

The reward of a private prayer life

Matthew 6:5-8

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“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. 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.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

These verses are preparing the way for the Lord's Prayer that comes later in this chapter. Christ is warning them about incorrect prayer practices, before presenting the model prayer to follow. Jesus starts out by talking about hypocrites. *Hypokritēs* in older Greek was the word used for an actor. It was someone who wore a mask in a drama and pretended to be someone whom he was not. In Jesus' day the word had taken on a new but similar meaning. It was one who claimed to be one type of person, but in reality was completely different. Today we might describe a hypocrite as someone who acts one way in public, but another way in private, or someone who says one thing and does another. All of us struggle with the issue of hypocrisy to some extent. In Christ we have been made new. We are new creations. We have been given a new nature. As we continue in this life, one of our goals is to learn to walk in this new identity and this new righteousness that is now ours through Christ Jesus. It is a worthy goal, but it will not be fully attained until we are in the presence of Christ in heaven.

We read of hypocrisy in the days of Isaiah: *“The Lord says, ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’* (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus quoted this same verse in Matthew 15:8-9, when he condemns the religious leaders. John the Baptist called people out of hypocrisy when he told them to produce *“fruit worthy of repentance”* (Luke 3:8). In Matthew 23:27, Jesus referred to hypocrites as *“whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.”* In Matthew 7:15, Jesus again speaks of

hypocrisy when he warns the people to *“beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*

Jesus used the word “hypocrite” in Matthew 7, when he spoke of one who judged the speck of sin in the eye of another, without first removing the plank of sin found in one’s own eye. Scripture clearly teaches that we all have sin in our lives. For any of us to judge another as if we are sinless is one more type of hypocrisy. We are once again acting in a way that is not truly who we are. Yes, there is a time to help others overcome sin, but it should always be done from our true identity. We are sinful people who have been made righteous through faith in Christ. It has been described as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread”. As we minister to each other from this low estate, all hypocrisy will be put aside.

Some might wonder why Jesus is including hypocrisy in his teaching about prayer. We find the reason when we look back to what was happening in the religious culture of Jesus’ day.

For the devout Jew, there were multiple scripted prayers that had to be recited every day at specific times. One prayer, the *Shema*, had to be recited before 9:00 am in the morning, to start the day. It then needed to be repeated before 9:00 pm, to end the day. There was another group of prayers known as the *Shemoneh 'Esreh*. The religious law demanded that this prayer, which was made up of 18 smaller prayers, be recited once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. The Jews had set times for these prayers. Wherever a person found themselves at that time of the day, they were to stop what they were doing and pray.

Some people were intentionally putting themselves in public places at these prescribed times, so that their prayers could be seen by anyone who passed by. That is what Jesus is referring to when he describes the hypocrites, *“For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.”* They were not praying to God. They were actually praying to be heard by people for their own glory.

The religious hypocrites were choosing to pray in public so they could be seen by others. This self-glorifying act stripped them of any eternal reward that could have been gained through prayer, and left them only with the superficial reward of a few people thinking more highly of them.

While praying for public recognition was their problem, it does not mean that all praying in public is wrong. Appropriate public prayer is seen in worship services, small groups, prayer groups, at meals and in other settings. The main issue is the condition of the heart of the one who is praying. All public praying has the possibility of tempting the pray-er to be too concerned with the opinion of those listening, but if one’s heart is humble and seeking God, their public prayer will be pleasing to God and beneficial for those present.

One way to evaluate the motive of our public prayers is to consider how it compares to our private prayers. The person who prays more in public than in private is likely more interested in the praise of man than drawing near to the heart of God.

Jesus then gives a solution. *“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.”* Pray for an audience of One. Find a place and a time where you can be alone with God and pray secretly. Jesus is making the point that private prayer lends itself to a purer motive. In private prayer we seek communion with God and His working in our lives. We are humbled and dependent before Him. This way of praying removes ulterior motives. There is no glory in it for us, because no one else knows about it. It leaves us alone with God where we can draw near to Him and just sit in His presence.

It is helpful to note that twice in this verse we see the word reward. Do you think that it is okay to serve God so that we can receive a reward? Some would say “no”, because from their perspective that would make the act of service selfish. Some would say that it is not okay to serve God for a reward, because serving God should be motivated only by our desire to give God glory. Others would say it is not okay to serve God for a reward, because serving God is such a privilege in itself that there is no need for other motivation. But what does Jesus say about the idea of “reward?”

Here, in Matthew 6, Jesus talks of rewards in regard to righteous deeds, giving to the poor and prayer. In Matthew 5:12, Jesus says that those who endure persecution and insults without bitterness will receive a great reward in heaven. In the parable of the talents, in Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells how faithful service receives a reward. In the teachings of the final judgment and heaven there is a clear theme of reward that awaits all who belong to Christ. In Matthew 10:42, Jesus even talks of a reward that awaits any disciple who *“gives one of these little ones a cup of cold water”*. We find this idea of reward throughout scripture.

