

THE REWARD MOTIVE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Matt. 6:1-18

When we study the opening verses of Matt. 6, we are immediately confronted with one most important question-- What is the place of the reward motive in the Christian life? Three times in this section Jesus speaks of God rewarding those who have given to him the kind of service which he desires (Matt. 6:4,6; Matt. 6:18). This question is so important that we will do well to pause to examine it before we go on to study the chapter in detail.

It is very often stated that the reward motive has no place whatsoever in the Christian life. It is held that we must be good for the sake of being good, that virtue is its own reward, and that the whole conception of reward must be banished from the Christian life. There was an old saint who used to say that he would wish to quench all the fires of hell with water, and to bum up all the joys of heaven with fire, in order that men seek for goodness nor nothing but goodness' sake, and in order that the idea of reward and punishment might be totally eliminated from life.

On the face of it that point of view is very fine and noble; but it is not the point of view which Jesus held. We have already seen that three times in this passage Jesus speaks about reward. The right kind of almsgiving, the right kind of prayer, and the right kind of fasting will all have their reward.

Nor is this an isolated instance of the idea of reward in the teaching of Jesus. He says of those who loyally bear persecution, who suffer insult without bitterness, that their reward will be great in heaven (Matt. 5:12). He says that whoever gives to one of these little ones a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple will not lose his reward (Matt. 10:42). At least part of the teaching of the parable of the talents is that faithful service will receive its reward (Matt. 25:14-30). In the parable of the last judgment the plain teaching is that there is reward and punishment in accordance with our reaction to the needs of our fellow-men (Matt. 25:31-46). It is abundantly clear that Jesus did not hesitate to speak in terms of rewards and punishments. And it may well be that we ought to be careful that we do not try to be more spiritual than Jesus was in our thinking about this matter of reward. There are certain obvious facts which we must note.

(i) It is an obvious rule of life that any action which achieves nothing is futile and meaningless. A goodness which achieves no end would be a meaningless goodness. As has been very truly said: "Unless a thing is good for something, it is good for nothing." Unless the Christian life has an aim and a goal which it is a joy to obtain, it becomes largely without meaning. He who believes in the Christian way and the Christian promise cannot believe that goodness can have no result beyond itself

(ii) To banish all rewards and punishments from the idea of religion is in effect to say that injustice has the last word. It cannot reasonably be held that the end of the good man and the end of the bad man are one and the same. That would simply mean that God does not

care whether men are good or not. It would mean, to put it crudely and bluntly, that there is no point in being good, and no special reason why a man should live one kind of life instead of another. To eliminate all rewards and punishments is really to say that in God there is neither justice nor love.

Rewards and punishments are necessary in order to make sense of life. A. E. Housman wrote:

Yonder, on the morning blink,
The sun is up, and so must I,
To wash and dress and eat and drink
And look at things and talk and think
And work, and God knows why.
And often have I washed and dressed,
And what's to show for all my pain?
Let me lie abed and rest;
Ten thousand times I've done my best,
And all's to do again.

If there are no rewards and no punishments, then that poem's view of life is true. Action is meaningless and all effort goes unavailingly whistling down the wind.

(i) The Christian Idea of Reward

But having gone this length with the idea of reward in the Christian life, there are certain things about which we must be clear.

(i) When Jesus spoke of reward, he was very definitely not thinking in terms of material reward. It is quite true that in the Old Testament the idea of goodness and prosperity are closely connected. If a man prospered, if his fields were fertile and his harvest great, if his children were many and his fortune large, it was taken as a proof that he was a good man.

That is precisely the problem at the back of the Book of Job. Job is in misfortune; his friends come to him to argue that that misfortune must be the result of his own sin; and Job most vehemently denies that charge. "Think now," said Eliphaz, "who that was innocent ever perished?" (Jb.4:7) "If you are pure and upright," said Bildad, "surely then he would rouse himself for you and reward you with a rightful habitation" (Jb.8:6). "For you say, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes," said Zophar, "but oh that God would speak and open his lips to you" (Jb.11:4). The very idea that the Book of Job was written to contradict is that goodness and material prosperity go hand in hand.

