

HONORED BY MEN, OR BY GOD?

By Steve Zeisler

The fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel ends with a powerful call: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." A few verses prior, this record of the Sermon on the Mount tells us that Jesus said, "Love your enemies...that you may be sons [children] of your Father in heaven." The fatherhood* of God as our source, caretaker, overseer, and leader is much in evidence beginning here. Reference is made to God as Father a dozen times in chapter 6, and so it is an important theme to have in mind.

The fatherhood of God as we considered it in chapter 5 had to do primarily with the imprint of the character of God that is made on us. Our attitudes, the way we live our lives, and the way we think are derived from our heavenly Father as we make choices to let him be the one who influences and controls us. But there is another very important thing that a parent can do for a child. It is not only to implant the character that will sustain them in every setting, but to pass on a word of blessing to them. The questions moves from, "Am I like my Father" to "Have I pleased my Father?" That is the concern before us as we begin chapter 6.

Receiving Blessing

There is a marvelous book by Gary Smalley and John Trent, called *The Blessing* . They note the pattern of the Old Testament patriarchs, who at the end of life would gather their children and pass on a word of blessing, promotion, and direction for the future. The concept of receiving a blessing from your parent is a very important one. Very few people, if they understand themselves at all, live without having a deep need to win the approval of their parents, wanting to know that they have succeeded in living up to their parents' standards.

Leslie and I are in a prayer group that consists mostly of people our age. And we're at an age when it is not uncommon to lose one's parents. Of the seven couples in the group, four members have had a parent die in the last eighteen months. It has been a powerful experience to live through and help each other through. We want to be there at the end of our parents' lives; to be at our mother's bedside, to touch a dying father. If there has been pain and hardship in the relationship, we long to receive even just a squeeze of the hand, to have a sense of making things right, of saying the things that were never said or never heard.

Some people have been parented very badly. We don't have to work very hard to think of situations in which there is pain in the relationship between parent and child. Some parents live as if their children weren't there, and they never talk to them, listen to them, face them, touch them, or show an interest in them. What can provide the longed-for blessing from that sort of parent? Other parents have dominated their children; their own lives didn't turn out the way they wanted them to, and they try to live vicariously through their children. Other parents exhibit their anger and frustration and pain by abusing their children. Again, the longed-for blessing is hard to experience. The disconnect is profound, the hurt real.

Yet Jesus speaks of God as a heavenly Father, and he speaks specifically in the passage before us of a reward that comes from God, which is essentially his blessing. What does it mean to have God shower on us a blessing? The striking thing about God is that his parenting is never withdrawn. His attention is never elsewhere. His approval can be entered into with certainty all the time. In this Parent we have someone who will in fact uphold us, care about us, and sustain us; who will be there---he won't die, slip into a coma, grow distracted, or give others all his attention so we're not permitted to have it. This is a Father whose blessing we can count on, and we ought to look forward to it. His gaze is always on us, even in secret. And he rewards what he sees. Verse 1:

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do,

you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Seeking God

Let me stop here and mention two assumptions that are in this verse before we go on. First, if we are Christians, we are going to do what Jesus calls "acts of righteousness;" we are going to have religious sensibilities. It is impossible that we don't. This passage will mention three religious activities done for God's sake: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. They are ways of making an offering to God of our life. In fact, these activities are all done in various cultures and religions. Islam has a great deal to say about all three; in the case of fasting, a great deal more than most Christians encounter. Judaism, obviously, and many other religions will have these religious activities that people engage in deliberately to make their life an offering to God. It is not enough, as some liberal theologians would say, to live an ethical life among human beings to succeed in doing everything that God requires of you. We ought to be good to others---just and loving and truth-telling and so forth. But inevitably we're going to want to turn our face toward God at some point; to be in his presence; to be deliberately, thoughtfully, actively, seeking him, giving ourselves directly to him, and caring about his response.

The second assumption in verse 1 is that our religious life is going to issue in reward ultimately. We'll discuss this further in a moment.

The point Jesus makes is that we must be careful---the reward for these religious activities can come either from men or from God. And if we receive our reward from men, we have received it in full. There is no more.

