

Matthew 6

How to Pray (Go for the Gold)

Main idea: Jesus taught us to love God, and trust Him to give us what we need, when we need it.

As Christians, why do we do what we do?

If you're an Olympic athlete, everything you do is to get the gold medal. And Paul wrote this in 1 Corinthians:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25)

So, what is our prize, our reward, and how do we obtain it?

To answer that question, please open your Bibles and turn or tap with me to Matthew 6.

In Matthew 6, Jesus taught His disciples how to pray. It's where we find what we call the Lord's Prayer. I'm going to begin reading in verse 5, but when we get to verse 9, where we find the Lord's Prayer, I invite you to start reading it with me, and we'll say the Lord's Prayer together, okay?

In Matthew 6, starting in verse 5, Jesus said:

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. 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. Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Matthew 6:5-13)

Later in my sermon this morning, we're going to be looking at the Lord's Prayer. But first, I want you to notice that Jesus's teaching on prayer is actually within the larger context of Him teaching about rewards for those who obey God. Verse 5 begins with the word "and," meaning that Jesus said what He said about prayer as part of a larger sermon. In fact, this is part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Two weeks ago, Travis Warner preached from the Sermon on the Mount. I hope you were here for that, because it was a great understanding of Jesus's most famous sermon in the Bible. Travis basically said that the point of the Sermon on the Mount isn't merely that we would see that we don't measure up for heaven, but that we would be challenged to live in a manner worthy of heaven even today. Because there are great rewards for godly living.

Jesus actually started this line of thought about rewards back in chapter 5, verse 46. But I want to back up even a few more verses from there, so that we can get the context of this as well.

Matthew 5:43-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

So within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directed His disciples to think about rewards for obeying God. And the very first command Jesus gives us in order to receive a reward is to love. Love not only your friends, but your enemies. This shouldn’t be any surprise at all, since the first and greatest commandment is to love,¹ and love fulfills the law.² But then what does surprise us is that Jesus then follows up the command to love with what He says in verse 48: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

We hear the command to love, and we think, “That’s not so hard! I can do that.” Nevermind the fact that loving entails not only that we feel a certain way toward others, but that we also act a certain way toward them. So not only are we not to harbor bitter feelings, but we should also go out of our way to care for others and put their needs above our own. But anyway, we kind of ignore all that and think “I can love!” But then we hear the command to be perfect, and we think, “Is that even possible?”

Does God command things of us that are impossible? God tells us to be perfect, and yet, we know that we’re imperfect. God tells us to trust Him, yet we continue to doubt. God tells us not to eat the fruit, and yet we reach for it, and take a bite.

So does God command things of that are impossible for us? And if He does, when He says “You must be perfect,” how can we possibly be perfect?

We come, now, to Matthew 6. And I want you to notice a pattern as we read this, because each section comes back to this idea of rewards for obedience.

Verse 1.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-4)

So, no reward for those who practice their righteousness in order to be seen.

Skip down to verse 14 for now.

¹ Matthew 22:37-38

² Romans 13:10

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

So, God rewards those who forgives, and condemns those who do not.

Verse 16.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16-18)

So, no reward for those who want others to notice when they're fasting. This assumes that you are fasting, which most Christians don't do.

Verse 19.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matthew 6:19-24)

So, your reward isn't on this earth, but is in heaven.

Verse 25.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:25-34)

So God rewards those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. But what is our reward, and why do we do the things that we do?

Many say that God gives people various degrees of rewards in heaven. And maybe that's true, but I honestly can't wrap my head around God giving a greater eternity to some more than others based on our meager and often sinfully motivated righteousness. But I do know this: God blesses us immensely in this life when we're

obedient. And I'm not talking about financial blessings or good health. I'm saying that when you obey God, you have more joy, and more peace, and it doesn't matter what you go through, you know that you're blessed by God.

But even more than that, in what we've already read, the Bible has already told us how God rewards us. Paul described our reward as imperishable. Jesus said that you love SO THAT you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. And Jesus said that if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. That's a pretty big reward!

