

Part 9: Religious Robbery and Righteous Rewards

Tyler Velin | Matthew 6:1-18

January 21st, 2018

I found an article on CNN the other day which opened like this:

"You'd have admired Sarah if you'd met her when I did. She was beautiful, brilliant, charming, the CEO of her company, the life of the party. She thrived on all that admiration; you could feel it in the razzle-dazzle energy that drew people to her like flame-bound moths. You'd never have suspected that Sarah was an addict, unless you'd seen her a few hours after she'd glowingly received an award or ovation, when she was curled up in bed, anxious, needy, already jonesing for a fix. Sarah was abusing something more powerful, insidious, and accessible than any street drug: the adoration and esteem of others that some psychologists call narcissistic supply. Simply put, she was addicted to praise."

If we are honest with ourselves we probably have come to realize that this is the way most of us operate in our own hearts. Studies are beginning to show that the social media outlets so many of us are using are actually having an inverse effect on our ability to genuinely connect and enjoy other people.

That's because social media is less about communication and more about adoration. Think about the last time you used social media to reach out and connect with someone with no agenda for your own benefit. But when was the last time you checked an update on what people said about your post, liked about your comment, or viewed your picture? Or on the flip side, when was the last time something you saw online piqued jealousy in you, and made you think, "I deserve that more than they do."

The reason these sites quantify your likes, shares and views is because it plays to the narcissist in all of us. This problem is not unique to those on social media. Desires to be respected by our families as we age, or in our careers as we advance are often signs of this similar problem. In fact we in the church, and in our acts of worship are often guilty of same craving. Often we are caught in the trap of seeking the approval of men because we desire what man can give us. Last week we saw Jesus encouraging us to love others to the best of our ability. But there is a difference between loving those around us and living for those around us. Jesus wants us to love men, but to live for God.

To live for the praise and love of men is to see the honor of others as the reward we so desperately want. Humans are too weak to be mindless about anything. Whether we know it or not we are driven by the desire for a reward. It is not wrong to desire something, it is not wrong to seek a reward. This craving isn't a byproduct of evolution, it is instead the remnant of the divine fingerprint impressed on the human heart.

What Jesus is going to free us from using religion as a tool to find rewards in this world. He is going to free us from the slavery of religious narcissism by showing us the greater reward we have in himself. What we are going to see today is this: The rewards we seek in this world can only be found in the God of heaven.

I use the phrase religious narcissism here because this is becoming a real phenomenon. Last year a study performed by two social psychologists found that self-obsession and narcissism rates were generally higher among religious people than non-religious people. I think part of the reason church-goers, of any religion, are more susceptible to this is because most of our beliefs require some sort of action related to a reward. These actions, activities, habits or patterns are seen by those around us. If we don't understand the clear relationship

between actions and rewards, we will mistake the public context of our actions as the source and substance or our rewards.

This is why Jesus begins our text today with a strong warning: Matthew 6:1. Jesus uses this phrase "practicing your righteousness." What does he mean when he says this? The word righteousness implies a right-ness. Righteousness is being right, not wrong, faithfully fulfilling obligations to justice and perfection. In the New Testament this word is used two ways. Martin Luther helped us understand these two distinctions by calling one an alien righteousness, and one a proper righteousness.

Alien righteousness is righteousness applied to us from someone else. It is alien to us. This is the righteousness that saves us. This is what Paul was referring to in Philippians 3:9, (being found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith). This is what Jesus was speaking of a few weeks ago when we read: Matthew 5:20. We need a greater righteousness than the one the law gives us. We need the perfection of Jesus Christ. Through faith, our imperfection is covered by Jesus' alien righteousness so that God declares us to be right because of Christ. Alien righteousness is not something we can do, gain, or merit by our actions. It is something graciously given to us by God through faith in Jesus Christ.

But then there is the second kind of righteousness, the one which Luther calls "proper righteousness." This is the righteousness which stems from alien righteousness. This is the kind of righteousness Jesus is talking about in Matthew 6. Luther explains it like this: "The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self."

