

Sunday 12th March 2023

Matthew 6:1-8

God Promises To Reward Us

Introduction

- The famous American swimmer, Michael Phelps, once said: “My goal is one Olympic gold medal. Not many people in this world can say, I'm an Olympic gold medallist.”
- Setting that target and spending years training hard, I wonder did he ever possible envisage that he would become the most successful and most decorated Olympian of all time with a total of 28 medals.
- He holds the all-time records for Olympic gold medals (23), winning an incredible 8 gold medals at the 2008 Beijing Games.
- Phelps put in the hard work and the training. He dedicated himself to the task that lay before him and the rewards were great.
- Our passage from Matthew 6 speaks, on two occasions, about how God will reward us. Now, it doesn't say that we are all going to get Olympic gold medals, but it does certainly say that we will be rewarded.
- Today we will take a look at the concept of Christian reward and we will then tie the pursuit of that reward into two significant Christian practices.

Main Body

- Firstly, let's look at the concept of reward. (v4b) speaks of reward in relation to giving and (v6b) speaks of reward in relation to prayer. On both occasions the wording is identical. “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”
- Jesus taught about the concept of reward on other occasions. Just a few verses earlier, in Matthew 5:12, he spoke of rewards in heaven for those who face persecution.
- In Matthew 10:42 Jesus associated reward with the offer of a cup of cold water to a disciple of his.
- At least part of the Parable of the Bags of Gold (Matthew 25:14-30) teaches that faithful service will receive its reward.
- Finally, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) promotes the reality of reward and punishment in accordance with our reaction to the needs of others.
- Christian reward is, therefore, clearly outlined in Scripture. But what does it look like in practice?

- It is really important to establish, firstly, that Jesus was not advocating materialism. None of the examples of Christian reward connect Christian faith with bigger bank accounts, better cars, or more expensive holidays.
- This belief is known as the prosperity gospel and it's not at all what Jesus taught. If anything, Jesus indicated that trial and tribulation, suffering and persecution, awaited his followers.
- Such is the danger of the prosperity gospel that the American pastor and author, John MacArthur, wrote a book called *"God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel: How Truth Overwhelms a Life Built on Lies."*
- In that book he declared with openness and love, **"My prayer is that this book will provide not only exposure but protection for people who might be drawn into error."**
- So, what is Christian Reward all about? I love how the biblical scholar, William Barclay, answers that question. **"The rewards of the Christian life are rewards only to a spiritually minded person."**
- Christian rewards are counterculture, they are rarely understood by the world, or appreciated by those who have little or no knowledge of God. But, for the people of God there are eternally significant and offer tremendous joy and fulfilment.
- The first Christian reward is satisfaction. Do you remember how the Psalmist declared, in Psalm 107:9 **"...for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things."** Or how Jesus declared **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"** (John 10:10). **C S Lewis, in his Letter's to an American Lady, said "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible."**
- Authentic Christian faith which is sincere, deeply rooted in love, grace-filled, biblically based and God centred, is transformative. This is why the first Christian reward is satisfaction.
- Our follow up reward is, perhaps strangely and also counterculturally, the promise that there is always more work to do. In the Parable of the Talents the reward for the one who was faithful was the allocation of greater responsibility.
- Frank Houghton, a missionary to China in the 1920s, certainly understood this. And it let him to write a marvellous hymn **"Facing a task unfinished that drives us to our knees, a need that, undiminished, rebukes our slothful ease, we who rejoice to know you renew before your throne, the solemn pledge we owe you, to go and make you known."**
- We (as God's people) should be committed, passionate and enthusiastic in our service of him because, our endeavours (throughout our Christian journey) should lead us to the ultimate Christian reward – a fresh vision of God.
- If we truly seek to walk with God, obey God, and grow closer to God, then this is the greatest reward we can ever be given. Why? Because it proves that our endeavours were all about God, and all for God. It wasn't about us, it was always

about Him! This is the attitude of John the Baptist – “He must become greater; I must become less.” (John 3:30)

- As we embrace the concept of Christian reward and pledge ourselves to pursue it, the passage offers us help with two significant Christian practices that are key components of our journey.

