

# Secrecy Gives it Power

*By Bobby Schuller*

Well today I have been sitting on this sermon for awhile. I preach this theme maybe once a year. We're not in any kind of series, it's just like something I couldn't wait to preach to everyone. And today I'm going to talk about this old idea which is a Jewish one, the idea of secrecy. The power of practicing our good works in secret so that we can test and approve that what we're doing is for God's approval and not for man's.

I want to warn you that this is not a type of legalism or new rule, but something you ought to do from time to time in order to sort of train yourself. That very often, most often our good works are out in the open for people to see, and the bad stuff, the vices, the things we don't want people to know, they're hidden. And there is this wisdom that if we can begin to do more of the bad stuff visibly and begin to do as Martin Luther said, 'if you're going to sin, sin boldly!' Don't hide it! Don't sin, but this idea that we don't do it in secret, so that if you're able to do more of your sinning visibly, before you stop doing it altogether, and if you're also allow.. and this is even cooler, a lot of your good works, whether its generosity or helping your neighbor, or saying good about others, that you do that stuff secretly. And that very often what happens that as you begin to do more good in secret, it sort of brings balance to the soul and can give you freedom to be vulnerable about your weaknesses, your

doubts, your addictions, your shortcomings, and then you can be vulnerable.

So we're going to talk about that in length. We're going to talk about wolves in sheep's clothing, but we're also going to talk about sheep in wolves clothing. There's a few of those out there. Let me explain what I mean by that. I went to Oral Roberts University, and I get asked all the time 'how did you end up at Oral Roberts.' I came up from a Reformed background and moved to Oklahoma and went to a Pentecostal Christian school. And the answer is I had moved to Oklahoma before when I was 15, and my sister was attending there. And as a new believer, I found ORU to be an incredible place to grow in my faith and worship.

They had this cool thing every Sunday night, they called it Vespers, and then later they called it, I think, Campus Church. And they would gather and it was in a style that I would call, I almost want to call like southern black gospel style where they would worship for four or five hours, but it wasn't fixed. It was like they would start around seven/eight-ish, and they would end sometime between eleven and one in the morning, and people would sort of come and go as they pleased. Sometimes people would stay the whole time, some would come at the end, some would come before. There wasn't a lot of preaching, it was mostly worship. And we'd have as many as four hundred or five hundred people there worshipping.

We had a guild with musicians; there had to be over a hundred of us that were there in the mix, and sometimes people would come up. There was nothing planned, there were no planned songs. People would come and sort of as the spirit led they would worship. And just frankly as a 17-year-old high schooler visiting and worshipping in that space with my sister, I just thought to myself I want to be with these kinds of people. And being young, I want to be around people that worship God the way David worshipped God. There was a sort of nakedness to their worship, do you know what I mean by that in the way that David: undignified, as the scripture says, way of worshipping where you're sort of bleeding, dying, weeping before the Lord. And I loved that passion of how these people would worship God. And I will tell you that that was the greatest reason why I picked Oral Roberts University. It wasn't about theology or doctrine it was about how much these people loved the Lord.

So I went to ORU and to be honest, going there I became sad and at some points even, forgive me for being dramatic, but disillusioned with how many of the folks that I thought were these incredibly deep, spiritual people, really were still quite immature and even shallow. And how some of the people I thought were the bad guys or they were sitting in the back or not participatory or whatever, I would find out very often that they were the ones who are actually deep. It was interesting as a young man to be in a Christian university and find out very quickly that the people you think are these spiritual giants when you're going through hardship

or difficulty, or when you need loyalty or a friend, or when you're kind of hard to be around, they were nowhere to be seen. But the reverse, the people that you think wouldn't stick around, or the people that you think wouldn't care, were often times the first to show up to give you a hug, to understand, to pray with you.