So when Jesus calls us to practice our righteousness, he is not saying that we practice righteousness in order for the coach of team righteous to see us and say: you've made the starting lineup. Instead the practice of righteousness is for those who have already been made righteous by the merit of Christ. It is a commitment to living a kingdom ethic because you have been saved by the king of the Kingdom.

If you think this is difficult to understand, try to place yourself in the shoes of the Jews listening to Jesus. They had not yet seen the cross, they didn't have the Bible which would explain to them how Jesus came to fulfill the law by dying on the cross as the perfect substitute for an imperfect people. Their only context for righteousness was the fulfillment of the law by the letter of the law, which was upheld and judged by the priests. Righteousness was almost an exclusively public act. Your sacrifices were to be given before the priests, your prayers were to be given in the synagogue, your Sabbath regulations were to be held in check by your neighbor.

And now Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people." Why is Jesus providing this caution? Because all the good and right actions which righteous people should be doing had been hijacked by wrong motivations. Jesus doesn't say "don't practice your righteousness before men, he says be cautious when practicing your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them."

Jesus knew the temptation of religious narcissism. He knew the fickle heart of man can easily be bumped off the track of pure worship and be twisted into a desire to be seen by men. And why is this dangerous? Look at what Jesus says: Matthew 6:1b. Do you understand the scandal of what Jesus just said?

There is a system of ethics called ontological ethics. Its premise is that we should do good things because we are obligated to do good things. If we do good things while thinking about the reward that good might accomplish, then we have ruined the good thing. It promotes this stoic execution of righteousness with no concern for the

wellbeing or benefit of the actor. Jesus just threw ontological ethics out the window. He said be careful when you practice your faith so that you do not lose your reward!

So Jesus has said, be careful when you “practice your righteousness,” so that you do not lose your reward. Well what does it mean or look like to do this? Jesus is going to give us examples of what he means and his examples center around what we would say today as “religious devotion.” Here we are a new year, new Bible reading plan, maybe a new prayer plan, perhaps new goals for your finances to better glorify God. These are acts of religious devotion.

But here is the challenge of Jesus and of this text: How do you practice righteousness without losing the reward? How many of you have been praying, or setting your alarm early to read, or fasting, or giving your money and deep down you’ve had the thought, “What I am doing here!? Why am I doing this?” Today Jesus wants to help save us from that reward robbing emptiness.

The idea of religious devotion in the time of Christ centered around prayer. And prayer was often seen as a central pillar supported by two other tasks: the giving to the poor, and fasting. When taken together this was the core of what it would mean for a religious person to “practice their righteousness.”

Jesus is going to address all three of these issues in this text, and we are going to look at them briefly, but out of order. Because prayer was the central part of this practice we are going to look at it last and we are going to start by looking at its two supports: giving and fasting. And what we are going to look at quickly in these three examples are three religious hearts which rob us of our reward. We are going to see what robs us of the reward, but then we are going to look at what the reward is.

First, let’s look at Matthew 6:2-4. One heart which robs us of our reward is Greedy Generosity. One of the places we want to get better at as a church is the care for those in our community who are less fortunate. As the church gets better at caring for itself, that growth should overflow into the way in which we care for our community. This is not a liberal agenda of wealth distribution, it is a glimpse which we can give our community of what God’s kingdom looks like. In the kingdom of God everyone is cared for.

And Jesus here describes a scene where people would come and give to the poor with great fan-fare. John Calvin said that it was the tendency of people to go and find a very public intersection in their town and begin a loud and austentacious summoning of the poor to receive their gifts. The givers would often justify such a display by saying that it was only with such visibility and pronouncement that the poor would know where to come. That’s because we are quick to justify what our heart should naturally be convicted by.

Jesus identifies the public action and connects it to a heart issue: Why such public appeal? Look at verse 2, “in order to be praised by others.” Depending upon your translation it may also say, “to receive the glory of others.” In America we are often more subtle with our money because we have this general rule where it’s rude to talk about such things. But just because we aren’t as public with it doesn’t mean these desires are not in our hearts. [How many of you have waited to deposit your tip money in the jar only when the employee turns to you!]

