

March 13, 2022

Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life: Doing Good

Matthew 6:1-4

We read today a passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6, verses 1-4.

6 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²So 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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

I'm talking this month about certain fundamental practices of our faith, basic habits that a vital Christian life can't do without. I've called these "The Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life," and one of the things I've said is that as essential as these practices are to our faith, they may not come naturally at first. You have to learn them, as you have to learn any habit, and when you first start, it will probably feel legalistic and mechanical. For instance, last week I talked about going to church regularly. In the beginning, the routine of Sunday attendance may feel like a grim duty. Eventually, though, you begin to realize that without this regular gathering, we can begin to feel discouraged and alone. For growing Christians, the gathering of the saints is not an unpleasant duty but rather is a time of refreshment and encouragement.

So there are different reasons for doing these things, and some reasons are better than others. That's especially true of the fundamental habit that I want to talk about today – doing good. Now when I say "doing good" I'm not talking about performing religious duties – going to church, praying, tithing, and so on – but rather doing acts of mercy for others: caring for the weak, helping the helpless, taking in the stranger, feeding the hungry, caring for widows and orphans. And let's start with one thing: this is not optional. Caring for others in their need is an absolutely essential part of any Christian life. The Christian who does not perform acts of compassion for others is someone who is unclear on the concept of being a Christian. There are some – many in our own congregation – who are tremendously gifted and well-practiced in this way, but gifted or not, no one gets a pass on this one. It is a foundational part of the Christian life, as the entire Bible testifies. The most passionate moments in the Old Testament law come when it speaks of caring for widows, orphans, and immigrants. The Old Testament prophets gave their most eloquent speeches when they were calling on Israel to stop oppressing the poor. Jesus' ministry was marked more than anything else by compassion for the crowds, healing of the sick, lifting up of the downtrodden, welcoming the outcast, remembering the forgotten. Even the Apostle Paul – who was *not* one of those people tremendously gifted in terms of mercy – comes back again and again to the issue of Christian compassion. In 2 Thess. 3:13 he says, "Do not grow weary of doing good"; in Romans 2:7 he calls for "perseverance in doing good." The author of Hebrews adds, "Do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 13:16). The Bible makes it pretty clear, doesn't it? And at its best, compassion for the helpless has always been the distinguishing mark of the church. During the years of the

Roman empire, for instance, when plague hit the cities and all the wealthy Roman rulers fled to the country, it was the Christians who stayed and risked their lives caring for the sick. Even Roman rulers who hated the church grudgingly commented on how merciful Christians were. Compassion for others is simply an indispensable part of who we are.

But here again, we have to admit this behavior isn't always automatic and doesn't always come easy. As with attending worship, we may have to start out forcing ourselves to do it, and it may take a while until it feels natural. Moreover, this discipline of the Christian life is even more complicated than the one we talked about last week. In that case I said you might start out acting out of duty, but eventually it becomes a choice. But with acts of mercy there are a *lot* of different motivations. Sometimes, yes, it's treated as a duty. Some twenty years ago, the church I served was hosting a free medical clinic for a day, and I went around to other churches in town inviting them to be involved. There's one response I never forgot: after I described the clinics to the pastor, he said thoughtfully, "I do believe we should give to the Poor. After all, we've been given so much that we ought to give something back." Well, it's hard to argue with those words, but the spirit in which they were spoken still makes me feel all withered up inside. There was no sense of "What an opportunity to help people!" (In fact, notice he didn't talk about "people" at all, but only about "the Poor," which I'm sure he pronounced with a capital P.) No, he seemed to be considering whether a free clinic might be a suitable way to meet an obligation. There wasn't any sense of joy in serving others' needs, but only a solemn decision to discharge his "Christian duty." Better than saying "No," I guess, and if a sense of duty is all you've got then go with it. But that's really entry-level compassion.

But even that's better than some motivations. Think back to our scripture from Matthew. Jesus says that when you give alms – that is, give to support the Poor – don't do it so as to attract attention to yourself. Whoever you're trying to impress, remember that you aren't impressing God. And then there are others who appear to be doing acts of mercy but are really just indulging their curiosity and taste for meddling. It makes some feel important to be caught up in other people's problems – a lot of us pastors have this weakness for self-important mercy. But in this case, the do-gooder is really trying to gratify their own need to feel needed, not tend to the needs of others: doing good is just a cover story. Here's one more inadequate reason for doing good. I once heard a speaker at a pastor's conference encouraging us pastors to show compassion to our members because it's a good way to get people on your side, and you never know when you might need support against the Council. Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. That, too, is missing the point. If we are doing good for others for any selfish reason – for personal recognition or as a busybody or in order to put people under obligation to us – then our efforts are not bringing us closer to Christ. In these cases, too, I can hear Christ saying, "You've already gotten the reward you were looking for; don't expect God to care."

There are apparently a lot of pitfalls in this mercy business. So, what is a right motivation to do good deeds? To answer that, I want to read one verse from the book of Acts. Peter has just been shown in a vision that he should not consider anyone to be unclean or unworthy of hearing the gospel – not even Gentiles, if you can imagine – and he's gone to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, where he presents the gospel to that household. In that speech, Peter is reminded of how Jesus behaved when he was on earth, and he describes Jesus' life in these words: "*You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with*

power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him.” (Acts 10:38). Why did Jesus help people? We see two reasons in this verse. First, because they needed help – that is, because they were “oppressed.” We must help people, not because of anything to do with *us*, but because they need help. Second, Jesus helped people because he was filled with the Holy Spirit and God was with him. But that isn’t a reason is it? No, it isn’t. And that’s exactly the point. At heart, Jesus didn’t help people for any external reason, he went about doing good because he was filled with the Spirit of God, and when you’re filled with God’s Spirit, that’s just the way you act. When you are anointed with God’s Spirit, doing good to others is simply easier than not doing good to others. When you truly walk with God, you don’t have to remind yourself to do good to others, and you don’t have to have a reason; compassion and mercy is just your natural state.

We’re not there yet, are we? I’m not, anyway. When I look at the times that I have done acts of mercy for others, I can always see some mixed motives. Maybe it’s partly out of a sense of grudging duty (it’s my job, after all); other times I’m sort of hoping someone notices. There is nearly always some hint of a selfish motive lurking somewhere in the background, staining the deed. Fortunately, I know how to get better at it: practice. The goal is still ahead of us, to get to the point where doing good for others, caring for the needs of others, is so automatic that we aren’t even aware we’re doing it, to the point where God is with us, so what else would we do? Jesus went about doing good; let us do the same.