

“Choose the Rewards of God”

Matthew 6:1-18

The Sermon on the mountainside is one unit, beginning at 5:3 and finishing at 7:27. The chapter and verse divisions were not original when the text was written but are there to help us break it up in more manageable chunks and find specific verses more quickly. Chapter divisions and headings sometimes disconnect us from what was just said, even if, as Jesus has shifted from ‘You heard it was said/I say to you’ to more specific teaching on three very common spiritual practices, giving, prayer and fasting.

But the connection is very clear when you go back to the end of Ch. 5 where Jesus was telling us to love our enemies and pray for them. Because if we only fellowship with our family or the same small group of friends ‘what reward will you get’? God’s reward vs. human reward becomes the predominant theme in Ch. 6. God wants to bless us and reward us for how we live our lives for Him as we obey His Word.

Jesus also just said in 5:48 ‘*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.*’ God is completely mature and so we must strive to be more spiritually mature each day. But what does that look like? Again, the Pharisees gave the impression that they were more mature than the ordinary Jew who obviously[!] wasn’t blessed of God because of physical, economical or social shortcomings. But Jesus hasn’t changed the theme of His teaching; there’s the Pharisee way of doing things to impress people and then there’s God’s way of doing things that impress Him. So, 6:1 is a warning:

“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.”

The word for ‘be careful’ means beware, be on your guard against error and act appropriately. Jesus was warning His people to watch out for wrong ways of worshipping and serving God and change the way you exercise spiritual disciplines so that God is glorified. V.1 acts as the header and so vv.1-18 is Jesus’ warning for all His people,

Don’t Try to Impress People with Your ‘Spirituality’, Live to Please God (6:1)

There are three specific examples Jesus cites that the Pharisees had practiced more for people than God. Giving to the poor (alms) in vv.1-4, prayer in vv.5-15 and fasting in vv.16-18. Each of the three begins the same way:

‘When you give to the needy ...when you pray ... when you fast.’ ... don’t be like the hypocrites

- who announce with trumpets when they are going to give to the poor *“to be honoured by men”* (v.2),
- who pray standing in the synagogues or the street corners to be seen by men (v.5)
- who fast with somber and disfigured faces to let people know ‘we’re fasting’ (v.16)

The word hypocrite in Jesus’ day referred to an actor on a stage. The actors would often wear a mask to hide who they were. So the word means to possess belief in something but doesn’t actually hold to it and so conceals their true feelings or motives. Again notice Jesus says the same thing for all

three when people only give, pray or fast to be seen by men; *“Truly they have their reward in full.”* What did He mean?

Acting receives an actors’ reward (vv.2, 5, 16)

An actor acts so as to receive the applause of the crowd. If we do our service for God so that people see us and applaud, then Jesus says that’s your reward, the applause of men but not the approval of God. Don’t expect any rewards from God for superficial, people-pleasing ministry. God sees it’s an act and is not impressed. God knows our motives. He knows our hearts. He knows when we our efforts are minimal so that people might think we did something with great God-glorifying intentions but we didn’t fool Him.

How did they actually give, pray and fast for people’s approval? In Israel, especially in Jerusalem, the trumpet was blown from the temple to announce special times. Especially times of prayer or for special times of year when it was expected (like Tabernacles) to give extra or when one of Israel’s many fast days was announced. For example, a well-to-do shopkeeper, knowing the trumpet was going to blow at a certain time of the week, might wait for the trumpet to call, close up shop in the middle of the day and go to the temple and give his gift. People would naturally be impressed that he would close his business to remember the poor but he did it for the very reason that people would notice.

Prayer was expected 3 times a day in Israel. It was not uncommon for a religious leader to stand in a public place like the street and pray facing the temple or Jerusalem where everyone could see him rather than go to the temple or synagogue and pray. Again, people would be impressed by their spirituality, meanwhile God sees through the charade.

And when people fasted the religious leaders would often rent their garments and spread ash on their heads and faces to show people they were remorseful about their sins. Yet again, God saw through it. It is dangerous and unrewarding and a sign of spiritual imperfectness (immaturity) that we serve God with the intention that people notice us and commend us for our maturity – even though its not true.

