Westlake Church Lausanne

**Religion's Reward**
**Matthew 6:1-18**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is setting out how his followers, which includes you and me if you're a Christian, are going to live differently from the world; the lifestyle that will mark his counter-cultural kingdom.

But in this next bit, he makes it clear that you can live differently like that, you can be counter-cultural, you can pursue spirituality, you can try and live out your religion and apply it to every area of your life – but your motives be totally screwy, and it do you more harm than good.

Look at v1, where Jesus says, "Beware". Now, when you see a sign that says, 'Beware', what's it telling you? There's danger up ahead. Beware of the dog. Beware of the edge. Beware teenage daughter's bedroom. So when Jesus begins this next bit with *Beware*, he's warning you. V1 again: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them."

So, there's a danger in religion, he says, and it's about doing it from a wrong motive. But then he tells you why, v1 again, "For then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

So what Jesus says here matters for you this morning because this is about your inner well-being and your eternal well-being. Get this area wrong, Jesus says, and rather than it being a force for good in your life, it will harm you.

And having given that general warning, Jesus sets out *how* you can get it wrong in three areas. And the areas he picks are the three pillars of traditional religion. They were central to Judaism, they are three of the five pillars of Islam, and Christians still practice them. No. 1: giving to the poor; No. 2: prayer; No. 3: fasting.

And to see what Jesus is driving at, you simply need to hear the phrases he keeps repeating.

**The Need for Applause**
Listen to one of his first repeated phrases: v2, "that they may be praised by others", v5, "that they may be seen by others", and again v16 "that their fasting may be seen by others." So Jesus is saying that, whether it's giving money to the poor, or praying in public, or fasting, you can do each of those to draw attention to yourself, so you get noticed, so you get some compliments coming your way: 'hey, do you really give that much? That's incredibly generous' or 'I love it when you pray, I love hearing your passion for God' or, 'man, you fast way more than I do, you put me to shame, I wish I could be as committed as you.'

And you can give and pray and fast, or do any number of things, and be doing it to get that kind of feedback. But, why? What's at the bottom of that desire to draw attention to yourself, or of enjoying that attention? Because the truth is, we

all want others to think and say nice things about us. And we feel good if they do. And we feel better about ourselves, and less insecure, and of more value when people say, 'you know what? You're great.'

And for some of us, when they don't, or when we get negative criticism rather than accolades, our world crumbles. I was speaking once to a professional musician, and if you met him you'd say he was full of self-confidence, but in private, he admitted he was devastated by negative critiques, because inside he was desperate for everyone to love him.

Now you may not be a professional musician, but where do you seek that kind of affirmation from? From your work colleagues, because you work harder than anyone else? From your peers, because you've published more? From your kids, because you're the best mum or dad? From a boyfriend or girlfriend, because they tell you you're beautiful or hot? To a greater or lesser extent, we all long for approval, to be told we're ok, and that we're loved. And we look for that approval from somewhere.

But maybe you're sat there thinking 'no, I don't!' and quietly congratulate yourself that you're not as needy as the rest of us! Well, if you don't look for that from others, do you look for it from yourself? Because that's probably behind what Jesus says in v3, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." That you can give in such a way that it makes you feel good about yourself, you don't broadcast it to others, but you congratulate yourself. You give, or do or don't do something else, and that enables you to tell yourself that you're not so bad, that you're ok, you're more generous, or less needy, or whatever, than others.

So why this longing for approval? What's the insecurity deep down that we're seeking to fill with others' – or even our own - words? Well, one writer has called it *Father Hunger*: that you and I were made to live in loving relationship with God our heavenly Father – that the picture we see in Genesis, of Adam and Eve walking with God in the garden, is what we all long for. That when Genesis says in ch 2:25, that they were 'naked and were not ashamed', that we long to be known as we really are, without the masks, and yet to be loved and accepted; to have someone see into the depth of our heart, of what we are really like, and say 'you're ok', and not be ashamed. But as Adam and Eve ended up hiding among in the trees, so you and I are alienated from God, and yet still longing for the affirmation of a loving father, and to fill that void, we cover ourselves with the figleaves of others' applause or approval.

And Jesus says, the danger is you look for that in religion.

**The Reward of Religion**

And Jesus says that practising religion has a certain appeal, and a certain power, because it can give you what you want, because you can be seen as a good person, a generous person, a spiritual person, a sacrificial person. But the irony is, it's all about you.

Now, I don't know if you saw the picture this week of Hillary Clinton and the selfie-takers. Clinton was standing on a small platform against a wall, separated from the crowd by a barrier. But whilst she was looking at them, to a man they all had their backs turned to her, with their smartphones held in the air, as they took selfies, with her smiling in the background. One commentator described it as a picture of our time: Nowadays no one wants a picture just of her, *they* have to be in the picture too.

