

Where is Your Reward?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 It's nice to be well rewarded for your hard work. A bonus or a raise, a congratulatory remark, an unexpected prize, whatever the reward, it's nice when it comes. A reward is different from a wage. A wage is what you earn; a reward is the extra on top of what you might've earned. A wage you get for doing the work; a reward you get for doing it well or ahead-of-schedule. So if you're going to get a reward for practicing your righteousness, your piety, your holiness, you'd better do it well.

2 How do you practice your righteousness? Follow the commandments. You fear love and trust in God above all things. You fear and love God so that you do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie or deceive by God's name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. You fear and love God so that you do not despise preaching and His word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. You fear and love God so that you do not despise or anger your parents or other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. You fear and love God so that you do not hurt or harm your neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical

need. You fear and love God so that you lead a sexually pure and decent life in what you say and do and husband and wife love and honor each other. You fear and love God so that you do not take your neighbor's money or possessions or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income. You fear and love God so that you do not tell lies about your neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. You fear and love God so that you do not scheme to get your neighbor's inheritance or house or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it. You fear and love God so that you do not entice or force away your neighbor's spouse, workers, or animals, or turn them against him, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

3 If the Ten Commandments didn't set an impossibly lofty standard for practicing your righteousness and thereby earning a reward, in the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, Jesus sets the bar even higher. Just a chapter earlier in Matthew's Gospel, part of the same Sermon on the Mount that today's reading comes from, Jesus said it's not enough not to murder. Now anger and hatred are just as bad as murdering. And it's not good enough not to commit adultery, now lust makes one guilty of adultery. And now in the second half of the sermon, Jesus turns His attention to doing good works so that others will see and notice them. "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." Don't let others know about your giving to the needy. Do not make of your prayers a display of your piety. Do not fast in order to seem holier than others around you.

4 All of the Sermon on the Mount may be summarized in Jesus' sentence immediately preceding today's reading: "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." If you keep all the Commandments and yet fail at one point, even once, St. James says,

you're guilty of breaking the whole law. If you obey the Commandments perfectly but have just one less-than-holy thought, all your righteous work does you no good. And even if you could get all the Commandments perfectly—inwardly and outwardly—and yet were proud of your good works and wanted others around you to notice and reward you, you're still damned as a sinner. But you know from experience that keeping the commandments is impossible. The ashes smeared on your forehead are crystal clean compared to your heart. You're sinful from birth and you sin with what you do and what you neglect to do. Repent. Rend your heart with sorrow over your sin and your sinful condition.

5 These Commandments, these admonitions from Jesus, every command of the Law was not given so that you might obey it. The Law was added, St. Paul tells the Romans, so that your sin might increase (5:20), so that your knowledge of sin might increase (3:20). The Law only makes you realize how imperfect, how doomed, how damned you are on your own. The Law was not given so that you would obey it. You can't. But One has.

6 The same Lord whose words are today's Gospel reading is the only One who kept the Law perfectly. He practiced perfect righteousness, was sinless. His was no shallow piety, no fleeting attempt to pacify an angry God. His was perfect righteousness. And for His righteousness, He was despised by those around Him. For all of Christ's righteousness, He received no reward from His Father in Heaven. The reward He received was rejection by His Father, abandonment by Him while He hung on the cross. With His righteousness, He took your sinfulness, your inability to obey even one commandment perfectly, and He received condemnation in your place.

7 The first time you received the sign of the cross upon your forehead, it was not made with ashes. At your baptism, as the Lord was claiming you as His own and placing His name upon you, you received the sign of the cross upon your forehead and

upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. Your Lord delivers to you the forgiveness He won on the cross where He paid the penalty for your sins. In Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, in His Holy Supper, the Lord delivers forgiveness of sins. And through the proclamation of His Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, he has given you faith.

8 You wear the righteousness of Him who was crucified. He kept the Law of God perfectly, so, wearing His righteousness, so do you. You may thus practice your righteousness as if getting used to a new garment. It may not seem to fit just right, it might not be perfectly comfortable, but the righteousness of Jesus is the garment you wear nevertheless. And as you practice your righteousness not so that others may notice but so that they may be served with the love of Christ, you get more and more used to it. It gets more and more comfortable.

9 That's why in Lent we make a practice out of intentionally denying ourselves. We deny ourselves food and bodily indulgences so that we may devote more time to prayer and meditation on God's Word. We deny ourselves luxuries and treasures we might otherwise have purchased so that we may give to those less fortunate. We deny ourselves, not in order to earn a reward in heaven, but because we know that the reward of eternal life has already been secured for us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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