

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Life, the Jesus Way
(Studies in the Sermon on the Mount)

Why Do You Do What You Do?

(Matthew 6:1-18)

Study #7

Introduction: Choose Your Reward...

A number of credit cards and stores allow you to “choose your reward” for the purchases you make.

For any given purchase you might choose the reward of dinner at a fine restaurant, cold hard cash, merchandise, or airline miles.

If you are reward-conscious shopper, you’ll give careful thought to what reward you choose. You’ll choose the most valuable reward you can get. After all, why get another set of steak knives when you could get a boost toward that once-in-a-lifetime vacation?

To be honest, only one time have I ever used my accumulated “miles” to get a free airline flight, and I generally don’t pay that much attention to these “reward” programs. Not that I don’t like rewards, but it’s just never seemed to me to be worth the hassle.

But when I discover that Jesus offers His own “choose your reward” program, I’m very interested. He promises that God will reward us who follow Him - and His rewards program is out of this world.

We’ll read the fine print of the Lord’s “choose your rewards” program in the passage we are considering today in the Sermon on the Mount.

Review...

The Lord has been urging us to righteous living, and that on a number of fronts. Compared to other standards of righteous living, Jesus has raised the bar really high.

He has spoken against murder and anger, adultery and lust. He has called us to unimpeachable integrity and non-retaliation. He has commanded us to love not only our friends, but also our enemies.

Now, though, He turns a corner and talks about three arenas of life in which we can express our obedience to God and the seriousness of our devotion to God. He speaks of giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. And He starts off with a warning about the practice of all of these righteous acts.

You’ll remember that our memory verse for the month of September was Matthew 5:16. There, Jesus said, ***“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”***

Right before that He said that we were not to hide our light under a bushel. No! We are to put it on a lamp stand so that it will shine bright. He wants God to be honored as people see our good deeds and He wants us to do our good deeds in such a way that people see them.

Then we hear Jesus say this.

A “Righteous Living” Warning (6:1)

If You’re Out to Get People’s Praise... (v. 1a)

[6:1a] “Beware¹ of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them...”

And that almost looks like a direct contradiction to Matthew 5:16. Almost.

¹ Beware = “watch out that you don’t...”

We are to let our light shine, not so that people will glorify us, but our heavenly Father. And we are to be careful to do great stuff, but not for the purpose of being noticed by others.

The opposing mindset is more popular. The prevailing thought - and our temptation - may be to believe, *"If you've got it, flaunt it."*

Got a great mind? Let everyone see that mental brightness. Got lots of money? Conspicuous consumption is the ticket.

It would seem that some players in the NFL and some in the NBA haven't read Matthew 6:1. When they cross the goal line or when they let fly with a windmill dunk, it's celebration time. They drink up the limelight, prance and preen for the crowd. All this, unlike say, the always humble, never boastful, now retired Tim Duncan (or, as he is now known in San Antonio, "Saint Timmy").

Jesus urges modesty, humility. By all means practice righteousness, but don't parade it.

But listen to the surprising end of Jesus' words from verse 1.

...Then You'll Get No Reward from Your Heavenly Father (v. 1b)

[6:1] "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

Here, I'd like for us all to especially note what Jesus does NOT say.

He doesn't say to not parade our righteousness around because it's not polite, or because it's not modest, or because it's not what respectable people do.

He says that we are to not play to the crowd or advertise our good works to be rewarded and applauded by people, because, there is another Audience - an Audience of one - who will give a better reward.

We will receive reward from one, but we can't receive reward from both.

And everything Jesus says from this point forward is to urge us to strive for the reward God wants us to have. He wants you to sign up for His "rewards program".

With that understanding, we listen to Jesus give us some "for instance's." His first "for instance" concerns the use of our money.

Heeding Jesus' "Righteous Living" Warning (6:2-4)

Giving to the Poor (6:2-4)

Hypocritical giving (v. 2)

[2] "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites² do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

Giving to the poor

Jesus doesn't say *"If you ever give to the poor..."* but **"When."** He assumes that we who follow Him will be generous toward the poor.

And in fact, giving to the poor has always been a hallmark of Christian discipleship.

The first church in Jerusalem made sure that widows were supported. Relief offerings were taken up and distributed to the poor. The apostles Peter and Paul gave priority to serving the poor (See Galatians 2:10), and James reminds us to remember the widows and the orphans.

