**Live Before Your Father God**

July 29, 2018

Matthew 6:1-8;16-18

Key Verse 6:4b “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Do you like receiving rewards? There is not a person who does not like rewards. I received a lot of awards in school. I received an award for not missing even one day during my middle and high school. I went to school even when I was sick. But I could not get it during my elementary school days because I had a chicken pox during my 2nd grade. I was happy when I saw my parents were proud of me. So what I really wanted was not awards themselves, but the approval of my parents and my teachers. We all want rewards. We all work hard for rewards such as good grades and good jobs or recognition from others. Students spend countless hours updating Facebooks because they want recognition. What about our Christian lives? Can we live Christian lives without any rewards? Living Christian lives without expecting any rewards sounds so pure. But the Bible says that we should expect a reward. Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The problem is whose rewards we should seek, man’s rewards or God’s.

In chapter 5 Jesus taught the characteristics of Christians, who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. But Christian life is not just lived internally; it is expressed in action. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” When we live according to Jesus’ words, our righteousness will be revealed. Matthew 5:16 says, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” So we receive praise and recognition as holy people. But the problem is that we become sensitive to man’s recognition.

Look at verse 1. “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” We all have a desire to be recognized by others. So we are all vulnerable to the sweet poison of human praise. What is the problem with this? There is no reward from God. Men praise us for a few minutes and that is all. This does not give us real meaning or lasting joy. God’s reward is eternal; it truly satisfies our souls. We need God’s reward. God’s reward makes our lives joyful, meaningful and fruitful. Jesus does not want us to settle for empty human praise, but to be rewarded by God. Jesus tells us about three kinds of acts of righteousness: giving to the needy, prayer and fasting.

**First**, giving to the needy (2-4). Look at verses 2. “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” Jesus gives us a warning not to be hypocrites in doing acts of righteousness. A hypocrite is an actor. What he says and does before others is not a true reflection of who he is. Hypocrites do not live by the truth. They have to pretend to be holy and carry out the acts of righteousness such as praying, writing testimonies and Bible studies, in order to gain recognition from others. This makes life dry and tiring, and causes Christian activities to feel burdensome. This is worse than not receiving reward from God.

Giving to the needy is an important virtue of Christian life. But it is not practiced exclusively by Christians. It is also a virtue in Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and many other religions. But there is an important difference. Those of other religions give in order to gain salvation. Christians do not give to gain salvation. Christians give to express their thanks to God who saved us by his one-sided grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We received God’s salvation free of charge, so we give to the needy free of charge. Jesus told his disciples, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt 10:8b). For Christians, giving is not something to boast about. It is a pure expression of the grace that God has given us.

What comes to your mind when you hear the words, “give to the needy?” Is it a homeless person asking for a few dollars? We should certainly show compassion to such people. However, this is just one small aspect of giving to the needy. Giving to the needy also includes giving spiritual help to needy souls. Sharing the word of life with someone who is perishing, visiting and counseling a person with a problem, and encouraging the downcast are excellent forms of giving. How wonderful it is to spend time and money, and to give our hearts, in order to help needy people in this selfish world! Many of us serve students through 1 to 1 Bible studies. Often times, we do not get any credit for doing so. Many people do many activities to get recognition. So for them, 1 to 1 Bible study does not look like an activity to get credit. It is easy for us to announce before people that we are giving to the needy, saying, “I am doing these things. Please pay attention to me and recognize me and honor me.” We may not verbalize it, but we say it in our hearts. We have trumpets in our hearts. Our generation excels in self-advertisement. Without advertising oneself well, it may be impossible to get a job. However, Jesus warns us not to advertise giving to the needy. If we do, there will be no reward from God. Jesus said, “they have received their reward in full” (2).

**Second**, prayer (5-8). What is prayer? Verse 8 says, “Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Prayer is asking God for what we need. Some may ask “if God already knows what we need, why do we pray?” I can think of three reasons.

Firstly, God wants to have a fellowship with us. Praying for what we need is only part of our relationship with God. Our whole life is to be a prayer to God because our whole life is about following Jesus, being a disciple of Jesus. Prayer is not a magic formula to be recited to bring about the desired results, like Harry Potter spell, “Wingardium Leviosa” (means “lift up high”). Prayer is having a fellowship with God. We collected prayer topics from each other. This is a way to get to know each other and have fellowship with each other.

Secondly, prayer is our expression of dependence on God. Many times we do not know what to do; we only groan before God, but God hears and understands our groans. He is happy when we turn to him for help in our time of need. God wants to give what we need, but if we don’t ask, he cannot give. James 4:2b says, “You do not have not, because you do not ask God.”

Thirdly, through prayer, we align our will with God’s will. Sometimes you see little signs that say, “Prayer changes things.” It is true. The first thing prayer changes is us. It helps us to turn from our self-centeredness to God. Through prayer, we begin to think about God’s will for our lives and it teaches us to depend completely on our Heavenly Father and it reminds us that he is God and we are not.