And that wasn't always the case. There were just many cases in which you would find out that some of the sheep were actually wolves, and some of the wolves were actually sheep. And I found out in life, in religious life in particular, that in churches and religious gatherings, you have sort of the folks that are, as Jesus said, wolves in sheep's clothing. And then you actually have sheep that are in wolves clothing. You actually have people who are really rough around the edges. They love Jesus but maybe they cuss a little. You know? Maybe they drive a little faster than they should. Maybe you look at them and you think this person can't be a Christian. You find out very often sometimes those people have the deepest faith.

And I'm not lauding cussing, for example, or anything like that, but simply saying that as believers, there is a huge temptation to look spiritual while being dead on the inside. To look religious while having doubts, fears, addictions, things we're not supposed to think about, things we're not supposed to feel.

And then you got these other people who are just like are they even believers? And you just find out how much they love the Lord.

I'll never forget when Hannah's dad talking about when he was healed of his leg. His leg was much shorter than the other, and he used to have people that would pray for his leg, and they'd say oh God's going to heal you, and they'd pace back and forth, and they prayed these big grandiose prayers, and they'd even like tug on his leg. And believe it or not, he got so annoyed.

And then finally one day he was at this gathering of this guy named Tom Moe, who at the time the guy was.. we actually just met him, a wonderful man, but he described him as being kind of this overweight guy who would light up a cigarette, and begin preaching as he's smoking. And in the middle of a sermon said, 'I feel that someone here has a leg that is shorter than the other and I'm supposed to pray for them. Is there anyone here like that?' And Richard, Hannah's dad was that guy, but he didn't want to raise his hand, he was so sick of people praying for his short leg. And then finally, here's Tom, he's like come on, where are you? You know, this kind of thing. And finally he goes and prays for him and before he says anything, just as he touches him, his leg comes out. He doesn't pray an elaborate prayer, just prays something very simple and the guy is healed.

And this is what I'm talking about. That you find out very quickly in the kingdom of God that you just never know is really what I'm saying. It's not that people that are spiritual on the outside are dead on the inside, or people that smoke a lot are somehow miracle workers, it's just

that there's thing in life that we need to stop living for the approval of man and seek the kingdom of God, despite what people think; to search after it with all our hearts and to not worry about being a little rough around the edges. We got some rough around the edges folks in this church, don't we? I'm very proud of that.

You say how can you be proud of that? Well I just don't want our church to be that refined. I want to have a church of real people. I'm not that refined. I mean I wear a suit, but you should see me on Monday's. It's not good.

I remember and you guys know, I've always been a touch rough around the edges, even in my preaching. I try and do that from up here so that I'm not seen as too holy, and I do that on purpose. And it's in large part because of this experience at ORU. I want to be a man who truly is after God's heart, not just be seen as someone who's after God's heart.

I remember when Rich Watts, a good friend of our family, he and I were hunting together, and this is when I was young. I was only 23. And I was going to come and work with a college group at the Crystal Cathedral, and so I hadn't quite started ministry yet but I was just getting into it. And Rich really liked this roughness that I had, this rogue-ness I have in my personality. And I was pretty young, 22/23, I still had braces, and I was like "Rich, I'm going into the ministry." And I was very, very excited. And I remember, he said something like never lose

the pokey bits about your personality. Never sand those down. Never lose the rough edges that you have. It'll be good for your soul.

And for me, that was something I was already living and something I was already trying to do, and it was a Rosetta Stone moment for me because here was someone I really looked up to that was validating what I felt like I was supposed to be as a leader.

There is a bondage especially when we're in leadership, when we try to live for the applause of others, the approval of others, to be seen as spiritual, to be seen as some great person. And there's a bondage that happens that takes away our freedom to lead appropriately, to be brave in our decisions, and to be in the front churning a path through difficult places.

We all wear masks, don't we? Look there's nothing wrong with wearing a mask and you've got to wear a mask most of the time. That's okay. If you're a doctor, wear the mask. You can't be like when somebody comes in, be like 'oh my goodness, gross, that's horrible!' You have to be like 'we can treat this.' You can't just be vulnerable all the time.

