

Righteousness Before God

Matthew 6:1-18

You are going to serve somebody. Jesus says not to do righteousness (*dikaiousune*) in order to be seen by men, because if you do then God will give you nothing for it (v. 1). But if you serve Him in secret these three ways—giving, praying, and fasting—He will reward you openly (v. 18). In both scenarios there is an audience and a reward, and this is necessarily the case: we will live for an ultimate purpose in front of an audience and desire a reward, even if we reduce that purpose and reward to our own appetites (cf. Phil. 3:19). The scribes and Pharisees loved theatrical righteousness, to be seen doing good things by the crowd. But Jesus wants His people to do righteousness to please God, and therefore to be greatly rewarded.

Alms

The “charitable deed” (*eleemosune*) in verse 2 is a different word than the “charitable deeds” of verse 1 and better translated as “alms” or “giving to the needy.” Don’t give like the hypocrites in the synagogues who sound the trumpet, wanting everyone to think they are doing it for unselfish reasons, but really do it to get glory from men (v. 2). Note how “meek and mild” Jesus trashes the synagogues, no doubt without visiting each and every one nor knowing the inner desires of every synagogue ruler. He makes accurate, stinging generalizations and would have spent many weeks in Twitter jail before getting banned altogether. In that day, big donors would come down to the front of the synagogue with the rabbi to be publicly honored, and Jesus hilariously makes fun of them tooting their own horn. The word *hypocrites* means “actor,” one who puts on a face to play a part. They pretend to honor God but really want the praise of men, and so they have their reward. Jesus requires a reverse kind of acting. Instead of blowing a trumpet, the Christian masks his generosity, giving in secret, not even letting his left hand know what his right hand is up to (v. 3). He rests secure knowing that God sees and will reward openly (v. 4). This may seem to contradict Christ’s command to “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (5:16), but it’s all about motivation. Do you want someone to be blessed by you in order make God’s name great or your name? This is the first of seven times Jesus mentions “reward” in this passage. Similar to His teaching on greatness (Matt. 20:26), we are not supposed to be uninterested in rewards: “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). God wants to reward you, and this is how. The greatest reward is pleasing God Himself and receiving His “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*” But we know what He is like and that those who seek His kingdom first then have everything else added to them. Rewards include material things that you can then use again to give in secret. Real faith in God gives when no one is looking.

Prayer

The second righteous action Jesus addresses is prayer, and a second time He targets hypocrisy. If He teaches without calling out the fraudsters, then people won’t know that what they see in synagogues and on streets corners is perverse. The prayer warriors of His day loved to pray in public to be seen by men (v. 5). They prayed to God verbally, but what they truly desired was for people to see and hear them, and so “they have their reward.” God doesn’t like it when people pray to Him in vain. Jesus emphasizes the singular “you”: “But you, when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (v. 6). The “room” is a particular word for a storage room, one typically in the middle of the house with no windows. Only God can see, and He is not like the pagan gods who the Gentiles think are persuaded by many words (v. 7). Jesus forbids His people from heaping up words

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thinking that the word-count will persuade Him. It's striking that Christians schedule 24-hr prayer vigils and public prayer events that often appeal to length and visibility. On a few occasions Jesus prayed all night and sometimes publicly, but it was not so that others could see and hear. God knows what we need before we ask so, like Solomon, Jesus says to keep it short" (v. 8; Eccl. 5:2). Of course He does not say we shouldn't pray at all! God knows everything and foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, including the means that lead to the ends. Our prayers are at the center of faithful action to change the world and ought to be consistent and persistent (Lk. 18:1). In this context He teaches the Lord's Prayer, which takes under a minute to say but weaves together all of life, drawing and keeping us near our Lord. God is our Father, so we call on Him, and we desire His name to be honored as holy throughout the earth: "hallowed be your name" (v. 9). Our next concern is His kingdom, His will done on earth *as it is in heaven* (v. 10). The direction of the kingdom is not going but coming from heaven to earth, and you can see it happening as obedience is rendered to the Lord. The angels and departed saints obey in heaven, but so do we when we worship God in the heavenly places: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." (Heb. 12:22ff.). We ask God for daily bread every day, and to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors (vv. 11-12). Jesus teaches us to keep short accounts. The wages of sin is death. Christ paid our debt on the cross, making full atonement for all of our sins. We experience this gift and freedom from sin through confession, and God forgives us in the same way we forgive others. You cannot confess sin honestly and be forgiven while holding onto the sins of others against you. You can't ask God to forgive your \$10 million debt while refusing to forgive your neighbor's \$10. We ask God not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil, knowing we should walk humbly and take care lest we fall (1 Cor. 10:12). The prayer concludes praising God for His dominion and Godness: His is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever, and a hearty "amen," "may it be so." Jesus comments on the request to forgive trespasses as we are forgiven, saying that the one who does not forgive others will not be forgiven by God. If the first thing we do with this verse is try to reconcile it with the fact that we don't earn forgiveness then we are missing the point. The point is to be sure to forgive others. If you don't, God will not forgive you.

Fasting

The third thing to be done before God is fasting. Hypocrites do it to be seen by men, or at least they make themselves look sad with disfigured faces so that others will think they are fasting (v. 16). Again, they have their small reward. The one set fast day of the old covenant was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:32), but we also see fasting occurring due to grief over sin, and to focus in prayer before important decisions (2 Sam. 12:16; Acts 13:3). Nagging hunger centers our hearts and minds on what matters. The way to fast righteously is to look like you're not fasting: get dressed and wash your face so people can't tell. God can tell, and He will see and reward you (vv. 17-18).

Conclusion

It is not news that God sees all things—either to us or to Him. Jesus teaches us live as though it's true. Full blown Pharisaism is hilarious, but all of our hearts are subtle (cf. Lk. 18:12). It is so easy to derive your identity from what others think (likes on social media!), so Jesus removes the temptation. Give, pray, and fast before God and enjoy His generous blessing.