

Seeking the Father's Reward

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[0:00] Well, let me end my warm welcome to you all as well. And a big shout out to those people at home. I know it was a big camp and you're probably still tuning in, so that's great.

You can at least tune in. But good on you, those who have gone to the camp and stayed up till 5 a.m. and are still here today. Now, with that in mind, what I might do is I will just pause at two points in the sermon, give you a chance to just not wake up, but talk to the person next to you with a question or two.

Just to help. Not everyone needs it, but some might, so I thought I'd help things along. Well, if you have your Bibles, do keep it open to Matthew 6, and there should be an outline as well in the newsletter.

I wonder what each of you will do if there are no rewards in life. Would you even bother to get out of bed?

Some years ago, a supermodel famously claimed that she never gets out of bed for less than \$10,000. You might know her name. With the cost of living pressures, you know, she might need twice the amount now.

[1:18] Who knows? But what about us? What is your motivation for doing specific things in life? You know, it's not always about money, is it?

Sometimes the reward is simply to please someone or to have their approval. At other times, you're doing it to measure yourself, to see how good you might be compared to others.

But whatever it is, we need motivation, don't we? We need to see the benefit of what we're doing. Otherwise, why bother? Why do it at all?

Well, this week, we're going to look at what our motivation or reward should be when it comes to living for God's kingdom, which really is about living generally in life.

And Jesus gives us a clear statement right at the start in verse 1. He says, And then what follows are three examples to illustrate this principle.

[2:23] The example of giving, praying, and fasting. And Jesus has chosen them because these are common ways for people in his day to practice their righteousness.

As Steph has said already, verses 7 to 15 gives us a bit more of an elaboration on prayer, and we'll come back to that next week. Now, as we read through the examples, you'll see that there is actually a common pattern.

They all expand on verse 1 and show how we're not to do something righteous for others to see. Otherwise, there'll be no reward from God. Now, if you've been with us for the last few weeks, you will notice that Jesus has been teaching in the sermon a bit about righteousness.

So, chapter 5, verse 20, on the next slide, he said that our righteousness is to exceed the Pharisees in order for us to enter the kingdom. Remember also in the Beatitudes that Jesus said, chapter 5 and verse 6, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

So, Jesus is saying that righteousness is something worth pursuing. There is reward in hungering and thirsting after it. Jesus' point here, though, in this chapter, is that it shouldn't be done so as to be seen by others.

- [3:45] Not to say that everything has to be done in secret, although he does talk about that, but rather the principle, if you look at it, verse 1, is that we are not to do it in front of others to be seen by them.

It's all about our motivation, you see. Are you doing something just to be seen by others? If you had a choice, for example, would you choose to draw attention to your good deeds?

And if you do, then, is what you're really seeking the praise of others, rather than the good of that righteous act in the first place?

And three times, Jesus then reinforces this in verse 2, 5, and 16, and he says that if you practice your righteousness in front of others, then you have received your reward in full, and therefore, there's no more reward from the Father in heaven.

Now, I want to come back at the end to this idea or motivation for rewards, but first, let's delve into the examples to see what practicing righteousness in front of others might look like.

- [4:51] So, verse 2 is the first example on giving. 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 reward you.

So, begin to notice the consistent pattern in each example. Jesus starts by identifying an act of righteousness. Giving to the needy, that's a good thing, that's a virtuous thing.

But, it's been subverted by some with their selfish aim of wanting to be honored by others. Now, how do they go about doing this?

They have trumpets, trumpeting their good deeds in the streets and synagogues. Jesus says this is hypocritical because the person's real motive of wanting praise, that's really what they want, is masquerading as an act of generosity.

- [5:56] Right? And that's deceitful. That's hypocritical. So, in Jesus, what he commands is secrecy in giving, to the point of not letting your left hand or your right hand know what your left hand is doing.

Now, of course, he can't mean this literally, right? Your right brain talks to your left brain. So, your right hand will know what your left hand is doing. But, the point Jesus is making here is that if your desire to help the needy is genuine, then you wouldn't care if no one knew about it.