If you're like an attorney and you're representing someone and you're in the courtroom and your client is like hey Bob, how are you? You can't be like 'my marriage it's just so bad I just don't know what I'm going to do.' Right? You can't be that way. You have to wear a mask most of the time, professionally. We have uniforms, we have decorum, we have things we do and that's okay. But there are times where we take the

mask off and we always should do that with the Lord. God doesn't even see our masks. God sees us like mom sees us when we go home for Thanksgiving.

I have to think about this, like you think about some high power guy, some big wig attorney or judge, or some big CEO or chairman of the board, and you imagine this man in his suit in New York. Respected. He has a magazine article about him. When he walks into his building, people stand at attention and guide him to the special elevator that takes him to the top of the building. And people are dignified. And then he goes home and his mom's like hey baby! Right? And he comes in, he has all this respect and then mom comes over and begins kissing him on the cheek in a way that's both nice but annoying and asks how he's doing, and how are the kids, and all of a sudden this big wig attorney or CEO is in the back cleaning up poop or taking out the trash and getting a noogy from his brother.

This is the thing about family, right? This is people who truly know us. These people who truly love us. Moms and brothers, when you go home for Thanksgiving, some do care about that kind of thing, but most of us we know, like your moms just your mom. Your grandma's just your grandma.

And the thing is, in the same way, when we come home to the Lord, we do need to learn to take those masks off. God doesn't care about that. He just doesn't care about that stuff. He cares about you! He

loves you just as you are without your achievements and all your trophies and titles, and all this legacy stuff. He cares about you. He loves you just as you are, not as you should be. That is the good news of the gospel of grace. Good news of God's enduring love for us.

There's a secret us. There are like this secret us that is hidden, that remains hidden. There's like layers of it, isn't there? I mean there's like our clients see the full masked version of us. And then our friends see a little bit more secret us. And then our family sees the really secret us. But then there are certain things in the soul that nobody knows, that sometimes we can't even articulate, and God sees that part. It includes our fears, our doubts, our vices, all the stuff in our unconscious, all the stuff that we're embarrassed or ashamed about, and God just looks at that and says I love you. I'm proud of you. You are my daughter, you are my son. I have a plan for your life. I'm going to get you where you need to go. You're forgiven, you're called. And isn't that great news? That's the gospel. My prayer is that every pastor is preaching that this morning, and many do.

But in order to live into the fullness of your calling, and you do have a calling, and to lean into the fullness of your leadership, and you are called to be a leader, you have to go through this painful experience of becoming more robust, more un-offendable, letting go of the need for applause, approval, and release that to the Lord, and to do merely what

is right, not only in public, but most of all, in secret because what we do in secret has more power, and I'll get to that in just a bit.

And so we get to the point of the sermon. And the point of the sermon is to practice, not a legalism; you don't do this all the time, but a spiritual discipline of secrecy. That we try to, maybe as an annual discipline or a monthly, we try to do something in our life that is good for our neighbor, or good for our walk with God like a retreat or something, and you do it secretly. Nobody knows about it, you take it to your grave, not your spouse, not your best friend. You don't accidentally let the cat out of the bag. You certainly don't post it on Instagram, but there's this thing you keep hidden and it's very good. It's a great discipline. And of course we get this from Jesus Himself, the rabbi.

Now we're about to read from the Sermon on the Mount. As many of you know, I love the Sermon on the Mount, and I went through a season where I was studying it in depth, memorized it, and the very first thing I noticed from the Sermon on the Mount was how often Jesus talked about reward. It's like the word that stands out the most in the Sermon on the Mount: reward, reward, reward, reward. Don't do this you'll lose a reward. Do this and you'll attain a great reward. And you see through Jesus' teachings, this whole thing about reward. The kingdom of God is like a man who sold everything he had to buy this little plot of land because he knew that there was a treasure hidden on it. He just goes on and on, but the power of this great reward that's available to us.

And what Jesus is teaching here about secrecy is not unique to Jesus but is an old Jewish idea, this idea of practicing what you do in secret. Okay, so let's read together. "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them." Okay, so remember He doesn't say don't do it, He just says be careful, right? "If you do, you will have" .. everybody.. "no" what? There's no reward. "From your Father in heaven. 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" what? "Reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be done in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will" what? "Reward you. 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 others. Truly I tell you they have received their" what? "Reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room and close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will" do what? "Reward you." What's the reward for a secret prayer? It's an answered prayer. Are you praying because you need an answer to your prayer, or are you praying because you need approval of others?

