

Best Practices for Followers of Jesus – Charity
From the Series, “The King and I - Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

For many years I have served in what is often called “The Ministry”. That started over 30 years ago when I felt a call from the Lord to serve. I felt this call near the end of my college career, so after college I went to seminary. Since that time, I’ve served in many different capacities in churches and Christian organizations.



We often think of church work as buildings with stained glass and altars and all of that. But sometimes, this work can take unusual forms. I’ve spent some of my time in the ministry in some of those “unusual forms”. Some of the places I served didn’t have a lot of money. That means they couldn’t pay a salary, or much salary. So, I needed to look elsewhere for income.

Somehow, I wound up getting training in computers. In fact, I even had a nice title – “Software Engineer”. At some points, I had this title. At other points, I was called “programmer.” If you’re outside the computer field, you may have no idea why there are different titles for people. But inside the field, these titles matter.

Now, why am I getting into this? Titles may matter inside the computer field or in any profession. But, why do they matter to us in church? There are lots of reasons for this, but here’s our reason for today: Engineers should know something called “Best Practices”.

What is a “best practice” you ask? As always, I’m glad you asked.

Here’s what the Merriam-Webster online dictionary says: “a procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption.”

That’s a mouthful, huh? Here’s my definition: “You want to do something, and there is a best way to do it.”

Here's what's great about discovering a best practice. You want to do something, and you don't have to start from scratch to figure it out. Someone else already did that. The definition we read a moment ago says that people sometimes figure out the best way to do something, or best practice, through experience. That means trial and error. With trial and error you try different things to see what works, and what works best. Along the way you also find out what doesn't work, or what doesn't work very well. That can be a problem because failed ways to do things are expensive.

There is a better way, though. Often, a company makes something. When they make it, they don't just hand it to people. They tell everyone the best way to use their product. They give you instructions. So, the best way to get a best practice is from the maker of the things you want to use.

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells us About the King of the Universe." We're in chapters 5-7, a section we're calling "The Christian Manifesto." In this manifesto, Jesus just finished telling us about things that are important - He told us about things that matter to the Master. We just finished that series. Once we know what these things are, once we know what matters to our Master, hopefully they start to become important to us.

So now we ask, "What do we do in response?" We'll find out that there are things followers of Jesus do. There are activities for disciples. Jesus tells us what these things are. As it turns out, Jesus doesn't leave us alone. He doesn't make us figure out on our own how we should do them. He tells us the best way. In any other place, these would be called, "best practices". So now, we're going to begin a series entitled, "Best Practices for Followers of Jesus."

What are things people should do if they're followers of Jesus? And what is the best way to do them? Let's read:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

Privacy

We're going to call the first best practice, "Privacy". It's foundational for many other practices. Let's break this statement apart.

Reward

Jesus tells us that if you use his recommendations, there is a reward. Here's an important point: There's nothing wrong with working towards a reward. In fact, it's a good thing. You just have to make sure you're looking for the right reward in the right place.

Here's what you need to know about reward: The reward comes from your Father in heaven.

What is the reward? It's important to be reminded what we're NOT working for.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

So, we're not working for salvation. We're not working for heaven. God gives those things as a free gift to people who have faith in him. He does not give salvation and heaven as a result of our good works. If this idea is new to you, Let us tell you how you can have a full assurance of eternity in heaven as a free gift from God. We'll have some sites you can visit at the end of this article.

So what are we working for? Two sessions back, we talked about love, and how it matters to the Master. Let's be reminded of what we learned there:

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:44-45)

Jesus tells us that when we love, we can be like our Father in heaven. Why is that important? Because that's what we were created for! God created us so that we could know him and enjoy him. That is the start of our reward.

Jesus told a story in Matthew 25 about a wealthy man who went on a long trip. As he was leaving, he entrusted large amounts of money to some of his servants. Some of the servants took the money and invested in various things that made even more money. When their master came back, they happily gave the money to their master. Here's what the master said:

20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'
21 His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' (Matthew 25:20-21)

The ultimate reward for a follower of Jesus is the smile of the master. We're happy to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." After that, we're just told that we will share in our Master's happiness. We don't need to know what that is, really. We trust him for that.

There more things that we receive as rewards, and we'll learn about those things in the future. For now, our understanding of rewards is that we want the right reward from the right place. The right reward is knowing God. The best place to get that is directly from him.

In learning this best practice, Jesus tells us about the wrong reward from the wrong place. Let's read again:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

So, the wrong place to seek a reward is others - Other people.

Notice, Jesus works on the assumption that people will try to practice their righteousness. This can take lots of forms, and we'll talk about those in coming sessions. The main thing though, is to avoid practicing our righteousness in front of others for the purpose of being seen by them.

So the wrong reward is the approval of other people. And it follows that the wrong place to seek this reward is others. So that's why Jesus teaches us that:

Best Practice Number one is Privacy.

This governs many of the other best practices. When you perform acts of righteousness, do them for your Father in heaven. Don't perform acts of righteousness in front of others to be seen by them so that you can gain their approval.

Now, some say that there is a little confusion here. Let's see why. Back in Matthew 5 we read this:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

OK. So, what is it? Are we supposed to do things in front of others, or in private? Here Jesus seems to say that we're supposed to do everything in public so that God will be glorified. Then just a few paragraphs later, he says we should do things in private. Which is it? The answer: It depends. It depends on your ***motive***.

So, the next thing Jesus is going to do after giving us the best practice is to give us some practical help in developing good motives.

Let's read on in Matthew 6:

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 others. Truly I tell you, 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. (Matthew 6:2-4)

So here is some practical advice that Jesus gives to his followers. He's going to base that advice on practices of his day. We'll try to bring them into our current day in a few moments.