Throughout church history, believers in Jesus have cared for the poor, established orphanages and hospitals, and helped the least, the lost, and the last.

² Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the reference to hypocrites and to hypocrisy is intended to take our thoughts to Pharisees and scribes. (See Matthew 23)

But there is a way to serve the poor that boomerangs back to glorify the giver. Jesus warns us against that.

The practice of some

His words take us into first century Jewish culture and customs. In the temple in Jerusalem and in local synagogues there were receptacles, made of metal and shaped like funnels, into which people would toss coins for the support of the poor.

Throwing money into these receptacles made a lot of noise. It was called "*sounding the trumpet*." - and everybody knew when some giver gave that money.

Sometimes, too, people would march in front of priests as they collected money for special purposes, blowing trumpets as they walked. In both of these cases, the spotlight was on the giver.

I don't know if this is where we got our own saying, "*He's just tooting his own horn*" or not. But clearly the same spirit can motivate our own giving, today.

Do you ever sense an internal craving for someone to know when you've helped someone out with a financial gift? Have you donated some large item to a needy family and then made sure to slip that donation into casual conversation?

If so, you know the temptation Jesus is warning against.

There is a married couple that is mentioned in the New Testament who craved a reputation for generosity. Their story is recorded in Acts, chapter 5. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property for a certain amount of money and then brought some of the proceeds of the sale to the apostles to be distributed to the poor.

That was a fine thing to do. The problem, though, was that they told the apostles they had donated the entire proceeds of the sale, when in fact they had kept back a portion for themselves.

They were more concerned to have the reputation for outrageous generosity than they were concerned to meet the needs of the poor. Peter rightly accused them of lying to the Holy Spirit and they dropped dead, judged by God for their lie.

Paid in full

But...for a moment they got exactly what they wanted. They wanted to be well thought of by the church for their generosity. They chose their reward and got slaps on the back and affirmation and applause for a few hours - until then their hypocrisy became known.³

That's as far as the reward for hypocritical giving goes. Hours or days. Maybe years. But Jesus doesn't want us to settle for that puny reward. He wants us to aim for a higher, more glorious reward.

Giving, the disciple's way (v. 3)

[3] "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"

The idea is secrecy, but I will submit that Jesus is counseling "relative secrecy."

We just noticed Ananias and Sapphira's hypocritical giving in Acts 5. Well, right before that we see another example of giving that was NOT hypocritical.

In Acts 4, we see giving that is pure-hearted, full of love and integrity, and God-honoring. A man named Barnabas sold a piece of property and then brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles to be distributed to the poor.

Notice. People knew what Barnabas had done. It wasn't done in total secrecy.

³ Hypocrisy consists of deception. At first, it is deception of others. In time, it morphs into self-deception. Who knows? Maybe Ananias and Sapphira thought that they were actually doing well. Our capacity for self-deception grows as we live hypocritically.

But there was something about the way Barnabas gave that drew attention to the beauty of generosity and that gave glory to God. And nobody saw *that* when Ananias and Sapphira gave.

So when Barnabas gave, it was not in total secret. But it was as *secretive* as it needed to be to deflect praise away from him (Matthew 6:4) and as *public* as it could be so as to direct praise to God (Matthew 5:16).

That kind of giving murders hypocrisy. And you can murder hypocrisy by contributing to our church's Benevolence Fund.

This is a special fund of money that is used to help people who are facing hardships.

They may be about to have their utilities turned off, have urgent medical needs, or are about to be evicted. Write a check to Northwest or give online and indicate "Benevolence." That money will meet needs in Jesus' Name.

Or...

Keep your eyes open while you're here at church on a Sunday morning and you just might see someone who would benefit from your generosity. You might hear someone make a comment about a need and think, "*I could help with that.*"

And then, with no show, no fanfare, no trumpets sounding, you approach her, press money into her hand, and whisper, "*Buy what the baby needs.*" You give him your cold, hard cash and tell him, "*I love you, brother. Get that car fixed.*"⁴

Here's what Jesus says about that kind of giving.

Rewarded by God (v. 4)

[3] "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing [4] so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

You won't get crowds applauding you. But you've chosen a better reward. It's a secret reward known only to the Father and it's way worth waiting for.

So, Jesus expects His people to give to the poor. He also expects us to pray. Without missing a beat, He moves from the theme of giving to the poor to the theme of prayer.