"I have been young, and now am old," said the Psalmist, "yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging bread" (Ps.37:25). "A thousand may fall at your side," said the Psalmist, "and ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent" (Ps.91:7-10). These are things that Jesus could never have said. It was certainly not material prosperity which Jesus promised his disciples. He in fact promised them trial and tribulation, suffering, persecution and death. Quite certainly Jesus did not think in terms of material rewards.

(ii) The second thing which it is necessary to remember is that the highest reward never comes to him who is seeking it. If a man is always seeking reward, always reckoning up that which he believes himself to be earning, then he will in fact miss the reward for which he is seeking. And he will miss it because he is looking at God and looking at life in the wrong way. A man who is always calculating his reward is thinking of God in terms of a judge or an accountant, and above all he is thinking of life in terms of law. He is thinking of doing so much and earning so much. He is thinking of life in terms of a credit and debit balance sheet. He is thinking of presenting an account to God and of saying, "I have done so much. Now I claim my reward."

The basic mistake of this point of view is that it thinks of life in terms of law, instead of love. If we love a person deeply and passionately, humbly and selflessly, we will be quite sure that if we give that person all we have to give, we will still be in default, that if we give that person the sun, the moon and the stars, we will still be in debt. He who is in love is always in debt; the last thing that enters his mind is that he has earned a reward. If a man has a legal view of life, he may think constantly in terms of reward that he has won; if a man has a loving view of life, the idea of reward will never enter his mind.

The great paradox of Christian reward is this--the person who looks for reward, and who calculates that it is due to him, does not receive it; the person whose only motive is love, and who never thinks that he has deserved any reward, does, in fact, receive it. The strange fact is that reward is at one and the same time the by-product and the ultimate end of the Christian life.

(ii) The Christian Reward

We must now go on to ask: What are the rewards of the Christian life?

(i) We begin by noting one basic and general truth. We have already seen that Jesus Christ does not think in terms of material reward at all. The rewards of the Christian life are rewards only to a spiritually minded person. To the materially minded person they would not be rewards at all. The Christian rewards are rewards only to a Christian.

(ii) The first of the Christian rewards is satisfaction. The doing of the right thing, obedience to Jesus Christ, the taking of his way, whatever else it may or may not bring, always brings satisfaction. It may well be that, if a man does the right thing, and obeys Jesus Christ, he may lose his fortune and his position, he may end in gaol or on the scaffold, he may finish up in unpopularity, loneliness and disrepute, but he will still possess that inner satisfaction, which is greater than all the rest put together. No price-ticket can be put upon this; this is not to be evaluated in terms of earthly currency, but

there is nothing like it in all the world. It brings that contentment which is the crown of life.

The poet George Herbert was a member of a little group of friends who used to meet to play their musical instruments together like a little orchestra. Once he was on his way to a meeting of this group, when he passed a carter whose cart was stuck in the mud of the ditch. George Herbert laid aside his instrument and went to the help of the man. It was a long job to get the cart out, and he finished covered with mud. When he arrived at the house of his friends, it was too late for music. He told them what had detained him on the way. One said: "You have missed all the music." George Herbert smiled. "Yes," he said. "but I will have songs at midnight." He had the satisfaction of having done the Christlike thing.

Godfrey Winn tells of a man who was the greatest plastic surgeon in Britain. During the war, he gave up a private practice, which brought him in 10,000 British pounds per year, to devote all his time to remoulding the faces and the bodies of airmen who had been burned and mutilated in battle. Godfrey Winn said to him, "What's your ambition, Mac?" Back came the answer, "I want to be a good craftsman." The 10,000 British pounds per year was nothing compared with the satisfaction of a selfless job well done.

Once a woman stopped Dale of Birmingham on the street. "God bless you, Dr. Dale," she said. She absolutely refused to give her name. She only thanked him and blessed him and passed on. Dale at the moment had been much depressed. "But," he said, "the mist broke, the sunlight came; I breathed the free air of the mountains of God." In material things he was not one penny the richer, but in the deep satisfaction, which comes to the preacher who discovers he has helped someone, he had gained wealth untold.

The first Christian reward is the satisfaction which no money on earth can buy.