And Jesus is saying that whilst giving and praying and fasting can all give the appearance of being very spiritual, in reality it can all be very self-centred. That you can be very religious, seemingly even very generous and sacrificial, but it's all about you. You're the one in the forefront of the picture.

So three times Jesus warns us not to be like the hypocrites: v2, "Thus when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do." Verse 5, "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites." Verse 16, "and when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites." Now, originally, a *hypocrite* was a Greek actor, who wore different masks to play different characters. And the danger for you and me, is that we do stuff that on the outside looks good, and compassionate and sacrificial, we put on the mask, but on the inside it's all about me. And we think the world is a stage, and religion becomes a way of having the spotlight fall on me, so I get some of the attention and applause I crave.

You see, the hypocrite isn't the guy you have to drag to the prayer meeting, is he? Verse 5, "They *love* to stand and pray" Jesus says. So he's not talking about spiritual sloths. Spiritual sloths have other problems, but probably not religious hypocrisy. Jesus is talking about someone who takes religion seriously. But he doesn't love to pray because he loves God, but because he loves himself and the attention it gives him.

And Jesus says you need to beware because religion will give you that applause you seek. But it's all you'll get. Verse 2, of those who give to be seen, "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." Verse 5, of those who pray to be heard, "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." Verse 16, of those who fast to be seen, "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." Get the picture? So there *is* this reward of religion, but it's the *only* reward. In fact, the word Jesus uses for *received* their reward, is the word that was used when a bill was stamped, 'paid in full.' They've got their reward, religion will give you what you want, but if you make this inner desire to be esteemed by others your aim, that's

all you'll get, and you'll miss the very thing that deep down you're really looking for: the affirmation of your heavenly Father.

**The Secret Place**

Now given the dangers of religious hypocrisy, you might think that Jesus would say 'stay as well clear of religion as you can'. Except he doesn't. He assumes his followers will give, and pray, and fast: verse 2, "*When* you give to the needy," not *if*. Verse 5, "*when* you pray." Verse 16, "*when* you fast." But when you do them, do them in secret, verse 4, "so that your giving may be in secret"; v6 "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret"; v17-18: "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret."

So it's not that you don't do them, rather you do them knowing you do them before an audience of One, the only audience who really matters; and you know it's not you on the stage. And no one else might ever know, but that's ok, because the One who does know is there, in the secret place.

So when you give you have three options, don't you? Firstly, you can give in a way so others know. Or, you can give in secret but congratulate yourself. You give in a self-conscious way, which as one writer [Stott] says, can quickly become self-righteous and you pat yourself on the back. Or, thirdly, you can give and your desire is that God gets glorified and it's only his opinion of you that matters. And you do it in a self-forgetful way, and your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing.

Then, when you pray, you also have three options Jesus says, and two of them are bad. Firstly, you don't want to pray like the hypocrites, to draw attention to yourself. But secondly you also don't want to pray like the pagans: v7, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words." So the religious person thinks they can get *others'* attention by praying; but the pagan thinks he can get God's attention by using the right words, or lots of them. And Jesus says, you're not to be like either of them. You're to be neither religious or worldly, you're to be different, because prayer isn't a matter of your image, or of twisting God's arm, it's about your relationship with your heavenly Father who already knows what you need.

Then, when you fast, Jesus says, v16, "Do not look gloomy" – I think that must be a word to Englishmen everywhere - don't adopt a Uriah Heep-ish attitude 'I'm ever so 'umble, I am.' Rather, do it with joy, because you know that this is between you and your Father.

But did you notice that as well as Jesus *not* saying, 'don't do these things' he also does *not* say, 'and don't get any funny ideas about there being a reward'? Instead, three times, in v4, v6 and v18 he says, "And your Father who sees in secret will

reward you." So, it's not that there is no reward from doing these things, it's what that reward is and who gives it. And the real reward is not others' applause: it's the commendation of your Father.

You see, what's the reward of giving to the needy? It's to see that need relieved, and the hungry fed, and the poor clothed, and the gospel spread. It's to see the power of money in our lives weakened and our relationship with God grow stronger, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9, that as we sow generously, we reap a harvest of righteousness. And the reward of our praying in secret is to see prayers answered and our relationship with God deepen. And the reward for our fasting, is the realisation of our weakness and of God's power.

And yet there's a danger here, isn't there? Because you can hear that and think that if doing these things is a way to earn others' approval, is that how I earn God's? Because that's what traditional religion will tell you. That if deep down what I long for is for my heavenly Father to say, 'you're ok', is doing these things the way to earn that?