Almost as if your left hand didn't know that your right hand did it, that's fine. So, he's saying, try giving discreetly as a way of checking your motives.

And if you're reluctant to give unless people know about it, then what's your real motive for giving? Now, for us today, particularly at HTT, we don't pass the bag around at church, right?

So, nobody knows. But, how do we apply this then? Are we saying that even the church treasurer shouldn't know because we all give by EFT and, you know, our name appears on the statement and all that?

- [7:06] Well, as I said, I don't think it's about absolute secrecy. Incidentally, us members of the staff, we don't know what you give anyway. So, it is secret in that sense, but it's known to the treasurer.

So, how do we apply this then? Given that we don't really publicize, you know, we don't have an honor board there that has the top ten givers in our church. You know, you might want to aspire to be on that if you are, but I don't know.

We don't serve better coffee to those who give more. You know, or have more chicken and chips for those who are... So, if we don't do all that, where might our danger be? Well, one area, perhaps, I can think of is online.

You know, where virtue signaling abounds. You know what that is about, right? For instance, when you donate online, right? Nowadays, the charity would often prompt you, wouldn't they, to share that you've given.

And I get it. They want to spread the word about this charity. You know, Mark has given, so everyone else should give as well, you know. Or if you go on a Fund Me page, you know, they would, unless you tick anonymous, they would put your name and amount on that page, isn't it, once you've given.

[8 : 15] Now, I'm not suggesting that there's a black or white rule about this, but here's an initial, here's an easy way, isn't it, for an initial goal of doing a worthwhile thing to go awry and turn into a bit of a look at me exercise, isn't it?

So perhaps, next time you do something like that, check your motives before you decide whether you want to share or not. Well, let's move on to the second example, that of prayer.

Jesus continues in verse 5. 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 reward in full.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. That same phrase again. Then your Father, unseen, sees what is done in secret and will reward you.

And I think implicitly that means rewarding you in public eventually. So again, notice the pattern. A righteous aim of praying gets subverted into a need to be seen doing it by others.

[9 : 20] The people here hope that when others hear their prayer, they'll be praised for how pious and holy they are. And you might recall that parable where Jesus criticized the Pharisee for praying in public and looking down on the prayers of a sinful tax collector, wasn't it?

He was being very self-righteous. Well, again, Jesus says here that these hypocrites have their reward in full. Instead, he says we're to pray in private, which again doesn't mean we can't have public prayers, particularly in church, right?

We do that every week. So it doesn't mean that those who come up here to lead prayers have got their reward in full, right? So, Rihanna, when you come and pray afterwards, it's okay. God might still reward you.

Only if you don't do it for us to hear, right? Just to impress us. So please, those of you who serve in that area, don't come and quit on me because we need people to pray each Sunday.

But again, it's what's in the heart that counts, isn't it? So let me ask you this question. Is your public prayer life, that is when you pray amongst other people, consistent with your private prayer life?

[10 : 35] Or do you only pray in public? Or do you pray in public in a different way to how you pray privately? Now, I know you do need to pray a bit differently because when you're up here, there's a sense in which you need to be clear and formal so that people can pray with you.

But, do you go overboard in using over-the-top language to be preachy, to show people how theologically sound your prayers are? Now, I'm not saying, please don't pray theologically unsound prayers up here either.

But again, it's a good thing to check our motives, isn't it? Why are we praying the way we are? Is it just for others to see? Now, here I want to pause and say that some people have said, look, Jesus says here, we're meant to do all these things in private, but I recall back in Matthew 5 and verse 16, Jesus has commended us to let our good deeds shine as light so that people can see and glorify the Father in heaven.

So, is Jesus being inconsistent within the same sermon? Well, no, because as I said, I don't think Jesus' point here is about absolute secrecy, but rather about being discreet so that you can check yourself to see if you're only doing good deeds to be seen.