(iii) The second reward of the Christian life is still more work to do. It is the paradox of the Christian idea of reward that a task well done does not bring rest and comfort and ease; it brings still greater demands and still more strenuous endeavours. In the parable of the talents the reward of the faithful servants was still greater responsibility (Matt. 25:14-30). When a teacher gets a really brilliant and able scholar, he does not exempt him from work; he gives him harder work than is given to anyone else. The brilliant young musician is given, not easier, but harder music to master. The lad who has played well in the second eleven is not put into the third eleven, where he could walk through the game without breaking sweat; he is put into the first eleven where he has to play his heart out. The Jews had a curious saying. They said that a wise teacher will treat the pupil "like a young heifer whose burden is increased daily." The Christian reward is the reverse of the world's reward. The world's reward would be an easier time; the reward of the Christian is that God lays still more and more upon a man to do for him and for his fellow-men. The harder the work we are given to do, the greater the reward.

(iv) The third, and the final, Christian reward is what men all through the ages have called the vision of God. For the worldly man, who has never given a thought to God, to

be confronted with God will be a terror and not a joy. If a man takes his own way, he drifts farther and farther from God; the gulf between him and God becomes ever wider, until in the end God becomes a grim stranger, whom he only wishes to avoid. But, if a man all his life has sought to walk with God, if he has sought to obey his Lord, if goodness has been his quest through all his days, then all his life he has been growing closer and closer to God, until in the end he passes into God's nearer presence, without fear and with radiant joy--and that is the greatest reward of all.

RIGHT THINGS FROM THE WRONG MOTIVE

Matt. 6:1

Take care not to try to demonstrate how good you are in the presence of men, in order to be seen by them. If you do, you have no reward with your Father in heaven.

To the Jew there were three great cardinal works of the religious life, three great pillars on which the good life was based--almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Jesus would not for a moment have disputed that; what troubled him was that so often in human life the finest things were done from the wrong motives.

It is the strange fact that these three great cardinal good works readily lend themselves to wrong motives. It was Jesus' warning that, when these things were done with the sole intention of bringing glory to the doer, they lost by far the most important part of their value. A man may give alms, not really to help the person to whom he gives, but simply to demonstrate his own generosity, and to bask in the warmth of some one's gratitude and all men's praise. A man may pray in such a way that his prayer is not really addressed to God, but to his fellow-men. His praying may simply be an attempt to demonstrate his exceptional piety in such a way that no one can fail to see it. A man may fast, not really for the good of his own soul, not really to humble himself in the sight of God, but simply to show the world what a splendidly self-disciplined character he is. A man may practise good works simply to win praise from men, to increase his own prestige, and to show the world how good he is.

As Jesus saw it, there is no doubt at all that that kind of thing does receive a certain kind of reward. Three times Jesus uses the phrase, as the Revised Standard Version has it: "Truly I say to you, they have their reward" (Matt. 6:2,5; Matt. 6:16). It would be better to translate it: "They have received payment in full." The word that is used in the Greek is the verb *apechein* (GSN0568), which was the technical business and commercial word for receiving payment in full. It was the word which was used on receipted accounts. For instance, one man signs a receipt given to another man: "I have received (*apecho*, GSN0568) from you the rent of the olive press which you have on hire." A tax collector gives a receipt, saying, "I have received (*apecho*, GSN0568) from you the tax which is due." A man sells a slave and gives a receipt, saying, "I have received (*apecho*, GSN0568) the whole price due to me."

What Jesus is saying is this: "If you give alms to demonstrate your own generosity, you will get the admiration of men--but that is all you will ever get. That is your payment in full. If you pray in such a way as to flaunt your piety in the face of men, you will gain the reputation of being an extremely devout man--but that is all you will ever get. That is your payment in full. If you fast in such a way that all men know that you are fasting, you will become known as an extremely abstemious and ascetic man--but that is all you will ever get. That is your payment in full." Jesus is saying, "If your one aim is to get yourself the world's rewards, no doubt you will get them--but you must not look for the rewards which God alone can give." And he would be a sadly short-sighted creature who grasped the rewards of time, and let the rewards of eternity go.

HOW NOT TO GIVE

Matt. 6:2-4

So, when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. This is the truth I tell you--they are paid in full. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms-giving may be in secret, and your Father who sees what happens in secret will give you your reward in full.

To the Jew almsgiving was the most sacred of all religious duties. How sacred it was may be seen from the fact that the Jews used the same word--tsedaqah (HSN6666)--both for righteousness and almsgiving. To give alms and to be righteous were one and the same thing. To give alms was to gain merit in the sight of God, and was even to win atonement and forgiveness for past sins. "It is better to give alms than to lay up gold; almsgiving doth deliver from death, and it purges away all sin" (Tob.12:8).

