# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Our Father’s Reward”**

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18**

 **April 16, 2023**

Do you remember the movie “Chariots of Fire?” Winner of the Oscar for Best Picture in 1982, it was the true story of a British runner named Eric Liddle who was training for the 1924 Paris Olympics. Born in China, the son of Christian missionaries, Eric was a strong believer who eventually returned to China to continue his parents’ work. When asked his motivation for running, he said: “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” How wonderful it is when what we do, when how we live, is pleasing to God, making it thereby even more pleasing to ourselves.

We have been following the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. This morning we read from Matthew chapter six where Jesus talks about practices of faith and shows us how to carry them out in such a way that they are pleasing to God. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

“Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.”

Jesus mentions three religious activities that were common spiritual practices among the Jews, namely giving, praying and fasting. Notice that he did not say, “If you do such and such” but “When you do such and such.” The question is not whether or not we practice what God calls us to – Jesus is assuming we will. The question is what our motive is for doing these things. With God, there is really only one motive that will gain the reward of his pleasure and that is the motive of love. Love for him and love for others.

Mother Teresa founded the *Sisters of Charity*, a Catholic religious order whose calling from God is to care for the poorest of the poor. She often spoke of doing small thing with great love: “It’s not how much we do, but how much love we put into doing it. It’s not how much we give, but how much love we put into giving it.” Her words reflect the intent of Jesus in these verses. When we give, when we pray, when we fast, when we do whatever it is we do as a part of our spiritual journey of becoming like Christ, if we do it from the motive of love, God is pleased.

Does the idea of receiving a reward from God make you feel a little uncomfortable? Doesn’t it sound a bit self-centered to live life hoping to be rewarded by God? Shouldn’t it be enough to do the right thing simply because it is the right thing? If we expect God to reward us with something material then, yes, we have misunderstood Jesus. To say, “I will give to the poor, pray to God, and fast because God will give me riches if I do” would be an unbiblical way of thinking. But reward from God has little to do with worldly riches.

There is an appropriate reward that goes along with, that naturally connects itself to, a particular act. If a man were trying to convince a woman that he loves her, just so she would accept his proposal of marriage and give him access to her money, we would not say that money is the appropriate reward for love. If fact, we would consider the man in the wrong if he married for money. However, marriage *is* the appropriate reward for true, unselfish love, and the person who wants to receive the reward of marriage is not wrong for desiring it.

If our desire to please God through our actions is genuine and he rewards us with his pleasure, then the reward is appropriate. “This is my beloved Son,” the Father said audibly of Jesus, “and with him I am well pleased.” However, if our motive for acting in a way that God desires is to receive some kind of self-centered reward, such as riches or the approval of other people or the admiration of our fellow Christians, then, Jesus says, we may get some version of the reward we’re looking for, but it won’t be God’s pleasure.

Jesus told a parable about a master who returned after being gone on a long journey. He met with his servants to see how they had done in his absence. Some of them pleased him, and the master said to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master’s happiness!” This 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 has in you. It’s hard for me to imagine anything better than to know for sure that my God has been made joyful by some little thing that I have done for the right reason.

When our boys were young, they would participate in school plays and church Christmas pageants. Standing up there on the stage they would scan the crowd until they saw Lauri and me. Seeing us, they might give us a little wave or a small smile, singling us out as being, for them, the most important people in the room. Similarly, our camera would be focused on our child, and our eyes and ears would be tuned into whatever he was doing. We were pleased with our son, and he could feel our pleasure. While he might like the applause of the crowd, nothing meant more to him than having us there and letting him know that we were proud and happy to be his parents.

Jesus is teaching us to live our Christian life not for whatever this world may have to offer us, but for the pleasure of his heavenly Father. He sees what we do, his eyes are on us 24/7, and when our eyes are on him and when we are delighted to be his child, we will feel his pleasure. What a reward that is!