

FASTING

Matthew 6:14-18

INTRODUCTION

I make first a few simple remarks about the pattern of prayer which we concluded with on the last Lord's Day evening. We stated that our prayers should be transcendent and should be without such familiarities as we know in the common walk of life which we have as individuals. That prayer concerns God's work and is an act of love and is a simple way in which man constantly holds communion with his Heavenly Father.

Verses 14 and 15 say that prayer can be short-circuited. The spirit of unforgiveness and hostility will do it every time. This is what Jesus intends to impress upon us. If we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. This is the very reason that many people continue to have a haunting feeling of not having been forgiven after they have prayed. God will not forgive if we do not. This is the elementary law of prayer. A grudge can keep us out of the ~~intimate~~ delights of intimate fellowship with one another and with God.

If I might illustrate what I am talking about, here is a mother in a nursing home. She has been there for twelve years. The father, the husband, is 75 years old. Every afternoon, he goes across town to be with her. He wants

to be there. She says he ought not to come. It's too hard on him, too long a trip. Now that is the (kind of communion) and love which Jesus is talking about as an act of faith. We come to have fellowship and communion with him.

In V. 16 we come to the matter of fasting. Did you ever notice how often the terms prayer and fasting appear in ~~xxxx~~ the Bible? Christian people don't fast much anymore. Although most of us could fast to a great advantage of both our bodies and our souls.

The Jews practiced fasting in connection with the Great Day of Atonement and some of it was carried on with a great deal of fanfare. Jesus is going to say to his followers, "When you fast, do so and so." Now, what is the meaning of fasting? It is like a man getting up at 5:00 to pray and to study. Now if he talks about it, the purpose of it has been defeated. If he keeps it to himself, then that is between the man and God. The real meaning of fasting is in this. If a person becomes so intensely interested in communion with God that he has no interest in food.

Did you ever visit someone or ~~xxxx~~ be with someone in the hospital who were critically ill, and you were intensely concerned. Have you noticed that you lost interest in food? Sometimes people become so intense in their studies or some kind of work that they forget to eat. Now, our communion with God becomes so

paramount that we forget to eat.

Fasting is no longer much practiced, except perhaps in minor sacrifices during lent. Now in the Old Testament days, they kept silent feast the day of atonement, the New Year day, the remembrance of national calamity were marked by fast, times of drouth were observed with prayers for rain. The pious people ~~were~~ would add personal fast, and would sometimes go unwashed and even put ashes upon their faces so that all men would notice the holy ritual of their religion.

Now Jesus is going to say, "Wash your face so that nobody would know that you are fasting, because the play actor is going to get his receipt. Let not your fast be with hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays?"

Now Jesus does not condemn fasting, but he approves it if you are going to take it either way.

A lady phoned a Washington church on Saturday night. "Will the President be in your church tomorrow morning?" The reply was, right. "I don't know, Madam, but we hope God will." The lady was going to attend church if she could be seen with the President.

It is most interesting that Jesus followed this instruction on prayer with talk about fasting. There was nothing wrong with it, but it was not for public show. Genuine fasting is when you become so preoccupied with the will and work of God that food becomes little or of no consequences.

Now you must line these three things up. He has talked about alms giving, he has ^{6:15} spoken about prayer, and thirdly, he speaks about fasting. ^{6:16} And in all three cases, he reminds them, "Do not your righteousness before men." What he condemned was the doing of their righteousness before men as in a theater. They were called play actors, hypocrites, taking a part.

They were making an effort to gain a reputation among men. Now character is what you are. Reputation is what you appear to be. And character is what you are and do when no one is looking. That is what Jesus desired in those who follow Him. Fasting is to be of the heart, not other things. Prayer is to be from the spirit, not for show. The giving of alms is to be the subject of your inner being, and not the subject of the eyes of men.

Three times Jesus repeated in speaking of rewards for righteous deeds is that men get their rewards from God, but the men that he was talking about, received their rewards from men. So, true alms giving, true prayer, and true fasting must be done in secret. He is saying that these righteous deeds should come from the heart,

not ~~xxx~~ merely for public consumption, for the eyes of men, but from the innermost secrets of our hearts. Those who do so with (proper motives) will get their reward. The reward, the word openly, God will genuinely reward those who serve him. Men may never know about that, but God knows, and this will be a greater joy and reward for greater service. Those who live righteously to be seen of men have their reward also. Three times Jesus said, V. 2, V. 5, V. 16, he says, "I have it. I have all that is coming to me, paid in full." We give alms to the glory of men, then men glorify you. You are paid in full. It is the law of ~~reaping~~ reaping. You reap what you sow. You sow unto men, you reap from men. You ~~can~~ cannot sow unto men and reap from God. You will reap the praise of men for a season, but you will never hear the "well done" of God. And even man's season may be short, for just a moment, and man even sees through the thin shell of pretense, that will label you "hypocrite." Now Jesus is going to instruct us in the matter of personal righteousness. He has already described the Christian in his general attitude to life, and his Christian conduct. He shows that in three ways.