If you are, then, prefer then to do them privately so as to avoid that temptation. Train yourself to do it privately so you wean yourself off the praise of others and instead do that righteous act just for its own good.

[12:11] So, for example, pray because talking with God is a good thing in and of itself. We pray because we wish to grow in our relationship with God.

We don't pray so that other people can see that we are righteous or that our relationship with God is great, isn't it? But secondly, I think, too, that when Jesus talks about the good deeds in Matthew 5 and verse 16, it's about those things that we've been looking at over the past few weeks.

It's about being humble enough to say sorry, to be forgiving and bearing with one another's burden. It's about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies. And if you ask me, no one fakes these things in order to get people's praise, right?

You're not going to turn the other cheek and then, wow, everyone's... No. That's just... You've got to be genuine in order to be practicing these good deeds. And I think the people that Jesus is talking about, it's not bystanders, right?

Not to say, look, I'm about to say sorry to Steph, so everyone, can you please have a look as I'm saying sorry to Steph? It's not that kind of public display, is it? But rather, it's when I say sorry to Steph, Steph will see, hopefully, my genuine humility and instead of praising me and saying, oh, Mark, you're such a good man, she will say, praise God in heaven.

[13:34] That's how it's meant to work, isn't it? All right, let me finish then with the final example of fasting. And here, we're just going to jump over the verses I said before and go straight to verse 16.

So here, Jesus says, when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly, I tell you, 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 others that you are fasting. But only to your Father who is unseen and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Now, I'm not intending to go into a lengthy discussion about fasting today. There are various views on it. If you want to come and chat to me afterwards about whether to do it or not, we can talk about that.

Instead, you need to realize that Jesus includes this example here because it was a common practice of righteousness in His day. And again, the true benefit of fasting was to help people, the one who is fasting, focus on repentance, on lamenting, on grieving over the sin, whether their own sin or the sin of the people.

[14:49] But again, to do it so that it's obvious to others defeats that purpose, doesn't it? Because then you're drawing attention to saying, oh, how holy I am, when really the whole aim of fasting is to realize how sinful we are before God and to repent.

Now, I'm not sure how prevalent fasting is among Christians today. And perhaps that's a good thing. We don't know because everyone's practicing what Jesus is commanding, not making it obvious to others.

So that's good. If you're fasting here today and I don't know about it, that's good. But I do notice from time to time that, you know, particularly now that it's Lent, you know, and it's only during Lent, I know people will sometimes tell you that they're giving up chocolate or alcohol or technology for Lent.

Now, again, I'm neither here nor there, but if there is value in doing something like that, then do make sure to ask yourself why you're doing it.

And also, ask yourself whether others really need to know that you're fasting from chocolate. Maybe it's a good thing they don't buy you those chocolate eggs, I don't know, but I can't really see that there's a real reason that people need to tell others.

[16:03] Can you? Alright, so those are the three examples, but as I said earlier, these examples are meant to be illustrative. It's not the complete list of everything.

And so, if you're going to take the thing that, oh, look, I've just done these three things, I follow Jesus exactly as he asked me, then job done, you know, I've applied this passage, I think you've missed Jesus' point.

Because Jesus' principle is in verse 1. And when he says you are to practice righteousness, he's talking about all forms of righteousness, not just these three examples.

So I think for us, if these three things are not really our thing, we ought to think hard about whether there are areas of righteousness which we do mainly for people to see and then to praise us.

And I think nowadays, we have to think not just in the face-to-face and physical realm, but also on the virtual world, don't we? In social media.

[17:05] See, the whole idea of a social media profile sort of gives it away, doesn't it? That you have to curate your social media image. What's that all about except to influence how other people see you, isn't it?

So as a Christian, have you asked yourself why you're in that space? If you're a worker, how do you decide what you say on your LinkedIn profile? If you blog, why and what about?

How much of it is to promote your profile as a good Christian? Now, and if this idea of practicing righteousness doesn't resonate with you, then try substituting the word righteousness with spirituality.

