world your dissenting voice. At the end of the day, if you don't think it's a good idea, well, don't do it, and that's perfectly okay. But more importantly, and this is really our concern, and this is really to introduce us into a much more important matter, and it is this.

[3 : 47] What does Jesus have to say on this matter of giving, and particularly in the very passage that would be employed to perhaps helpfully make us think about what we're doing or what we're involved in. So, let's turn to the passage that we've read, and as we consider the passage there in Matthew in chapter 6 in the first four verses, our primary concern is not that we've introduced the sermon with a reference to the ice bucket challenge. Our primary concern is not to defend or condemn what is, after all, just a passing fad, but rather to gain instruction on a matter that ought to occupy the attention of disciples of Jesus, namely the subject of giving to the needy. This is a subject of great importance. Even today we've been involved in, and we've certainly been given the opportunity to give to those who are in great need. In Syria, in northern Iraq, here in Bonacord on a weekly basis, we're involved modestly, but involved in a food bank facility that endeavors in a small way to provide for those who are in need. And these are good things, and it is right that we should be so involved.

But what does Jesus actually teach us in regard to this matter? Well, in these verses, Rabbi Jesus, for He's teaching here as a rabbi, as a teacher of the law. He's teaching His disciples who were

gathered there around Him, and He teaches us also. He's teaching us about giving. And so, we want to hear what He has to say, and we want to draw out what Jesus says, what He teaches, by posing a number of questions that the teaching in these verses answers. So, let me just indicate, just mention what these questions are that we're going to pose, and hopefully find answers to in the verses that we've read. The first question we want to think about is, how does Jesus describe giving? What I really mean by that, and I'll explain a little bit more fully in a moment, is what does He understand? What does He have in mind when He speaks of giving? What is it that He has in mind? What is that in the mind of Jesus, and importantly of His disciples? So, what or how does Jesus describe giving? But then also, very briefly, how does or what does Jesus take as a given? In these verses, there's something that Jesus takes as a given, and even that is worth just highlighting because it's, I think, quite challenging, certainly instructive. Another question we'll ask is, who does Jesus expect His disciples to give to? Who are to be the recipients of their acts of mercy, of their giving?

The next question really is the central one, and it's the one that I think Jesus is most concerned about, and so I hope that we'll give it the most careful attention, and it is this. What does Jesus have to say about the manner and underlying motivation of our giving? Because I think this really is the heart of Jesus' concern. It's a question of motivation. What is the motivation behind what we do, the giving that we give, and what lies behind it? This is His great concern. But then, finally, there's another question that is answered, at least in part, in the verses that we've read, and that is, what does Jesus say concerning our reward for giving as we ought? Perhaps even the concept of being rewarded for giving seems a little incongruous, but we'll think about that towards the end. So, let's think about these questions and see what Jesus has to say. First of all, how does Jesus describe giving? Well, there are two words that Jesus uses in the first two verses that give us an insight into what Jesus has in mind when He talks about giving, or certainly that's the word that is used in translation in our passage, when you give to the needy. But the two words, the first word is to be found in verse 1, and in English it's become a phrase, acts of righteousness. Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men.

This phrase, acts of righteousness, translates one word, which, if the word existed, could be translated righteousnesses. I think it's pretty obvious why the word doesn't exist, because it's so difficult to say.

[8 : 38] But that's the idea, your acts of righteousness, those acts that together constitute the performing of particular religious duties. And this is important. The word was almost a technical word that referred to specific religious duties that pious Jews would seek to perform, indeed were required to perform.

And Jesus goes on to identify three of these principles, we might call them religious duties. The first that will concern us this evening was this matter of giving. The second was prayer, and as we see, that is what follows in the chapter. And the third, fasting. So giving, prayer, and fasting.

It's of anecdotal interest and curiosity when we think of the great world religions, we think of Islam that is something that is gaining much attention. Of the five pillars of Islam, three of them are three of these. Now that just reminds us of where the roots of Islam are to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And moved on and diversified, certainly, but it's of curious interest to notice that. The point is, these were religious duties that Jews would perform.