Why pray if God knows everything in advance? Because God has ordained that our prayers are part of his plan for the universe. Our prayers really do matter to God. In a sense God limits what he can do in the world so that he can work through our prayers. It’s not that God “needs” our prayers. He doesn’t. But in his grace, he has invited us to join him in the great adventure of bringing his kingdom to this sinful world. Through our prayers, we partner with God in changing the world.

However, there is a great enemy in our prayer life, which is hypocrisy. Look at verse 5a. “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.” Devoted Jews prayed three times a day: morning, noon and evening. Daniel did this (Dan 6:10) and would not be interrupted, even at the risk of his life. When the time came, pious Jews stopped whatever they were doing and prayed, even on the streets. Those who prayed like this were recognized as pious people. In an attempt to gain this recognition, some people prayed only in public with ostentatious displays. They would stand on a street corner or in the marketplace, stretch out their arms, look up to heaven, and say something. Though their lips uttered prayers, in their hearts they were saying, “Look at me. I am praying. I am holy.” Jesus said they are hypocrites. One great evangelist said, “Those who don’t pray in private tend to pray long in public with many beautiful words. But those who truly pray in private keep their public prayers short.”

Then with what attitude should we pray? Jesus teaches us two things in verses 6-7. First of all, we should pray privately. Look at verse 6a. “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.” To whom do we pray? Our Father God, who is unseen. Prayer is not speaking to the air; it is a genuine conversation with our Father God, who is unseen. Our eyes do not see him, but our faith informs us that he is present and he is listening (Heb 11:1). We should turn off our computers, our phones and i-pads, and open our ears to God. We need this kind of prayer to live by faith victoriously in a troubled world. Secondly, we should not repeat empty words, but pray according to our needs, with faith. Look at verse 7. “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” Babbling is defined as foolish or meaningless chatter. Pagans think that if they keep babbling long enough, God will listen to them. So they repeat the same meaningless words again and again. For example, Buddhists chant, “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo,” (means, “Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra or Glory to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Supreme Law”) repeatedly as if it has a magic power. There is a danger that those who pray ritually can do the same. God does not want us to be superstitious and ritualistic. God wants us to come to him with our genuine need, as children coming to their Father. God values the depth of our prayer, rather than the length. God wants a genuine personal relationship with us. When we really cry out in faith, God hears us. A prayer can be simply, “Have mercy on me.”

**Third**, fasting (16-18). What is fasting? Fasting is to abstain from eating food for a spiritual purpose. In the Old Testament the Israelites fasted once a year during the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29). On the tenth day of the seventh month they had to deny themselves--literally, to afflict or humble their souls--which is connected with fasting and prayer (ESV). They also fasted when there was a national disaster or on other special occasions. For example, in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast for his people, urging them to join him in prayer when the enemies attacked them. Then all the people came together to seek the Lord. However, during Isaiah’s time, many people fasted without knowing the true meaning. So on the day of fasting, their fasting ended in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists (Isa 58:3,4). Maybe when they fasted, they became very hungry, and then they became angry, and then they began to fight with each other. So Isaiah taught them that real fasting is to humble themselves and to do justice and to help needy people (Isa 58:5-7).

In the days of Jesus, pious Jews fasted twice a week--every Monday and Thursday. So fasting became the symbol of a pious life. While fasting, they did not wash their hair or trim their beards. They spread ashes on their faces, and disfigured them. It was to impress others, who would say, “Oh, you are a holy person.” Jesus said this was their full reward. Look at verses 17-18. “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Jesus wants us to fast before God our Father, not men. Then our Father will reward us. In principle, fasting is not just abstaining from eating. It is to discipline our body for spiritual life. Worldly people live according to their flesh. But those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires (Gal 5:24). So we need to control not only our appetite for food, but our sleeping, thoughts, use of time, words, and sinful desires, such as lust, anger, hatred, pride, rebellion, laziness, and so on. It can be my checking e-mails every 10 minutes. It can be abstaining from Facebook. We need to discipline ourselves to resist everything that hinders us from living with God. It is self-denial. So Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself...” (Mk 8:34). This, too, should be done before God, not men.

In conclusion, we should do acts of righteousness before God. God sees everything that is done in secret. Nothing is hidden from him. People look at the outward appearance. But God sees the heart (1 Sa 16:7). God sees not only our hidden deeds, but also our thoughts and even our unconscious world. We can deceive men, but not God. God cannot be mocked (Gal 6:7). Hypocrisy is like a computer virus that infects our souls and taints our service to God. It robs us of spiritual life and meaning and leaves us empty. Let’s repent our hypocrisy and live before our Father God, and seek God’s reward in everything we do and find true satisfaction, peace and joy.