

## Sermon on Words of Jesus: The Giving Trap

Text: Matthew 6:1-4 NIV  
November 9, 2008  
First Presbyterian Church

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8:30am, 9:16am, & 11am Worship  
Lancaster, PA, USA

### *Matthew 6:1-4 NIV*

*1"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will 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. 3But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

**Main point: As we give, Jesus wants our hearts focused on God, not others.**

**I just returned from a week in Las Vegas visiting my family.** When you walk into the airport your senses are bombarded by the sounds of slot machines, big video screens of all the hot shows, and the sense that people there do not wear much clothing. It is a place that promises pleasure, excitement, and riches. Many people who visit there lose piles of money, drink way too much, and do things they often regret. Las Vegas promises a lot, but delivers little. Life there is all about the externals...good looks, big cars, expensive clothes, and unlimited cash. If you look at the heart of Vegas you see greed, lust, violence, and emptiness. Not a great way to live. The issues of Las Vegas are not new. They have been in the human heart since the beginning of time.

### *Background*

**Jesus found these same issues in the hearts of the religious leaders of his day.**

They were living out their faith in public ways to get the attention of others. They were focused on the externals and what others could do for them. Belief in God had become a means to an end. They were using the "God business" to meet their own selfish desires. In contrast, Jesus instructed his followers on how to live a life of real faith. Real faith is between you and God. Your faith, your trust is in God, not in the things and people around you. Your cues on how to live come from God.

**KNOW THAT THIS IS A RADICAL WAY TO LIVE.** What it means is that everyday you are seeking to please and honor God, not yourself. Some of the religious leaders in Jesus' day had forgotten this. They knew they were called to love God first. Repeatedly they were instructed in Deuteronomy and Joshua to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut. 6:5)." In their pursuit of God they lost their way. They took their eyes off the mark. They had become distracted. They were becoming like all the pagans around them. Jesus says to them in Mark 7:6-8: "Isaiah (29:13) was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

**We distract easily, too, don't we?** We live in a world that badgers us to look to the celebrities, the rich and famous, the cool and good-looking, and the stock market for our cues in how to think and live. The media pounds us with the surface, the temporary, and the fleeting as if that is all there is to life. Electronic toys have replaced face-to-face relationships. Money has become our rock of security and the provider of the good life. We are distracted and easily deceived. Like the Pharisees, we choose to keep up external appearances and busy schedules to the neglect of our inner lives. We, too, forget that the goal of life is to serve and honor God. The Pharisees got caught up in looking good, and forgot about being good. Sadly, so do you and I.

**Jesus in this whole section of core teachings in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is calling us back to the basics.** He is reminding us of the simple truths of faith that will set us free. As followers of Jesus we learn to trust God more than ourselves. **A. W. Tozer talks about faith being when our soul looks to God for help.** *"It is summed up for us in the Hebrew epistle when we are instructed to run life's race 'looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). From all this we learn that faith is not a once-done act, but a continuous gaze of the heart at the Triune God.(The Pursuit of God, p.84)"* God becomes the continual focus of our souls and inner attention. We are to live our lives simply, honestly, and generously.

**This is particularly true when it comes to the practice of giving.** Remember that main point? As we give, Jesus wants our hearts focused on God, not others. Jesus knows that the practice of giving will help us become more like him. Early in his teachings he warned his disciples about the greed of the world and to beware of all the "get rich" schemes. In Mark's account of Jesus he says, *"Listen carefully to what I am saying—and be wary of the shrewd advice that tells you how to get ahead in the world on your own. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity. Stinginess impoverishes."* (Mark 4:24-25) So as followers of Jesus we are to be known for our generous giving and living.

**Jesus knows that the practice of giving can shape and change us in wonderful ways.**

- Giving from what I have and who I am takes my attention off of me to serve others.
- Giving reminds me that all I have is not mine, but God's. When I die, it will all stay here.
- You and I are managers of God's resources to do God's work.
- Giving helps me live free and openly, not in fear or anxiousness.
- Giving can be a statement of ultimate trust. As I give, Lord, I trust you to meet my needs.
- I have found great joy in giving as well. As my family and I give to support God's work here and around the world, we rejoice that others will be helped.
- Giving can feel good.

**Know there is a trap waiting for us as we live generously.** I call it the "Giving Trap". Let's hear again what Jesus says about it in **Matthew 6:1-4 Message: 1 "Be**

*especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding. 2-4"When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself. You've seen them in action, I'm sure—'playactors' I call them— treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, true, but that's all they get. When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.*

**There is a danger in giving.** I might do it to impress others. I might do it to get people off my back. I might be tempted to think that I am better than others. This is dangerous for your soul and mine. If I start thinking of myself as better than others...those single working moms, those people on welfare, those poor orphans in another country, then I will probably start treating people as objects, not fellow human beings. I can picture those religious leaders in their long robes and tassels, strolling into the temple, drawing all the attention, thinking to themselves, "I am it. I have reached the top. Watch what I can do for you poor beggars. Trumpets! Hear go my gold coins!!!" Not pretty, is it. It is very sad when a person has full pockets but an empty soul.

*Riding the public bus in Las Vegas*

**I did something I never did before this past week when I was in Las Vegas.** I rode the bus. I was told later by a business man who lives in Las Vegas that no one rides public transportation except derelicts and drifters. I found this was not true. Hard working people ride the bus. The people who keep Las Vegas running ride the bus. They work in the hotels, casinos, restaurants, stores, and low-paying jobs. They come in all different colors and speak lots of different languages. They are people like you and me with hopes, dreams, and struggles. I almost forgot that. I could have easily classified them as objects, derelicts and drifters if I had hopped into a taxi or limo. I needed to enter their world to understand them, to really see them as God does. My eyes were open to real people. People whom God loves, people Jesus died to save.

**As we prepare for communion,**

- Let us ask God to cleanse out of us any attitude that hints of superiority.
- Let us ask Jesus to forgive us and give us eyes to see the people around us as truly people God has created, not objects to use or fear.
- Let us ask the Holy Spirit to come and make us clean, humble, and free.

Jesus came out of heaven, his comfort zone, to be fully with us. Jesus lived, taught, and died a generous life. His blood on the cross and his resurrection from the dead makes it possible for us to live generous lives as well.

**Prayer-**

**O God, you sent your Son to save us. Thank you. Meet us at the table today with your love, hope, and courage so we can go see, love, and serve the people you have that are waiting for us. In Christ, Amen.**