Practicing your spirituality so that others can see. Because after all, you know, at HDD, we're all reformed evangelicals, right? So deep down, we know that we're all saved by grace, not by works of righteousness.

And we know we don't practice our righteousness in order to be praised as a good Christian. But the idea of being more spiritual, ah, that's a different matter, isn't it?

[18:17] We're all trying to grow in spirituality, be more mature spiritually. So ask yourself, and maybe now turn to the person next to you, what are some of the things that we do as a church that we think helps us to grow spiritually?

Have a think, have a talk. Okay. Any ideas? Hands up. You don't do anything to grow spiritually?

Yes, Julian. If I share, if I read my life, it depends what your aim of sharing is. What?

Reading culture. What do you mean by that? Reading Bible? Yep. Okay. Yep. Yes. Okay. No. Yep. That's fine. I'm not sharing. Okay.

Others? Someone said, yeah. Someone here. Stephen? Praying. Praying. Yes. I think that's right. Yeah. So I had others that's like, coming to church, how often do, what do we serve in, areas of service, how much service we do.

[19:27] And look, all these are good things, right? They are. I'm not saying stop. Actually, we ought to keep doing these things to grow as Christians. And God wants us to do these things. But whatever comes to mind, we have to ask ourselves whether we do these things to be seen by others.

Because these very things that we value actually become the greatest temptation for us. Because we value them, we want to show others, we do them, in order for others to think we're spiritual, isn't it?

That's the temptation. So praying, giving, coming to church, all these things are actually good things not to be stopped. but they can also turn into things that signal how spiritual we are.

Now, if you look around the churches, different churches will emphasize different things, right? So for some churches, it's all about their praise and singing. That's what they value on a Sunday. And so, you'll see that everyone wants to join the band, right?

They want to show, and when they go to church, they want to show how spiritual they are by their praise, right? The person who plays the guitar, you know, extended solos and things like that, right?

[20:37] And deep in whatever. I'm not trying to criticize someone, but, you know, you see that happen. For others, it's other types of spiritual gifts which are valued, you know, prophecy or tongues or whatever.

And so, everyone wants those things, right? And then they want to be anointed to use them publicly because that's the thing they value. So the question for us then, at HVD, because I've just talked about other churches, what is the thing that we value?

It's not hard, it's not hard, is it? What do we prize as a church? The teaching of God's word, right? We all come here and everyone says, I'll come to this church because there's good Bible teaching.

Now, that's a great thing, right? I'm not going to say, look, let's go back to bad teaching. No. But, that is also our greatest danger, isn't it? So especially for me, I'm coming clean, as I preach every week, it's so easy for me to preach just to impress, isn't it?

Rather than to truly feed God's people. And the funny thing is that, the hard thing, the most ironic thing is that, I can't preach secretly, can I? It doesn't work.

[21:53] So, do pray for us as your pastors because, you know, how sad it is, isn't it, that we preach week in week and then we miss out on God's true reward.

But it's also true for the rest of us, isn't it? The temptation as we go to Bible studies or whatever is to show others how good our Bible knowledge is, right? Rather than to really concentrate on applying God's word and encouraging each other, which is the ultimate aim of the Bible study.

Instead, whether you're a Bible study leader or a member, you're always trying to impress by, I've got this right or I've got that right. Or how good I am as an evangelist that my apologetics is just right or whatever.

So, that's our danger, I think. We can look at others and see their dangers, but we too have our dangers, isn't it? Of doing those things we value, not because they're good in itself, but because we want others to think how spiritual we are.

But let me finish by saying, we need to come back to the right motivation or the right kind of reward, because if we do that, then the practice, I think, follows. You see, as I said already at the start, we're all motivated by reward.

[23:04] So, there's no need to deny that. Let's, however, make sure that the reward that we are seeking is the right one. And in our passage today, Jesus shows us two kinds, isn't it?