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Don't be like

them for your Father knows what you need even before you ask Him.”

Now just some reflection on this, this is a very Jewish way of looking at what we do in terms of goodness. The Jews actually taught that our good works, our alms giving should be done, in a way, discreetly. And again, I just want to propose something – this is not necessarily the right view of the scripture. This is my opinion. This is what I think about the Jewishness of the scripture. Typically this is taught that to do good publicly for the approval of others is evil, and to do good secretly is righteous. But I want to suggest that maybe that’s not true. That rather doing good for the approval of others is immature, and lacks the same reward even though there is a reward in it, as giving secretly.

And by the way, it’s not a legalism. There’s plenty of times we’ve done it in this service where I’ve gotten up here and prayed in front of you, right? Jesus does this all the time. Jesus prays in front of others, right? But what’s the difference? He’s not doing it to be seen by them. There’s lots of times where Jesus gives in public but He’s not doing it to be seen by them. We’ve had people in this church who have given publicly and I know that these are not people who are doing it to be seen by them. These are people, very often, some of the people who give or pray in public, they do so privately, anonymously as well. And so at the heart of it is the heart. And anyway, it’s not evil. Is that confusing?

Let me give you an idea of this. This Jewish way even today of teaching about goodness is that if you do something good for the

approval of others, it's still good. It's just not as good and as rewarding as doing it in secret. In the west we have this idea that you should only do good for goodness sake. That you shouldn't do it for award or to avoid punishment. But that idea frankly is not Jewish or scriptural at all. Jesus talks a lot about doing good to avoid punishment, and to attain reward, over and over and over.

The reason I think this is important is especially when we're teaching young people who want to live a rewarding life, that the goal of doing what is right is in order to retain a great reward. And the decision to do what is right is also to avoid a great demise. Do you agree with that? I once heard Dennis Prager, who is Jewish; I think he actually might even be a rabbi, say this overtly. He said 'if you want to give to put your name on the side of a hospital and you want people to applaud,' he's like 'just do it! It's still good! It's just not as good as, you know, giving in secret.'

Actually Maimonides the Ram Bam who actually created a list of eight ways that you could give and care for others that are in ascending goodness. And at the very bottom of the list, number eight on the list is when donations are given grudgingly. Now notice Maimonides doesn't say it's bad to give donations grudgingly, he's just saying it's the least good but it's still pretty good. This is like when you don't want to give and your wife is like you need to give them something. Like fine! I'll give them

something. Get off my case! Even though the intent is bad, in a way, and its public and whatever, it's still considered good.

And this is why I love Judaism so much. It's so clear. Is like good intentions that lead to harm are still evil. That's a very Jewish thing to say. If you create a policy, for example, that you want to help people and it harms people, it's still evil. It's not as evil as wanting to harm people but it's still bad. And if you do good for others begrudgingly, but you still do it, it's still good because you helped others.

I know this seems like I'm preaching the opposite of what Jesus is saying but I'm not. I want you to see that Jesus might be preaching into a culture that teaches this, believes this, and that He Himself may believe it, as well. Notice how He doesn't say those who give in front of others in order to be seen by them have done evil, or have sinned against God, but rather He says they what? Received their reward in full. Their reward is what? The respect, the dignity, the applause and the acclaim of others. But, there is a greater reward available to those who are able to give, not in order to be seen by others, but to just attain a greater reward, one that comes from God. Are you tracking with me?

All of this to merely say that I don't think giving, first of all, I've given in public, I've prayed in public, but if we give in public in order for the applause of others, or if we pray in public for the applause of others, it's not evil, it's just dumb. I think that's what Jesus is saying. I might be wrong, but it's dumb because we are forgetting that if we are praying to

honor God, there is this great reward, but if we forget about that, we lose that reward, and that reward is good. That reward is tremendous. It's amazing. Its everything you want.