Prayer (6:5-15)

Hypocritical praying (v. 5)

[5] "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites;⁵ for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

How some pray

Jesus is not against praying out loud and He's not against praying publicly. He's not making a statement about the need to kneel rather than stand.⁶ No, He's warning us against "praying" to the crowd.

In faith communities, like ours, those who pray out loud run the risk of forgetting that they are speaking to God. When that happens, what is happening isn't really prayer at all.⁷

⁵ Hypocrisy is the opposite of "perfect" in Matthew. To be perfect is to be "whole-hearted"; hypocrisy is obviously the opposite. Hypocrisy is inner incongruity.

⁶ See Matthew 15:36, where Jesus prayed, publicly and out loud before the feeding of the 5,000; Matthew 18:19-20, where Jesus assumes His followers will pray together; 1 Timothy 2:8, where Paul urged Christians to pray, publicly, together.

⁷ See the parable in Luke 18:9-14 where Jesus tells of the tax-collector and the Pharisee. They both prayed, but the Pharisee was praying **[11] to himself.**

⁴ Such giving enhances real fellowship. The Greek word "koinonia" (often translated "fellowship") actually means "shared life." Giving is being a material witness to the life we share in Jesus.

Paid in full

God's not moved. He's not pleased. But people are impressed. And, if that was the reward sought, well, **Mission: Accomplished.**

People walk away thinking, "*Now that was a really good prayer*" - and the pray-ers rewards card is stamped, **PAID IN FULL.**

But as it was with giving to the poor, so it is with prayer. God has a better reward in mind than the applause of the crowd. So here's Jesus, on prayer.

Praying, the disciple's way (v. 6a)

[6a] "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret..."

Be sure that you pray more in secret than you pray in public. Be sure to never neglect to nurture your intimate life with God in prayer. Pray privately first. Pray privately most.

Rewarded by God (v. 6b)

[6b] "...and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Again, just as with giving, Jesus promises reward for genuine, sincere prayer. Prayer without hypocrisy is what He's after and He'll reward you for it. There is no mention here of what the reward will be, when it will be given, or what the reward will look like.

But choosing whatever God will choose to reward you with will bring the greatest delight you can imagine. You'll never ever be disappointed with God's reward.

And now Jesus does something with prayer that He didn't do when He was speaking of giving and that He won't do when He deals with fasting.

He takes a moment to paint a picture of what He wants our prayers to look like. And, first, He shows us how NOT to pray.

It may sound odd to hear that there is a right and a wrong way to pray, but Jesus says that if we listen to Him here, we'll avoid a couple of prayer errors.

A model prayer (vv. 7-15)

How NOT to pray (vv. 7-8)

[7] "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. [8] "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

The point is certainly not that we shouldn't pray long prayers. Jesus prayed long prayers, once, praying through the night (Luke 6:12). He is not objecting to that.

And He also repeated Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying three times that after He drank the cup of God's wrath, it would pass from Him. Later in this sermon (Matthew 7:7) Jesus will tell us to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer. It's not a foul to pray repeatedly for the same thing.

Rather, He is correcting the false thinking that it is the length of a prayer or the number of repetitions that make it effective.⁸ God hears and is moved by short and long prayers, all night petitions, or a quick plea for help. He's listening for genuineness. Authenticity. Desperation.

Instead, we are to pray this way.

⁸ Pagan religion did - and does - believe this.

How TO pray (vv. 9-15)

[9] “Pray, then, in this way:

**‘Our⁹ Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.**

[10] ‘Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

[11] ‘Give us this day our daily bread.

[12] ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

[13] ‘And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.]¹⁰

[14] “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. [15] “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”¹¹

This is “The Lord’s Prayer”. Or, more properly, “The Disciple’s Prayer.” It’s not the prayer the Lord prayed. It’s the prayer the Lord wants you and me to pray.

***Simple and brief

The prayer is simple and it is brief. Fifty-nine words. There is nothing showy about it. Jesus’ language is plain and down to earth.

***All about God (vv. 9-10)

This prayer is all about God from the outset. We address God as “Father.” Jesus wants us to think of God as a Father, a powerful protector.¹²

⁹ “Our” Father indicates a community of people praying this.

¹⁰ It is my understanding that the final doxology (the end of verse 13) was probably not a part of Matthew’s original Gospel. Scribes may have added it to make the prayer “liturgically complete.” See 1 Chronicles 29:11 for similar language.

¹¹ Verses 14 and 15 are expansions on “as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

¹² God is referred to as “Father” 15 times in the Old Testament. The term was always used to refer to His relationship to the nation. Jesus’ habit of referring to God as the Father of individuals was striking and new.

