YOUR FATHER WILL REWARD YOU

Matthew 6:1-18

Key Verse: 6:4b

“Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

This passage mainly talks about practicing righteousness. Some of us immediately associate righteousness with justification. We love to hear about justification. Justification is more than forgiveness. It is God’s final declaration that we are not guilty, and have a right relationship with God. What a blessing this is! We did not earn this righteousness by our own effort. It was given to us as a gift, freely by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus, who fulfilled the law perfectly. This righteousness is passive; it was imputed to us by Jesus (2Co 5:21). However, in today’s passage righteousness does not refer to justification. It refers to religious observances that are the fruit of faith. Jesus’ examples are giving to the needy, prayer and fasting.

We should understand this passage in its context. Israel was a religious nation in which the Mosaic Law was publicly enforced. The synagogue was the center of society and religious leaders had great authority. Religious observances were highly regarded as the evidence of righteousness. People were under great pressure to practice them, whether they really wanted to or not. In that kind of atmosphere, people who desire honor and recognition easily become hypocrites. This can happen in our churches. Practices that are meant to build up our spiritual life can be misused to gain people’s praise. Decisions that should be made prayerfully and honestly before God are made reactively, to please people. Jesus wants his followers to practice righteousness as the genuine expression of faith. How can we? When we know who God is and live before him. This is what Jesus teaches us today.

Verse 1 warns us, “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.” Jesus implies that we should practice righteousness. This is the proactive effort to do what is right in practical life. It is not easy in a fallen, sin-sick world. One man met a brother in urgent need on the way to a prayer meeting. He said, “God bless you,” and continued his way. Later, he repented and came back to help his brother. He had to struggle to do what was right. Some people do not practice righteousness because they are paralyzed by selfishness. Some people do not practice righteousness because they are afraid they will become hypocrites. This kind of cowardly, do-nothing attitude is not an option for Christians. Jesus assumes that we will practice righteousness. It is the way to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. However, there is a danger to watch out for. It is that we seek to please people rather than God. If that is our motivation, Jesus warns that we have no reward from our Father in heaven. Jesus wants us to be rewarded by God. So he tells us how practice righteousness in three ways.

First, giving (2-4). Jesus said, “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” (2). Jesus assumes that we will give to the needy. Giving to the needy is an important virtue in all religions. But Christian giving is distinctive. While other religions emphasize giving to obtain salvation, Christians give as the fruit of salvation. We have received God’s salvation free of charge, so we give to others free of charge. Jesus said, “Freely you have received; freely give” (Mt 10:8b). We should not give to earn merit and boast, but to express gratitude to God and to give him the glory. Giving to the needy means more than contributing money. It includes visiting the sick or lonely, encouraging the broken-hearted, and sharing the word of God with others. How wonderful it is to practice such giving in this selfish world. Yet, there is a danger. In Jesus’ time, some people blew trumpets when they gave. They wanted to hear others say, “Wow! Look at that generous person! Let’s elect him as mayor!” We may not promote our giving so blatantly. Still, we have trumpets in our hearts. Self-promotion seems necessary to get a good job, marry well, or gain prestige. But in giving to the needy, we should not promote ourselves. If we do, we become hypocrites (2). A brief moment of human recognition will be our full reward.

How, then, should we give to the needy? Jesus said, “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” (3-4a). Our giving should be done in such a way that, in some sense, even we ourselves are not aware of it. How can we do this? It is possible when our giving comes so naturally that it is done subconsciously. This requires us to develop a giving spirit and lifestyle as our habit. This happens as we practice giving in secret diligently. Then our Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us (4b). In Acts 10, we find a man named Cornelius. He was a centurion in the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. God chose him as the first to receive the gospel of salvation through Peter. What a blessing!

Second, prayer (5-15). Prayer is personal fellowship with God. Through prayer, we can connect to God who is our source of life. We can gain wisdom and strength, forgiveness and peace in our time of need. But there are dangers that our prayer life can become hypocritical (5). In truth, hypocrites do not talk with God in prayer; they use prayer to display their holiness before others. Jesus said they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Devoted Jews prayed three times a day. During these times, Daniel went into his room, closed the door and prayed to God sincerely (Da 6:10). But the hypocrites went outside and stood on the street corner to pray. They prayed loudly with dramatic arm motions. Like them, some in our time promote themselves through prayer. Though they pray very little in private, they pray for a long time in public.

Jesus teaches a right attitude in prayer: “But 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 reward you” (6). When we pray, we should go into our room—closing the door to the world and opening the door to God. We should turn off our cell phones to have personal time with God. What a blessing this is! Most of us probably cannot have a personal meeting with the president, or a famous athlete or movie star. Nevertheless the Creator God invites us to meet with him personally. This has been called the sweet hour of prayer. It is the way to find new strength when we are weary. It is the way to find courage and wisdom to overcome temptation and hardship. It is the way to a victorious and fruitful life. When we know what a great privilege we have in prayer, we will not misuse it.

Jesus warned against one more danger in prayer: “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (7). Here “babbling” means to keep repeating the names of gods until one is found who listens, or to keep repeating the same phrase in the hope that the god will become so worn out that he answers the prayer. For a Christian, this could be praying without any real point. It may be making “small talk,” with God such as “thank you for this day, thank you for this weather” ignoring the real need they have. In truth, they do not bring their real problem to God because they don’t really trust him. However, God knows everything we need, even before we pray (8). He wants us to bring our real problems to him in prayer, even one time with sincere hearts, so that he can help us.