The irony of such a heart is that in their generosity to the poor, they are attempting to rob men of praise. They are not giving out of charity, they are giving out of selfishness. They think that the praise of men is the reward that would satisfy them, but Jesus says they have already received their reward in full. What is this reward? Just like the woman in the opening article, the reward is a heart enslaved to the fickle adoration of men. In trying to become a master we become puppets.

John Bunyan says of such men, "they look for returns, but it is in the windy applause of men." "But you" says Jesus, are not like these hypocrites. Who is this "you"? True disciple of Jesus. "But when you give you do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

The principle of the examples Jesus is giving is secrecy, but the issue isn't anonymity. It's worship. Our Father sees in secret. He can look into our hearts, past whatever external actions are there, and he sees our motivation. For whom, and to what end are we practicing our righteousness. Man may be duped, but God will not be. The reward is for those who please the eyes of the heavenly Father in secret, not the public men on the street.

The second example of religious devotion is fasting: Matthew 6:16-18. The second heart which robs us of our reward is Gluttonous Fasts. It's funny as I was studying this text. I was wrestling with the idea of how to make this fasting idea make sense since no one really fasts. What would a modern application be? Then I realized, we should probably fast. Jesus doesn't say, "if you fast," he says "when you fast."

Now we shouldn't fast because Tyler told you to fast, we should fast because of what fasting does in regards to our righteousness. Fasting reminds us of the God who sustains us. Fasting helps us exercise self-control over our flesh. Fasting gives us opportunities to pray to God in weakness. Fasting brings us a greater reliance upon our Father in heaven. While fasting is good for the soul, it is frustrating to our bodies. We want food. We feel hungry.

It is interesting to note that the word, "hypocrite" is really just the Greek word for "actor" or "role-player." I can't think of a better definition of what a hypocrite is. A hypocrite is someone who wants to put on the façade of being Christian in hopes that they can pass as one. And when the hypocrite fasts, he literally would go and unnaturally disfigure his faces. He would put on make-up. Maybe pull out fat-pants so his bodies would look more feeble than normal. And they would make it very obvious to people that they are fasting. "Look at how committed I am to righteousness!"

Even though the doctrine of fasting is often neglected in America, this problem is not. We fast from non-essential things like coffee or social media, and we announce it to everyone when we do it. Or we post pictures of our devotions, quotes from our quiet time hoping that people will see the sacrifice we make in order to be a good religious person.

But again Jesus gets at the heart: "so that they may be seen by others." The comfort they seek in their religious devotion is the support of men in their weakness. The whole point of fasting is to seek the support of God in our weakness. Fasting makes us stronger, not weaker. Therefore as Jesus says, wash your face, comb your hair, so that God who sees in secret will reward you. If the greatest reward we receive is the support of men, we have received nothing of any substance. In fasting these people feasted on the applause of men.

The last heart which robs us of rewards: Prayers of Performance. Let's look at Matthew 6:5-6. I think it's really interesting the word which Jesus uses here. He says these people pray in public because they "love" to be seen by others. For such hypocrites, it is the love of man which is the fuel for prayer not the love of God.

The other night I was holding Ellie on the couch while Sarah was putting the kids to bed. Normally at bed we do prayer time with the kids and they are to the age now where they want to pray too. Sarah came out this night and told me, "Owen just said he wants you to come in and hear how good he is at praying." How often are we motivated to pray for the same reasons? We are just better at disguising it.

How many of us are quick to pray at meal time with family or friends, but neglect to pray in the private times of our life? How many of you wrestle in your community groups or during the pastoral prayer to pay attention to the prayers of others because you are not the one praying?

If we pray only to be seen by men, then our greatest reward is what man thinks of us. But which opinion of man can satisfy us? Whose opinion among man can save us? As the article I mentioned early went onto say, "Her entire life revolved around eliciting positive attention from others, and she succeeded magnificently -- but always insufficiently." This is no reward.

I would say in regards to giving and fasting, but especially in regards to prayer the inverse of what Jesus is saying is also true. How many of you are paralyzed to pray in front of people because you fear being seen by others. Jonathan Edwards calls this "counterfeit humility." This is the same problem, just from the other direction. One says love me for my strength, the other is do not despise me for my weakness. Neither is a reward we would really want.