1. Genuine Faith

- As we read these verses we should notice that Jesus calls us to be humble. We’re not to do our acts of righteousness before other people (v1); we shouldn’t boast about our giving (v2); we should avoid becoming performers in our prayer lives (v5);
- What Jesus is looking for in our lives is an authentic, genuine, faith through which we choose God (and not other people) to be our audience, and by which we can point people to our Lord.
- In other words, our focus needs to be on God and not on acquiring status among other people.
- Some of the great heroes of faith throughout history were deeply humble people. The story is told of Hudson Taylor, who was scheduled to speak at a Large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "our illustrious guest." Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master."
- Our first challenge is to be humble people who live out a genuine faith. Jesus unpacks three examples in our passage: giving (v2-4), praying (v5-8).
 - a) **Giving** – God loves a generous giver because He himself is a generous giver: giving that which He loved most for each of us, His Son. Think about this for a moment. Where was Jesus born: in a stable. No fanfare, no pomp or circumstance. No signposts to announce the birth. Great humility. God wants us to follow that no fuss example. Read (v2). The Pharisees are repeatedly singled out in this passage. John Stott reminds us “Jesus paints a picture of the hypocrites way of being religious...Such receive the reward they want, the applause of men.” We need to help those less fortunate than us, and support Christian work. Did you notice how Jesus used the word ‘when’ not ‘if’ in (v2). But we need to do this humbly and without fuss.
 - b) **Prayer** – Stott argues that “...our religious devotions should be secret lest we boast about them.” Prayer times are opportunities for us to spend time with God and communicate with him. They aren’t occasions to for self-publicity. Look at (v6-7). Here Jesus encourages us to close the door: remove distractions and minimise disturbances. He is challenging us to draw intimately close with God. Is there any greater privilege than to speak with the Creator of all things?

- Jesus urges us, challenges us, to be genuine and humble followers – individuals who are more concerned about our walk with God than receiving a pat on the back from other people.
- God must be first in our lives and one thing that can help us on our journey is to develop a prayerful faith.

2. Prayerful Faith

- Like he did in relation to giving in (v2), Jesus uses the word ‘when’ as he begins his reflections on prayer in (v5). He gives us the direction that we should be people of prayer – “...when you pray...” not IF you pray!
- Let me ask a question: how is your prayer life?
- **Two men were talking together. The first challenged the other, "If you are so religious, let's hear you quote the Lord's Prayer. I'll give you £10 if you can." The second responded, "Now I lay my head to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." The first pulled out his wallet and fished out a £10 note, muttering, "I didn't think you could do it!"**
- There’s a point in that, isn’t there! If we’re honest, each of us, we can and should be praying more.
- In our passage Jesus encourages us to be confidential, meaningful and specific when praying. Later in Matthew 6 he gives us the example of the Lord’s Prayer – perhaps the most famous prayer of all. **John Stott says “The so-called Lord’s Prayer was given by Jesus as a model of what genuine Christian prayer is like.”** He gave it to his disciples as a pattern to copy but it is also a prayer that we can use.
- It offers praise to God and invites Him to usher in the coming of His Kingdom. It’s a prayer of surrender to God, it acknowledges our dependence on God as the ultimate provider of our everyday needs, and it brings us to the point of repentance: acknowledging that only God can forgive us our sins.
- **Someone once said “What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but people whom the Holy Spirit can use - people of prayer, people mighty in prayer.”**
- We need to be people of prayerful faith, people who come before God with openness and humility, seeking His touch in our lives.

Conclusion

- Today, the church is relevant because Jesus is relevant. He can transform even the most troubled life and bring hope to those in despair. This is truly great news and we need to get busy about telling it – through word and deed.
- Jesus can use each of us to proclaim this Good News but our faith needs to be genuine and focused on God alone.