In verses 9-13, Jesus taught us how we should pray. Prayer begins with the words, “Our Father in heaven.” Though God is so awesome and holy, he is also our Father. How can we call God “Father”? Because of what Jesus has done for us through his suffering, death and resurrection. Who is God? God is not just one of many gods. He is the unique God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3,17). He is the God of the Bible. He is the Creator God, Redeemer God, and Judge of all. He is holy, righteous and just. He is loving, compassionate, forgiving, and everlasting. He is perfect, unlike our earthly fathers. We can God our Father and have an intimate love relationship with him. He protects us, provides for us and blesses us with every blessing. He leads us safely to his heavenly kingdom. It is so wonderful to call God “Father.” Let’s call out together, “Our Father in heaven.”

This prayer contains six petitions—three related to God and three to our needs. The first petition is “hallowed be your name.” It is for God’s name to be highly honored and set apart as holy. When people fell into sin, they no longer thanked God or glorified him as God (Ro 1:21). They became idol worshipers, morally corrupted, and blasphemers of God’s name. It is now common to hear many vile words about God. In this social environment, Jesus’ people are to honor God as God. So, whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, let’s do it all for the glorify God (1Co 10:31).

The second petition is “your kingdom come.” This means that God’s reign may be restored in our hearts and lives, and in this world. Some people abandon God, thinking they will be free. Instead, they find themselves ruled by evil powers that make their lives as miserable as hell. In the final analysis, no one can be their own master. Each person will be ruled by God or by the devil. The devil rules with coercion, deception and terrible fear. As a result, people become depressed, depraved, and violent. On the other hand, God reigns with love and peace, grace and truth, justice and righteousness. Under God’s reign people are happy, fruitful and victorious. This is why we should pray for God’s kingdom to come in our hearts, families, society and nation.

The third petition is “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In heaven, everything is done according to God’s will because God is the Lord of all things. But on earth, there are many people and powers who do not submit to God out of rebellion. This is the real reason there is so much chaos in our world. We must pray that God’s will be done. Sometimes we pray for both God’s will and my will to be done. But prayer should be a time of submitting our will to God’s will. Even Jesus prayed, “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Mt 26:39b). We can pray like this because we know that God’s will is good, pleasing and perfect (Ro 12:2b).

Now Jesus guides our prayer to our practical needs. First of all, we should pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (11). The point is to depend on God daily for material needs. We should not be proud and self-sufficient, but come to God for help daily. Jesus asks to pray for “our” daily bread, not “my” daily bread. We have heard of the dire need of the people of Venezuela. We should pray that God may give them their daily bread. We should be generous and mindful of all those in need.

Secondly, Jesus teaches us to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (12). Here “debts” refer to “sins.” Sin breaks the relationship between God and us, as well as between people. The relationship between God and us is unique. God is holy. We are all sinners. Each of us is like a man who owed his master 10,000 talents (Mt 18:21-35). We could never repay this, no matter how hard we tried. But, in his great mercy, God graciously cancelled our debt completely; he forgave all our sins unconditionally. Still, we need to ask God’s forgiveness every day. As God has forgiven us, he wants us to forgive one another. In fact, he assumes that we have forgiven all who sin against us before we come to him in prayer.

Finally, Jesus teaches us to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (13). We assume that we can overcome all kinds of temptations with our own strength and wisdom. Sometimes we don’t realize how clever and powerful the evil one is. He has seven heads and ten horns (Rev 12:3; 13:1). With our one head and no horns we are no match for the evil one. We should acknowledge that we are vulnerable, especially when we are alone. So, we need to pray for ourselves and for each other.

In his version of the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew emphasizes restoration through forgiveness. Jesus said, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive yours” (14-15). The only condition that Matthew mentions her to be forgiven by God is to forgive others. By the same token, those who don’t forgive others who sin against them will not be forgiven by God. Unforgiveness is a very serious problem in a Christian community. Those who don’t forgive others are extremely miserable—they experience hell in their hearts. They become like venomous snakes who spread a judgmental spirit, grudges and complaints. Forgiving others is not an option, but mandatory. How can we do so? We should always remember that God forgave all our sins. Then we can forgive others and experience God’s forgiving love and restore relationships with them.

Third, fasting (16-18). Fasting is to abstain from eating food for spiritual purposes. In Jesus’ time, pious Jews fasted twice a week. This became a kind of standard of righteousness. Some people, when they fasted, disfigured their faces to show others they were fasting (16). They let their facial hair grow, spread ashes on their faces, and went around with a grimace. Jesus said that the recognition they received from people was their full reward. Then he gave instructions about how to fast, saying, “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…” (17-18a). Jesus wants us to fast, not before men, but before God. Then the Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us (18b).

We can apply this teaching more broadly than to just fasting. It can apply to anything we do for the sake of self-control to devote ourselves to God. It can be fasting from social media or entertainment. It can be denying our sinful desires, such as lust, anger, pride or hatred. We Christians must know how to control ourselves. This struggle should be done before God, not before people. When we do this, we can please God and God blesses us. We can be healthy, happy and fruitful in body and spirit.

Throughout this passage, one phrase is repeated three times: “…your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (4,6,18). Here we learn who God is and what he wants us to do. Though God is invisible, he sees what is done in secret. He knows everything; he is present everywhere at once; nothing is hidden from him. King David knew this about God and he said, “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar…Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Ps 139:1-2,7-8). What then shall we do? We should do everything before God’s eyes. God rewards those who live before him. The reward from people is recognition, praise and honor. This reward does not last long and generally makes one proud and useless. Apostle Peter knew this and said, “For, ‘all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1Pe 1:24-25a). The problem is that our desire for human recognition is very strong. But when we know that God’s reward is far greater than people’s recognition, we can practice righteousness secretly, seeking only God’s reward. God rewards us with joy, peace, love, and true satisfaction. God enables us to bear good fruit and to grow in his image. God also blesses us in every way to be a blessing to others. Let’s live before God. Let’s seek God’s reward.