They were required to perform, one of them being giving. Together, they're called acts of righteousness. So the acts of righteousness refers not just to giving, but to the other two that follow, and no doubt to others that might be mentioned, but that aren't in this particular passage.

So that's the first word that is relevant in helping us to understand what it is that Jesus is speaking about. In that connection, it's important to notice that what Jesus is saying to His disciples is that they, too, should perform these duties, but that the manner in which they would perform them would be very different to the manner in which the religious Jews performed them. Perhaps the disciples were wondering, well, you know, we're disciples of Jesus now, and, you know, how does this work? You know, religious Jews, who we know are often hypocrites, they do these things, you know, should we be doing these things?

[10 : 58] And Jesus says, yes, these are things that you must do. They're good and right that you should do them, but the manner in which you will do them ought to be very different. That Jesus has this in mind, that the manner in which they would do them would be very different, is particularly apparent when we read this chapter as we must in the light of what Jesus had said in the same

sermon, but that's recorded for us in chapter 5 and in verse 20. Notice what Jesus says there. We just need to turn back one page, and there Jesus, addressing the same disciples, says, for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. And with that in mind, we ought to read chapter 6 when Jesus speaks of acts of righteousness. He's saying, yes, the Jews do these things, and quite rightly they do them.

You should also do them, but the manner in which you should do them should be in the manner of, if we can coin a phrase, surpassing righteousness. That is what should characterize the way in which you engage in these religious duties. So, disciples of Jesus were not and are not let off the hook in the matter of performing legitimate and prescribed religious duties. But then moving on to a second word that Jesus uses that helps us understand what it is He's speaking about, and it is the word there in verse 2 where we read, so when you give to the needy, when you give to the needy. The word that Jesus uses that is translated in this way is a Greek word, and I'll just mention what it is because it draws out something I think helpful. It's a Greek word, *elemosune*. Now, literally translated, the word is acts of mercy. The Greek word *eleos* is ingrained in the word. These are what would be described or what could be translated as acts of mercy. It's where we get the English word *alms*.

It comes from that Greek word. Now, we'll come back to the relevance of the word *mercy* in a moment, but the point to stress and the point that is made evident by both these words that Jesus uses, the one translated acts of righteousness and the one that simply translates as giving to the needy, both of these words highlight that giving to the needy, acts of mercy if you wish, are a Christian duty, not just some charitable option. And when we think of charity, we think very much of something that we can do if we wish, but we're under no obligation to do. If I want to give, I give. If I don't, I don't. There's no obligation. That would be to misunderstand what Jesus is speaking about here.

He's not just speaking about charity, as we understand it. He's speaking about that which He considered to be, and He would have His disciples consider to be a Christian duty, a privilege certainly, a glad duty to perform, but a duty nonetheless. It's also just worth noticing or stressing or highlighting to avoid any kind of confusion that this giving, these acts of mercy, were quite distinct from the obligations that were laid upon the people of Israel with regard to the time. We know that there's instruction in the law of Moses, the law of God given through Moses, concerning the giving of tithes. Now, that is quite distinct from what Jesus is speaking about here when He's speaking of giving to the needy, or what is literally said, acts of mercy.