First, alms-giving. That which we do (good to ~~xx~~ others).

Others

Second, our prayer life, our personal relationship (with God).

God

Third, fasting, the personal discipline in (one's spiritual life).

Self

Therefore, a man has contact with men and women, he has contact with God, he has contact with himself. And here are the divisions we have been discussing. Contact with others and with God and with myself, must be carried on without any thought of personal reward. Now alms-giving is an outward act in our relationships to our fellow men. But prayer is an upward relation having to do with God. Now both of these were not to be practiced for show.

First, V. 16, the whole advantage of undertaking these great Christian experiences depends upon motive. The advantage of fasting is lost when the motive is wrong. The Pharisees had the objective of the ~~px~~ approval of men. Now the question of fasting has almost disappeared from our lives and even from our consideration. How often and to what extent have we thought about it? What place does it occupy in the Christian life? Very rarely do we think of it. And I wonder if some have ever fasted at all.

Now there are some who have various forms of fasting in various denominations. There are men and women who consider (certain days) the times through which they should fast and there have been people who have been looking for revival and are wakening in the spiritual realm who have given themselves to fasting.

The tendency to do these things in order to be seen of men to exhibition something is the thing that we are to guard against.

What is really the place of fasting in the Christian life? Where does it come

in according to the teachings of the Bible? It is something that is taught in

the old testament under the law people will say that Moses commanded the children

of Israel to fast once a year, and this is binding upon that nation and people

forever.

They were to fast in certain national emergencies and that they had

certain appointed fasts which they were to keep regularly and the one great annual

fast.

When we come to the New Testament times, we find the Pharisees fasted

twice in the week. They were never commanded to do so by God but they did so.

They were religious types, and they were going beyond the scriptures.

Now our Lord's teaching, we find that he never taught directly fasting.

He certainly taught it indirectly. Matthew 9 - he was asked a question specifically

about fasting. They said to him, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but thy

disciples fast not?" And Jesus said unto them, "Can the children of the Bride chamber

morn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the day will come, and then shall

they fast." This is an implicit teaching of and almost an advocacy of fasting. He

never prohibited it. He approved of it is obviously implied. What he says is, "When

thou fastest, annoint thy head and wash thy face." This is clearly something that

was regarded by our Lord as right and good for Christian people. He himself fasted for 40 days and 40 nights when he was in the wilderness being tempted of the devil.

The Church practice fasting according to the information we have at Antioch when it sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first preaching tour did so only after a period of prayer and fasting. Indeed, the early church almost seemed to give themselves the fasting as well as the prayer before every important occasions or decision.

Paul in referring to himself and his life talks about being in fasting often.

Mark 9:29. It is reported of our Lord this ^{thing} time can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting. It is of righteousness and has a value.

The saints of God in all ages and in all places have not only believed in fasting, but they have practiced it. Some of the protestant reformers, it was certainly true of Wesley and of Whitfield. They tended to do this even before they were truly converted, more so than afterwards, but they did nevertheless continue to fast after their conversions. When they were confronted with new and exceptional difficulties and problems, they spent a period of time in fasting as well as in prayer.

What exactly is fasting? What is it's purpose? It must be ultimately something that is based upon our understanding of the relationship between body and ~~xxx~~ spirit. Man is body, mind, and spirit, and these are related one to another, and cannot be distinguished apart. But that physical body and condition has bearing upon the activity of the mind and the spirit. What fasting really means therefore is (abstinence from food) for spiritual purposes. That is the Biblical notion of fasting which must be separated from the purely ~~xxx~~ physical. For certain spiritual reasons and purposes, men and women decided to ~~abstain~~ abstain from food.

Now this is a very important point, so we might put it in the negative form, as Paul's statement I Cor. 9:27 he says, "If I keep under my body " that he does this ~~that he may~~ in order that he may do his work more efficiently. It is a part of a man's general discipline. He should always keep his body under control and discipline. Fasting is something unusual or exceptional. Something man does now and again for a special purpose.

Now moderation in eating is not fasting. Moderation in eating is a part of discipline of the body. Fasting means an abstinence from food for the sake of ~~xxx~~ certain special purposes, for meditation, or the seeking of God for some particular reason, or exceptional circumstance.

To make the matter complete, we will add that fasting if we truly conceive of it must not only be confined to the question of food and drink, but fasting would really be made to include ~~xxx~~ abstinence from anything which is which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate but under certain circumstances should be controlled.

