

Sunday, September 27, 2020 am

**TEACHINGS OF Jesus (19)**  
**Sermon On the Mount (18)**  
**Concerning Fasting**  
**Matthew 6:16-18**

As we continue to examine Jesus contrasting our righteousness with that of the scribes and Pharisees who had corrupted truth and were seeking the praise of men, we have been addressing how our actions are to be done in secret. Our past few lessons have addressed how we are NOT to be self-righteous in what we do. One source in summarizing the section we are in by noting that our secret giving deals with our righteousness toward others, secret prayer deals with our righteousness toward God, and secret fasting (today's lesson) deals with righteousness toward oneself.

**I. What is Fasting?**

- a. Defined – to abstain from food for a specified period of time.  
People can fast for many reasons –because of troubling circumstances (where one has no appetite), because of lack of food, or even for health reasons or as a spiritual discipline. It is this latter reason that we are discussing.
- b. Brief history of fasting in the Old Testament –
  - i. Fasting was commanded under the LOM on only 1 occasion – the annual Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16:29-30 says, *“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord.”* (cf. Acts 27:9 speaks of “the fast”).
  - ii. Other occurrences of fasting were found in lives of various individuals – Moses, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, Ester, etc. It was also done during times of great mourning – often when Israel was being punished by God for their sinfulness, they would fast as part of their repentance. But each of these instances were either by individual choice or events driven.
  - iii. At some point, Jews (and likely well intentioned) made fasting a weekly ritual that would become incorporated into their interpretation of the LOM. For some, it would become a binding practice or an indicator of spiritual virtue (i.e. if you fasted you were more righteous and if you didn't you were not what you ought to be). This is the environment we find as Jesus is preaching this sermon.  
Sometimes this was done without much thought – Zechariah 7:5-7 indicates that fasting during the captivity was insincere – for themselves, not what God had commanded.
- c. Fasting in the New Testament –
  - i. Jesus and fasting – Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Matthew 4:2ff.  
He was asked why His disciples did not fast - Matthew 9:14-15. Jesus responded there would be a time when they would fast.  
We also learn from this that both John's disciples and the Pharisees fasted (likely regularly)
  - ii. Other examples of fasting in the NT included:  
Brethren prayed for Paul and Barnabas as they began their first preaching journey – Acts 13:3  
Acts 14:21-23 – as elders were appointed in every church, it was with prayer and fasting. – NOTE that prayer was associated with fasting, which often happened. More later.

## II. Our Text –

- a. **When you fast** – it is worthy of note that we have no command to fast. BUT, if we do it must be done properly.
- b. **Do NOT be like the hypocrites** – who made a show of it. They would look sad, wear torn clothes or sackcloth and might even powder their face for an ashen look or go around with a sad look.. Luke 18:12 spoke of fasting twice a week (the praying Pharisee) – which according to sources was Jewish tradition and was usually done on Mondays and Thursdays – the market days, wherein they could show their “piety” in public. The way our text describes it they WANTED to be seen. NOTE again that Jesus said, “*They have their reward*”. God saw through their praise seeking antics.
- c. **But YOU, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face** (and wear what you would normally wear). Act like normal. Most of us if we missed a meal or two would not suffer greatly because of it. And there is no reason it should alter our appearance.  
**Do not appear to be fasting** - Jesus is VERY clear here that IF you fast, it is a private matter. This phrase goes further than the previous as it includes facial expressions, attitudes and our conversations (are you bragging about fasting?)  
**Let it be in secret and God will see your hearts and intents and reward you openly.** NOTE: This is not as much about others finding out as it is your attitude. If someone sees you or figures out what you are doing – that doesn’t invalidate the act. There may even be situations where you need to let it be known (if you have decided to fast and someone asks you to do something to break that fast, you may need to give an answer).

## III. Should we fast today?

- a. There is no command that orders us to fast as we do have with other acts of worship (singing, prayer, Bible study, assembling, etc.). Nor is there ever an example of ritualistic fasting as a congregation. Just as such was not found in the LOM. I would be concerned with a congregation that organized a public fast. There simply is no authority for such.
- b. But it is something you CAN do. Jesus did NOT condemn fasting, as you see in our text. And He also fasted as noted. Fasting is something that ought to be viewed as a CHOICE rather than an obligation.
- c. Fasting CAN be beneficial if it is done with proper motives and as found in scripture.
- d. What are some proper motives? In scripture consider some of the reasons they fasted
  - i. It was done in times of distress – Israel fasted at the threat of war. David prayed and fasted over his sick son. Elijah fasted as he was fleeing from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:8), etc. Sometimes the consequences of standing for truth brought about unintended fasting – 2 Corinthians 6:5, 11:27
  - ii. It was done when seeking God’s protection – Ezra fasted before traveling (Ezra 8:21-23)
  - iii. It was done in repentance – both Ahab and Daniel fasted (1 Kings 21:27, Daniel 9:3-4)
  - iv. Before receiving revelation from God –Moses fasted (Exodus 34:28, Daniel 9:3)
  - v. Jesus dealing with temptations – Matthew 4:1ff
  - vi. Before entering into an important spiritual work - Antioch prayed for Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3)
  - vii. Before appointing elders – Acts 14:23
  - viii. Others could be added to these, but the point is they are associated with serious times where focus on God is magnified (we should always be focusing on God).
- e. How can fasting make you better spiritually?
  - i. It is about self-control. When you fast, you are learning self-control because you are denying yourself of something for a period of time (and it is something that is not wrong in itself, and even necessary). We are commanded to exercise self-control often (Galatians 5:22-23, 2

Peter 1:6 , Acts 14:25, etc.). There is only way to develop that – to deprive yourself of something. Fasting can help you with that.

- ii. It is about sacrifice as you are giving up something useful for the sake of God (Hebrews 13:15, Romans 12:1-2, etc.). With proper motives this shows due praise to God.
  - iii. It is about awareness. When we fast, we ought to be focusing on spiritual needs, which is why we are doing without something material.
  - iv. It is about one drawing closer to God –
- f. If and when you fast:
- i. Make it a private matter as our text indicates. This is so important as it reflects motives!
  - ii. Make sure you have time to fast – let it be planned and something done free of distractions – just as you should find a private place and time to study and pray.
  - iii. Devote that time to some spiritual exercise. I am a believer that if you choose to fast, whatever you are giving up needs to be replaced with something spiritually relevant - such as Bible study, prayer or meditation (cf. think on these things – Philippians 4:8). If you are skipping lunch, use the time to pray or read a chapter of the Bible – MORE than normal. 1 Corinthians 7:5 speaks of a time where you give yourselves to fasting and prayer.

Do not forget the point that Jesus was making – let your righteousness be genuine and truly God centered. It is about Him first, but as we have noted all throughout this section, if you act properly, God takes note and will reward you openly. And let whatever you do be a natural outgrowth of your maturing in Christ. Let us seriously think about these things.