"Almsgiving to a father shall not be blotted out,
And as a substitute for sins it shall stand firmly planted.
In the day of affliction it shall be remembered to thy credit.
It shall obliterate thine iniquities as the heat, the hoar-frost."

(Ecc.3:14-15).

There was a rabbinic saying: "Greater is he who gives alms than he who offers all sacrifices." Almsgiving stood first in the catalogue of good works.

It was then natural and inevitable that the man who desired to be good should concentrate on almsgiving. The highest teaching of the Rabbis was exactly the same as the teaching of Jesus. They too forbade ostentatious almsgiving. "He who gives alms in secret," they said, "is greater than Moses." The almsgiving which saves from death is that "when the recipient does not know from whom he gets it, and when the giver does not know to whom he gives it." There was a Rabbi who, when he wished to give alms, dropped money behind him, so that he would not see who picked it up. "It were better" they said, "to give a man nothing, than to give him something, and to put him to shame." There was

one particularly lovely custom connected with the Temple. In the Temple there was a room called The Chamber of the Silent. People who wished to make atonement for some sin placed money there; and poor people from good families who had come down in the world were secretly helped by these contributions.

But as in so many other things practice fell far short of precept. Too often the giver gave in such a way that all men might see the gift, and gave far more to bring glory to himself than to bring help to someone else. During the synagogue services, offerings were taken for the poor, and there were those who took good care that others should see how much they gave. J. J. Wetstein quotes an eastern custom from the ancient days: "In the east water is so scarce that sometimes it had to be bought. When a man wanted to do a good act, and to bring blessing on his family, he went to a water-carrier with a good voice, and instructed him: 'Give the thirsty a drink.' The water-carrier filled his skin and went to the market-place. 'O thirsty ones,' he cried, 'come to drink the offering.' And the giver stood by him and said, 'Bless me, who gave you this drink.'" That is precisely the kind of thing that Jesus condemns. He talks about the hypocrites who do things like that. The word *hypokrites* (GSM5273) is the Greek word for an actor. People like that put on an act of giving which is designed only to glorify themselves.

THE MOTIVES OF GIVING

Matt. 6:2-4 (continued)

Let us now look at some of the motives which lie behind the act of giving.

(i) A man may give from a sense of duty. He may give not because he wishes to give, but because he feels that giving is a duty which he cannot well escape. It may even be that a man can come--perhaps unconsciously--to regard the poor as being in the world to allow him to carry out this duty, and thus to acquire merit in the sight of God.

Catherine Carswell in her autobiography, *Lying Awake*, tells of her early days in Glasgow: "The poor, one might say, were our pets. Decidedly they were always with us. In our particular ark we were taught to love, honour and entertain the poor." The key-note, as she looked back upon it, was superiority and condescension. Giving was regarded as a duty, but often with the giving there was a moral lecture which provided a smug pleasure for the man who gave it. In those days Glasgow was a drunken city on a Saturday night. She writes: "Every Sunday afternoon, for some years, my father went a round of the cells of the police station, bailing out the week-end drunks with half-crowns, so that they might not lose their jobs on Monday morning. He asked each one to sign the pledge, and to return his half-crown out of the next week's wages." No doubt he was perfectly right, but he gave from a smug eminence of respectability, and included a moral lecture in the giving. He clearly felt himself to be in a quite different moral category from those to whom he gave. It was said of a great, but superior man: "With all his giving he never gives himself" When a man gives, as it were, from a pedestal, when he gives always with a certain calculation, when he gives from a sense of duty, even a sense of

Christian duty, he may give generously of things, but the one thing he never gives is himself, and therefore the giving is incomplete.

(ii) A man may give from motives of prestige. He may give to get to himself the glory of giving. The chances are that, if no one is to know about it, or, if there is no publicity attached to it, he would not give at all. Unless he is duly thanked and praised and honoured, he is sadly disgruntled and discontented. He gives, not to the glory of God, but to the glory of himself. He gives, not primarily to help the poor person, but to gratify his own vanity and his own sense of power.

(iii) A man may give simply because he has to. He may give simply because the overflowing love and kindness in his heart will allow him to do no other. He may give because, try as he may, he cannot rid himself of a sense of responsibility for the man in need.