Let's break apart this statement: "...when you give to the needy..." Notice something here. Jesus says, "when" you give to the needy. In other words, he assumes that his followers will do this. He assumes this because he's said in other places that God's word matters to the master. And God's Word encourages God's people to be generous with those who are less fortunate.

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. (Proverbs 19:17)

That's just one statement. There are many more. So, Jesus assumes that his followers will be kind to the less fortunate, because that's what God's Word says to do. And God's Word matters to the Master.

Jesus also told us that humility and love matter to the Master. In those sections we discussed being kind to the less fortunate, even if they are your enemy. We won't go back there; I'll encourage you to look up those messages in the series, "What matters to the Master". Again, you'll find links at the end of this article.

So, whether or not to give isn't the question. Giving with the right motive is.

In this best practice, Jesus starts with the wrong way to do it:

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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:2)

Note the words: "Do not announce it." The commentators that I go to for information suggest that there is no clear example of people actually blowing trumpets when they gave. Once again, Jesus sometimes used colorful language to make a point. These people weren't blowing trumpets. Although, they were so obvious in their giving that they might as well have. The point: Don't announce your giving. Don't tell people you're doing it if you can avoid it.

Jesus says that people who do this are **hypocrites**. The word that is used here is a Greek word for actor. An actor is a person who plays other people on the stage. For professional actors on a stage, that's fine. For people who want to be followers of Jesus, it's a very bad idea. Jesus will use the word hypocrite many times as we work our way through Matthew. Believe me, it's never a compliment.

Jesus says these people do this to be honored by others. Sometimes, they are successful in that. That's a shame, because in that case, that earthly honor is all they get. They have received their reward in full. No more.

What should we do instead? What is the best practice to help us to give with good motives? How can we avoid being a hypocrite?

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. (Matthew 6:3-4)

Is it possible to avoid having one hand know what the other is doing? No. Once again, we're seeing colorful language. It makes the point well, doesn't it? You can't be more secret than to keep your hands in the dark from each other. The point: Do everything you can to give in secret, in private.

What happens when you do that? Your Father sees. God can see everything. There is nothing hidden from his eyes. When he sees, he will reward you. This takes something called **faith**. You must believe that God is capable of seeing all things. You must believe that he will reward those who obey him.

So, when we apply this best practice, privacy, to giving, it helps us in at least two ways.

1) It helps our motives. In this way it helps us to have pure hearts. We do things to please God, not others around us. 2) Next, it also helps our faith to grow. We rely upon God's ability to see the things we do in secret.

Let's look at an example in the Scriptures of someone who did this. This is a story from the book of Acts, where the apostles of Jesus travelled around the Roman empire sharing their faith and starting the first churches.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision.

He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" 4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. (Acts 10:1-4)

Here is the man name Cornelius. He was a Roman. He was an important officer in the Roman army. And yet, he and his family had come to faith in the God of Israel. So, he prayed and gave to the needy. One day, he is visited by an angel who tells him that God heard his prayers and saw his gifts. Those gifts are a "memorial offering before God".

So, God does see when we help those in need. It's not important that anyone else saw: God saw. And God rewarded Cornelius. He was told to call the Apostle Peter who came and shared the Christian faith with him.

As we said earlier, this is how things looked in the days of Jesus. The story of Cornelius took place in the days of the early church. What does this look like today?

Giving Today.

Today, we encourage followers of Jesus to give in three ways.

First, we give to the church. We need to pay the bills and keep our building running. We need to modernize old things. This all happens with the gifts of God's people.

Next, we give to special ministries that spread God's word. You can give to support a missionary or you can give to a group like the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Finally, you can give to the poor. You can do that personally if you know someone in need. Or, you can give to ministries that help the needy in the name of Jesus. There are groups like Samaritan's purse - That's an offshoot from the Billy Graham Association. They do everything from medical missions to helping starving people around the world. In our area, we have some local things like the local crisis pregnancy center. If a woman is pregnant and doesn't know where to go, she can get all kinds of help at places like this.

There are groups that allow you to focus on individual needs. One group I like is Compassion International. They let you sponsor a poor child somewhere around the world. You give a small gift every month, and it goes to one child. Your money helps the child to be fed and to receive an education.

I like these groups in particular, because when they help people, they tell the people that they're getting a gift in the name of Jesus. So, as we're told, the people receiving the gifts can glorify God because of your generosity.

In every case, it's possible to give in secret. If you give at our church, we have envelopes so you can hide what you're giving. For a long time, we passed around plates during an offering time. Recently, we've returned to a box at the back of the worship hall. You can put your money in an envelope and drop it in when no one's looking. If someone is looking, and your money is in an envelope, no one knows how much you're giving. Or, you can mail your envelope in during the week.

In America, contributions are tax-deductible, so someone needs to see the check. Be assured that those people in our church are sworn to secrecy. They don't advertise what you give. They don't even tell me what people are giving.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, this week, we've begun to learn about best practices for followers of Jesus. One overriding best practice is privacy.

Today, we've seen the best practice of privacy applied to charity - Giving to the needy. We learned that we need to take strict steps to avoid being showy. We try to avoid announcing our giving. If it were possible to have our left hand be ignorant of what the right was doing, we would do it. If we do this, we can learn to have pure motives. There's nothing wrong with working towards a reward, but we want the reward to be the smile of our heavenly Father. We want to be like him. We want to know him. We want to enjoy him and spend eternity with him. If we put into place these best practices, we will be well on the way to doing these things.

May God bless us as we seek to serve him in the best way possible.