Now, first of all, we are confronted with the right and the wrong way of doing it. If we fast in mechanical manner, or merely for the ~~xxx~~ sake of doing it, then we violate the teachings of the word. If I make fasting an end in itself because I have become a Christian now, I say that I am going to fast on such a day and at such a time during the year, this will be part of my Christian religion, it might be well to do it, but that does not seem to be the answer. It is good for people to have certain special times for prayer in their lives, and to make up their program for the day, but if it merely becomes mechanical with me, then I think it misses the mark.

If it is mechanical then it is a kind of law that I have to do on a certain day in the week that I must not eat meat and so on. It is not the thing to do in the Christian life. You do not eat on a particular day, again at a certain time or period of the year, you abstain from certain food, or eat less food, or

Now this is going by rule or by law. Some people say it is a good thing that one day during the week that you do not eat certain things, or that you abstain from certain things from the standpoint of discipline.

I think also it is wrong if I fast and expect direct, immediate results always. This is like paying a coin in a slot in view of getting a certain kind of music. You put a penny in and you have your immediate results. Certain benefits will come. Now, this is not proper attitude when we come to the matter of fasting. Some people decide on an all night prayer meeting, and they have prayed right through the night, and the result has been that a revival broke out. So they decided that they would have another all-night prayer meeting the next time a week of special services arrived, and they would have a revival that would follow. And that it must come, and that this is going to be a direct result of this.

But we seem to be guilty of writing into the account of our lives these things and we say that this is going to produce thus and so. Some men write the history of their lives in this way.

But there must be a w right way of looking ~~at~~ at this matter of fasting because I fast on Friday, or because I fast during the period of Lent that I have disciplined my life, because I feel* in some peculiar way that I have the concentration of putting my whole being under the power of God. But I must look at the way in which it is done, and I must consider this way.

Therefore we read V. 16 in which he says that we should not be as the ~~hypocrites~~ hypocrites who (disfigure) their faces. Now this is a duty to one's self, and he ~~is~~ uses the example of fasting. Now, there were those who felt that this was going to bring great spiritual development. That is the reason why so many people, so many times engaged in outward activity that they forget their own spiritual growth and he is neglecting his own development. Now Jesus uses a pattern here as he did in the matter of prayer. And the pattern is that we are not to go after the critical Pharisees. You don't want to be like the hypocrites, the play actors.

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He describes it as (long faces), long ugly, as mean looking as a Missouri mule. You ~~don't~~ don't have to have such a sad looking face, Jesus said. They did it for men to see them. They did it for men to see, and what is the good of it? They have their receipt in hand. ~~is~~ He never smiles, he looks sad, but brethren, I'm glad when I go to church, and when I think about it. I have joy, it makes ~~me~~ me happy. But here were these people who ~~were~~ had a long face and they had unkept hair, and they paraded this as having religion, and as being Godly. There was one saint that joined a convent of 130 nuns who never washed their feet, and who shuddered at the mention of a bath.

St. Anthony had never to extreme old age been guilty of washing his

feet. A famous virgin named Sylvia, though she was 60 years of age and bodily sick, as a consequence of her bad habits, refused on religious principles to wash any part of her body except her fingers. Now this was the type of thing that Jesus had to deal with.

V. 17. The (rewards promised). "But thou, when thou fasteth, annoint thy head and wash thy face." This is the command to remove all outward signs of the act and keep it secret with God. They were to do these things when they indulged in fasting. You are not fasting for men, now what is your purpose? It is before God, what is your motive? Well, I've really never read in the New Testament where Jesus put a premium upon looking unkempt or disorderly. I've never read anything where he said it was notorious - what he said here is that you ought to look nice. You know how to look. Now, when he said annoint your head, he wasn't saying for somebody to come along with a little horn of oil and pour it on you. You remember when the woman came to Jesus to annoint him, she had what - the most expensive ointment. Well, what was that ointment for? And now when you use it on your hair and head, it will serve as hairdressing - wasn't it? Exactly. They had it in those days, ~~it~~ and that is what the good lady had. We know that they used - well we call them cosmetics, don't we?

As long as those monuments in Egypt have been standing, we still find that they used cosmetics. And the Jews were not left behind in using them. In fact, they perhaps exploited them, so Jesus says, don't go around with your hair sticking out this way and that. I don't think he says we ought to use lard. But use this preparation. It will make you look just as nice as you know how to look. And I think that that's what a person is instructed here to do.

