

The Reward of Secret Service

Matthew 6:1-18

Northwest Community Church, Todd Havekost, 10/16/2022

Introduction

My brothers and I were blessed to grow up in a stable home with two very loving parents. One aspect of this (among many) was that we always had a roof over our heads and food on the table. It never occurred to us kids that it might be otherwise.

I didn't realize until I became an adult the reason we enjoyed this security was that one of the primary motivating factors in my dad's life was a commitment to provide financially for his family. That commitment led him to make a major career change as a young man to leave farming and take on a series of challenging jobs in order to obtain a more reliable source of income for his family.

Living out that core motivation of providing for his family had far-reaching implications in his life. It meant never again enjoying the level of job satisfaction he experienced in his twenties as a small but independent farmer.

All of us have a set of motivating factors that drive what we do and how and why we do it. We may be able to clearly articulate some of these factors, while others may remain more or less unexamined in our thinking. In our passage today, Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus presents a motivating factor He considers worthy of orienting our lives around, one that you may not have expected.

As we seek to understand a passage it is always helpful to examine the context and audience. Matthew chapters 5 to 7 capture Jesus' well-known Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the Sermon Jesus presents perspectives very different than what His audience was used to hearing. 5:2 tells us His primary audience was "disciples", people following Him from place to place showing interest in His teaching (a broader audience was likely also present).

There is another subtle theme running in the background throughout Jesus' Sermon that we should keep in mind. At this time the Pharisees were widely considered to represent the epitome of spirituality and thus role models for righteousness. But Jesus saw things very differently. He repeatedly presented sharp contrasts between their conduct and that of a life that is pleasing to God¹, which will also be evident in our passage.

Matthew 6:1

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father² who is in heaven (6:1).

When doing good works, Jesus warns against valuing the immediate praise of men more than the ultimate reward of God. The heart of the issue is who I consider the audience for my good deeds. Am I seeking to impress men and gain their approval? Or am I serving in the sight of God, to please and honor Him? Jesus' primary teaching throughout this passage is that when I seek to be noticed by men, I lose out on the highly valuable reward of God.³

¹ For example, in the preceding passage (5:17-48) He taught that righteousness is not primarily an external matter (as the Pharisees thought) but flows out of the heart.

² Another of the many revolutionary teachings of Jesus was for believers to address God as their Father. Only fifteen times was God referred to as the Father in the Old Testament, and then only by comparison, not direct address, e.g., Ps 68:5; 103:13. God was never called the Father of an individual or of human beings in general (Thomas Constable, Notes on Matthew, p. 191).

³ The Greek word translated "reward" here is *misthos* (also in vs. 2, 5, and 16). "Misthos refers to some kind of monetary compensation in Matt. 20:8; Acts 1:18; [1 Tim. 5:18]; James 5:4; 2 Pet. 2:15; and Jude 11. But the English word "pay" (or

Jesus now proceeds to apply this general principle to the three chief areas of piety as identified by the Jewish rabbis: giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. It is reasonable to consider His teaching here applicable across the broad categories of service to others, devotion to God, and spiritual disciplines.

Matthew 6:2

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites 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 (6:2).

Jesus begins by teaching we should not draw attention to our giving. "Sounding a trumpet" metaphorically represents any action which draws attention to what one is doing, though there are accounts from NT times of trumpets being blown to gather the poor so that gifts could publicly be distributed to them.

Jesus describes those that seek the praise of men as "hypocrites," an English word that comes directly from the Greek "hupokritos." In the Greek of New Testament (NT) times, that word simply meant an actor who performed on a stage. Jesus was personally responsible for giving this word a new meaning with the ethical connotation we think of today, someone who intentionally represents himself to be different than what he really is. Jesus is only person who used the word in the NT, and He used it 17 times, most frequently referring to the Pharisees as here.⁴

So the next time you encounter someone who rejects Christianity because there are hypocrites in the church, you can point out to them that they owe their understanding of the folly of being a hypocrite to Jesus Himself. And you might go on to observe that since they passionately agree with Jesus that being a hypocrite is a bad thing, they may be closer to being a Jesus follower than they realize.