But godliness receives God’s rewards (v.4, 6, 18)

Jesus practices what He preaches. He ‘warns’ us about man-pleasing spirituality, points out what it is but then tells us what godliness looks like, what God-pleasing spiritual exercises look like. When we do these things, God will reward us. Each of the three ends with the exact same statement from Jesus:

“And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (vv.4, 6, 18)

Not only does God want to bless us but He wants to reward us. The New Testament gives very little information about what those rewards are. In some places we read about crowns we might earn. Jesus tells us through parables that some of us will be given greater responsibilities in the Kingdom age when Jesus returns because we lived believing He would return. I think God intentionally leaves the rewards somewhat vague so that they don’t become our focus but He tells us enough to encourage us to live for them. They are eternal and they will last forever so how we live now makes a difference for all eternity.

We serve to please God trusting that whatever rewards He wants to give us will be wonderful beyond what we can find here on earth. God is far more satisfying than anything earth has to offer (and not surprisingly, that’s the next subject in 6:19).

That's the overview of the passage. A warning against man-pleasing spirituality and the promise of rewards for God-pleasing obedience. So let's look at this more closely. How should we serve God in the expected disciplines, in our ministries and in our personal devotions?

Serve God and People Without 'Advertising' **(6:3-4, 6-7, 17-18)**

Even though many of the things we do in serving God are public and people see what we do, Jesus says don't advertise or slyly make sure people are noticing – because if we're doing that then we're not doing it for God. On the other hand, don't go to the extreme where you never do anything so people won't see you because at some point you'll be disobeying God because you're actually refusing to use a gift He has given you to build up the body. So how do we avoid the temptation to make God's gift about us?

Honour God for people and their gifts (vv.2, 16)

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for seeking the honour of men, the 'well-done' of the people. They didn't have to make a show of their giving or praying or fasting. They could have just quietly given when they went to the temple or synagogue when everyone else did. Even if they were called upon to lead prayer in the synagogue or they practised prayer at the appointed times, didn't mean they had to do it so as to be seen by people. And fasting should be almost unnoticeable by anyone else except maybe your family.

If people notice your ministry or God's gifts and want to encourage you by way of compliment (because we are commanded to encourage one another daily so that we will not be hardened by sins' deceitfulness – Heb. 3:13) then just say 'Praise the Lord He gifted me to serve Him' or 'thank you, I just enjoy serving God through the gifts He gave me.' Don't belittle God who gifted you by false humility 'Oh, I'm a nobody' or 'I can't believe I got that right' or 'You should have heard all the mistakes I made.' All those are about us, not God. Just simply thank people and praise God.

Jesus spends more time on prayer than the others here. Everyone can pray. There are no social or economical divisions for who can pray. So everyone might be tempted to pray to be heard by people and not by God. And especially when we are praying in public we can sometimes get the two mixed up unintentionally.

One of the temptations we struggle with when it comes to public prayer, so that people notice us, is to use prayer as a source of relaying information we alone are privy to that shouldn't be shared. So

Let's avoid using prayer as gossip (vv.5-6)

Because, like the Pharisees we're using prayer to be noticed by people not God. We're using prayer to make us the attention and not that person or God. But shouldn't more people be aware so that we can pray? Where in the Bible does it say the more people who pray the better chance God will hear it? James 5:16 says

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Then he goes on to illustrate that through Elijah, a man even as we are. 'But didn't Jesus Himself say *'Where two or three are gathered there I am with you?'* some might ask (Matt. 18:20). We

love to quote that verse as if its about prayer but its actually about church discipline. Where two or three witnesses agree that a brother/sister needs to be approached about sin in their life, Jesus is there with us to lovingly confront them.

The reason why we ask more people to pray for a need is so that when God answers more of us can glorify God for the answer. Jesus says don't use prayer as a way to make ourselves the attention. Sometimes we do it through lengthy praying in a group setting, where we're taking turns praying and someone takes the whole list of requests and prays them all. And the reason why some people don't pray in public, I'm sure is because a) they find it hard to do; and b) they are still learning to pray and don't know what to say. I can remember as a young Christian being intimidated to pray in a group because someone prayed on and on, or their prayer was full of Thees and Thous and God's name was said in every other word. And I would be listening and hoping that the one or two things I was going to choose to pray for wasn't prayed for yet. Because now what am I going to say since that person prayed everything over here? Let's do something radical this morning,

Let's learn to pray Jesus' way (vv.7-15)

The first thing Jesus says about prayer is don't babble on and on like pagans who think they will be heard by their many words. Jesus says that kind of praying is a sign of unbelief because you've bought into the pagan idea that God only hears you if you keep telling Him over and over again. There's nothing wrong with praying a long time if you're by yourself in your 'closet' (your home) in your personal time with God. We should be praying longer by ourselves than when we're praying in public. What is the Jesus' way of praying? Now He gives us a model for **how** to pray (not a prayer to babble over and over as if saying the Lord's prayer is the magic key to getting God to hear us. Here's 3 things we can learn about prayer from Jesus' model:

Less is more (vv.7-8)

Have you ever noticed how short this is? It's less than 60 words. It takes less than 30 seconds to read it at a moderate pace. But it is a good memorization tool to give us a framework to know what God wants to hear us pray for. What does God want us to pray for?

