

MATTHEW 6:1 – RIGHTEOUS REWARDS FOR RIGHTEOUS DEEDS

This morning in our study of the Gospel of Matthew we come to chapter 6, the second chapter in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is a lengthy teaching that Jesus gave to His disciples:

Matthew 5:1-2 (ESV) – 1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, **his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them ...**

Jesus began with the Beatitudes, which describe what a Christian is. He told us just how important His church is to the world: we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He emphasized the eternal authority of the Word of God. We are to treat the Word of God very carefully, with faith and obedience, because, as Jesus said,

Matthew 5:20 (ESV) – 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

From Matthew 5:21-48 Jesus explained what it meant to have a righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees by comparing the letter of the Law and the spirit of the Law in six representative topics. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus tells us just how much our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees:

Matthew 5:48 (ESV) – 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In the latter half of Matthew 5 Jesus showed us how the letter and spirit of the Law differ in principle; in Matthew 6-7 He shows us how the letter and spirit of the Law differ in practice. He speaks what righteousness looks like in giving, praying, and fasting; He speaks about the effect of true righteousness on our goals, priorities, and discernment; He describes the impact of true righteousness on our faith, our obedience, and our devotion to the truth; He concludes by

emphasizing the need for genuine righteousness in salvation, and tells us the only possible means by which genuine righteousness comes.

Just as Matthew 5:20 provided a foundation for what follows in Matthew 5, Matthew 6:1 provides a foundation for what follows in Matthew 6-7, a governing principle that we can apply in many situations. Let's read these two chapters, and then talk a little about the governing principle.

READ MATTHEW 6-7

THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

I said that Matthew 6:1 is a governing principle for Matthew 6-7. Jesus says in Matthew 6:1,

Matthew 6:1 (ESV) – 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.”

Matthew 6:1 begins with a strong word of caution: we must beware of doing righteous things for unrighteous reasons.

Why this caution?

Because righteousness is not optional; we MUST do righteous things so that God may be glorified. Jesus says in Matthew 5:16,

Matthew 5:16 (ESV) – 16 In the same way, let your light shine **BEFORE OTHERS**, so that they may **SEE** your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

But at the same time, we are all prone to wanting human approval. In Matthew 6-7 Jesus describes righteous actions. God commands us to do them; they are necessary for His people. They provide a picture of righteousness in action. They are high-level works, done in obedience to God in order to glorify Him. Someone who claims to be righteous, but doesn't do these things, is a liar. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus commands us to practice our righteousness before others so that OUR WORKS may be seen, and those who see them will glorify God, and He in return will reward us. That is a high-level reward for high-level actions.

But we are prone to wanting human approval instead of God's approval; we want low-level rewards for our high-level actions. We are easily tempted to practice our righteousness in such a way that WE are glorified by those who SEE US AT WORK, rather than God being glorified by those who see OUR WORKS. It's not that the scribes and Pharisees didn't do these righteous deeds, but that they did them to receive human applause rather than divine rewards; they sought low-level rewards for high-level acts.

This hunger for low-level rewards for high-level deeds is behind the moral failures of many celebrity pastors and Christian leaders. Celebrity pastors fail in three areas: sex, money, and abuse of power; it's often a combination of all three. Many of them are charlatans to begin with, preaching false Gospels and milking people for as much money as they can squeeze out of them. But others begin with godly intentions, and end up in failure. Why? Because they longed for an earthly reward for their heavenly deeds. They looked for a quick and shallow payoff; they settled for low-level rewards for their high-level righteous deeds.

But pastors aren't the only ones. All Christians are vulnerable to this temptation. Why spend time in the Word every day if no one notices? Why pray faithfully if no one is there to see? Why serve if there is no benefit to yourself? So as Jesus says, we must beware of the strong, frequent desire for low-level rewards for high-level behavior.

Does this mean that all righteousness should be invisible? Not at all; sometimes it's not possible to be invisible. Teachers and evangelists must do their work with someone else present. For the most part the gifts of the Spirit can't be exercised in secret, because they were given so that others would be edified, not the person who exercises the gift.

But it does mean that we must be constantly aware of how quickly we can fall into a trap of self-pity or personal ambition.

The wrong reward, the low-level benefit, is being seen and noticed and recognized by others, or wanting others to approve of us. I think we could also say that wanting money in return for righteousness is wrong, wanting power, or success, or happiness, or pleasure, or personal contentment in return for righteousness is wrong.

