

For Father's Eyes Only

Matthew 6:1-21

Turn to Matthew 6. We're up to Matthew 6:1 in the Sermon on the Mount, and 6:1 is an important turning point in this Sermon. Up until the end of Matthew 5, Jesus has talked mostly about how his followers relate to *people*. Matt 6 is how we relate to *God*.

The first four beatitudes are about our relationship with God. The last five are more about our relationship with people. So Jesus stayed on our relationship with people for the rest of Matthew 5, and now in ch. 6 he moves back to our relationship with God.

And when Jesus spoke to his followers about how we relate to God, the first thing Jesus wants to know is: who do we hope is watching us? He starts with a warning: be careful. Jesus was afraid something would go wrong among his followers: we would care more about what people think than what our Father thinks.

How much does it matter to you and me, that people think we are good Christians? How far would we go to make sure people don't see what poor Christians we really are? How far will I go to make sure people don't find out how poor in spirit I really am?

And for Jesus, what is wrong with going down that path? What happens if we do the right thing, so that people will think we're good Christians? What trouble lies down that path? The answer: we will lose the Father's reward! We'll miss out on the Father's reward.

Be careful not to lose your reward – 6:1

*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.*

Our Father in heaven will reward us for our righteous actions. That's what normally happens, the way things ought to be. This text does not say how or when he will reward us, so we'll leave that alone. In his way and time, the Father rewards our right actions.

But if we're not careful, we'll lose this reward. That's what Jesus warns about. Here's how we lose it: we do the good things we do, so that *people* will see us and respect us.

POOF! The Father's reward is gone. *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.* And that, Jesus knows, would be a tragic loss.

Jesus next gives three examples of this, three different kinds of righteousness: alms (giving money to the poor), prayer, and fasting. But in each he's just explaining this same truth: do it for your Father, Jesus says, so you don't lose your reward.

By "righteous practice" Jesus means just about anything we would do because we are God's children. It would include everything in Matthew 5, as well as giving to the poor and praying and fasting. Now, let's look at Jesus ends this section, in vv19-21.

Where is your Treasure? Where is your reward? – 6:19-21

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Verses 1-2 said, Don't 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.

Verses 19-21 say, do not store up for yourselves rewards on earth, where they don't last. Store up for yourselves rewards with your Father in heaven, where they last. For where your rewards are, there your heart will be also.

We talked about motives last sermon. What motivates us to live in God's ways? There are several good reasons to obey the Lord. Wanting to imitate our Father in heaven is a good reason. We want to be like him, to do what he does. Here, wanting the Father's reward is also a good reason, our Father will repay us, and we want that.

The Sermon on the Mount ends with warnings, and Jesus has already mentioned hell three times. Jesus finds fear of final judgement an entirely acceptable reason to listen to him and follow his teaching. Jesus often warned his people about judgement. Here, in Matthew 6, we obey to receive the Father's reward.

Give to the Needy in Secret - Mt 6:2-4

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

Hypocrites did not actually announce their giving with trumpets. Jesus is having fun with his audience here, having them imagine this, because they had all seen people give money who certainly wanted others to notice.

Hypocrites are those whose words and actions don't fit each other. Their words tell us that they serve God, but their actions tell us they want something else. In Jesus' day, *hypocrite* was the word for "actor," and it was not really a bad word. But Jesus calls his people to be pure in heart, not to pretend, so being an actor isn't good.

Again, it's the reward. For Jesus, the question is *not*: what will the reward be? *Rather*: who will reward us? If we do our righteousness for our Father, our Father will reward us. If we do it for people, people will reward us.

All the way through this teaching, you can feel our Lord's urgency about not missing the Father's reward. That would be such a sad loss. Make sure you don't miss that. If we do our good things for people, their seeing us will be our reward. In a sense, it is the reward we chose, but we'd miss out.

Why do we do the things God has asked? Here, two choices. We do it to please God, or we do it to impress people. We're afraid of people finding out what bad children of the Father we really are.

So, give in secret. When you give, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. He does not tell us to stop giving until our reason is right. He tells how to give so that we'll more naturally be doing it for the Father's eyes only. And then the good thing will happen: the Father will reward us!

It is not wrong to give publicly, so that everyone knows. In Acts, the believers brought large gifts and gave them to the apostles. Sharing possessions was entirely open. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look more generous than they were, and that was a big problem. But believers still gave openly after that. Let's just guard our motives.

Pray to the Father in Secret - Matt 6:5-6

*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 people. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will repay you.*

The actors say they are praying to God, but when you watch them, it's clear that they are doing it for people. They are pretenders, actors, and you can see that from their praying. Their loss is that they have already gotten all the reward they will get.