Note the interesting way Jesus describes this outcome. Rather than saying they lost out on any reward, He says the opposite, "they have their reward in full." They got exactly the outcome they were looking for, the honor of men.⁵ But the tragic thing (from Jesus' omniscient perspective) was they missed out on the most important thing, the weighty thing, the eternal thing, the reward of God.

Matthew 6:3-4

But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward⁶ you (6:3-4).

"compensation") would work in virtually every NT instance of this word. The frequent traditional translation "reward" somewhat clouds for the English reader what was obvious to the Greek reader. "Reward" referred to one's pay or compensation for this or that" (Zane Hodges, "We Believe In: Rewards", JOTGES Autumn 1991, p. 5, fn 3).

⁴ Jesus makes veiled references to the Pharisees as "hypocrites" at this early stage of His ministry when they had not yet corporately rejected Him, inviting them to repent of the errors of their ways. He confronts them directly and forcefully late in His ministry with a 7-fold "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (Matt. 23), after they as a group had conclusively rejected Him, stating explicitly there (23:5) what He implied here, "**they do all their deeds to be noticed by men.**" Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were among a small minority of Pharisees who eventually believed in Jesus (John 19:38-39).

⁵ "When we want human approval and esteem, and do what we do for the sake of it, God courteously stands aside because, by our wish, it does not concern him" (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Kindle 210).

⁶ A different Greek word translated "reward" is used here (and in vs. 6 and 18), apodidomi, lit. "give back", repay. It is the word used by the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:35 when he told the innkeeper "**when I return I will repay you**" for the expenses incurred for the wounded man. There doesn't appear to be a significant difference in the meaning between the two words as used by Jesus in this passage, as evidenced by the fact that most major English translations translate both as "reward."

Instead of seeking to impress men, Jesus uses a figure of speech that calls us to be so committed that our giving not be seen by others, it is as if we are not even aware of it ourselves.⁷ When your giving is in secret, when it is done in the sight of and for the pleasure of God, "your Father will reward you."⁸

Reward

Notice how Jesus frames His teaching throughout this passage. The motivation He cites for His primary exhortations, both the negative ones (don't try to impress others) and the positive ones (do good works in God's sight), is so that we will receive God's reward. That was His rationale in verse 1 when He introduced the entire discussion. And He repeats that for each of the three sections (giving, praying, and fasting). His seven references in this passage identify "reward" to be His unifying theme.⁹

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.		
When you give to the poor ...	When you pray ...	Whenever you fast ...
6:2-Do not sound a trumpet before you ... so that they may be honored by men ... they have their reward in full.	6:5-They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men ... they have their reward in full.	6:16-They neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting ... they have their reward in full.
6:4-So that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.	6:6-Go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.	6:18-Wash your face 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.

You may find it surprising that Jesus would identify "reward" as the driving principle here behind what we do and why we do it. For some, the concept of being rewarded for how we live is unfamiliar territory. For others, it is a source of misgivings of various sorts. So we are going to spend a few minutes here to see if we can bring more clarity to Jesus' teaching here of living for God's reward.

Distinction: Salvation Apart from Works vs. Walking as a Christian in Good Works

If your life journey has involved leaving behind teaching that people had to earn their way into heaven, and you now joyfully embrace the amazingly good news that everyone who believes Jesus' promise of eternal life is saved by grace apart from works, the concept that God rewards His children for good works may appear to conflict with the grace and "free-ness" of salvation.

Indeed, the moment we believed Jesus for eternal life countless aspects of our position and standing before God changed for us forever. These include being delivered from the prospect of condemnation, being made alive to God, being adopted as His daughters or sons, and having Christ's righteousness credited to us.

But God didn't take us home immediately to be with Him at the moment we believed. Instead, He has a purpose for the rest of our lives, that we live in a manner pleasing to Him and do good works that He has graciously promised to reward (2 Cor. 5:9-10). And the great majority of the NT is written to help us do exactly that.

⁷ Earlier in this Sermon Jesus exhorted His followers to "**let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven**" (5:16). There He emphasizes how the overall impact of a loving and grace-filled life brings glory to our Father; here He laments the vanity of works intended to impress others and bring glory to ourselves.

⁸ "A life lived listening to the decisive call of God is a life lived before one audience that trumps all others – the Audience of One" (Os Guinness, "The Audience of One").

⁹ Note that Jesus has already referenced "reward" twice earlier in the Sermon, 5:10-12 and 5:46.