There was a kind of vast kindness about Dr. Johnson. There was a poverty-stricken creature called Robert Levett. Levett in his day had been a waiter in Paris and a doctor in the poorer parts of London. He had an appearance and manners, as Johnson said himself, such as to disgust the rich and to terrify the poor. Somehow or other he became a member of Johnson's household. Boswell was amazed at the whole business, but Goldsmith knew Johnson better. He said of Levett: "He is poor and honest which is recommendation enough for Johnson. He is now become miserable, and that insures the protection of Johnson." Misfortune was a passport to Johnson's heart.

Boswell tells this story of Johnson. "Coming home late one night he found a poor woman lying on the street, so much exhausted that she could not walk: he took her upon his back and carried her to his house, where he discovered that she was one of these wretched females, who had fallen into the lowest state of vice, poverty and disease. Instead of harshly upbraiding her, he had her taken care of with all tenderness for a long time, at considerable expense, till she was restored to health, and endeavoured to put her in a virtuous way of living." All that Johnson got out of that was unworthy suspicions about his own character, but the heart of the man demanded that he should give.

Surely one of the loveliest pictures in literary history is the picture of Johnson, in his own days of poverty, coming home in the small hours of the morning, and, as he walked along the Strand, slipping pennies into the hands of the waifs and strays who were sleeping in the doorways because they had nowhere else to go. Hawkins tells that one asked him how he could bear to have his house filled with "necessitous and undeserving people." Johnson answered: "If I did not assist them no one else would, and they must not be lost for want." There you have real giving, the giving which is the upsurge of love in the heart of a man, the giving which is a kind of overflow of the love of God.

We have the pattern of this perfect giving in Jesus Christ himself. Paul wrote to his friends at Corinth: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2Cor.8:9). Our giving must never be the grim and self-righteous outcome of a sense of

duty, still less must it be done to enhance our own glory and prestige among men; it must be the instinctive outflow of the loving heart; we must give to others as Jesus Christ gave himself to us.

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Matt. 6:5-8

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they are fond of praying standing in the synagogues and at the corners of the streets, so that they may be seen by people. This is the truth I tell you--they are paid in full. But when you pray, go into your private room, and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what happens in secret will give you your reward in full. When you pray, do not pile up meaningless phrases, as the Gentiles do, for their idea is that they will be heard because of the length of their words. So, then, do not be like them, for your Father knows the things you need before you ask him.

No nation ever had a higher ideal of prayer than the Jews had; and no religion ever ranked prayer higher in the scale of priorities than the Jews did. "Great is prayer," said the Rabbis, "greater than all good works." One of the loveliest things that was ever said about family worship is the Rabbinic saying, "He who prays within his house surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron." The only regret of the Rabbis was that it was not possible to pray all the day long.

But certain faults had crept into the Jewish habits of prayer. It is to be noted that these faults are by no means peculiar to Jewish ideas of prayer; they can and do occur anywhere. And it is to be noted that they could only occur in a community where prayer was taken with the greatest seriousness. They are not the faults of neglect; they are the faults of misguided devotion.

(i) Prayer tended to become formalized. There were two things the daily use of which was prescribed for every Jew.

The first was the Shema (compare HSN8088), which consists of three short passages of scripture--Deut.6:4-9; Deut.11:13-21; Num.15:37-41. Shema is the imperative of the Hebrew word to hear (HSN8085), and the Shema takes its name from the verse which was the essence and center of the whole matter: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord."

The full Shema had to be recited by every Jew every morning and every evening. It had to be said as early as possible. It had to be said as soon as the light was strong enough to enable a man to distinguish between blue and white, or, as Rabbi Eliezer said, between blue and green. In any event it had to be said before the third hour, that is, 9 a.m.; and in the evening it had to be said before 9 p.m. If the last possible moment for the saying of

the Shema had come, no matter where a man found himself, at home, in the street, at work, in the synagogue, he must stop and say it.

There were many who loved the Shema and who repeated it with reverence and adoration and love; but inevitably there were still more who gabbled their way through it, and went their way. The Shema had every chance of becoming a vain repetition, which men mumbled through like some spell or incantation. We Christians are but ill-qualified to criticise, for everything that has been said about formally gabbling through the Shema can be said about grace before meat in many a family.