“Father” speaks of intimacy while “heaven” reminds us of His otherness, His transcendence.

The first three requests of the prayer center on God.

We pray that God would be seen to be as holy as He truly is, that the earthly kingdom (the kingdom of Messiah) that is spoken of throughout the Old Testament would come soon,¹³ and that until that day comes we, Jesus’ disciples, will display THAT kingdom’s values by the way we live.

We fix our focus on Him, His glory, His reign, His holiness. And then we bring Him our requests. This prayer is a declaration of our dependence on God.¹⁴

***A declaration of dependence (vv. 11-12a, 13)¹⁵

We express our trust in God for daily bread. For all we need - not the luxuries, but the necessities - we affirm our dependence on God. TODAY’S stuff.

Forgiveness is the one thing we can never earn and it is exactly what we need from God. So, we express our trust in God to take care of YESTERDAY’S sins.¹⁶

¹³ Yes, the kingdom of God is His sovereign reign over all history. Yes, the kingdom reign of God is a reality into which we can, in part, enter by submitting to Jesus’ Lordship now. But when Jesus tells us to pray, “*Your kingdom come...*” He is speaking of neither. He is telling us to pray for, to eagerly anticipate, and to prepare ourselves for the time when He will set up an earthly kingdom over which He will reign as Messiah. This is predicted in the Old Testament, is affirmed in the Gospels and in the New Testament letters, and is explicitly described in Revelation 20 as a reign that will last for one thousand years (the words “*one thousand years*” being written 6x in six verses). Those listening to Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount could have welcomed the kingdom by receiving Him as Messiah. Instead, they rejected Him. (See John 1:11; John 19:15)

¹⁴ Jesus commands that we bring our personal requests to God. This is not selfish. This is trusting Him with our deepest needs rather than trusting ourselves or any other human resource.

¹⁵ All three of these are connected by “and” indicating that the three are a unified request for all our needs.

We were forgiven, once and for all, the moment we believed.
(Acts 10:43; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14)

We became God's daughter, God's son, and nothing will change that. But on-going cleansing for the sins we continue to commit is necessary for intimacy with God. (1 John 1:9)

And then, with respect to TOMORROW, we pray for protection from temptation so that we can lead holy lives. We are all vulnerable to temptation's lures. We might sin if the opportunity arises. So we pray that God would keep us from tempting situations that could result in our sinning.

We lay the past, the present, and the future before God and declare our dependence on Him. And then we bind ourselves to the disciple's highest calling to forgive as we have been forgiven.

***Forgiven forgivers (v. 12b, 14-15)

Once I see the enormity of my sin against God, and the grace that has been poured out for my pardon, I will weigh the wrongs I have suffered from others far differently. I'll become a forgiven forgiver.¹⁷

If I withhold forgiveness, I'll not enjoy the grace I've received. I'll give up intimacy with God and will invite His severe discipline.

That is the model prayer, The Disciple's Prayer. It's brief and simple. It's all about God. It's a grace-filled declaration of dependence.

And then, after dealing with giving to the poor and with prayer, Jesus speaks about fasting.

¹⁶ Forgive us our "debts" - viewing sins against God as a debt we owe Him. See Psalm 51:4.

¹⁷ Jesus' point is certainly NOT that we earn our forgiveness by forgiving others. It is that if we want full enjoyment of the forgiveness we have received, the experience of forgiveness, and the intimacy with our Father that should be ours, we will forgive those who wrong us.

Fasting (6:16-18)

Hypocritical fasting (v. 16)

[16] "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

Abstaining from food is not as popular a discipline as prayer and it's not practiced as much as giving to the poor. But Jesus does envision His disciples fasting.

Fasting isn't about going on a hunger strike to wrench a blessing out of God. It's about abstaining from food to more fervently seek God, to concentrate on God, and to pray to God about those things that are closest to your heart.¹⁸

The truth is that our physical hunger can actually be a catalyst that will drive us to depend on God and there are lots of examples in Scripture of people who fasted.¹⁹

There was only one day on the Jewish calendar when God's people were required to fast: The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. But as the centuries passed, more fast days of were added.²⁰

¹⁸ God required that the Jews fast on only one day out of the year, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur - observed this year, on Tuesday, October 11 at sunset until October 12 at sunset.) But over the years, other fasts were added, many of which are mentioned in Zechariah. God was not impressed. The Jews then were fasting just as they were in Jesus' day - to impress people.