I heard about a woman the other day when the wind was blowing, and a ball of fur went by on the ground, and she thought it belonged to her, and so she ran to ~~the~~ retrieve it, and when she caught it it was a cat. Now, Jesus is saying you ought to look just as nice as you can. What is the point? He says I want to get - there is no premium on looking untidy. Do the best you can with what you have, and if there is anything that will help it out, then Jesus said use it.

Sometimes we ponder about this question of dress that comes to all of us, and it may be baffling and perplexing at times in connection with our Christian lives and we find ourselves between two opinions as to what we ought to do. Now, Jesus is telling them to fix up a little bit. It's really something when you see a woman come along in a sloppy pair of men's britches. Now in the New Testament there were certain instructions, and it's not a matter of asceticism in which he writing against this or that. The early Quakers who used to dress differently

from other people had the idea that they were going to show the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, between the church and the world, and they said that we must not even look like the world. We must look different. Now, in every Christian there must be something that says, "Amen" to that.

Now, personally, I cannot understand the Christian who wants to look the typical average worldly person in appearance, in dress, or in anything else, the vulgarity, the sensuality of it all. No Christian should want to be or look like that. It is very natural that the Christian would react against that.

Now, you have to agree with me about this. The dress does proclaim the man or the woman up to a point, but not completely so. Now the Pharisees wore certain dress, but it did not guarantee true righteousness. The Bible teaches that ultimately that is not really the way in which the Christian is different, for we do not determine the non-Christian by this way. But what I am is the thing that shows the difference, and if I am what Jesus wants me to be, then I suspect that even this will control perhaps some of my dressing habits. When I think it out, it is an ~~interesting~~ interesting and a fascinating question. Now, I am aware it has arguments on both sides. And people do not like to be different from the world, and they like to follow the fashions of the world. Christians like to do this.

Now Jesus said they have their reward. People think that those who fast in that way are very spiritual, and that they are exceptionally holy people. They will get the praise of men, and that is all the reward that they will get.

Now, all of us will agree that sometimes the use of a little Wild Root Cream oil and how about the stuff, that the ladies use that makes them look nice? A little bit of (red) - that's rouge isn't it? It's just French for red. And then a little bit of (powder). And what is this mascara for? What is xx that? I'm not sure. And what they put on their eyebrows, to make it look a little darker. And the hair, and the elder-berry juice! And sometimes they look one way during the day, and they get ready to go out, and they look another way.

I think Jesus said "look nice." There is a difference ladies. There is a difference between looking nice. ^{+ looking a mess?} Now this may be a hard thing to do. Sometimes mothers have problems when the young daughters begin to give instruction about how to put ~~xxxxxx~~ a little lipstick on. They say you are just smearing it on. It doesn't follow the contour. Now, there is a difference in brushing it on like using a paint bucket, and looking nice. It's not for advertisement to men, but it is - Jesus said you wash your face, you look nice when you come out.

What then is the right way? The first thing is that it does not mean going out of our way to be unlike the Pharisee as possible, but he says it's not necessary to disfigure your faces and give the opposite impression. He said it ought to be a (normal) usual procedure. ~~when~~ When you fast, let it be a (natural) experience with you. And don't be afraid of being miserable as a Christian, or afraid ~~x~~ of being called a fool. Now, you may go to extremes in any direction as we stated. And ~~you're~~ you're not really to worry about this, but you are seeking the honor and the glory of God who sees you in secret.

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V. 18 - Appear not unto men.

Now I know a lots of people who ought to fast. I saw a lady the other day so fat she had to have help in getting up out of her easy chair.

Not be put on status of an ordinance or a sacrament! Giving up watermelon and smoking during Lent - special seasons - have their reward in full.

Unto Father + secret

Here is the right motive - righteousness! We do it for what - that Father's sake! God is the motive, he wants me to do this.

Main compartment in your life is righteousness, Dr. Sampey had a sermon entitled, "The Keys." Don't have any room in your heart that Christ does not have the key to. Give him the keys to your life.

Difference between (self-display) and (self-discipline).

Just forget yourself and give yourself entirely to God. Be concerned about pleasing Him.

The man or woman who is living entirely to the glory of God, you will need not to prescribe for him when he has to fast, you need not prescribe the sort of clothes he has to put on or should wear, or anything else.

He has forgotten himself and given himself to God and the New Testament says that man will know how to eat, and drink, and dress because he will be doing it all to the glory of God.

Reward of that man is safe.

Story is told of Dr. W. T. Conner, one of the greatest men of theology in Southern Baptist history, taught for years at Southwestern Seminary.

One night he was down in the little cubby hole in his home where he studied. Often he studied late into the night, but one night he failed to come to bed at all. At Breakfast -

Finally Mrs. Conner asked him why he had not come to bed. He simply said, "I got into a session with the Lord, and I couldn't get away."