The second thing which every Jew must daily repeat was called the Shemoneh 'Esreh which means The Eighteen. It consisted of eighteen prayers, and was, and still is, an essential part of the synagogue service. In time the prayers became nineteen, but the old name remains. Most of these prayers are quite short, and nearly all of them are very lovely.

The twelfth runs:

"Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be showed upon the upright, the humble, the elders of thy people Israel, and the rest of its teachers; be favourable to the pious strangers amongst us, and to us all. Give thou a good reward to those who sincerely trust in thy name, that our lot may be cast among them in the world to come, that our hope be not deceived. Praised be thou, O Lord, who art the hope and confidence of the faithful."

The fifth runs:

Bring us back to thy law, O our Father; bring us back, O King, to thy service; bring us back to thee by true repentance. Praised be thou, O Lord who dost accept our repentance,

No Church possesses a more beautiful liturgy than the Shemoneh 'Esreh. The law was that the Jew must recite it three times a day, once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. The same thing happened again. The devout Jew prayed it with loving devotion; but there were many to whom this series of lovely prayers became a gabbled formula. There was even a summary supplied which a man might pray, if he had not the time or the memory to repeat the whole eighteen. The repetition of the Shemoneh 'Esreh became nothing more than the superstitious incantation of a spell. Again, we Christians are ill-qualified to criticise, for there are many occasions when we do precisely the same with the prayer which taught us to pray.

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Matt. 6:5-8 (continued)

(ii) Further, the Jewish liturgy supplied stated prayers for all occasions. There was hardly an event or a sight in life which had not its stated formula of prayer. There was prayer before and after each meal; there were prayers in connection with the light, the fire, the lightning, on seeing the new moon, comets, rain, tempest, at the sight of the sea, lakes, rivers, on receiving good news, on using new furniture, on entering or leaving a city. Everything had its prayer. Clearly there is something infinitely lovely here. It was the intention that every happening in life should be brought into the presence of God.

But just because the prayers were so meticulously prescribed and stated, the whole system lent itself to formalism, and the danger was for the prayers to slip off the tongue with very little meaning. The tendency was glibly to repeat the right prayer at the right time. The great Rabbis knew that and tried to guard against it. "If a man," they said, "says his prayers, as if to get through a set task, that is no prayer." "Do not look on prayer as a formal duty, but as an act of humility by which to obtain the mercy of God." Rabbi Eliezer was so impressed with the danger of formalism that it was his custom to compose one new prayer every day, that his prayer might be always fresh. It is quite clear that this kind of danger is not confined to Jewish religion. Even quiet times which began in devotion can end in the formalism of a rigid and ritualistic timetable.

(iii) Still further, the devout Jew had set times for prayer. The hours were the third, the sixth and the ninth hours, that is, 9 a.m., 12 midday and 3 p.m. In whatever place a man found himself he was bound to pray. Clearly he might be genuinely remembering God, or he might be carrying out an habitual formality. The Mohammedans have the same custom. There is a story of a Mohammedan who was pursuing an enemy with drawn knife to kill him. The muezzin rang out; he stopped, unrolled his prayer mat, knelt and raced through his prayer; and then rose to continue his murderous pursuit. It is a lovely thing that three times a day a man should remember God; but there is very real danger that it may come to no more than this that three times a day a man gabbles his prayers without a thought of God.

(iv) There was a tendency to connect prayer with certain places, and especially with the synagogue. It is undeniably true that there are certain places where God seems very near, but there were certain Rabbis who went the length of saying that prayer was efficacious only if it was offered in the Temple or in the synagogue. So there grew up the custom of going to the Temple at the hours of prayer. In the first days of the Christian Church, even the disciples of Jesus thought in terms like these, for we read of Peter and John going up to the Temple at the hour of prayer (Ac.3:1).

There was a danger here, the danger that a man might come to think of God as being confined to certain holy places and that he might forget that the whole earth is the temple of God. The wisest of the Rabbis saw this danger. They said, "God says to Israel, pray in the synagogue of your city; if you cannot, pray in the field; if you cannot, pray in your

house; if you cannot, pray on your bed; if you cannot, commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still."

The trouble about any system lies, not in the system, but in the men who use it. A man may make any system of prayer an instrument of devotion or a formality, glibly and unthinkingly to be gone through.