Let's continue with our text in verses 2-4:

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Our Father's reward

Verses 5-15 comprise Jesus' discussion of prayer, but we're going to skip over this section for now and come back to it in the next message. Verses 16-18:

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

What does it mean to receive a reward from God? What is at stake in this? Does it seem a bit self-centered to live life looking forward to being rewarded by God? The old saying is, "Goodness is its own reward." Shouldn't it be sufficient to do what is right because it is right without any thought of reward? It is important for us to understand what the reward that comes from our Father is, because it is true that if we were thinking of rewards as material things it would be immature, and unrighteous. To say, "I'm going to love God, do what is right, worship, pray, and fast because I will become rich, famous, and secure if I do" would be a non-Christian way of thinking. But reward from God has nothing to do with riches. We are not in competition with anyone else. There is not some limited supply of something over which we are fighting with other people to be rewarded by God and to hoard for ourselves.

Rewards from God are never an entitlement (a word much in the news lately). They are not something that we can demand because we have done the correct things and we have a right to expect God to respond as we tell him to. C.S. Lewis commented thoughtfully on this in his essay *The Weight of Glory* :

We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward that has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward for love. That is why we call a man a mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not a mercenary for desiring it.

If our desire to please God is genuine and he communicates his pleasure to us, a circle has been completed. The reward is the consummation of the righteous act itself. It is not some material thing tacked on that is unrelated to the action that we do to receive it.

Jesus told a parable about a master who returned after being gone on a long journey, and he met with his servants to see how they had done in his absence (see Matthew 25:14-30). Some of them pleased him, and the master said to them, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness!" That is the reward that we can expect from God--his smile, his delight in us, his embrace. You enter into the joy that your Master feels in you. I can't imagine anything finer than to know for sure that my God has been made joyful by some little thing that I've done for the right reasons, and for him to come near enough to give me the Father's blessing: "Well done! I'm delighted! I see you, I understand you, I haven't missed a thing, and I'm thrilled with you! Let me communicate what is in my heart regarding you!"

When God is not pleased

The warning about rewards, however, is that we can be religious and be paid off by the folks around us. We can sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the poor. We can pray loudly and brilliantly. We can fast. We can do all that and get just what human beings will give us; that is all we'll ever receive. God cares about our motivation, not just our activity.

Sometimes the activities as Jesus describes them here are done in a public, attention-grabbing manner. This is funny language, by the way; he intends this to be a caricature. He speaks of a man who is blowing a trumpet in public and then dragging some poor person into the spotlight who is desperately embarrassed to be there and forcing alms upon him, saying in effect, "Look at me, look at what I'm doing!" Jesus talks about the ancient people who in their time of fasting would put ashes on their face or leave their hair disheveled or do something else that would call attention to how much they were denying themselves, and once again be cheered for their superior religious behavior.

Paul Kroeger and I were talking a little bit earlier about this subject. He and his family live in Malaysia, a Muslim nation. Ramadan is a month long fast that Muslims undertake every year. When he was a school teacher, kids would come to class looking wan and put their heads down on their desks every morning during the month of Ramadan. Those who were most successful in calling attention to their deprivation were accorded the highest status. We can do things that ought to please God for public approval and get what we ask for; that is all the reward. God's pleasure in our activities is nowhere to be found because we have done them for the wrong reasons.

Interestingly, Jesus makes the more subtle point that we can be religious to please ourselves, even without calling others' attention to what we're doing. That is what he means when he says, "...Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...." He means, Don't dwell on what a terrific person you are even in your private thoughts. Don't spend a lot of time patting yourself on the back for your generosity, for the extra sensitivity you have in your prayer life, and for your willingness to deny yourself things that other people seem caught up with. Don't smugly make your way through life looking at yourself in comparison to others. Don't let what you've done for the Lord's sake keep coming up again in your consciousness. Otherwise you will miss out on the reward from God."

Now let's look at the religious activities themselves: giving to the poor in prayer (which we will take up next time), and fasting.

Care for the needy

Almsgiving, or care for the needy, is important to consider. This is not just giving a quarter to the spare-change artist on the street. If your Creator who loves you in your complete poverty loves other people as much as he loves you, then you have some responsibility to care for the people whom God cares for. Shouldn't we be motivated to meet the needs of the needy not because it makes us impressed with ourselves, assuages our consciences, or makes us look good in the eyes of other people; but because God cares for them, and we offer this service as an act of devotion to him? We hope to see as he does people who can't make their own way; who are diseased, poor, or ostracized.