Nowhere is this distinction between becoming a Christian that "has nothing to do with works" and living as a Christian that "has everything to do with works"¹⁰ more apparent than in the familiar Ephesians 2:8-10 passage.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9). After highlighting the free gift of salvation that comes through faith entirely apart from works, Paul continues ... **For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them** (Eph. 2:10).¹¹

Note how Paul pivots seamlessly from "saved ... not as a result of works" in verses 8 and 9 to "created ... for good works" in verse 10. God's purpose in our lives as believers is that we walk in the good works He prepared for us. These are two entirely distinct subjects: one (receiving eternal life) has nothing to do with works; the other (living out that life as a faithful follower of Jesus) is all about works, which He graciously prepared and are done in dependence on Him.¹² When we consider eternal salvation, grace and works are mutually exclusive, like oil and water. When the subject is the Christian life, grace and good works go together like peanut butter and jelly.

These good works don't reflect "doing our own thing" in a manner independent from God. These are "works God prepared ... that we should walk in them." In John 15 Jesus uses the image of us as branches connected to Him as the vine so that His life and power flow through us to produce much fruit (15:5). In 2 Cor. 4 Paul describes us as ordinary earthen vessels through whom the "surpassing greatness of [God's] power" is clearly seen (4:7).

So when reading the NT, keep in mind the basic interpretive principle that if you are reading about something that comes as a free gift through faith apart from works, you know the subject is eternal salvation. When you encounter exhortations to godly living (which make up the majority of the NT¹³), the context is how we are to live as Christians, seeking to please God with good works that He will reward. If you keep this basic distinction in mind, you will find the NT to be very understandable.¹⁴

Reward Considered an Inferior Motivation¹⁵

Another consideration inhibiting some from embracing the reward motivation advocated by Jesus in Matthew 6 is the perception it is an inferior or even selfish motive. This line of thinking considers the most noble service to be

¹⁰ "A Christian ... is saved freely and forever by the grace of God. But once he is saved he is profoundly responsible for what he does with the rest of his life." (Hodges, Grace in Eclipse in Free Grace Primer, p. 433).

¹¹ Verse 10 is probably best understood "We [plural, the church] are God's masterpiece [collectively singular], created in Christ Jesus for good works ..." (John Niemela, "We are His Masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10)", Grace in Focus, Aug. 29, 2022).

¹² "For Christians, salvation took place in a moment in the past. It was free, it can't be lost, it is the same for all Christians, and it is for those who believe. By contrast, rewards will be given in the future, are earned (by God's grace), can be lost, differ among Christians, and are for those who work" (Randy Alcorn, The Law of Rewards, p. 95).

¹³ In the NT, John's gospel is the only book with a stated evangelistic purpose, "**so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name**" (20:31). Almost all of the rest of NT is addressed to us as believers, calling us to follow Jesus and showing us how God wants us to live. Note the introductions to the epistles explicitly indicating they are written to those who have believed in Jesus ("to the saints", "to the church", "brethren", etc.).

¹⁴ If you consult notes in most study Bibles you are likely to observe a different approach, one that starts from the assumption the subject matter is eternal salvation and thus interprets the text as conditions for getting saved or requirements for keeping or proving your salvation. This confusion is often compounded by an apparent lack of awareness that the root meanings of the words usually translated "to save / salvation" (sozo / soteria) are "to deliver / deliverance", and these words are frequently used to indicate deliverance from a variety of calamities other than hell (e.g., Phil. 1:19, from imprisonment, cf. 1:28, 2:12; James 5:16, from illness; many other examples could be cited).

¹⁵ The extent of reluctance to embrace the teaching that God intends rewards to be a primary motivator fueling the service of His people continues to surprise me. If reward truly represents a prevalent theme of the NT, as supported by the 50+ references in Appendix A, perhaps this reflects effective Satanic opposition (as depicted in C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters) to a truth that when properly understood greatly energizes and mobilizes Christians to live for Jesus.

disinterested or selfless, and any consideration of “what's in it for me” lessens the value of that service. The term “altruism” is sometimes used to describe this.

Notice that Jesus advocates for altruism toward other people but not toward God,¹⁶ beginning with Luke 14.