[14 : 55] So, that's just to give us a little bit of an understanding of what it is that Jesus is speaking about. Moving on to the second question, which we'll deal with much more briefly, and it's this. What does Jesus take as a given in His instruction to the disciples? And the answer to this question really follows on from what already has been said. And what Jesus takes as a given, very simply, is that the disciples are already giving. There's no need for Jesus to say, look, disciples, this is something that you really should be doing. It's important you do it. It's good that you do it, and I really want to encourage you to do it. No, the language he uses makes it clear that he just takes as a given, it's his starting point, that they are doing it. And consequently, in verse 2, we read, so when you give to the needy. It's not if you give, or I'd really encourage you to give. No, when you give. I know you're doing it. Of course you're doing it. But when you give, this is the manner in which you should give. And we'll come to that in a moment. But it's simply taken as given that this is something that the disciples would be already doing. They don't need to be exhorted to do it. I wonder if that's true of us. If Jesus were addressing us, if He were addressing you on this matter, would He be able to say, so when you give to the needy, this is the way you should do it? Or would He have to say to you, look, I really want to encourage you, urge you to give to the needy? Would He need to take a step back, as it were, and insist on the performing of the duty before moving on to say, and when you do, do so in this manner? I wonder. That's for each of us to answer for ourselves. So Jesus takes as a given that His disciples are giving to the needy. They're engaging in acts of mercy, a term that by this stage had become a reference to the giving of a monetary contribution. Obviously, literally, the term acts of mercy could be broader than that, but it really had come to speak of the giving of money for the relief of need of one kind or another. So Jesus takes as a given that the disciples are doing it, and also the word that He uses there, translated, so when you give, perhaps it could be better captured by whenever you give, because I think the word *whenever* captures a little

bit more something that is implicit in what is being said, and that is the matter of regularity.

The language Jesus uses makes it clear that not only is He persuaded that the disciples are giving, but they're doing so in a regular manner. This was a regular duty to be performed in a regular manner.

I'm not saying there's any reference to how regular or the periodicity, but nonetheless, there was a regularity to the performing of this duty, something the disciples, it would seem, were already doing. So the third question, who does Jesus expect His disciples to give to?

Well, this may seem just almost insultingly obvious. They are to give to the needy. Now, in the context of first century Palestine, those in view would have been, I imagine, orphans and widows, often the term used to give a kind of catch-all description of those in great need, the sick, those principally in some kind of serious material need of one kind or another. We know that need goes beyond the material, but this matter really was related to principally material need that could be met in some measure by the giving of money that could then be used to purchase whatever was required for those in need. That's not so different today. We still live in a world that is characterized by great material need. Improved communications increase our awareness or exposure to the needy.

They broaden the geographic scope of the calls upon our giving to the needy, but in essence, the situation is not greatly different to the one that faced the disciples 2,000 years ago.

[19:19] Who would Jesus have us give to? Well, those who are in need, the needy. Of course, giving to the needy is to be or is to go beyond the mere performing of a religious duty. And if it is to go beyond the mere performing of a religious duty, it requires or is aided by what we could identify as certain preconditions. We're thinking about who we're giving to. I think something that's very important that may seem obvious, but perhaps isn't as obvious as it appears, and that is it's important for us to have a clear knowledge of who the needy are. Now, sometimes we're so distant from, yes, we see on the TV, we hear about it, but we're maybe distant from those who are in direct material need. And so often, our knowledge is very limited. You know, even if we think of the matter of food banks that has kind of become a big deal in the UK over these past couple of years, I wonder how many of us really have a grasp of what the problem is and what the needs are and why this is a problem. You know, often our knowledge is limited. I think there's an onus upon us to gain understanding in order to give intelligently, in order to genuinely identify those who are needy. Perhaps there are many who are needy we simply don't know about and so aren't able to help simply because of our ignorance. So if we are to give to the needy, then we need to have a knowledge of who they are. Together with that, it's very much combined with that, is the importance of having a meaningful exposure to those who are needy.

