

Live Before Your Father God
Matthew 6:1-8;16-18
Key Verse: 6:4b

"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

In chapter 5 Jesus mainly taught the basic attitude and inner life of a Christian, who is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. But Christian life is not just lived internally; it is expressed in action. Through acts of righteousness, we love God and our neighbors practically. In chapter 6, Jesus tells us about three kinds of acts of righteousness: giving to the needy, prayer and fasting. Giving to the needy relates to others and regards our estate; prayer relates to God and regards our soul; and fasting relates to ourselves and regards our bodies. When we practice giving, prayer and fasting with integrity of faith and deeds, we can grow spiritually and be healthy, happy and fruitful children of God; Christian life is meaningful, rewarding, and joyful. The book "Hinds' Feet on High Places" illustrates this well. It is an allegory about Christian life, similar to "Pilgrim's Progress," based on Habbakuk 3:19. A "hind" was a "deer" in old English. A deer is able to jump from place to place on high mountain ledges without falling because his front feet and back feet land in the same place. We can think of the front feet as our faith and the back feet as our actions. When our faith and actions are in harmony we can travel the spiritual high places in our Christian life. This is what Jesus really wants for us. However, many people feel that their Christian lives have become dreary and fruitless. Without true joy or peace, they feel driven all the time, like a squirrel on a wheel, and become stressed out. Why does this happen? What can we do to correct it?

In today's passage 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 exchanged truth for the fleeting glory of recognition by others. In doing so, they are cut off from God. This makes life dry and boring, and causes Christian activities to feel burdensome. Today Jesus teaches us to guard against hypocrisy and to live before our Father God.

In verse 1 Jesus said, "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." Jesus assumes that his disciples will carry out acts of righteousness. We Christians desire to do what is right in an unrighteous world. Metaphorically, we want to shine the light of Jesus into a dark world. This is expressed through acts of righteousness. However, not all acts of righteousness are accepted by God. There are some that he does not accept. For example, both Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. Abel's offering was accepted by God; Cain's was not. What God does not accept is hypocritical acts which are done for human recognition. We all have a desire to be recognized by others. Therefore, 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. So Apostle Peter confessed, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Pe 1:24-25). 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. So he teaches us how to practice giving, prayer and fasting.

First, giving to the needy (2-4). Look at verses 2-4. 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!

Yet when we give to the needy it is easy for us to blow a trumpet. 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).

What, then, should we do? Look at verses 3-4a. "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret." Hypocrites give alms with the right hand and blow a trumpet with the left hand. But Jesus said our left hand should not know what the right hand is doing. Jesus encourages us to keep our giving secret, even from ourselves. After giving, we should forget about it. In the parable of the sheep and goats, King Jesus foretold that he would reward his people for their good deeds. But they answer, "When did we do these things?" (Mt 25:37-39). They had completely forgotten what they had done. However, God saw their good deeds and remembered them. Jesus said, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (4).

What is the reward? God gives generously to those who give freely and causes the generous to prosper and refreshes them (Pr 11:24-25). Those who freely scatter their gifts to the poor will enjoy honor from God (Ps 112:9). Those who give to the needy will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Lk 14:14). This is God's everlasting reward, which is greater than we can imagine (Eph 3:20). When we give to the needy in secret, we can gain this reward-- both in this life and in the age to come.

Second, prayer (5-8). Look at verses 5-8. Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is personal fellowship with God. Sometimes, in serving God, we don't know what to do. Sometimes we are exhausted. But through prayer we can receive strength and wisdom, and find direction from God. Without prayer we cannot survive spiritually. Every great man of God, whom God uses, is a great man of prayer. Prayer can be a measure of piety. When a man kneels down and prays he looks holy. There is a picture of George Mueller, praying with his head bowed and hands folded, and with one loaf of bread before him. He looks so holy. He was used greatly by God through prayer.

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. They were like the prayer warriors among us who pray at 5:30 a.m. every morning without fail. 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." Some people use the time of prayer to boast about what they have done, or to rebuke their prayer partner for something. This is not prayer. It is using the form of prayer for another purpose.

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 there. Our eyes do not see him, but our faith informs us that he is present and he is listening (Heb 11:1). Where should we pray? In our room. This is a secret place where the door to the world is closed and the door for God is open. Jesus prayed in a solitary place (Mk 1:35). God wants to have personal and intimate fellowship with us, which is undistracted by anyone or anything. So Jesus said, "...go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father..." Each person should have a secret place: a small room at the church, or corner in the backyard, or even a closet. We should leave our computers, turn off 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.

Some people say, "I have no private place, so I cannot pray." Others say, "I have no time to pray." When we try to come to God in prayer, we find there are many obstacles. Satan works in many ways. So we need to focus on God

alone and pray to God, having a personal conversation with him. Karl Heim, a famous German theologian, and a mentor to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, taught that we should pray as though our soul alone faces God, while our bodies are buried underground. This may have been Father Abraham's attitude when he said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes..." (Gen 18:27). Our prayer should be a spiritual, intimate meeting with God alone.

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, ad nauseam. There is a danger that those who pray ritually can do the same. But such prayer is not connected to one's own soul as a reflection of true need, or to God in living faith. In verse 8, Jesus implies that our prayer should be based on our need. This indicates that God wants us to ask for what we really need. Hannah cried out for a son, and God blessed her with Samuel (1 Sa 1:10, 20). A leper asked for healing, and Jesus made him clean (Mt 8:2). Two blind men asked for sight, and Jesus enabled them to see (Mt 20:33). 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. Third, fasting (16-18). Let's look at verses 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, when the Jews faced the danger of being exterminated, Queen Esther said to Mordecai, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Est 4:16). God blessed Esther's fasting prayer and intervened to save her and her people. However, during Isaiah's time, many people fasted without knowing the true meaning. So on the day of fasting, they exploited all their workers and 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, "Ooh," and "Ahh, you are a holy person." Jesus said this was their full reward. These days some boast of their fasting, saying, "I fasted seven days," or "I fasted forty days, like Jesus."

What does Jesus want us to do? 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. 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.

When we survey this entire passage, we find that Jesus repeated three times the phrase, "...your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you" (4,6,18). Here we learn two things. First, 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). Before God's eyes, everything is laid bare (Heb 4:13). King David said in Psalm 139:1-4, "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my

lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely." When we truly know God, we do everything before his eyes.

Second, we must seek God's reward. God is the God who rewards. God said to Abraham, "I am your very great reward" (Gen 15:1). 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." Many people say, "I don't need any reward." But secretly they seek a reward. Jesus did not tell us not to seek a reward; there is a reward-- either from men, or from God. Seeking man's recognition we will make us miserable hypocrites. 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. Jesus wants to cleanse this sickness by his blood and to restore pure faith in us to live before God alone. Then we can seek God's reward in everything we do and find true satisfaction, peace and joy. We can grow in the image of God. Let's repent our hypocrisy and live before our Father God, so we may be healthy spiritually and truly happy.