Let me ask you, what do you want in life? That's a simple question, isn't it? If you and I were sitting at a lake together, friend, and we were staring at the lake and you were being pensive, and I looked at you and said, what do you want in life? Would you say money? Maybe. Would you say glory? Maybe. I think what you would say if you really took enough time to think about it is something like I want to live a life that matters. I want to belong. Or I want my friends or my family members to be well and happy. And can I tell you that this is, I believe, the reward of the kingdom of God. This is the reward. That you can't live to please others and still live to your fullest potential, and boy do you have some great potential. You can't live to please others, and still be full of joy and happiness. You have to have boundaries, you have to say no sometimes, and you can't be seen as spiritual all the time because all of us go through despair. All of us have broken hearts from time to time. All of us weep. All of us suffer. All of us get caught up in things we didn't need to get caught up in. And if our need is for the applause of others, or to be approved by men, we miss out on the reward of Christ' likeness because we pretend to be somebody we're not when we're dying on the inside. And this is why secrecy is such a gift.

Secrecy, something that has a bad connotation. When you say if they're so secret or secretive. That's pejorative, isn't it. But what if their secret-ness was like they're secretly good.

This is Bobby Schuller philosophy, but I want to propose to you that anything that is done in secret always has more power. If you do good in secret, the good that you've done will have more spiritual power than if you'd done it publicly. Although both are good. And if you do evil in secret, its worse than if you would have done evil in public. Can we agree on that? And will have greater consequences for the harm of others.

Therefore, to discipline our soul into Christ' likeness, we want to become more vulnerable about our sins, mistakes, flaws and failures, and more secretive about our goodness. That's weird, isn't it. All this to simply say that every time you do something in secret, it's as though you're putting a seed in the ground. When you do something good, it's like you've planted a good seed in your life. You do something evil in secret, it's like you're planning evil in your life. And the only way to uproot it is to become public about it.

So first, the spiritual discipline of secrecy, which is not a Bobby Schuller thing, it's an ancient monastic thing, is this idea that you do something really great for someone, and you keep it a secret. A big gift, or you serve someone, or volunteer somewhere, and you don't tell anyone and you take it to your grave. Has anybody here done that? That's a joke!

Don't raise your hand! Almost got you! Almost got you! Oh! Woo! That's it, man. And I've taught on this before, but you do something really tremendous for someone, or a little something, and you just keep it a secret, and then pay attention to your soul about your desire of how you kind of want somebody to accidentally find out. Let that go. It's like you bring it in balance where you have more good in secret and less bad in secret.

And so that's the second thing is as you begin to move some of, not everything, but some of the good things in your life, your prayer life, your giving into a secret place, also become more vulnerable where you begin to be honest with your close friends, or whatever, with somebody you trust, one or two people about your doubts, your fears, weep with someone and allow that part of your life, and you watch as that frees you, in many ways, as a discipline and allows you to pursue the reward giver who is the Lord and to pursue the great reward that He has.

God sees all of that and He just loves you so much. I want you to know that despite your mistakes, we've all made them, my mistakes, whatever, God doesn't take away our destiny, He doesn't take away our purpose and calling, He just continually is merciful, continually is forgiving, continually is loving, and any heart that no matter how fallen or how wrapped up in vice or addiction or anything else, is Lord but still I desire you and your kingdom. God loves that person. God turns His

mind and His face and His heart towards that person and receives them with joy.

And I want you to know that the things in the kingdom of God take time. God's not as overnight, over the counter as we think He is. It takes time for you to grow into the confident, powerful, warrior for God that you're called to be. I'm so proud of you and God's proud of you, too.

Let's pray: Father, we love you, and we thank you that you see our secret lives and you still love us. You've seen all the mistakes that we've made, all the ways we've disappointed others, all the things that we've missed, all the stuff we wish we had done in our lives that we haven't, and you just say I'm proud of you. I love you. You belong to me. And that's the voice of the Lord. We just thank you, Lord, for that and we love you and it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.