**The Son who Gives (and prays and fasts) and the Father who Knows**
The good news of Jesus, is not that you have to give and pray and fast, or practice the 5 pillars of Islam, or pursue the noble 8 fold-path to enlightenment. Religions the world over will tell you all that you must do to be accepted and loved by God. But the gospel is very different. At the heart of the gospel is not what you have to do at all. It's about what Christ has done for you.

And whilst we can think we can get the applause of others, or maybe even of God, by giving money, Jesus gave himself, in our place. And rather than receiving applause he was mocked; and rather than pats on the back he was scourged. And at the cross he took upon himself everything you've ever thought, said or done, that shames you and separates you from God. And he was separated from God his Father instead of you; he gave himself, so that you might receive the love and acceptance and welcome of God your father.

And Christ prayed for you. And on the night of his betrayal, in the garden, he prayed, 'not my will but yours be done' and he drank the cup of God's wrath, so that you need never drink it, but instead be seated at God's banquet table and drink the cup of blessing.

And in the desert, Christ fasted forty days, breaking Satan's power; and at the cross he cried out, 'I thirst' that your thirst, your inner longing and need for acceptance by God might be quenched.

And it's through what Jesus has done for you, not by your giving, or fasting or praying, that you can know the approval of your heavenly father. That he sees you, naked to your core, and says, 'I love you, I accept you, you are my precious

son, you are my precious daughter, because of what my Son has done for you.' And when you know that, you'll be happy to give in secret for the causes close to your Father's heart; and you'll be happy to fast in secret, if it deepens your relationship with him. And you'll be happy to pray the way Jesus teaches here in the Lord's prayer, because it will capture the thoughts of your own heart.

Verse 9, "Pray then like this, "Our Father in heaven". And because of what Jesus has done for you, because at the cross he was cut off from his Father, you can know deep in your heart that God is your Father, and you can come to him in prayer, knowing nothing can separate you from his love.

This week, I found a little note on my desk that had been left there by someone who will remain anonymous. It said, 'Daddy, I love you soooo much I could schnuggle with you all day.' But for many of us, including myself, that hasn't been our experience with our fathers. But if we project how our dads were, or are, onto God, we're getting things round the wrong way. It is we who should be modelled on him not him on us. And regardless of how well or poorly your earthly father did, your heavenly Father loves you, and welcomes you into the secret place. And he is in heaven, in absolute supreme control. So your Father is not just good, he is also great.

And notice Jesus says, 'pray, 'our father.'' So it's not just that you get a Father, you also get a family: his family, the world-wide church of God.

Then he says, pray "Hallowed be your name." Because when you know what Jesus has done for you, your need to be the one on the stage, getting the attention, disappears. You know that he's the only one worthy of applause, and that this life isn't about you – it's about him. You see, religion says, 'Hallowed be my name'; the gospel says, 'hallowed be your name.'

Then v10, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And the gospel makes you God-centred. It's no longer, 'I'm the king, or the queen, and life is about what I want.' Instead his will becomes your desire. How could you live any other way, than for the one who gave everything for you?

Then v11, "Give us this day our daily bread." And if ever a group of people need to remind ourselves daily in the secret place, that everything we have is his, we're that people, aren't we? Because as we pray for daily bread, it's an acknowledgement that all our necessities, of food, and health, and finance, it all comes from him, and it's all to be used for his glory. And just notice how the word *bread* is spelt. B-R-E-A-D. Not G-R-E-E-D. There is no promise of provision for our greed, but there is wonderful promise of access to a Father who knows all our needs.

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And if you need bread, don't you also need forgiveness? Verse 12, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And if bread is about our physical needs, this is about our heart need. We all need forgiveness. And in Jesus, you find it. And forgiveness not just for ourselves, but for those who sin against you. You see, as Jesus says in v15, "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Now, does Jesus mean by that that your forgiveness of others earns your own forgiveness? No. He means that there is only one way to come to God for forgiveness, and that is humbly, acknowledging your brokenness and sin and need, and when you come like that, it's impossible to hold on to unforgiveness towards others.

But then Jesus finishes this prayer by saying, v13, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." It's the realisation that we go through stuff in life that puts us at risk of sin, and we don't want to. It's the realisation that we're in a battle with evil, that in our own strength we cannot win. But with God we can. As Paul wrote, 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?... We are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom 8:31-2, 37).

So it's in Christ, and through faith in Christ, that that inner longing to be known and loved can be met. It's in him that the way into the secret place, the place where your heavenly Father is, is opened. So give in secret, pray in secret, fast in secret, and do it all to his glory.