Our understanding of reward is also a matter of faith. Do you believe that a reward truly awaits all who have put their faith in Christ? If so, we will not *“lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal”*, but instead we will *“lay up treasures in heaven”* that can never be taken from us. Are we living like we believe that this world is passing away and that eternal rewards are awaiting us?

When investing, a financial investor does the research, does the math and makes the best investments he or she can to gain the greatest profit possible. It is gathering the facts and investing for the least risk and greatest reward. Which future are we investing in? What reality are we living in? What rewards are we pursuing? Are we, as parents, raising our children so that they will receive the greatest possible reward in heaven, or the greatest pleasure, comfort, and prestige here on earth? Are we investing our time, money and abilities so that we can receive the greatest reward in heaven, or in the trinkets and titles of this short-lived life on earth? Are we living for the rewards of man, or the rewards of God? Do we really believe how short this life will be, how long eternity will be, and how good God’s rewards will be? Yes, we are to selflessly live for God’s glory and love others as Christ loved us, but within scripture we also see this theme of believing and living for the eternal rewards of God.

Hebrews 11 tells us of those who fixed their eyes on the promised rewards that are found in Christ. We read of those who *“through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice . . . stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of*

weakness, became mighty in war . . . Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy . . . And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us.”

Can you imagine a better reward that makes being sawn in two worth it? Can you imagine a better reward that makes torture and facing lions worth it? Can you imagine a reward so good that it makes mocking, flogging and even death worth it? *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Corinthians 2:9). This is the eternal reward that we are to live for.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:7-8)

When we talk with God we do not need to use long, impressive, meaningless phrases or chants like the godless do. We see in scripture examples of pagans dancing, chanting, even people cutting themselves to get their god’s attention. But that is not how we get God’s attention. Jesus is telling His listeners that a great number of meaningless words serve no purpose in prayer.

As discussed earlier, the Jews had many prayers that they prayed each day. All of these prayers were scripted. After praying the same prayers hundreds or even thousands of times, the tendency was for the words to no longer be the sincere offerings from one’s heart, but just repeating words from rote memory. It no longer meant anything to the person and to God. Prayer had become an empty religious ritual. There is nothing wrong with praying pre-written prayers if they are being prayed from the heart, but the danger is that familiarity can bring a lack of sincerity.

The Jews also had a tendency towards long prayers. The length of the prayer was not the problem. We see long, God-honoring prayers, multiple times in scripture. The problem was when someone prayed a long time to either impress others, or thinking that it was the only way to get their prayers heard. A prayer prayed for the approval of others will not be heard by God, because it is not really praying to God. On the other hand, to think that God will listen to us because of something that we do is rooted in pride as well. God’s hearing of our prayers is not based on anything that we do. Our prayers are not heard because of how long we pray, how loud we pray, what method of prayer we use, or the position we are in when we pray. In scripture we see people praying as they kneel, as they sit, when they are standing or even laying on their face. Christians from all over the world pray in many different ways, and God hears their prayers. It is not because of something that we do. It is because of what Christ has done. We were separated from God because of our sin. Through faith we have been reunited with God through the death and resurrection of Christ. The communication lines between us and God have been reopened. We now enjoy an intimate relationship with God, the Father. It is our relationship with God as our Father that opens the way for our prayers.

Jesus concludes this verse with these words: *“Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* Do not depend on long, meaningless prayers to try to get God’s attention. God is our loving Father, who knows what we need, just like an earthly father cares for and knows what his children need. Now some may reply to this, “Then why should we pray, if God already knows our needs?” Because that is how God has decreed it. It is not about asking and getting. It is about drawing near. It is about the relationship. Our needs are a pathway that, time and time again, leads us back to God. Throughout scripture we see that it is impossible to come into the presence of God and leave unchanged. It is that we, the children of God, would come to God recognizing our desperate need and pursue Him and take hold of Him as our faithful Provider and the Lover of our Souls. In prayer we humbly realize our dependence on Him, draw near to Him and come to know Him. With this heart of prayer our heavenly Father, who knows our needs, will hear our prayers.

As we pray, may we continue to allow God to rid our hearts of hypocrisy. May we not seek man’s approval, but instead intimacy with God. May we live and pray with eternal rewards in mind. May we remember that God hears our prayer because of what Christ has done to reunite us with God. May we rest in the fact that God, our Father, knows our every need and hears the prayers of those who humbly call to Him.

Discussion questions:

1. What different ways of prayer have you seen or experienced in the past?
2. When you hear the word “hypocrites” what examples come to mind?
3. Do you agree with the statement “we are all hypocrites to some extent”? Explain your answer.
4. Do you think it is okay to serve God so you can receive eternal rewards?
5. Based on what we know of the Bible, how can a parent raise their children to receive greater reward in heaven?
6. God hears our prayers as a father hears the requests of his children. How should this affect the way that we pray?
7. What from these verses do you think God wants you to remember and apply to your life?