So how then do we turn from the empty rewards of men and instead attain the reward from our father who sees in secret? And how is seeking this reward not also self-centered and narcissistic? How does it protect a pure motivation and not also rob those who are around us?

Let's look together at this final passage: The Righteous Reward. Matthew 6:7-15.

In our other three passages we saw a pattern. We saw a warning to not be like the hypocrites, we saw a heart diagnosis, we saw the threat of poor rewards, and the promise of greater rewards. This passage, though sandwiched between the other patterns, breaks the mold.

Jesus doesn't call us to not be like hypocrites, he calls us to not be like the Gentiles. He does diagnose the heart though. He says that they heap up empty phrases, some translations say, they babble thinking that in their many words they will be heard by God. But then he doesn't mention the lack of reward.

Instead he says that we don't need to heap up strings of empty prayers to be heard by God, because God knows what we need already, and then Jesus tells us how to pray. Why? I think it is because the heart of a hypocrites is trying to please men, not God. But the Gentiles, though doing it wrong, are truly trying to be heard by God.

Perhaps this is you today. The idea of religious devotion has set you to a frantic set of commands hoping that God would accept those actions as righteous. If you seek your reward from men, you have already received it. But if the heart of faith sincerely seeks God, God is merciful to help us see him and seek him rightly.

Here we see the audacity of Jesus when he says, "God knows what you need, now pray like this." Jesus also knows our needs because he himself is God. And he is a God who wants us to see our religious devotion rightly. And then Jesus teaches us what is called, "The Lord's Prayer," which is an interesting title because Jesus tell us to pray this prayer. This is more the "sinner's prayer" than it is the "Lord's Prayer." Let's look again: Matthew 6:9-13.

What do we see in this text: We see men in prayer asking for God to be honored above all things, praying that his will would be chief in all things, seeing God as the provider of all sustenance, relying on God's forgiveness of sins as the touchstone for our relationship with others, and pleading with God to help us resist sin.

Here is the irony of this text: In a passage which harps on vain repeated words, we have the prayer which is most often vainly repeated. But this is the point of this text. And this is why there is no mention of losing or gaining a

reward in this passage. This relationship with God is the reward. It is nothing to know the prayers of God if we do not know the God of prayer.

What Jesus has just done is provide for us a framework of asking God to occupy our hearts with things which expel the thieves of joy out of our hearts. This is the beauty of true prayer, prayer which Paul describes in Romans 8:26-27.

Prayer is not our tool to get to God, it is God's tool given to man, so that man may better know God.

Who is more concerned about the praise of men when he prays that God would be honored as Lord? Who seeks to be seen by man when he prays that God's will would be the center of their life? Who boasts in the giving of gifts when it is God who gives us all things? Who seeks the reward of men when it is God who has forgiveness us of sin? Who relies on the support of men when it is God who delivers us from evil?

To pray this prayer in sincerity is not to practice your own might, but to practice the faith which Jesus has already enabled for us. To the hypocrites and to the Gentiles Jesus holds out the reward of the Father as a right relationship with the Father. This saving and satisfying prayer of faith is met with the reward of God himself. He is our reward.

Why is this not selfish? Why is it not narcissistic? Because it is hard to be self-obsessed when we are so wildly satisfied by someone else. The reward of God is not what God gives us, the reward of God is the forgiveness of God which lets us seek our Father in truth. This is our motivation for righteous works. We work out our righteousness because it allows us to better know and be known by God. In public and in private this is our greatest joy.

So if you are not a believer, I want you to consider the implications of this prayer. I pray that you realize there is nothing on earth which can bring you the security and salvation which has been provided by the Father in heaven.

And for the believer, I want you to practice your righteousness to the fullness of your reward. I pray that God meets this church richly in 2018. That our acts of faith are joyfully executed to the extent that we trust God to reveal himself more and more to us as we live out the redemption that he has already provided for us. And I pray that this reward spills over from this church and into our city. For we have the better prize which men want, and which Jesus has given.