(v) There was amongst the Jews an undoubted tendency towards long prayers. That was a tendency by no means confined to the Jews. In 18th century worship in Scotland length meant devotion. In such a Scottish service there was a verse by verse lecture on scripture which lasted for an hour, and a sermon which lasted for another hour. Prayers were lengthy and extempore. Dr. W. D. Maxwell writes, "The efficacy of prayer was measured by its ardour and its fluency, and not least by its fervid lengthiness." Rabbi Levi said, "Whoever is long in prayer is heard." Another saying has it: "Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard."

There was--and still is--a kind of subconscious idea that if men batter long enough at God's door, he will answer; that God can be talked, and even pestered, into condescension. The wisest Rabbis were well aware of this danger. One of them said, "It is forbidden to lengthen out the praise of the Holy One. It says in the Psalms: 'Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or show forth all his praise?' (Ps.106:2). There only he who can may lengthen out and tell his praise--but no one can." "Let a man's words before God always be few, as it is said, 'Be not rash with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter a word before God; for God is in heaven, and you upon earth, therefore let your words be few'" (Ecc.5:2). "The best adoration consists in keeping silence." It is easy to confound verbosity with piety, and fluency with devotion, and into that mistake many of the Jews fell.

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Matt. 6:5-8 (continued)

(vi) There were certain other forms of repetition, which the Jews, like all eastern peoples, were apt to use and to overuse. The eastern peoples had a habit of hypnotising themselves by the endless repetition of one phrase or even of one word. In 1Kgs.18:26 we read how the prophets of Baal cried out, "O Baal answer us," for the space of half a day. In Ac.19:34 we read how the Ephesian mob, for two hours, kept shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." The Mohammedans will go on repeating the sacred syllable HE for hours on end, running round in circles, until they drive themselves to ecstasy, and finally fall down unconscious in total exhaustion. The Jews did that with the Shema. It is a kind of substitution of self-hypnotism for prayer.

There was another way in which Jewish prayer used repetition. There was an attempt to pile up every possible title and adjective in the address of the prayer to God. One famous prayer begins:

"Blessed, praised, and glorified, exalted, extolled and honoured, magnified and lauded be the name of the Holy One."

There is one Jewish prayer which actually begins with sixteen different adjectives attached to the name of God. There was a kind of intoxication with words. When a man begins to think more of how he is praying than of what he is praying, his prayer dies upon his lips.

(vii) The final fault which Jesus found with certain of the Jews was that they prayed to be seen of men. The Jewish system of prayer made ostentation very easy. The Jew prayed standing, with hands stretched out, palms upwards, and with head bowed. Prayer had to be said at 9 a.m., 12 midday, and 3 p.m. It had to be said wherever a man might be, and it was easy for a man to make sure that at these hours he was at a busy street corner, or in a crowded city square, so that all the world might see with what devotion he prayed. It was easy for a man to halt on the top step of the entrance to the synagogue, and there pray lengthily and demonstratively, so that all men might admire his exceptional piety. It was easy to put on an act of prayer which all the world might see.

The wisest of the Jewish Rabbis fully understood and unsparingly condemned this attitude. "A man in whom is hypocrisy brings wrath upon the world, and his prayer is not heard." "Four classes of men do not receive the face of the glory of God--the mockers, the hypocrites, the liars, and the slanderers." The Rabbis said that no man could pray at all, unless his heart was attuned to pray. They laid it down that for perfect prayer there were necessary an hour of private preparation beforehand, and an hour of meditation afterwards. But the Jewish system of prayer did lend itself to ostentation, if in a man's heart there was pride.

In effect, Jesus lays down two great rules for prayer.

(i) He insists that all true prayer must be offered to God. The real fault of the people whom Jesus was criticising was that they were praying to men and not to God. A certain great preacher once described an ornate and elaborate prayer offered in a Boston Church as "the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience." The preacher was much more concerned with impressing the congregation than with making contact with God. Whether in public or in private prayer, a man should have no thought in his mind and no desire in his heart but God.

(ii) He insists that we must always remember that the God to whom we pray is a God of love who is more ready to answer than we are to pray. His gifts and his grace have not to be unwillingly extracted from him. We do not come to a God who has to be coaxed, or pestered, or battered into answering our prayers. We come to one whose one wish is to give. When we remember that, it is surely sufficient to go to God with the sigh of desire in our hearts, and on our lips the words, "Thy will be done."