Jesus exaggerates here. Again, in Acts we have several examples of public prayer. The Bible is full of open prayers. Jesus does not mean all prayer should happen in a room alone. He means, pray so God will hear, not so people will hear.

This is a chronic problem for me. A congregation needs to pray together, and one good way for that to happen is for one person to pray out loud, and the others pray along with their minds and hearts. It is good, and important.

But for the one leading prayer, like me, wanting to lead a group to God's throne wanders over into wanting the group to see how godly I am. I catch myself at this often enough. You have perhaps caught me at this too. It's not good. Let's be careful.

Jesus teaches more about prayer here, in vv7-15, but we will leave that for the next sermon. We'll talk about the Lord's Prayer then.

Let's talk about something else here that you may be wondering about. What happens when we do the right thing, we serve God's people, or we help someone, because we've decided to live that way, but we're not actually thinking about God. Does Jesus mean there is no reward unless we are actually thinking about God?

No, he does not mean that. At the end of Matt 25, Jesus talks to people who took care of him when he needy and in trouble, and to others who ignored him and did nothing for him. What is striking about that parable is that none of those people, either good or bad, were thinking about Jesus. They weren't thinking about doing anything for him.

Our motives can be pure and pleasing to God without us actually concentrating on God or on the Lord. Our mind is not that big. If we have a situation in front of us right now that demands our attention, we cannot be going into action and concentrating on God at the same time. We can have pure motives that please God without thinking of him directly.

Here's another one: Jesus said in Matt 5 that we should let our good works shine before people, so they would see us and glorify our Father. Here Jesus says do it all in secret. But in ch. 5, Jesus taught mostly about how we treat people. That is what makes us salt and light.

Here Jesus speaks about how we treat God: offering, prayer, fasting. That the world does not need to see those things. The world needs to see how we care for one another, and how we are merciful and peaceful toward everyone.

Fast so No One can Tell - Matt 6:16-18

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show people they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to people that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will repay you.*

This is the same as the rest: Jesus shows us two different ways to fast, one that makes people the audience, and the other that makes God the audience. Do it the way that makes God the audience, says Jesus, *so that you get Father's reward*. Don't miss that!

Pharisees did not think other Jews were taking the Scripture seriously, and the Pharisees wanted to be the ones who did that, and showed others what that looked like. That was good. We evangelicals also see ourselves as those who take the Scripture seriously, and who try live that out. But the danger is that we just make sure we *look* devout to others. When we do that, the Father looks away. Behaving to just *look* devout is useless to God and useless to others, and useless to ourselves.

I am not sure what to do about fasting. Jesus seems to assume his followers will fast. Jews had regular fasts. Prayer and fasting are mentioned a couple of times in Acts.

In the olden days, Dave the builder and I would fast one day a week. We did that for a two or three month stretch, a few different stretches like that. I would pick something to pray for on that day. I did not experience anything special from God, but that was not the purpose. The purpose I take it is to tell God we are urgent about our prayer.

Marilyn and I had four young children in those days. Marilyn told me once that on the days that I fasted, she tried to keep the children away from me. Hunger does put me in a desperate mood, no doubt about that. I thought I was doing well in managing this.

But when she said she kept our children away from me on those days, I quit. Four young children are enough work without a grumpy father sulking around. God didn't need that.

None of the letters to the church ever mention fasting. So, I take it that it was not a priority in NT church life, but it also is part of life in some churches. We could put other things in there that we do for our Father. Many of us have private practices that we do for our Father in heaven.

That is wonderful, perfect, he sees you and he will repay you, for sure. Jesus just says, make sure we're doing it for our Father and not for people, and he will reward you.

Don't store up for yourselves rewards on earth, where they don't last. Store up for yourselves rewards with your Father in heaven, where they last. For where your rewards are, that's where your heart will be.

My brothers and sisters, don't do too much introspective hunting for bad motives. Find ways to honour God that people can't see. That's what Jesus said to do.

And talk to your Father in heaven. Tell him that you want to seek *him* and *his* righteousness, that you want *his* name to be honoured. If you are worried about motives, turn that into prayer. The cure's not inside us. Look at the Father, ask the Father. Amen.

PRAYER: God our Father, the good news here is that you reward everything we do for you, and that it would be awful to miss that. And if we aim ourselves toward you, we will have reward in heaven, treasure in heaven. Father, lead us to live this way. Help us live this way. Send your Spirit so we will have our eyes on you, and act like it. And Father, you've already begun this in us. We have done the right thing, just because we're your children, many times! Thank you for freeing us so that we could live for you, thank you for freeing us with your Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To our Father in heaven, who is able to keep us from stumbling, and to bring us into his glorious presence, without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.