

Righteousness & Reward

Matthew 6:1-18

So we've been working our way through Jesus' very famous *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus is setting before us "Life in the Kingdom of God". He is answering the question, "What does it mean to live as a disciple of Jesus?"

All through chapter 5, Jesus has been pressing his hearers beyond the external commands of the law, filling full the heart of God's good commands. He is pushing us deeper than a superficial righteousness to a righteousness of profound integrity and transparency. You could say that chapter 5 is the *what* of life in the Kingdom.

Now, in chapter 6, Jesus takes us deeper still to the *how and the why* of Kingdom righteousness. Having just spoken of righteousness that comes from the heart, Jesus now confronts the *desires* of our heart. In the next passage Jesus speaks to our desire for *wealth* and *treasure*. He will go on to address the desires that we have for *security*, and *provision*, and even *justice*. *But today*, Jesus addresses that deep desire that all of us have to be recognised and rewarded for our righteousness. Again Jesus confronts our hearts and calls us to live for his Kingdom.

And so here's the plan for today,

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is it a problem?
3. What *is* not the solution?
4. What *is* the solution?

1. **What is the problem?**

So what is the problem here? Well, Jesus states it plainly in chapter 6 verse 1. Have a look again with me, Jesus says:

*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others **to be seen by them.***

You can see this as Jesus unpacks the principle in each of the three sections of this passage. In each case he says

*When you give to the needy/when you pray/when you fast...**do not be like the hypocrites.***

Now we know what a hypocrite is don't we? We can smell the stench a mile away! That terrible gap between appearance and reality. Hypocritical righteousness is play-acted righteousness.

And that's exactly what Jesus is getting at. The Greek Word here is basically *is* hypocrite, and it's taken from the world of the theatre. A Hypocrite was literally an *actor*. And when we give and pray and fast just to please the people around us, Jesus says it's like we're putting on a show at the Concourse. And everyone around us is the crowd.

Giving to the needy stops being an act of service, and becomes a staged production announced with the trumpeting of our own goodness.

We turn our prayers into PR. Reading our lines for the applause of our fans.

And fasting ceases to be a discipline that turns ourselves out to the love of God and our neighbour, and instead it is just another thing that turns the spotlight on ourselves to show how serious we are, and how spiritual we are.

The problem Jesus is targeting here is the sinful inclination of our hearts to turn away from the very *practical* matters of loving God and our neighbour and making our lives *theatrical*. It's so easy to give up on the messy and difficult righteousness of reconciling with our neighbours, of being faithful to our promises, of being radically generous and loving towards our enemies, and to opt instead for the flashy – and much easier – righteousness of the hypocrite.

The problem here is exactly what we have seen over the past few weeks: It's the self-centredness that is the very root of our sin. The problem is we recast reality as the *grand story of me*. And we make other people, and even God himself, bit-part players in the riveting drama of our life.

And I hope you can see how Jesus' words come crashing into the reality in which we all live today. I mean, you're more likely to get odd looks than admiring looks if you start to pray outside Chatswood Chase (hypothetically). And you're more likely to be praised for intermittent fasting than the sort of fasting that Jesus is talking about.

And yet, don't we just swim in the water of this self-centredness. We are always putting our lives on display before others in order to be seen by them. I mean what is the point of going on a holiday, or having a pet, or of doing *anything* if you can't leverage it for likes on social media. Tally told me last week that during her prac at a pre-school the kids would draw pictures of their family and their parents would always be holding their phones in their hands.

We have literally become the producers of our own indie films, phone camera in hand, filtering out the mess – or maybe even keeping the mess – depending on what will look the most impressive.

It ought not surprise us, then, that we carry this attitude into church with us. In fact, it's probably even more dangerous at church because we really do want to esteem service, and prayer, and spiritual discipline. So we volunteer to pack up the chairs with half an eye to whether the girl we like is watching. We pray once a week...at home group, when others are listening. We drop subtle hints to what we are reading in our quiet times, or we always work hard to appear super serious so that everyone knows how super spiritual we are.