Again, we live often in a very comfortable bubble. We're surrounded by people who largely aren't needy in terms of material need, and that's the reality even of our congregation. I'm not saying that nobody faces material need, but largely that isn't a big issue for those of us who are here this evening, those who form part of this congregation. And indeed, not just in our congregation, in the social circles that we move, in the work places where we are engaged, we're not generally confronted face-to-face with those who are in great material need. And that also limits our understanding and indeed our opportunity to respond. A third thing that is, of course, very important if we're going to give in a meaningful way and not simply in performing a duty is compassion for those who are in need. And that takes us back to the word that we identified, acts of mercy, elemosune, acts of mercy. These are acts of mercy. And for an act of mercy to be meaningful, there needs to be a merciful attitude in the one who is giving. If there is no compassion in us, then while we may be able to perform the duty, it will be devoid of an essential element. It will still be a good thing to give to the needy, even in the absence of compassion, but genuine compassion will transform both the nature and, I'm sure, the scale of our giving. Moving on to the next question, what does Jesus have to say in these verses about the manner and underlying motivation of our giving, of your giving? And as I suggested at the beginning, this really is the heart of Jesus' concern and indeed purpose in teaching as He does on this subject. And we can divide the answer really by posing two parallel questions. First of all, how are we not to give? And then how are we to give? For these are things that Jesus deals with here. Well, how are we not to give? Well, in verse 1, where Jesus is dealing more generally with acts of righteousness, He makes it clear that these are not to be performed before men. Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men.

Then when He moves on to the specific matter of giving to the needy, we're told that we are not to announce it, not to announce our giving with trumpets. We are not to give in a public manner. This, of course, is what people would home in on with certain merit in saying, well, the ice bucket challenge and things of that nature really go against this very clear teaching of Jesus, where it is argued what is going on is self-promotion and the very opposite of what Jesus is instructing concerning the manner of our giving. However, things are not that simple, and they seldom are, because how do we square what Jesus says here concerning secrecy and the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing? How do we square that with what Jesus also says in this very sermon?

[24 : 33] Just a few verses before, if we turn to one page back again in chapter 5 and in verse 16, what does Jesus say there to His disciples? He says, In the same way, let your light shine before men, and then what does He say?

That they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Jesus isn't dealing with exactly the same matter, but nonetheless, there seems to be this big contradiction. The one hand He's saying, you know, make sure everybody sees what you're doing so that they'll praise your Father in heaven, and then He turns around and says, oh, you've got to do it in secret. You don't want anybody to see what you're doing. What's going on? Is this Jesus entering into contradictions, is it? As some would very happily conclude, oh, that's the Bible contradicting itself again. Well, of course, it's nothing of the sort. What this highlights, this seeming contradiction, is that the key issue is not really public versus private. The problem is rather the reason for giving in public that Jesus is condemning and identifying. If we go back to the passage in chapter 6, when He says that they are not to do their acts of righteousness before men, He then goes on to say, to be seen by them. The big problem isn't that it's before men. The big problem is that the motivation is that they would be seen by men. If the act of righteousness requires to be public by its very nature, that's not a problem. But if the reason you're doing it is so that people will see you and congratulate you and think well of you, that is a problem, and that is what Jesus is condemning.

Equally, in the specific matter of giving to the needy, He condemns those who do so in public, on the streets, to be honored by men, to be seen and congratulated and honored by men. They have their reward, says Jesus. So, how are we not to give? We're not to give in a manner that has its intention, that we would be honored, that we would be congratulated. How then are we to give? Well, of course, it's really just the reverse of the same coin. And verse 3, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, rather that what you do may be in secret. May your giving be in secret.

This does not preclude any giving that is visible or public, if the nature of the giving requires that, but it simply lays stress on the importance of not seeking publicity or the approval of men.

Again, it's all about motivation. It's about who we seek to please. Are we men pleasers? Then we will look to ensure that everybody knows how generous we're being. Are we God pleasers? Then we will do all we can to keep our acts of righteousness, our giving, our acts of mercy under wraps.

[27 : 28] Getting back to the seeming contradiction between this passage and the verse that we read in chapter 5 and verse 16, I came across the following, I found at any rate, helpful challenge that captures some of the tension in these two pieces of instruction. And I simply quote what I read in a book that was dealing with this matter. And the charge or the encouragement is as follows, show your Christianity when tempted to hide it. Hide it when tempted to show it. Now, that can be applied more broadly than to this matter. But I think it captures an important truth for us. Finally, what does Jesus say will be our reward for giving as we ought in the manner that He described and with the motivations that He encourages? Well, before trying to answer that question, we do have to acknowledge that there seems to be a certain incongruity in even speaking of reward. It's not the whole point that we are to give in a manner that is devoid of self-interest. We don't do it because of what we're going to get.

