

Religion's Reward

Matthew 6:1-18

Jesus begins the next section of the Sermon on the Mount with a warning: 'Beware!'. He then addresses three almost universal religious practices.

The Need for Applause

Jesus says you can practice religion to gain attention for yourself. What is at the root of this desire? Why do we want people to say nice things about us? Why can our lives crumble when they don't? Deep down we long to be known as we really are, and yet loved. We long for the affirmation of our heavenly Father. But in its place we look for others' applause and approval.

The Reward of Religion

Jesus says that practising religion can give you what you want: you can be seen as a good, generous, spiritual person. But it's all about you. So he warns us not to be a hypocrite – to put on an act. If we look for the reward of what others think of us, that is the only reward we will get, and we will miss out on what we are really looking for.

The Secret Place

Jesus tells us to practice these things – giving, prayer, fasting – in secret. We are to do them before an audience of One. We are to give in a self-forgetful way. We are to pray, not as the religious or the pagans, but to our Father in secret. We are to fast with joy, not being gloomy.

He does not say there is no reward from these practices; it's about what that reward is and who gives it. And the real reward is not others' applause: it's the commendation of your Father.

And yet there's a danger: to think that we have to earn the Father's love by these religious practices.

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 to be accepted and loved by God. At the heart of the gospel is not what you have to do at all. It's about what Christ has done for you. He gave himself, prayed to do the Father's, and fasted and thirsted so that you might receive the love and acceptance of God your father.

When you know what Christ has done for you, you can pray the Lord's Prayer, knowing that its words express your heart: God is your father. Life is about glorifying him, not you getting applause. You want his will, not yours to be done. You know everything you have belongs to him. You know you need forgiveness and because of that you can forgive others. And you know the difficulties of life put you at risk of sinning – and you are not strong enough on your own. But he is, and you know he will stand by you.

In Christ the inner longing to be known and loved can be met. In him the way to your heavenly Father is opened. So give in secret, pray in secret, fast in secret, and do it all to his glory.