And yet, do we earn that? No. Paul is clear.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So salvation isn't something we earn, but something that God freely gives us. And then, out of joy, we desire to serve God. Paul goes on in verse 10.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

You see, as Jesus describes the life worthy of heaven in the Sermon on the Mount, He's describing the life that we would all gladly live if only we would remember the reward that God has freely given us. So while it's true that blessing follows obedience, obedience doesn't earn the blessing. All blessings are a matter of God's grace. If I had to earn anything, I would not earn anything. So I serve not to earn anything, which I'm unable to do, but out of the joy of God's grace toward me.

So with all that said, let's talk about prayer.

Verse 5.

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. (Matthew 6:5)

Okay, so don't be like the hypocrites. Who are the hypocrites? Historically, Jesus was talking about the scribes and Pharisees. They were the ones who prayed in order to be seen.

But more generally, the hypocrites are anyone who say they are devoted to God, and who tell others to be devoted to God, but who aren't really genuine in their own devotion to God. Prayer is not to show others how religious you are.

And too many times, I've prayed words here at church, and afterward thought, "That was a pretty good prayer."

So who are the hypocrites? Well, I'm one of them. I've prayed in order to be seen.

And when I have, I received my reward. I probably fooled some of you. Because I'm fairly eloquent. I've been doing this a long time. I probably built myself up a little bit.

So I'm telling you, don't be like me when I've messed up. But do be like me as I follow Christ.

On the issue of prayer, how do you do that?

Verse 6.

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 6:6)

So, pray in secret. So, does that mean we can never pray together as a church? No! Because there are plenty of passages that talk about praying with one another.

So Jesus didn't mean that we should never pray together as a church. But it does mean that if you only pray in public, you're probably not praying to your Father who is in secret. And if you never pray in secret, then you're probably missing out on the reward.

And what is the reward, anyway? What reward are we really striving after?

Verse 7.

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. (Matthew 6:7)

So what reward are the Gentiles striving for? They want to be heard. But we're not heard for praying long, eloquent prayers. That's not what prayer is all about. Check it out. Verse 8.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:8)

This verse should completely wreck your prayer life. Most Christians think that we pray in order to get God to give us what we want. But God already knows what you need. You're not telling anything to God. And God definitely isn't going to take orders from you.

So if we don't pray in order to get things from God, why do we pray? What is our reward?

Verse 9.

Pray then like this:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Do you see that God is your Father, and that He's holy? Then just rejoice in that.

Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Do you long for God's will to be done in your life? Then run toward that.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Do you recognize that everything you need comes from God? Then look to Him alone for that.

and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Here's where the Lord's prayer starts stepping on our toes. Do you really rejoice that God forgives you of all your sins? Then show that same grace toward others.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9-14)

And here's the reward. We want to be delivered from evil. And through Jesus, we are. When we have Jesus, we have freedom. We experience freedom, and it is freedom that causes us to begin running like crazy.

We're like these dogs, set free.

[Video of dogs set free]



They were trapped. And when they were set free, what did they do? They began to do what they were created to do. They ran, they sniffed, they played! What caused them to do what they were made to do? Just realizing they were free to do it. They naturally began to do what they were supposed to do. What about when they started thinking of their past? What happened when they got hung up on their past? They started hiding, and they went back to the crates that had been their prison for so long.

All this is like us, right? When you realize that Jesus is your prize, and when you realize HE LOVES YOU, and when you realize HE LOVES YOUR ENEMIES, you are able to forgive your enemies. You are able to feel and experience God's forgiveness and love. And when you finally see that love and forgiveness are yours, it sets you free. And you begin running. You begin running the race set before you. But it's a race you know you will win. Well, maybe not you specifically, but your team, your kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Do you feel honored to represent God's kingdom? Do you know you are on the winning team? Do you know Jesus already won the greatest prize for you, the gold medal, for the Kingdom we are on? And shouldn't that energize you to do your best? To run the race?

You see, we run not to earn the prize, but as worship.

It's like Trevor read earlier in Psalm 141.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice! (Psalms 141:2)

Prayer is worship. Prayer is rejoicing in God. Does God reward us for worshiping Him? Yeah! But maybe not in the way that we initially want. Because before we truly worship God, we tend to want stuff. We want more stuff, or better stuff, or more enjoyment from our stuff. But after worshiping God, all we really want is more of Him.

Jesus is the One who makes us perfect. And He does it by His blood. What was impossible for us to achieve, Jesus did for us. So rest in Him, and begin to rejoice everyday in the way that you live that He has done it.