And it's not just a matter of external fanfare either. Jesus says in *verse 3* that we should give without our left hand knowing what our right hand is doing, because he knows that the trumpets in the streets are not the only problem. For don't we all know that swell of the orchestra in our hearts when we do the right thing and we sing to ourselves, "Ah! I really am quite a decent fellow after all!"

The problem, Jesus says, is that we can so easily even make our service of other people into an act of self-promotion. In our stubborn self-centredness we turn purity into a performance, and piety into a play.

2. Why is this a problem?

So why is this performative righteousness such a problem?

Well, for starters, and this isn't really in the text so much, but can you see how this is such a **DISSATISFYING** way to live. For how fickle are the praises of our fellow human beings. Talk about a tough crowd, am I right?

What wins you acclaim one minute will get you cancelled the next. I mean just look around: is the constant display of our lives for others to see leading us into greater joy and satisfaction? No! Loneliness and anxiety and self-doubt are rampant, especially amongst young people as they feel the constant gaze of the critical crowd.

But here in the passage Jesus points us to two more reasons why performative righteousness is such a problem.

Firstly, it's **DEHUMANISING**. We've already seen the way that Jesus uses the language of fanfare and the theatre in this passage, and we also see that he uses the language of *finance* and transactions. Jesus says that the praise of others is a reward, literally a *wage*. When we perform for the praise of others, we take our service out of the realm of genuine relationship and cast it more as a business transaction. Rather than seeing people as an end in themselves, we actually see them as a *means* to an end. In chapter 5 we saw how we can objectify people as objects to be *used* for our pleasure, or obstacles to our own satisfaction to be *cast aside*, and now here is a new dehumanisation: people become simply an outlet for our own egos.

And here's the nasty out-working of this: if this is the way you view people, how will you treat them, when nobody is watching?

If people are simply a means to the end of your own praise...will you serve them when nobody is watching? No! Will you perhaps even hurt them? Maybe.

Ravi Zacharias was an internationally renowned Christian apologist. He travelled the world defending the truth of the resurrection, and he was greatly respected for living a life that matched. But in the past couple of months it has come to light that behind closed doors he preyed on, manipulated and ultimately abused many women in the most vulnerable positions.

He wore a mask before the crowds. And was a monster when no one was watching.

In his exposition on this passage, Don Carson says it right up front that this passage is a particular warning to people like me in Christian ministry. And I had better hear it. For if people are just a crowd to be pleased then at best I will be indifferent to people's real need. At worst, I will drag them through the mud, and the name of God with them.

And this leads to the second big reason why the problem is a problem: that when we *perform* our righteousness we **DISQUALIFY** ourselves from the Kingdom of God. There *is* a reward in pleasing people – it's a great feeling to be praised by those around you. But Jesus says if that is what you're living for, you'll get it, sure, but that's all.

Now I'm going to step into some dangerous territory here, because I know there are some big Seinfeld fans in our church. But of course the whole premise Seinfeld is that it's a show about nothing. You take everyday events of ordinary life and you make a show about it. The fact that some people can quote a Seinfeld episode for just about any social situation is proof enough that it absolutely works!

Well here Jesus is warning us against the great danger of living our lives as if we are the main character in our own show about Nothing. Because in the end, it really will be a show about *nothing*. It leads nowhere expect the judgement of God.

A show about nothing is a hilarious idea for a sit-com, but it's a disastrous way to live your life.

Performative righteousness is a problem.

It is destructive for individuals as we run on the treadmill of public opinion.

It's destructive for community, as we use each other rather than serving each other.

It's eternally destructive, as we live for our own little kingdoms of self, we cut ourselves off from the Kingdom of God.

3. What is NOT the solution?

So what is the solution to the problem. Well, I'll tell you what it's not. Did you notice that Jesus doesn't say here: **"STOP SEEKING REWARD"**

As Jesus speaks to this yearning for recognition and reward, Jesus doesn't simply go after the desire of the heart; Rather Jesus wants to get us to see the heart of our desire. Jesus isn't calling us to stop seeking reward, but to seek a better reward.

For Jesus knows that we are creatures who were made to hear and receive blessing for our righteousness. Just think back to Genesis 1, and the very first words God spoke to man and woman after creating humanity in his own image:

*God **blessed** them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.*

God *blessed* them. And though humanity has fallen into sin and rebellion, our desire to be recognised by others is a dim echo of this ancient longing to hear again God's word of blessing upon us.