¹⁹ Moses fasted when He was on the mountain with God receiving the whole Law, after having received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:18); The Jews fasted after a military defeat (Judges 20:26); Hannah fasted out of desperation for a child (2 Samuel 1:120; The people fasted, asking God for a safe journey from Babylon home to Palestine (Ezra 8:21-23); The people fasted before Esther went before the king to beg for her people (Esther 4:16); Jesus fasted before He was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-20); the church fasted before sending our missionaries. (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23)

²⁰ See Zechariah, chapters 7 and 8.

By the first century, the Pharisees were fasting a couple of days out of every week²¹ - God was not impressed.

They had turned fasting into one more show, just as they had done with giving to the poor and prayer.

On “fasting days” they looked the part. They didn’t shave, dressed badly, looked haggard and worn. Everybody who saw them knew that they were fasting. The fasters were practically shouting, *“Look at me. I haven’t eaten for hours, for days!”*

And people were impressed. That had been the point all along. So, again. **Mission: Accomplished.** They chose their reward and were paid in full. Again, Jesus points to a better reward.

Fasting, the disciple’s way (vv. 17-18a)

[17] “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face [18a] so that your fasting will not be noticed by men...”

Jesus doesn’t lay down a law as to when we should fast. But He clearly assumes that we will, from time to time, fast.

And when you fast, keep it a secret. Make sure nobody can guess that you’re fasting. Put on a smile. Shave and dress up. Do your hair and keep to your routine.

And why does He recommend a secret fast? You know.

Rewarded by God (v. 18b)

[17] “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face [18] so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

- God smiles when, on purpose, you go without eating for hours or days to draw near to Him.
- Your Father is pleased when you refrain from food to pray, to seek Him and to get to know Him better.
- You bring joy to your Father’s heart when out of desperation for Him to do what only He can do, you fast.

And when you do all this in such a way that nobody else even knows - it’s just between you and your God - you are in line to receive great reward from this gracious and loving Father.

Conclusion:

If we do what we do for the praise of the people we want to impress, we’ll get that and nothing more. We can spike the ball in the end zone and hear the crowds yell our name, and we are **Paid in Full.**

Or, we can do what we do in a way that shines light on God and receive an infinitely better reward.

Hebrews 11:6 says that if we come to God as He would have us come to Him, we will believe not only that He *“is,”* but that **“He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”**

Eternal life is a free gift, given to those who don’t work, but who believe in the finished work of Christ on their behalf. The rewards Jesus speaks of here in the Sermon on the Mount are earned by faithful service by those who have been given eternal life.

And while we aren’t given lots of specific revelation about what these rewards are, we are told that faithfulness will be rewarded with increased authority and responsibility in the coming kingdom and even with the privilege of reigning with Jesus in that coming kingdom.

We do, though, get a glimpse of the rewards that will come our way for faithfulness in a parable Jesus told about some slaves who had been left to do work while the master went on a long journey.

²¹ Although it is agreed that these were “partial” fasts, either allowing the person to eat lightly, or to only fast during daylight hours.

One of the slaves was unfaithful and was severely disciplined for not working in the master's absence. But the two slaves who did what they were charged to do received commendation.

They received that increased authority and responsibility I just mentioned - and more.

To both of these slaves, the master said **[Matthew 25:21] "Well done, good and faithful slave...enter into the joy of your master."** (also verse 23)

Among the rewards you have to look forward to then and there for faithful service here and now is unfettered joy in the presence of God. That is a joy we never quite taste today, because today there's always something wrong with everything. There, you will be home, with your Father and all will be perfectly well.

And this. You will receive God's commendation. Heaven's applause.²²

Just imagine. You have passed through death's door and you stand in God's presence. You are welcomed because you are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus.

And you have given your life to living as Jesus calls you to live. You never got much recognition. But you pursued holiness and you loved. You served the poor and you prayed and you fasted "under the radar."

And then, standing there in glory, the most amazing thing happens. Your Father begins to clap - for you. He's celebrating your life. All heaven joins in the celebration. There is thundering applause that continues as your Father approaches, embraces you, kisses you.

Then He steps back and says, "*Well done.*"

THAT is the reward you have to look forward to. And THAT is a reward worth choosing.

²² With gratitude to Max Lucado for his insightful book on the Beatitudes, [The Applause of Heaven](#).