The wrong kind, which is the praise of others, or the right kind, which is the reward, which is from the Father. And Jesus explicitly motivates us to seek that right reward.

It's okay to pursue the Father's reward. Don't pursue the other one, because praise of others is fleeting and useless. Don't waste your time, Jesus says, on that.

Only God is able to judge whether we are righteous or not. So what if people praise you for your righteousness? They don't count. And Jesus says, if that's what you seek, well, that's exactly what you're going to get.

You're going to get their praise, and that's your reward. That's it. That's your full reward. If you want that, you'll get it. But that's anti-human praise, isn't it? Which changes like the wind.

[24:02] It's a sugar hit that you need to keep seeking validation from. So ultimately, in the long run, it's not satisfying, is it? But if you seek the Father's reward, then that's a lasting reward.

Now, what's that reward? Well, I don't think it's some huge pot of gold that's waiting for you in heaven, or some luxury mansion, if you're righteous enough, waiting for us. Instead, what the Gospel tells us is that when we put our faith in Jesus, we already have Christ's righteousness, don't we?

So there's nothing more that we can do to be more righteous in God's eyes, in that sense. Instead, as Jesus said last week, we practice righteousness so that we can become like our Father in heaven, to be perfect even as God in heaven is perfect.

So our reward, when we practice, is actually that we become like God. It's finding joy in the very things that God finds joy in doing. Our reward, it turns out, is intrinsic to the act itself.

Our reward is part and parcel of the doing of it itself. Now, we remember that when we were young that our parents used to make us do things, right? So for me, it was learning the piano.

[25:17] And sometimes parents would give us a reward. If you keep practicing your piano and if you pass your exams with distinction, they say, we'll take you to Disneyland, right? I never made it to Disneyland, so...

But how's Disneyland related to playing piano? It's not related, is it? There's no connection. So you practice hard, you pass with distinction, you go to Disneyland, and then after that you come back, you quit piano, right?

I've seen people get to AMAS, right? And then they hand their AMAS to the parents and say, there you've got your AMAS, I'm finished with piano. Because why? They have not tied the intrinsic reward of learning piano to the learning of piano, have they?

What is the intrinsic reward of learning piano? is to be able to make music joyfully, right? That's why you learn piano. There's reward in doing it because when you know how to do it well, you can play a song that you love hearing and have pleasure in it, you can sing along with others.

That's the reward that comes from playing the piano, isn't it? That we should all be seeking when we learn the piano. And it's similar to life generally, isn't it? If we love our work, then we work, the work itself has its reward.

[26:36] We love doing that work, right? We enjoy doing it. You don't just do it because you've got to get the pay. And that's the really sad thing, that sometimes people have to work just to get the pay. They don't really enjoy what they're doing, right?

And the same is true with righteousness. We practice righteousness because, just like God, it brings us joy. We pray, not to show how holy we are to others, but because we enjoy talking with God.

We know that when we talk and pray, we grow in our knowledge of God and we grow in our relationship and that in itself is the reward, isn't it? We give, not to show how generous we are, but because we experience joy when we see someone in need being helped.

The act itself is the reward. And when Jesus encourages us to do them privately, it's so that we wouldn't be tempted by the false reward of human praise.

And as we take joy in practicing righteousness, what God does is that He changes us. That's the unseen work of transforming us by His Spirit and rewarding us by making us like His Son.

[27 : 47] And then, that's a lasting treasure, isn't it? When we become like Jesus, when we become like God, then no one can take that away from us. And we don't need the praise of others to validate us, do we?

So, if you had to choose tonight, which would you want? I think it's pretty plain and obvious, isn't it? It's the thing that's unseen, isn't it? But lasts forever.

Let's pray. Father, help us not to fall for the temptation to practice our righteousness to be seen by others, but to remember that You see what is truly in our heart and will reward us accordingly.

Thank You that we don't have to be perfect in order to be saved, but that instead we are free to live righteous lives in order to please You, to be like You, and ultimately to get that true reward that You've promised us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.