And so when I was in youth group and I looked out of the corner of my eye to see if the girl that I liked saw what a servant I was, it was never about the girl. It was about God, and my longing for *his* attention, and *his* affection.

And as you pray in home group with half an ear open to the grunts of affirmation and hearty amens to your rather eloquent prayer, it's not about the group it's about God, and your longing for God to hear you and to answer you.

Yet in our unbelief we settle for the praise of people instead of the praise from God that lies at the heart of our desire.

And so the solution is not “stop seeking reward”, rather it is “seek after God!” But there’s another wrong path here as well. Because it’s also not the solution to **“PERFORM FOR GOD”**.

When I was in youth group there was a very common phrase, you might remember it: we were often told to *live for an audience of one*. But the problem here is that we cast God as a *discerning critic*! As if we need to *impress him* in order to earn his attention.

But this is exactly what Jesus addresses in verse 7. Having said don’t perform for people like the hypocrites, now he says, “don’t perform for God like the pagans!”

*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans do,
for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*

It’s not enough simply to say “seek after God.” Many many people live their lives most concerned about pleasing God above all. And yet it makes all the difference in the world what kind of God we are seeking.

For some the gods are petty and and undependable, so they must convince them to listen to them, and compel them to answer them.

For others God is so distant and absent that they think God will only listen if they work up to God, and earn his listening ear by the quality of their performance and the perfection of their own righteousness.

And it’s just as destructive to individuals and communities and eternities to seek God on our own merits, trying to win his favour or earn his approval. We don’t just need God in the abstract. We need the God of the Gospel, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

4. What is the Solution?

And that's the solution. It's right there at the very centre of the passage – in fact at the heart of the whole Sermon on the Mount – in the Model prayer that Jesus teaches to his disciples.

We could spend weeks unpacking the simple content of the Lord's prayer, but for today, let us simply consider three stunning truths that ought to captivate our hearts and transform our righteousness from the inside out.

Firstly, **THE FATHER!** At the end of Matthew 5, almost out of nowhere, Jesus refers to God as Father in Heaven. He tells us to love our enemies *so that we will be children of our Father*. He ends his filling full of the Law by calling his disciples to be *perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect*.

And now the Fatherhood of God is the dominant note through all of chapter 6. 9 Times in these 18 verses Jesus refers to God as Father. And in the Lord's prayer, right up front, Jesus says pray like this: "Our Father in Heaven". This is not something we must work up to, because it is who God is! This concept of God would have been absolutely alien to his hearers, and remains utterly unique to the Christian faith.

And what we need to see today is the way that *the grammar of family* completely trumps all the language of fanfare and finance.

This is not a god we perform for like a critic, to win his approval.

This is not a god we deal with like our landlord, like some sort of business transaction where we get what we pay for.

No, we draw near to God like a child to their Father, delighting to show him the latest trick we've learned or the new drawing we've done.

I don't actually remember this, but when I was a very little, I performed at my very first O'Keeffe family concert at my grandparents house on the Sunshine Coast. My Act: I jumped off a chopping board. And there's this classic family photo of me standing next to the board absolutely buzzing as I receive the adulation of my family.

Now, it would be absurd to say that I had *won over* the crowd. Or that my daring act had somehow *earned* their praise. Of course not! My family delighted in my small act *precisely because they were my family*.

And so it is with God. God delights in our fumbling attempts at righteousness and humility, *not because they deserve it* but because he is our Father in Heaven.

He smiles upon our righteous acts, no matter how secret, or seemingly small and insignificant, because he is our Father in Heaven

God hears our prayers not because we have *earned his listening ear* but because he is our Father in Heaven.

Jesus confronts our every instinct about what God is like.

He is not distant or cold, nor is he small and capricious.

God is intimate *and* eternal.

He is personal *and* infinite.

He is utterly set apart from us and wonderfully near.

He is the God who in his goodness loves to hear us, and in his glory is able to answer us. He is the great desire of our hearts.

He is the Father in Heaven.

