

Series: Sermon on the Mount

Title: Fasting

Text: Matthew 6: 16-18

Date: November 1, 2009

Place: SGBC, New Jersey

Matthew 6: 16: Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17: But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18: That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Moreover when ye fast

There were times for “fasting” in the law of God given to Israel. At the time that our Lord said this, having not yet been to the cross, the Jews to whom he was speaking were yet fasting as required by law. Christ being the end of the law, the believer is no longer under the law. There are not now any set days required by law, for “fasting.”

What is the purpose of fasting?

Most know that *fasting* means to abstain from food and drink. At times, your physician may require you to fast before tests, or surgery, or such. *Fasting* for medical reasons is not what the Lord is speaking of here. But physical sickness may help to illustrate a fast.

When we are sick we have no appetite. We are turned from all desire to eat the things our bodies normally crave. Fasting is our body’s natural reaction to sorrow and bodily affliction. A spiritual fast holds much the same significance. The day of fasting was a deeply personal matter. It signified soul-sorrow, godly repentance from the appetites of sinful flesh, the turning of our thoughts away from the comforts of this world to Christ Jesus our soul-satisfying Bread from heaven.

This was typified in the fast required on the Day of Atonement. In the fast you had believer's repenting from the sinful bread of the flesh with all attention on the High Priest, the Lamb, the Blood, as he enters into the holiest of holies to make intercession for the sin of the people.

Are we required to fast in our day?

We are not required by law to literally abstain from natural food in our day. In fact, those who fasted in Israel merely because God required it, never truly fasted. A true spiritual fast involves a work of God’s grace in the heart of the believer. By his grace, God afflicts our souls in loving correction, turning us from the bread of sinful appetites to an earnest desire to feed on the spiritual Manna—Christ Jesus the true Bread. Often these are seasons when no earthly food will do. But, our Lord says...

Not Unto Men, But Unto Thy Father Which Is In Secret

Our Lord teaches the believer that true worship is not carnal, to be seen of men. True worship is a spiritual matter between the believer's inward man created anew by the Holy Spirit and God who is Spirit.

Matthew 6: 1: 1: Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven...4: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6: 5: And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in [public places], that they may be seen of men. 6: But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

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The hypocrite contrasted with the believer

One of the best contrasts between the hypocrite's intentions in a fast, and the Lord's meaning of a true fast, is found in Isaiah chapter 58.

Isaiah 58: 1: Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. 2: Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. 3: Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? *wherefore* have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?

The Lord Jesus just told us that our Father sees in secret. Here, the complaint of the hypocrite is, "thou seest not", "thou takest no knowledge." Men do! Every one around sees and takes knowledge of us, that we fast. Why not the Lord? They do not need a reward from the Father because they have obtained what they seek: the applause of men. That is exactly what the LORD says next:

Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

Instead of sorrow over their sin, they took pleasure in fasting. They exacted--kept track of--all they personally did in afflicting their soul, because their labor was their wealth, their reward. Also, they exacted--forced--everyone in their house to fast. This too, was their reward.

Instead of turning from this polluted bread of sinful flesh, they took pleasure in it. Instead of proclaiming liberty, they gloried in what they constrained others to pay-up as well. Then they complained that the Lord had taken no knowledge. The LORD promises he will never take knowledge of such a vain show.

Isaiah 58: 4: Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye *do this* day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

If our voice is heard on high before men, it will not be heard on high by our Father.

Isaiah 58: 5: Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? *is it* to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes *under him*? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

A Day

Is God's fast merely one day when the sinner separates from fleshly appetites? Is it a practice--a religious exercise--whereby men see you bowed down? No. A true spiritual fast is not a one day, one time, not a visible act of religion. It is perpetual separation, mourning that we yet far too highly esteem our natural, sinful things. The LORD called them to:

Isaiah 22: 12...weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth: [remember the beatitude: "blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." But instead of mourning sin and taking delight in Christ, the Lord says:] 13: And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine.

The LORD says this is not a fast for you, this is a feast. When we were blind religious sinners, we took pleasure in this religious bondage. Too often, we still do. But the Lord continues to call us to mourn our sin that we might be comforted only in Christ. This is a true fast.

TRUE FASTING

Isaiah 58: 6: *Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?*

Christ did this by his one sacrifice for the sin of his people

When he regenerated us and gave us faith to behold Christ we believed on him who became flesh because we were flesh, that through death conquered death, conquered sin and conquered the power of the devil and delivered us from the tormenting bondage over our fear of death He removed the heavy burdens of answering to the laws demands, the chains of our vain imaginations, and the whips of will-works-religion. We were oppressed and he let us go FREE: FREE GRACE, FREE FROM OUR WORKS, ALL BY CHRIST, GIVEN TO US FREELY.

John 8:36: If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

By grace, his love constrains every believer to deal with others the same way that he has dealt with us--the believer delights to loose the wicked bands, to undo heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke.

Isaiah 58: 6: *Is not this the fast that I have chosen?...7: Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?*

This is the fast of our Lord. He who was rich, for our sakes, became poor that he might make us rich. We were starved! He is the Manna from heaven. We were poor! He brought us into the household of God--heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ. We were naked! He covered us in his Righteousness. When he drew us to call on him for mercy, he did not hide himself from us--because we are his own flesh, bone of his bone. In all this amazing love and grace, he makes every believer willing, ever-ready, to do the same for poor, starved, naked, who are of the same sinful flesh as we.

See the connection between alms giving, prayer and fasting?

In Matthew 6, the Lord goes right from speaking of alms giving, to prayer, to fasting. By Christ's alms giving to us, by joining us to him in truth and in spirit, our Lord Jesus Christ separates us from flesh to feed on Him. He makes us alms givers, prayerful (forgiving others as he has forgiven us), and once you have experienced his grace, he gives you distaste for your former fleshly, sinful, religious appetites. This is a true fast. Every saved sinner hungers and thirsts after righteousness, after Christ.

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