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

Look for situations where you can help other people who can't help you in return, Jesus says. Why? So God will reward you in heaven.¹⁷ In Luke 6:35 He also makes that same distinction. **“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great” (Luke 6:35a).**

When you love people who aren't loving you in return, and give to people who won't pay you back, your reward from God will be great. This can have far-reaching implications for how we relate to others, calling us to embrace opportunities to reflect God's grace in one-sided relationships, valuing God's reward over human reciprocity.

More broadly, Jesus' challenging exhortations to self-denial in this life never stand on their own but are also always linked to promises of future, greater reward (e.g., Luke 9:23-25).¹⁸

One more reference from Jesus on reward comes from earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, speaking to people facing persecution. In four weeks when we set aside time in our Sunday services to pray for persecuted Christians, we will hear the story of a woman from Nigeria whose husband and son were killed by Muslim extremists and her home destroyed. She and many of her fellow persecuted Christians face some of most hopeless conditions imaginable in this life. With that context in mind, listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 5.

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10-12).

Jesus says, if you knew what I know, how great the reward will be for Christians who are faithful in the face of intense adversity, you would “rejoice and be glad” at the opportunity your persecution provides to receive such reward. Jesus' “go to” motivation for people facing the most intense hardships in this life is for them to look ahead to great reward.¹⁹ Jesus considered God's future, eternal reward to be a primary motivator fueling godly living.²⁰

¹⁶ The definitions and descriptions of altruism on 10 dictionary and psychology websites all dealt exclusively on the human plane. As Jesus repeatedly indicates, God's involvement changes the picture entirely.

¹⁷ I expect this also applies to other cases of helping those who can't help you in return, e.g., mothers raising little children.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis wrote extensively on this theme. “The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak” (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, sermon, p. 1).

¹⁹ Reward is also presented as the “go to” motivation for those facing severe opposition in 2 Cor 4:7-18 and Heb. 10:32-11:40 (see end of sermon). Also, it is likely that a similar principle of great reward applies to those faithfully serving God in the face of other forms of extreme adversity, e.g., chronic health issues, difficult home situations.

²⁰ The central role reward played in Apostle Paul's motivation to spend his life in service for Jesus is described in Appendix B.

Disheartened not Motivated by Reward

There are others who embrace the NT teaching about rewards but find it disheartening rather than energizing. This temptation to give up on the prospect of reward can come from a couple of different angles.

Some are inclined to compare themselves with others and conclude "I could never measure up to that person's service." The deception there is that such comparisons are completely invalid, every person's stewardship and every person's life situation is entirely unique, including the home situation they grew up in, adversities they have faced, and scope of areas in which God is calling them to serve.

Paul spoke directly to each of us having a unique stewardship²¹ and the futility of comparing in 1 Cor 4.

In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Cor 4:2-5).

Only Jesus with His infinite knowledge and understanding of each of our lives and hearts and stewardships is qualified to deliver a fully informed assessment. Remember that at the time Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount people were putting the Pharisees on a pedestal and comparing themselves unfavorably to them. The entire Sermon on the Mount showed how wrong that perspective was. Don't fall for the deception of allowing comparisons to derail you from saying "yes" to Jesus to carry out the good works He is putting on your heart. Every act of service done in God's power to please Him will receive His reward, whether known to others or unknown, in an up-front role or behind the scenes, speaking or serving gift, in public or in the home.²²

Another potential source of being disheartened by teaching on rewards can arise from regrets over opportunities we have missed or ways we have fallen short in our past. In our Sunday afternoon visits our son Grant who was then on a great path of following Jesus would often express regrets about his wasted years, as would I about my years as a judgmental, self-righteous Pharisee. Then we would pivot to thanking Jesus for having taken away all those sins. Finally, we would affirm God wanted us to walk in the good works He prepared for us going forward.

Paul's history as Saul persecutor of Christians meant he was no stranger to regret. His words to his son in the faith Timothy in 1 Timothy 1 give us a window into how he dealt with his past.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1 Tim 1:12-16).