And by some scandal of grace Jesus says we can call him *Our Father*.

Then, Jesus tells us of **THE KINGDOM!** Did you notice how the whole of Jesus' prayer turns as away from our self-interest and out towards God and our neighbour.

The prayer begins, "God may *YOUR* name be honoured as holy; may *YOUR* Kingdom come; may *YOUR* will be done." Jesus lifts our eyes away from the Grand Story of Me, to the far Greater Story of who God is and what he is doing. And it's a story unfolding not just in our little patch, but *on earth* – everywhere! – as it is in heaven. This is a story of cosmic proportions!

Even on top of that, the whole setting of the prayer resists our natural self-centredness. We pray *OUR* Father, not just *my* Father. We pray for *OUR* daily bread, and as soon as we ask for forgiveness we pray for our own forgiveness of people around us. Jesus' prayer is not for the heroic individual, but the **humble community**, where each child of the Father is turned out in love to the needs of their brothers and sisters.

But here is the great paradox of Jesus' prayer: *Where the theological concerns of God's name and Kingdom and Will are most prioritised, the human concerns of our bread and forgiveness and guidance will be least neglected.* When we live for our own Kingdom we end up dissatisfied, dehumanised and disqualified. When we live for God's Kingdom we find ourselves fed, and forgiven and freed from the power our sin and the deceptions of the devil. This Kingdom is not ultimately about us, but it is undeniably *for* us. God provides us with the things we need to live, and then he gives us the forgiveness and the guidance we need to *really* live.

By some scandal of Grace, Jesus invites us to let go of our own stories about nothing and to find ourselves in *God's story about something.*

The solution to the problem of our performance is lifting our eyes to The Father, and to the Kingdom – and then finally to see that all of this is contained in a **PRAYER!**

We have all been struck over the last few weeks by the *strong* commands of Jesus' Sermon. But here, in the very centre of all Jesus says, is this great expression of our own *weakness and need*.

Jesus' prayer is the beating heart of discipleship, the fountain from which true righteousness flows, the renewable power-source of life in the Kingdom. *The key to living in the Kingdom is to recognise our own weakness and so open ourselves up to receive the strength of God, that by some scandal of grace he might fill us up with all we need to live for him.*

And here is the scandal of Grace. That Jesus suffered the rejection of men, and the wrath of God, so that we could pray this prayer.

I said before that Jesus' speaking of God as Father comes almost out of nowhere. But we have already heard from the Father in the life of Jesus. Remember the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism saying, "this is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

Here is the voice of approval that all of us long for so desperately, and which Jesus entirely deserved. For Jesus never wore a mask before the crowds. We will never discover some hidden darkness in Jesus. His love was sincere and his service genuine, and he perfectly sought the honouring of God's name, and the coming of his Kingdom and the doing of his will.

As one writer says,

"He never pulled Peter to one side saying "How do you think that talk went down? I think some of them were unhappy with how I ended the parable..." He never reminded His grumbling

disciples "Hey, can I have a bit of respect here, do you have any idea what I'm doing for you?" There are no fanfares or ego trips. He just does good, forsaking the approval of men but knowing the smile of His Father."

And yet all through his life he was constantly rejected by people around him. They condemned him for he kept company with sinners, they called him a blasphemer, some even said he was possessed by the devil himself.

And then they strung him up on a cross to die like a common criminal. And the Serious, Spiritual people mocked him, and they said "If you really are God's Son, come down from the cross and prove it."

And if Jesus was merely performing for the praise of people, in that moment he would have stepped down and *proved* who he was for all to see. But thanks be to God that Jesus wasn't out to impress people but to save them. To save us.

For his death was the ultimate act of "Father, may your will be done." And on the cross the displeasure of His Father at all of our selfishness and sin was poured out on Jesus. As darkness covered the land, he experienced all the nothings that all our stories deserved.

And he did it all so that our nothings could become something. That we could be freed from the terrible anxiety and the disastrous consequences of performing for others. And that we might share in the intimacy and love that he has always known with his Father. And That we might hear God's words of blessing, "This is my child whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

It is by this scandal of grace that our selves and our stories are cleared out of the way. And that as our Lord has taught us we can pray: