

Living the Sacrificial Life

Looking Up to Look Out

Matthew 6:25-34(33) "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Background

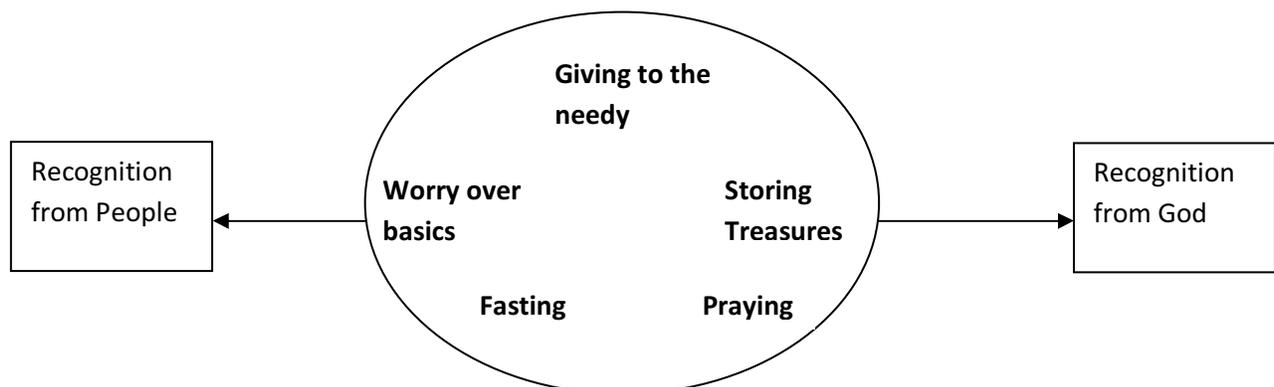
Jesus is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, not just speaking to disciples, but to the larger crowd of people looking to hear what He has to say. In this discourse, He is speaking of the difference of following path the world takes to obtain righteousness, and living the life of the kingdom of God.

Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen of them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven – Matthew 6:1

Jesus' main point throughout this discourse seems to go against everything we strive for. This is true not only for the world, but we will find in many ways He gives the church a new way to look at life, and a new understanding of kingdom living. This discussion is not just about how we interface with the world or about our "means of grace", i.e., our actions that give credence our changed life. Jesus covers everything, starting at what we consider the highest level of significance, "acts of righteousness" such as giving to the poor, and then moving down the *actualization ladder* to the most basic human needs: food, water, and clothing.

Focus and Perspective

In Jesus' discourse, the acts of righteousness were neutral. The issue was *the focus* that was placed on them and even more what the expected result was.



For the crowd, they were doing the acts of righteousness for the external validation that they would receive by doing them. In the scripture they are described simply as doing them in public for public

recognition, but they speak to a deeper need for having a selfish reason to do such acts. To bring this modern day, here are some reasons people will do “acts of righteousness”

- Tax breaks
- Publicity
- Building or repairing a public image
- Networking with others who do them
- Balance out failures in life (“I’m basically a good person, and here’s proof”)

For Jesus, however, there was a proper reason to do the acts of righteousness, and a proper way to do them. The way to do them was to focus solely on the act and not on the recognition that may come from it, and the reason was the reward that would come from the Father

Rewards from Works?

It would appear that Jesus is trying to bribe us into a life of self denial on earth, for the promise of “something better” in heaven. We end up with mental pictures of bigger houses, more money, better friends, more recognition and such because we have sacrificed *so much* here on earth. We can get very focused on doing things for the *reward* that is supposed to come, even trying to maintain our own level of righteousness, looking for that particular prize. In doing so, we miss the very thing that God has for us, the thing that has been there all along

*But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends –
Luke 15 (29)*

When we equate those treasures with the acts of righteousness that we are doing, are we not doing the same thing as the rest of the world, in seeking an external validation for who and what we are? And what happens when the reward doesn’t come, or when we see a disparity between the effort given by others and the *reward* received?

However, Jesus does repeatedly state (4 direct references to rewards and 1 indirect) that there are rewards to be had, and they are from the Father and in heaven. Our dilemma: do we *work* for these potentially tangible rewards? Do we give \$10.00 to the homeless, so God can give us \$10 (or \$20, or \$1000) back *as proof that “it” works*? What are the rewards we are to receive, and what is to be our position regarding them?

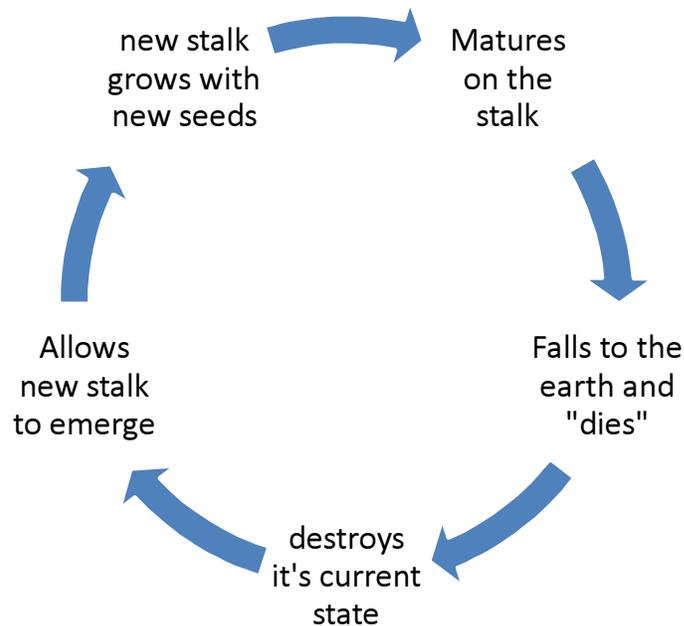
Opening the Un-Mystery Box

We have treated these verses like Santa with Christmas: “be careful, because if you don’t do it right, you won’t get any toys when Santa comes”. The scriptures, however would have us view this subject of sacrifice and acts of righteousness differently

*If in fact Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about but not before God. What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.
– Romans 4:2-4*

Abraham's status before God, and consequently before himself and anyone else, was not determined because he did any particular act. In fact, God declared Abraham righteousness long before circumcision, or before he had a son to sacrifice, and *in spite of the apparent failures that we associate with Abraham*. For Abraham, then, he did not do what he did in order to gain something from God; he did what he did *because of what He already had gained from God*. **Abraham's acts of righteousness were the fruit borne out of the righteousness that God had already declared.**

Remember the lifecycle of the seed:



Reward (μισθός) defined is:

- 1) Dues paid for work
- 2) Used of the fruit naturally resulting from toils or endeavors

Our reward, similar to the life of the seed, comes from what was already planted, and produces what it has naturally inside it. So, our "acts of righteousness" are performed, *not to become righteous*, but because God has already declared us righteous. Similarly, our reward from God is that which naturally comes as a result of planting that seed of righteousness. Remember, *righteousness* defined is "the state of him who is as he ought to be". Because we are in that right place, we act out of that place, and produce that right place, not just in us, but in others.

The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. Master, he said, you entrusted me with five talents. See I have gained five more. His master replied, Well done good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. - Matthew 25:20-21

The master had already entrusted the servants with the property. In turn, the servants did what was right by trusting themselves to do what was right with the property, and upon the master's return,

they received more trust with the master's property. We need to realize, then, that what we so often seek in performing the acts of righteousness **we already have**.

My son, the father said, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. - Luke 15:31-32

Where Do We Look?

Jesus finishes this part of His discourse talking about being anxious. In context, we can even get self satisfaction over spending inordinate amounts of time and effort fretting over the necessities of life. He wasn't necessarily speaking to people who didn't know where their next meal was coming from, but people who lived in the "negative what if": spending their time focused on, and seeking for even those basics, as if they would be gone if they did not seek them with such voracity. Jesus would rather have us focus on the relationship we have with our Father, and on how trustworthy He is.

So do not worry, saying, "what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear?" for the [nations] run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness... - Matthew 6:31-33a

Like the servants with the talents, we need to look to the relationship we have with the Master, with what He has already declared and provided. In the same way, if we understand that, like the elder son, we are always with the Father, and everything He has is ours, then our acts of righteousness will be borne out of the character of righteousness that has already been given and declared. We do what we do not to get, but because we have already received. We give out of the fullness we have received from the Father.

Summary

We are, as individuals and as a body, to give ourselves to reaching outside of ourselves, touching, loving and sharing with those who have need. Jesus wants us to be secure in our relationship with the Father, so much so that we can freely give of ourselves, not looking for what we receive out of those situations. We can be confident that as we approach the life of sacrifice in this way, we will see what we plant grow into something that resembles what we have planted, producing the same fruit in others as it has in us.