

Matthew 6:1

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-6/matthew-61/>

Jesus presents the basic warning he will repeat with various examples throughout the next several verses. He warns against displaying outward acts so others will think well of you, that you are righteous. If we do this, Jesus assures us that we will already have our reward, and our heavenly Father will not reward us any further. This will be a great loss that should be avoided.

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus begins to teach about what motivates our actions. He addresses our motivations at the inner level of the heart. He focuses first on our desire for positive outcomes and presumes humans will seek *reward*. (At the end of this chapter He will focus on our desire to avoid negative outcomes by using the term “worry.”) Interestingly, in this chapter Jesus teaches that only seeking the correct *reward* can be a healthy and proper motivation in seeking His kingdom. Worry has no place.

The proper motivation for seeking His kingdom is seeking a *reward* from the proper authority (God) in the proper manner (obedience). Seeking a reward of being *noticed* by *men* in order to gain their approval is something Jesus’s disciples should *beware* of, and avoid. Performing acts considered *righteousness* as defined by *men* gains the approval of men. But it does not please God. It is natural for humans to seek approval. It is in our design. The most tangible and available way to gain approval is to get it from other humans. Small children seek approval from their parents. It is instinctive. But the best *reward* comes from seeking the *reward* from God by living in faith, and obeying His commands.

The term *righteousness* refers to living in harmony with a social standard. Every culture honors some version of social harmony, and has a version of *righteousness*. Every culture honors a set of behaviors that gain approval. In the Jewish culture, *righteousness* was connected with observance of the Mosaic Law. That was a reason the Pharisees were largely held in high esteem. They were meticulous in observing a vast array of religious rules. As Jesus will point out, however, they are doing it to be seen by men rather than to please God (Matthew 23:5).

The statement in 6:1 immediately follows the mandate, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48): Jesus then states, “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.*” Clearly Jesus is not warning us to *beware of practicing* the *righteousness* of God. His warning is that practicing righteous behavior so that other people will admire us is not true *righteousness*; it does not lead to living in harmony with God’s standards. Jesus teaches that it is not in our best interest to act *before men* so that they take note of the *righteousness* based on the standard of man. The reason for this is because if we do, *we have no reward with our Father who is in heaven.* Our *Father who is in heaven* seeks to reward those living in harmony with His standard.

Jesus is not teaching His disciples to shun the thought of *reward*. He is teaching them how to get the best *reward*. A *reward* that lasts. A *reward* from our *Father who is in heaven*. It seems clear Jesus is teaching that we have to choose. We can either seek a *reward* from our *Father who is in heaven*, or we can seek a reward by *practicing* a set of behaviors with the motive of being *noticed by men*, and seen by them as behaving righteously. It seems clear that Jesus does not expect worldly standards to normally align with heavenly standards.

The word Matthew uses for *reward* is “misthos” (G3408). It means earnings, wages, or compensation. It is a term describing what someone deserves for what they have done. Rewards can be positive (Matthew 5:12; 10:41, 1 Timothy 5:18, 2 John 1:8) or negative (2 Peter 2:13). In this particular context Jesus is using *reward* as a positive or desired compensation.

Christ assumes that we desire good things. He knows that we will willingly (sometimes eagerly) endure hardship so that we can obtain good rewards. He knows this because He created and designed us to seek these things. God made us to seek rewards. We cannot help but seek rewards. Everyone always pursues what they consider to be in their self-interest. The issue that is addressed here is **who** do we seek *reward from*—*men* or our *Father who is in heaven*? It is a binary choice. We must pick one or the other. Our *Father who is in heaven* is a much better Rewarder; His rewards are exceedingly superior to anything that *men* can give. In order to please God, we must have the faith to believe that He will reward us if we diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

In teaching these things, Christ is giving His disciples an accurate framework to see reality. He is helping them understand the nature of their choices and the rewards that come with them. But He is leaving to them the power to choose. They will decide. In a strict sense, Jesus is not commanding them to choose one over the other. He is not forbidding them to choose man over God in the same way that He forbids hatred or murder. Rather Jesus is advising His disciples how to seek the better *reward* by letting them know how rewards work in His kingdom and within the systems of the world. He makes it clear He is letting them choose which *reward* to pursue. Jesus is sharing truth and grace like He always does. He gives His disciples accurate information and grants them freedom to follow or ignore it. But He makes the consequences clear.

Jesus is using a principle of self-governance, which is a major platform in His kingdom. Self-governance is a principle that empowers everyone to function freely at their highest capacity. Christ, the Messiah, encourages this principle in His kingdom by rewarding those who employ their talents, abilities, and resources to freely serve God and serve others. Self-governance cannot be imposed, by definition. Self-governance can only be chosen. Jesus is clear that the disciples are empowered to choose. Jesus is simply making a clear declaration of a true perspective about these choices.

Jesus speaks of God as *Father*. The concept of God as Father would not have been new to the Jews. Isaiah speaks of the LORD as “our Father” (Isaiah 63:16; 64:8). It depicts a close, familial relationship while also evoking an image of authority, as well as love. God is spoken of in other terms in the Old Testament, such as being Israel’s husband (as in Ezekiel 16), shepherd (Psalm 23), King (1 Samuel 8), as well as Israel’s shield and fortress (Psalm 18:2).

But among all the choices, Jesus chose the image of God as *Father* for this context. A father is generally happy to reward his children. He is eager to see his child rewarded. If the father is a spectator at an event, he mainly watches his own child, wishing him or her to prosper. It seems that by using *Father* as the image of God, Jesus is conveying God's eagerness to reward His children. Since Jesus is speaking to *disciples* who have gathered around Him, it seems clear His purpose is to motivate them to consider where their true self-interest lies, and urge them to live a life that is pleasing to God.

As the Son, Jesus knew God as the Father. He often spoke of God as His Father. God is not just Jesus's *Father*; He is the *Father* of all who believe in the Son and become His children (John 1:12-13).

At first glance, Christ's warning to *Beware of practicing your righteousness before men* appears to conflict with Jesus's earlier command in Matthew 5:16 to let "your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works." How are we to let our good works shine before men and at the same time be wary of our righteous works *before men* being *noticed by them*?

This matter is readily resolved when we remember that Jesus is not as concerned with the external actions as He is about our hearts. He is speaking about motivations. People will see what we do and hear what we say. They will notice our external behavior and whether it is righteous or unrighteous. That is a given. We all live in a fishbowl, to some degree. The question is whether the rationale for our behavior is to manipulate praise from men, or to please God.

Jesus laid bare the Pharisees for abusing the vulnerable while putting on a show of respectability and religious purity. He likened them to a whitewashed tomb, full of dead men's bones (Matthew 23:27). They looked good on the outside, but were rotten on the inside. Jesus is telling his disciples that their motive should be to please God, to have behavior that pleases our *Father who is in heaven*. If His disciples live like whitewashed tombs, Jesus tells them, *you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven*.

Biblical Text

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in he