Paul never got over that Jesus didn't write him off and instead gave him the honor of serving Him as His primary apostle to the Gentiles. God has proven again and again across the pages of Scripture that He can redemptively

²¹ "You have been commissioned to manage an asset for your Master. Your asset is your life --- the sum of your talents, strengths, personality, and interests. Your opportunity is to manage your life in such a way that you greatly increase your Master's kingdom. Your Master has not yet returned ..." (Bruce Wilkinson, A Life God Rewards, p. 65)

²² "God will reward everyone who seeks the honor that comes from Him alone. This is within the reach of everyone - whether you are a high- or low-profile Christian ... whether you are the 'eye' or the 'hand' in the body" (R. T. Kendall, Sermon on the Mount, Kindle 182).

bring good out of the failing of His people. So it was with Paul, despite his being the “foremost” of sinners, which included being a primary force behind the killing of Stephen in Acts 7 that lit the fuse of persecution that scattered the church out of Jerusalem.²³ God was still able to bring His good purposes to pass, using that scattering to advance the gospel across Judea and Samaria (as Acts 1:8 had anticipated), and making Paul Exhibit A that God will save anyone who believes in Jesus for eternal life and He can deploy anyone in His service.

No matter what we have done or opportunities we have missed in the past, God still has good works He wants us to walk in today. Let us all affirm we won’t allow regret for missed opportunities in the past to be the cause of more missed opportunities in the present.²⁴ And let’s affirm you won’t allow what anyone else is or isn’t doing to stand between you and fulfilling His unique stewardship for you that only you can fulfill, as you reflect onto others the grace and mercy He has showered on you.

Jesus and the NT authors repeatedly refer to God’s reward as a primary motivating factor in our faithfully serving Him, as reflected in Appendix A insert listing more than 50 NT references to reward or Jesus’ evaluating our lives. Jesus intends for His promise of eternal reward to spur us on to a driving passion to please and serve Him.²⁵

Matthew 6:5-6

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; 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 (6:5).

Returning to Matthew 6:5, Jesus applies the same principles to prayer. If my objective in praying is to impress others with my devotion to prayer or to sound spiritual to others when praying in public, then any admiration from others will be the extent of my reward.

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (6:6).

If I regard prayer as intimate personal interaction with my Father²⁶, then of course I will pursue that in private. The first blessing of prayer that comes to mind is seeing prayers answered in my life and in the lives of others. But here Jesus also promises reward for our private prayer, perhaps primarily as we intercede on behalf of others.

Matthew 6:7-8

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 (6:7).

Along with not praying “like the hypocrites”, there are other pitfalls with prayer Jesus also wants us to avoid which He places under the heading “don’t pray like the Gentiles.” When people who don’t know the true God pray, it often ends up having two serious problems.

²³ “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

²⁴ In addition to living faithfully for Jesus today and each day going forward, James tells us another way we can influence His assessment. “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:12-13). Jesus makes the same point later in this Sermon (7:2), that in evaluating our lives He will apply the same degree of mercy we show to others.

²⁵ Other motivations for godly living highlighted in the NT include love for and gratitude to God, avoiding temporal consequences of sin, and temporal benefits of righteous living.

²⁶ Dallas Willard defines prayer as “intelligent conversation about matters of mutual concern” (Kindle 214).

The first one NASB translates “meaningless repetition” (NIV has “babbling”). This is a fascinating compound word. The second half of the word is “logeo”, to speak.²⁷ That is standard fare. But the first half of this word makes it interesting, because it is the unknown word “batta,” found nowhere in surviving Greek literature. It doesn’t mean anything. So we might translate this “speak gibberish”. Pagan prayers often consist of sounds that have no meaning. An equivalent for us could be, “Dear God, blah, blah, blah, yada, yada, yada.” Along with unintelligible words, Jesus may also be including here any prayer where fixed words are mindlessly recited in a rote manner.

The second problem with “Gentile” prayer is that it commonly relies on a sheer quantity of words. Jesus dismisses the idea that the length of a prayer makes it effective.²⁸ These two errors of the prayers of people who don’t know God are connected. They end up babbling and multiplying words devoid of meaning because they think what matters is saying the words rather than the true expression of the heart. They view God as if He was a vending machine that takes words rather than quarters.²⁹

So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him (6:8).

Unintelligible sounds and multiplied thoughtless words are of no value because God already knows what you need. He is not lacking information. But if God knows what we need, then why pray? Primarily, because God’s chosen standard mode of operation is to carry out His purposes through His people, and this is nowhere more prominent than through prayer. Later in this Sermon Jesus says, “ask and it will be given to you” (7:7). James wrote “you do not have because you do not ask” (4:2). Jesus told multiple parables teaching that we should persist in asking, that in response to our asking God acts, often through our own good works, across every sphere, including our own lives, in the lives of those close to us, and through the ministries of our church.

Another key aspect of prayer is relational. When I pray, I am “casting my cares” (1 Pet. 5:7) on my loving Father, exchanging my anxiety for His peace (Phil. 4:6-7), tuning in to His promptings, expressing my dependence on His working in and through me, and aligning my walk with His purposes (“Your kingdom come ...”, Matt. 6:10).

Matthew 6:9-13

Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 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' (6:9-13).

In verses 9-13 Jesus gave His disciples (and us) a model prayer commonly known as The Lord's Prayer. It was not His prayer in the sense that He prayed it, but in the sense that He taught it. He introduced this prayer as an example of a way to pray, particularly one that avoids the pitfalls He just mentioned.³⁰ Unfortunately, we don’t have time this morning to do justice to examining this prayer, but we will come back and use it as our corporate prayer at the end.

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you your sins (6:14-15).

²⁷ The corresponding noun is “logos”, famous from John 1:1, “**In the beginning was the Word** (logos) ...”.

²⁸ Note the distinction between multiplied (thoughtless) words, which Jesus condemns here, and persistent, thoughtful, heartfelt prayers, which He frequently commends.

²⁹ Helpful material on verse 7 gleaned from treasuringgod.com/mt-6-7-8.

³⁰ Constable, Notes on Matthew, p. 190.

In verses 14 and 15 Jesus added a postscript on the importance of forgiving, because not forgiving others is a major impediment to our prayers. He already highlighted this earlier in the Sermon (5:23-24), and it would be the subject of His famous parable about forgiving 70 times 7 later in Matthew (18:21-35).

Matthew 6:16-18

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 (6:16).

In verse 16 Jesus transitions to the third “good work”, fasting. Fasting as a Christian discipline is going without food to engage in a spiritual exercise such as prayer with greater fervency and focus. It often reflects a desire to be more “dialed in” to God’s presence and promptings. Faithful Jews of the Old Testament fasted on the Day of Atonement, and several examples of fasting are recorded in the NT.³¹

Again, as with giving and praying, the “hypocrites” distorted fasting into an occasion to impress others with their spirituality, exaggerating the impact on their appearance so their “discomfort” was apparent to all. And again, that admiration by others was the full extent of their reward.

But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 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 (6:17-18).

Spiritual disciplines such as fasting are designed to enhance our intimacy with God and thus are only of value when done for His attention alone. And when done in such a manner, Jesus assures us our Father will reward us.

Conclusion

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote to Jewish Christians facing intense pressure to abandon following Jesus and to retreat to their prior “don’t rock the boat” lifestyles as observant Jews. His appeal to them to endure in walking by faith (beginning in 10:32) contains multiple references to reward. This appeal continues into chapter 11 where the author cites many heroes who continued to walk by faith in the face of opposition and adversity.³² Beginning in verse 24 we see how Moses stepped out in faith and what motivated him to do so.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:24-25).

Moses left behind his "lifestyles of the rich and famous" in Pharaoh's palace to enter into the sufferings of his fellow Jews. That decision resulted in a life full of headaches, including:

- his personal 40 years in the wilderness
- incurring the wrath of most powerful man in the world
- being chased for his life through the Red Sea
- the thankless job of leading a perpetually grumbling people for another 40 years of wilderness wandering
- and finally, dying before he could set foot in the promised land.

That choice resulted in a great deal of adversity for Moses. Why did he do it?

³¹ Including Anna (Luke 2:37), Jesus (for 40 days prior to His temptation from Satan, Matt 4:2), the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:14), the leaders of the church at Antioch (as they prepared to send out missionaries, Acts 13:2-3), and Barnabas and Paul (in conjunction with appointing elders in newly planted churches, Acts 14:23).

³² Verses 8-16 explain that Abraham’s leaving behind his luxurious life in Haran and wandering around in tents without ever reaching the promised land was driven by his faith that God would deliver on His promises after he died (“they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one”, 11:16).

Considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward (Heb. 11:26).

In Moses' case, we get a special glimpse of the ultimate outcome of that decision at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17). Instead of a life on the sidelines resulting in 80 years of luxury in Pharaoh's palace, Moses chose a life with the hardships that came from being fully engaged in God's work leading to 80 million years of glory beside Jesus. Moses chose wisely, because "he was looking to the reward."

Verse 6 of Hebrews 11 details what these great men and women of faith believed about God that motivated them to walk by faith in the face of great adversity.

And 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 seek Him (Heb. 11:6).

If we want to live lives of enduring faith that please God, we will build upon the twin truths that:

- God exists - though unseen His presence is woven into every aspect of our lives (Heb. 11:27)³³, and
- He is a rewarder of everyone who seeks Him.

This is the only time this word for "rewarder" is used in the NT. It is a compound word made from putting together the two words used for reward in our Matthew 6 passage, "wages" + "pay back".³⁴ I understand stacking those words to be an indicator of intensity, emphasizing that God is a super-rewarder, an over-the-top rewarder.

We have seen today that God wants us to do our good works not to impress men but for His reward, that living motivated by His reward has far-reaching implications for what we do and how we do it, and that it is His gracious nature to be a super-rewarder. We each face different temptations. It may be to live for man's applause, to retreat from adversity, or to remain a spectator from the sidelines. Whatever our situation, Jesus promises His reward will make living "all-in" for Him so worth it. He wants us to be spurred on by the prospect of gaining His weighty glorious eternal reward.

In our passage Jesus gave His disciples an example of how to pray. As we close, let's stand and pray together thoughtfully using His words.

**Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
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.**
(Mat. 6:9-13)

³³ "By faith he [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (Heb. 11:27).

³⁴ Misthos + apodidomi = misthapodotes

Appendix A: Verses on Reward and/or Judgment Seat of Christ

Gospels

- Matt 5:10-12; 6:1-18, 19-21; 10:39-42; 16:24-27; 19:27-30; 25:14-30
- Mark 8:34-37; 9:41; 10:28-31
- Luke 6:22-23, 35-38; 9:23-25; 12:33-34; 14:12-14; 18:28-30; 19:11-27
- John 4:36; 12:24-26

Pauline Epistles

- Rom 14:10-12
- 1 Cor 3:8-15 [cf. Matt 7:24-27]; 4:1-5; 9:24-27; 15:58
- 2 Cor 4:16-18; 5:9-10; 9:6
- Gal 6:7-10
- Eph 6:5-9
- Phil 4:15-18
- Col 3:22-25
- 1 Tim 6:17-19
- 2 Tim 2:12; 4:7-8

General Epistles

- Heb 10:34-36; 11:2, 6, 7, 8-16, 24-26, 35, 39
- Jas 1:12; 2:12-13 [cf. Matt 7:2]
- 1 Pet 1:3-9; 5:1-4
- 2 John 8
- Rev 2:7,10, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 11-12, 21 [overcomers]; 11:18; 22:12

Appendix B: Apostle Paul Motivated by Reward

The Apostle Paul's testimony was that reward served a primary motivating role in his life. Throughout 1 Cor. 9 Paul shares his perspective on his personal life and ministry, explaining that receiving God's reward was the driving motivation that led him to relinquish the right to receive financial support from the Corinthians and to orient his entire life around how he might win more people to Jesus.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified (9:24-27).

We had a former youth pastor who liked to hang out at Krispy Kreme donut shops. Olympic gymnasts or swimmers don't spend their lives hanging out at Krispy Kreme shops. They orient everything they do around getting up on the medal platform and being awarded the gold medal. Paul oriented his life around faithfully fulfilling the ministry God had assigned to him so that he would receive eternal reward (in Paul's day the winning athlete was awarded a wreath rather than a gold medal). But there are a couple of big differences here that make this even more powerful. First, this is not a competition with a single gold medal, the wreath is available to every Christian. Also, an earthly gold medal is transitory and pales in value compared to the "imperishable wreath", the eternal glory and benefit of God's reward.³⁵

³⁵ When he reached the end of his earthly life Paul rejoiced that he was soon to receive the reward (now "crown") that had been his lifelong pursuit. **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day"** (2 Tim 4:7-8a).