High-level righteousness is heavenly-oriented righteousness; it is righteousness that reaches into eternity. Low-level rewards are earthly rewards. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with these rewards as far as they go, but they are earthly, and therefore temporary.

But it's not just that we're selling our righteousness for too low a price, if I can put it that way. It's that seeking or desiring earthly, temporary rewards for heavenly, eternal acts of righteousness will cost us heavenly, eternal rewards: **for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.**

The Father might bless you on earth with money, or success, or happiness, or He might not:

1 Samuel 2:7 (ESV) – 7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.

But God does not give earthly, temporary rewards for heavenly, eternal righteousness. Earthly rewards are not an indication of heavenly success.

TRANSITION: So, do we do all this righteousness just because its the righteous thing to do? Is righteousness its own reward? No. Let's talk about rewards for a moment.

SEEK THE RIGHTEOUS REWARD

Matthew 6:1 (ESV) – 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.

Jesus expects us to want to be rewarded for our righteousness; He expects that the promise of rewards from God will motivate us to be righteous. And He wants us to be motivated by the risk of LOSING the reward from our Father in heaven.

There is nothing wrong with expecting rewards from God for true righteousness. In case you are inclined to disagree, let me remind you of what Hebrews 11:6 says:

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV) – 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe (a) that he exists and (b) that **he rewards those who seek him.**

Genuine faith in God has two components. It believes that God EXISTS in the first place. And it believes that God REWARDS those who seek Him. Let me put it differently: believing that God rewards the righteous is so much a part of true faith, that those who DENY that He rewards the righteous cannot please Him.

The truth is that God promises rewards throughout Scripture, from Genesis 15:1, where He promises, **Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your REWARD shall be very great,** to Revelation 22, where He promises, **BLESSED is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.**

Over the weeks to come we're going to see the truth that God will reward our righteousness when we serve for His glory rather than our own.

TRANSITION: Let's bring it home this morning.

BRINGING IT HOME

From the moment God created mankind, we have been intended to not merely exist, but to work and produce. We were created in the image of the Creator, and that means that we ourselves are involved in our own kinds of work and creation. Just as God receives glory from His creation, we are meant to receive a blessing, a reward, for our own work.

Jesus promises us,

Revelation 22:12 (ESV) – 12 “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.

Salvation is purely by grace through faith. It is not based on what we do, or who we are. We cannot earn salvation; we certainly do not deserve salvation.

If you have any ideas that you are saved because you have done a certain think, or lived a certain way, I urge you to repent and believe the true Gospel:

Romans 6:23 (ESV) – 23 For the wages of sin [the reward] is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We rightly deserve eternal judgment; hell is the wage that the wicked are working for. But no one is able to earn their salvation; it can only be given – and received – as a gift.

But Jesus isn't talking about salvation in Matthew 6. He is speaking to His disciples about the righteousness that they do because they are His people, and the rewards that the Father gives us for that righteousness. Paul wrote the Corinthians that each one's work will be manifest, tested by fire. Some of what we have done in our lives is compared to wood and hay and stubble; those works aren't going to survive the test. But other works that we have done are truly righteous; they are compared to gold and silver and precious stones; those righteous works will survive the test.

I think our greatest problem is that we can't imagine what could be better than earthly rewards. Some of us are so insecure that we feel we need the approval of other people; some of us are afraid that if we don't receive rewards in this life, we have no guarantee of receiving rewards in eternity; and some of us, honestly, are just so worldly-minded that we think earthly rewards are far better than heavenly rewards.

If you are worried about not receiving human approval, let me encourage you to trust in God's favor as did the apostle Paul:

2 Timothy 4:18 (ESV) – 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The opinions of fallen people are, at best, fallen opinions. The children of God have this very same promise: He will bring you safely into His heavenly Kingdom. Don't worry about pleasing man; make sure you please God.

If you are worried that you won't receive rewards in eternity:

Ephesians 1:13-14 (ESV) – 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

If you are in Christ, then you have received the Holy Spirit, who is God's guarantee that you will receive the promised inheritance.

And if you think that the heavenly, eternal rewards will not be worth having,

1 Corinthians 2:9 (CSB) – 9 But as it is written, What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived — God has prepared these things for those who love him.

Nothing that you can receive in this world is a reward for your righteous acts in Christ.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.