Let me raise the obvious point that giving to the poor assumes that we have overcome the tendency to distance and insulate ourselves from AIDS sufferers, the mentally ill, runaway and throwaway children, etc. It is important to give for relief of Rwandan orphans, but much greater lessons are learned when we are personally engaged with poor people who are loved by God.

Fasting

Let's think about the second issue, fasting. Clearly, it has to do with food first of all. The simple point is to deny yourself meals for a day or some period of days in order to deal with the distraction that comes with eating. Eating not only has to do with consuming food, becoming drowsy afterward, and all the other associated physiology; but it also has to do with shopping for food, preparing it, and the social environment in which it is eaten. It is a demanding appetite that can take a great deal of time and attention. So we can at times deliberately say, "For God's sake I'm going to say no to the demands, cut off the responsibility. I'm not going to get involved in using up my time and thoughts and activities for food, in order to be able to devote them to God."

Fasting can include denying ourselves other things besides food. You can go on an information fast---cut yourself off from your computer bulletin board and all the things you do to pour information into your life all the time. We can turn off the television for awhile; or say no to casual, unnecessary, silly relationships for awhile; and instead devote some time to prayer and thoughtfulness. There are all kinds of ways that we can make a choice to live with discipline in order to devote ourselves to what is important.

In the Old Testament there were two things that fasting was always associated with in the life of Israel. One was sorrow, brokenheartedness, and repentance. We can say no to all the daily distractions that make up our lives in order to sit brokenhearted over something. We can do this when we come face-to-face with some truth about ourselves that was hidden from us and discover that we hate it, or when we face the awfulness of the culture that we live in, the brokenness of other people's lives and our own.

The other thing fasting was often associated with in Israel was the future. I can fast when I don't know where God will send me next, what his will for me is, or how to make the important decision that is before me. So I can say no to all the clutter and clamor, the demands, the responsibilities; and clear the decks in order to focus on asking what is his call for me is. In both of those cases, the fasting is done to deliberately place ourselves thoughtfully and fully in God's presence, to hear from him, whether about sin's sorrows or about the future.

The expectation, as Jesus says, is that either we will do these things because we love God and we want to live our lives so that he sees how much we love him in our choices, making our life an offering to him in fact---or we will do these things for the sake of others. Not too long ago I was sacrificially working hard, giving up time and effort, helping some folks repair their home. I was wearing old clothes because it involved some demolition, dust and clutter. I had a meeting with a church leadership group shortly afterward in our home. I got home and thought to myself, "I have an hour before these people come. I have plenty of time to shower and change into my regular clothes. Or I can sit here in my old clothes, with all the evidence that I've been doing something difficult. I won't bring up what I was doing, but if they're willing to ask, I'll subtly let them know how sacrificial, thoughtful, and helpful I have been." That is really the issue that Jesus is talking about here---doing things in such a way that we get credit for it among people; or doing our acts of service and our self-denial as offering to God, because we want to please him and no one else.

Today the children were up on the platform singing, and it brought back memories to me of when our kids were little and the Christmas pageants and other functions in which they were involved. The little ones stand up here looking for their mom and dad, waving, pointing, smiling, and bouncing up and down, unconscious

that there is anyone else in the room. Mom and Dad have the camera focused on their child. Now, other people are listening and music is being sung (supposedly); a congregation is present. But there is a marvelous sense in which the child is getting the approval of his parents. They are saying, "You're doing great! You're such a great singer and such a marvelous child! What you're doing is completely delightful to us!" The child is beaming because his parents are pleased with what he's doing. Parents and child are often oblivious to anything but what is going on between them. No one else enters into what is being communicated.

Jesus wants us to understand that our Father wants to reward us, to pass on a blessing to us. He wants us to know how much he loves us. Our Father wants to say, "Come and share in your Master's happiness! I want you to know how much I'm delighted about the things you think and the things you've done. You made an offering of your life to me and I accept it wholeheartedly!" However much a failure we are as parents to our children or our parents were a failure to us, there is a heavenly Father who does give his blessing, who does reward those who make choices from the heart for his sake.

Act only for the sake of "...your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Live your life not for the sake of those around you who will observe it and communicate their observation. Your Father is unseen. He sees what is done in secret and why it is done. Live your life as an offering to him, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

* The term father here is not used to distinguish from a mother but rather from a child. We are to think of God as our parent and receive enlightenment from him rather than from our peers. The point is not maleness and femaleness, nor is it when the word son is used.

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