Focus on God's work (vv.9-11)

What is God's primary work or what is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Everything we do is to glorify God. If we know Jesus Christ as our Saviour He is our Father, we have that relationship with Him. As His children we can come to Him any time and He listens to us. We don't need to impress Him with our many words. He already knows what we need, what He wants to know is do we know what God wants? He wants us to make His Name holy; to live in such a way that we and others find out who He is; the only true God who is distinct from all of us. He's not from earth. He's in heaven. He's eternal. He's everywhere and sees everything and knows everything. The most repeated prayer request in the New Testament is for spiritual growth, which is the work of God in us.

He wants to bring His rule to earth. He wants to pray for His ultimate rule to come to earth, praying for Jesus' return. That means we should be looking forward to Jesus' return more than our own personal pleasures here. He also wants Jesus' rule to come to the hearts and lives of individuals through salvation. He also wants His people to do His will on earth. To obey His Word. Some people say 'we love the Lord's prayer' but they love saying it, not believing what it says. Praying for God to be glorified in our life, for Jesus' return, for salvation of souls and for God's people to obey the Word of God. That's the work of God. Jesus says pray for that.

Our needs get one line. *Give us today the food we need for today.* That's a prayer for contentment. For many in Jesus' day they lived day to day. We who could probably go a while month without having to buy groceries need to pray that we would be content with how God meets our needs for today and not be worried about tomorrow. The reason why we know this is what He means is because that's what the rest of Ch. 6 is all about.

The rest of the Lord's prayer Jesus says is to be

Mindful about our sins

How many years have we recited the Lord's prayer being totally oblivious to the fact that half of it is about our sins?

Forgive us our sins – which means we have to identify them, think about them.

As we forgive others their sins against us. Have we? Do we have any grudges or bitterness in our life?

And lead us not into temptation – temptation to do what? SIN! Lord, help me not to sin more.

But deliver us from the Evil One – why? Because he wants to lead us into sin. And then He goes on to explain that if we don't forgive others' their sins how do we expect God to show us grace and forgiveness?

Since we all have the Lord's prayer memorized do we spend half of our time in prayer about confessing sins and forgiving sins and praying we won't sin? Do you see how we've numbed ourselves through familiarity and repetition thinking that by reciting the Lord's prayer we've actually prayed? If Jesus meant for us to recite this over and over why did he word it differently in Luke? Why did Paul never mention it any of His writings? Nor John, nor Peter or James or Jude? Jesus spoke about how to pray because the religious leaders' example of praying [long, for show and to impress people] had become the standard for prayer. Jesus says it doesn't have to be long, it needs to be God-focused, content in what God has done for us and deal seriously with sin in our life.

In all three of these disciplines – giving, praying and fasting – Jesus ended the same way; do these things quietly

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Live Knowing God Sees You **(6:3-4, 6, 8, 15, 18)**

God sees what we do. He will reward us appropriately for the ways we serve Him. He knows our hearts and our motives for when we serve Him half-heartedly or selfishly. Let's make sure that's not our problem. Our problem, I believe is more the opposite. God has gifted all of us to bring Him glory and so we need to be working on doing the very things Jesus told us to pray about.

Let's ask yourself some good questions:

- what did I do this week that brought God glory? If this is my whole purpose in life as a believer how did I seek to live that out this past week?
- did I pray for God's rule to come into people's lives? For the unsaved to hear the gospel? Did we pray for ourselves and each other to obey God's will as He teaches us in His Word?

- were we content with how God met our needs this week or did we grumble about what we don't have or didn't get to do?
- did we spend any time praying about our sins? Asking forgiveness, extending forgiveness and praying that we would not succumb to temptation and be delivered from the evil one?

God wants to reward us, Jesus tells us here. He rewards us for the things we even do for Him secretly and privately. Nothing we do for God goes unnoticed. So, let's live for Him by faith *"because without faith it is impossible to please God and anyone who comes to Him must believe he exists and rewards those who earnestly seek Him"* (Heb. 11:6)

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