We don't do it because we're going to get some reward that we want, or that's largely, I think, how we generally would consider this matter. Does not the introduction of a reward somehow sully our giving? Well, let me just make three observations in the light of the passage that we can bring to debate on this. The first thing to say is that it is God who has determined that He will reward those who give in a manner that is pleasing to Him. God has determined that that is what He's going to do.

Jesus is very clear. Your Father in heaven will reward you. And if God determines that He wishes to reward us, then that is certainly His prerogative. And we can bow to His greater wisdom that if that is what He wishes to do, however He chooses to do that, and we'll come to that in a moment, well, that's up to Him. And we can simply be grateful that that is what He has chosen to do. And very related to that, I think our principal focus when thinking about this matter of reward, our focus should be not so much on what the reward might be, but rather on the identity of the one who rewards. It is our Father in heaven who rewards, and He will reward in a manner that is just, in a manner that is fitting, and we can rest easy in that knowledge. The curious thing, that maybe somewhat intriguing thing about this passage, is that Jesus doesn't actually tell us what the reward is. He makes it clear that there is a reward or that we will be rewarded, but He doesn't say what the reward is.

And we might think, well, I'd quite like to know what it is, if only out of curiosity. Maybe it's good that we don't know. Maybe that would be unhelpful in doing what we have to do. I don't know. The fact is, Jesus doesn't tell us what the reward is. We can maybe speculate in a reasonable and grounded way in the same sermon Jesus has touched on the matter of reward in the previous chapter, or it's recorded in the previous chapter, and in verse 12, they are following the Beatitudes, rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. And then it continues, speaking about another matter, but nonetheless, there is this acknowledgement of a heavenly reward. And perhaps this is what Jesus has in mind here as well, that there is a heavenly reward for those who give in the manner that is pleasing to God.

I think we can also reasonably suggest that the nature of the reward enjoyed is in the here and now. There is the satisfaction of pleasing God in doing what we do and in reflecting something of His giving character.

[31 : 20] There is the pleasure of any legitimate and healthy pleasure of seeing a need met, that we have been able in some small way to meet a need that somebody else had. And that is something that gives us satisfaction.

That's not unworthy, that is a legitimate pleasure that we can enjoy. There is perhaps for some of us the discovery in giving that it is indeed a happier thing, a more blessed thing to give than to receive. And that truth is something that is only discovered in the doing. So perhaps even in the here and now, there is reward. But I would stress that Jesus Himself chooses not to identify for us what the reward is.

One final question, and with this we draw things to a close. Did Jesus, did Rabbi Jesus practice what He preached? We know how important it is for a teacher to practice what He teaches and a preacher to practice what He preaches.

Well, what about Jesus? Here He is, waxing lyrical in this great matter of giving. Did He practice what He preached? Well, we could say so much about that, but let me just summarize in very brief and inadequate words.

[32 : 31] Well, we certainly know of Jesus that He was one who saw the needy and was moved to compassion by their need, both material and spiritual. He was the one who gave Himself for the needy in a supreme act of mercy.

He gave Himself motivated by His desire to please His Father, the very motivation that we are encouraged also to have. And we know that He received His reward. He was given the name that is above every name, exalted to the highest place, His reward for that supreme act of mercy on behalf of the needy.

So ultimately, the greatest lesson taught by Jesus on the subject of giving is not to be found in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, helpful and inspired though they are.

But the greatest lesson that He gives is in His own example, in the giving of Himself for us, in the giving of Himself, God's indescribable gift for we who are His disciples, for you and me.

And so as we would seek to respond to the encouragement and the exhortation, to engage in these healthy and commendable religious duties that we would give to the needy, that we would do so in the light of the One who has taught us in this manner, and the One who has given Himself for us, that we too might give of ourselves and for others.

[34 : 07] And may God help us so to live and so to give. Now let's pray.