

A Righteousness Rewarded

Matthew 6:1-4

Scripture Reading

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Introduction

With these words of Christ, there is a shift in the flow of the Sermon on the Mount. For much of chapter 5, our Lord focused his preaching on our living according to **the Law of God**. In particular, Jesus exposed the manipulative and deceptive teaching and practice of the scribes and Pharisees while at the same time calling all true disciples to a *“righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.”* (5:20)

Ultimately, this call to superior righteousness is meant to expose our helplessness and inability to meet such a holy standard. The righteousness Jesus calls us to is unattainable thru works of the flesh. Yet, thru faith Christ, the *“exceeding righteousness”* that gives us victory over murderous anger, lustful adultery, vindictive retaliation, and malice toward our enemies is imputed to us by the grace and mercy of God. This imputed righteousness, accomplished and distributed thru the Cross of Christ, empowers us to live righteous and holy lives that glorify God the Father.

In chapter 6, Jesus shifts His focus onto our living in **the Presence of God**.

In chapter 5, it was critical that we listened to, interpreted, and applied the teachings of Christ thru the lens of verse 20...

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In chapter 6, it is critical that we listen to, interpret, and apply the teachings of Christ thru the lens of verse 1...

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

Now, before we go any further, let us stop here and take note of something very important. Notice if you will that both verses deal with two critical elements of our Christian faith – righteousness and eternity. Could it be any clearer? Our Lord and Savior is very passionate about our earthly living, as well as our eternal destination.

As disciples of Christ, we have been called to live holy lives on this earth. The Apostle Peter echoes this truth when he writes,

“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all our conduct.” (1 Peter 1:14-15)

Similarly, the Apostle Paul writes...

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...”
(Romans 12:1-2)

Holy living highlights the cross of Calvary where Jesus willingly offered His life as an acceptable sacrifice for sin.

Not only are we to live holy lives, we are to fix our hope on the glory of heaven. One day, in the blink of an eye, we will be ushered into heaven's glory where we will at once be made whole and perfect. We will meet our Savior face-to-face and receive our glorified bodies – bodies like that of Christ's resurrected body.

By the grace of God, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the merciful gift of saving faith, we have been redeemed and called to live lives of God-glorifying holiness. We have been called to remember that this world is not our home. We are sojourners who are on a journey whose ultimate destination is the glory of heaven.

Holy living and the promise of heaven's glory should influence everything we say and do.

Exegesis

Now, let's plunge into our text. Don't forget! Throughout chapter 6, Jesus is focused on our living in the Presence of God.

This morning, thru the words of Christ, God wants to issue us a warning, expose one of our greatest weaknesses, remind us Who is watching, and exhort us to choose the right reward.

Specifically, these four principles will apply to our giving (vs. 2-4), our praying (vs. 5-15), and our fasting (vs. 16-18).

“A Warning from Christ”

First, I want us to see the warning of Christ in verse 1. Notice how Jesus begins this new preaching emphasis – **“Beware...”**

We find this verb in present, active, imperative tense, which simply means that Jesus is calling us to immediate, urgent, and ongoing action. What our Lord is about to say is of utmost importance and he expects our diligent and careful application.

To be sure, this warning carries with it the idea of being on heightened alert. We are to be on guard. We are to give careful and consistent attention to what Jesus is about to say. We are to devote ourselves to the principle Christ is about to lay forth.

Listen carefully to the warning of Christ...

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

What is the warning?

The warning is this! As Christians, we are to diligently guard ourselves from seeking self-glorification thru performing acts of righteousness. We are to be on alert for the fleshly desire within us all to perform for men rather than worship God. We are to give careful attention to our natural disposition to seek the approval and applause of the world, rather than our Savior Jesus Christ.

What is the warning?

The warning is this! Self-glorification steals the glory of God and strips us from heavenly rewards. One of our great hopes, and one of God’s great promises, is that we will receive eternal rewards in heaven. Yet, when we trade the enduring applause of God and His heavenly angels for the fickle and fleeting applause of man, we have received our reward – a reward that appears and vanishes like the wind. A reward that will not withstand the fiery, all-consuming, and righteous judgment of our judge Jesus Christ.

As we will see today and in the coming weeks, every one of us is prone to perform acts of righteousness with the desire to be seen and applauded by men. Jesus proves this to be true by offering us three examples – alms giving (i.e. giving to the poor and needy), praying, and fasting.

Can I ask you some questions?

- ⇒ Are you performing your righteousness for the glory of men or the glory of God?
- ⇒ Are you practicing the righteousness of Christ out of a heartfelt desire to please your Savior Jesus Christ or to be seen and applauded by your peers?

According to Jesus, both pursuits will produce rewards. One pursuit will produce temporary rewards that will be enjoyed for a moment and then quickly vanish. The other will produce eternal rewards that will be enjoyed forever in the glory and majesty of heaven.

“A Glaring Weakness”

Beginning in verse 2, Jesus offers us the first of three examples of how prone we are to practice our righteousness for the recognition of man, rather than the applause and glory of God.

Let's read it again!

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Giving to the needy, or what is known in the Bible as alms giving, was an important aspect of the Jewish culture. Early on in God's choosing and formation of the Jewish people, he called them to give alms.

In Deuteronomy 15:11, God instructed the Israelites...

“For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.’”

Giving and caring for the poor and needy is very important to God. Just as important is how we give to the poor and needy. It's precisely the "how" that brings temptation into our lives.

Let's be honest! One of our most glaring weaknesses as humans is that we like to "sound our own trumpets." You like to sound your trumpet and so do I.

Have you ever known someone who loved to sound his or her trumpet? Have you ever known someone who performed acts of kindness or generosity and then "blew his or her own horn"?

Such boasting leaves a bad taste in your mouth, doesn't it? Now, imagine the aroma God smells when we seek the applause and recognition of man by performing acts of righteousness – acts like giving to the poor and needy, acts like praying in public, acts like fasting and letting everyone know about it. More than likely, the aroma God smells from these Pharisaical acts of self-righteousness would be better defined as a "stench."

When I think of someone who loved to sound their own trumpet, one person immediately comes to mind - Muhammad Ali. To be fair, Muhammad Ali was the greatest heavyweight fighter of all time. No heavyweight fighter has ever possessed the combination of speed, quickness, endurance, and sheer power that Muhammad Ali displayed in the ring. However, nor has there ever been a boxer who has displayed more arrogance and boastfulness.

I can still hear Muhammad Ai saying, *"I'm the greatest of all time!"*

Like Muhammad Ali, we too are prone to sound our trumpets – especially when it comes to giving our money. Or should I say God's money? We like to be noticed, applauded, and admired for our acts of financial kindness and generosity. Our pride and ego thirsts for such recognition and applause.

When we give this way, we forfeit heavenly rewards. When we give this way, we become actors just like the Pharisees. Did you know the root meaning for hypocrisy is "to act"? A hypocrite is basically an actor.

D.A Carson writes...

“Hypocritical piety is not from the heart, it is not genuine; it is play-acting. This kind of philanthropy is motivated by egoism. The whole thing turns out to be a successful public relations stunt, and no more. There is no real “act of righteousness,” no genuine piety – and no reward from God.”

Can I ask you some more questions?

- ⇒ Are our acts of righteousness nothing more the man-centered public relation stunts?
- ⇒ Is our righteousness nothing more than play-acting?
- ⇒ Is our philanthropy motivated by egoism or the glory of God?

Thru the prophet Jeremiah, God proclaimed...

“Thu says the Lord: Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For these are the things I delight in, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Will you sound your own trumpet? Or, will you sound the trumpet of God’s glory, God’s faithfulness, and God’s provision by giving generously and joyfully in “secret”?

“God Is Watching”

Thus far, Christ has warned us and revealed one of our most glaring weaknesses. Now, lastly, Christ reminds us that God is watching how we perform acts of righteousness.

Look what Jesus says at the conclusion of our text...

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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Whether man sees our acts of righteousness or not is irrelevant and should play no role in how we give, how we pray, or how we fast. What is profoundly relevant is that the unwavering eyes of the holy God are fixed upon us with great attentiveness. God is watching! God is looking for men and women who practice acts of righteousness for His glory and favor – not the applause and favor of man.

May we all carefully ponder the Word of God on this point. Such a truth does not simply apply to our giving, praying, or fasting. This truth applies to every facet of our lives. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is hidden from the holy eyes of God. We might fool the eyes of fallen men, but we cannot deceive the righteous eyes of the Almighty God. God sees everything!

“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:7-8)

“Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:24)

“They say, ‘The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive. Understand, O dullest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?’” (Psalm 94:7-9)

On this point, Martyn Llyod-Jones offers some lucid insight...

“We must always remember that God knows all about us. He knows the thoughts and intent of the heart. And He can divide to the separating of the joint and marrow and the very soul and spirit. There is nothing hid from his sight.

If we were all to practice this it would be revolutionary. What a difference it would make to church life, and the life of every individual. Think of all the pretense and sham, and all that is unworthy in us all. If only we realized that God is looking at all, and us aware if it all, and us recording it all! That is the teaching of the Scriptures, and that is the method of preaching holiness – not offering people some marvelous experience which solves all their problems. No, it is just realizing that we are always there in the presence of God.

For the man who starts with the true realization of that is soon to be seen flying to Christ and His cross, and pleading to be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Here's a final question for you:

⇒ Have you forgotten that God is looking at you, aware of all you do, and is recording it for the purpose of rewarding you in heaven?

Closing Comments

As I hope you have seen this morning, this text runs far deeper than a simple command to give alms to the poor and needy. This text is about how honor God thru acts of righteousness – a righteousness that has been imputed to us thru the death of Christ and our faith in Him.

Our righteousness is to be on full display for all the world to see – not because we desire the world's applause and favor. No! Rather, because we desire for our heavenly Father to be supremely glorified among all the earth. Because we desire to draw people to Jesus Christ and His work on the cross – that most glorious instrument of salvation and reconciliation. And, because we desire to enjoy the favor of God and His immeasurable riches, which He promises to reward us with when our righteousness is performed for His glory rather than our own.

Remember this – our righteousness was accomplished thru the cross of Christ. Let us not forget that Christ became our sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. Our glorious righteousness, that free and costly gift from God, does not belong to our peers or our world. Our righteousness was purchased and secured thru the suffering and sacrificial death of Christ. Christ alone is worthy to be the object of our righteous acts.

To God be the glory! Amen!

