

The Sermon on the Mount, Part 4, Matthew 6:16-34

Seek God's Kingdom, Not Mammon's Provision

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By giving, God becomes a debtor: "Is not life more than meat, and the body than raiment?" (Matt. vi. 25.) Our Saviour's argument was this; 'If God give life, he will give food; if a body, he will give raiment.' If he hath given grace, the earnest of the Spirit, he will give glory. If he hath given us Christ, he will give us other things together with him. If he hath begun with us, he will end with us (Phil. i. 6). One mercy is the pledge of another. — Thomas Manton

Sermon 37, True Fasting, Matthew 6:16-18

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 58

"Fasting is in itself a work of indifferent value, not of the sort that God requires and approves, in the way that almsgiving is. It pleases Him up to a point, as long as it is directed to an end beyond itself, namely, to prompt us to abstinence, to subject the lasciviousness of the flesh, to incense to a desire for prayer, to testify to our repentance, whenever we are moved by the judgment of God."
— Calvin

"Whenever you undertake this duty, study therein to approve yourselves to God, and not to recommend yourselves to the good opinion of men; humility must evermore attend upon our humiliation." --Matthew Henry

"The popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete." --Richard Foster

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Proposition: True fasting is abstaining from food for spiritual growth in secret to please your Heavenly Father!

You might not pray, but you probably understand at some level that praying is something Christians are supposed to do. You might not give charitably, but you probably know that Christians are supposed to be generous with their money. You probably don't fast, and here's the key difference: you may not even realize that fasting is something Christians are supposed to do. Here at this church, you are asked to pray every Sunday and give every Sunday. But you're not asked to fast every Sunday. Far from it. So far as I can tell from reading the session minutes and interviewing the old-timers, this church has never asked people to fast. Of the 9 churches in my life of which I've been a regular attender, only one of them has ever asked for a fast. You might have grown up in a different denomination that had regular fasts on the calendar. But if you didn't, then chances are that you simply do not fast or think about fasting. Well, what I want to show you today is that fasting is abstaining from food for religious purposes, and that Christians need to fast.

I. Fasting: Abstaining from Food for Religious Purposes

Why do so few of us fast? Mostly because fasting is really countercultural. We live in the era of the triumph of feelings. If you feel hungry, then you need to eat. If you feel horny, then you need to find a sexual outlet. If you feel like a woman, then you need to get sex-change surgery and hormones. And so on.

C.S. Lewis put it this way: in fasting, the will is turned against the appetite. Remember, we as human beings are made up of a reason, will, and appetites. In our culture, it is commonly held that the reason and the will exist to satisfy the appetites, and that any attempt to resist the appetites is a form of harmful "repression" with really bad psychological consequences. This view, though common, is quite simply garbage. Putting the reason in charge of the will and training the will to master the appetites is a good thing, not an evil one. Of course, as Lewis further points out, the reward of doing this is self-mastery. If you train your will to be strong enough to rule your appetites, then you have what is called self-control. But if you have attained self-control, the obvious danger is that you will become proud of how self-controlled you are, and despise the weaklings who are carried hither and thither by their appetites.

Well, why would you want to attain self-control? So that you can obey God better. So that you can turn your entire life over to Him more faithfully. So the first motive for fasting that we can identify is simply an ability to control ourselves. We should fast so that our will can be stronger than our fleshly desires, and so that our will can say, "No, I'm not going to do that even though I really, really want to."

Fasting is a specific thing we do to attain self-control. Fasting is the voluntary abstention from food for a certain period of time for the sake of some spiritual benefit.

II. Motives for Fasting

Now, as I just said, our culture is radically opposed to the idea that abstaining from something we want might be good for us. But according to the Bible's teaching, fasting, when done rightly, can be very good for us. What are some good reasons to fast?

A. To Admit That You Don't Deserve Your Daily Bread

God does not owe you the means of physical sustenance. He has promised to take care of you, but I don't think any of us would dare affirm that no Christian in the history of the world has ever died of starvation. Our bread is God's gift. The fact that we have food to eat is a blessing, not a right. And so, when you voluntarily stop eating for a time, you are admitting to yourself that eating is not your fundamental right. Just as a power outage can remind you that humans didn't have electrically wired homes for most of history, so a fast can remind you that food is a luxury, and make you more grateful to God for giving it to you.

So there's a spiritual purpose: humility and gratitude. To increase both of these in your heart, sometimes abstaining from food can be just what you needed.

B. To Make Your Soul Contribute

You can also fast to make your soul contrite. When you're full and well-fed, you tend to be more courageous and overbearing. The physical and spiritual are linked. When you are hungry and know how weak you quickly get without food, you can remember that spiritually, you are nothing special. You are not the cat's meow, or the bee's knees, or the best thing since sliced bread. You are a weak, frail human being who desperately needs God's sustaining grace. Once again, the spiritual benefit derived from physical abstinence is one of humility and contrition. You stop thinking so well of yourself, admiring yourself so much, when you see that you can't and won't live without food.

C. To Quicken Your Desires for Spiritual Good

Finally, the most obvious reason to fast is that it makes you hungry. It should make you even more hungry for spiritual good than for physical food, however. That's why in Scripture fasting is so often linked with prayer. You fast to put a sharper edge on your prayers. You fast to show yourself, and thus God, that you are really serious about this. You fast because the spiritual benefit it gives you is extra time with God.

Think of it this way. How many things are regular parts of your life that you do three times a day? Probably none of us shaves or showers three times a day. Very few of us change our clothes three times a day. We don't go to work three times a day, or call our parents three times a day, or go to church three times a day. Most of us don't worship God, in private worship or family worship, three times a day either. Oftentimes, then, fasting can be a way for you to spend extra time with God, which is in itself a spiritual good and will quicken your desires for more spiritual good.

Can you get these benefits without fasting? Yes. Fasting is just an adjunct, a handy way to prepare yourself physically to receive spiritual goods. As Don Whitney says, you are hoisting your sails, preparing to catch the wind of the Spirit.

III. Hypocritical Fasting, v. 16

Well, Jesus speaks particularly about hypocritical fasting in this section. As you might remember, way back in July we talked about the beginning of this chapter. Christ denounces hypocrites who do what they do to impress the people around them and not to get closer to God. That hypocrisy is seen clearly in prayer, in giving, and in fasting. It was seen in prayer and giving by doing them ostentatiously in public, and fasting can be abused in the same way.

A. Its Method: Ostentatious Dishevelment

The hypocritical fasting person “disappears” his face, to translate the Greek literally (alpha-privative + *phanomai*, appear). He hides it under ashes, perhaps, or under a huge grimace that makes it clear to everyone how much he’s suffering.

Isn’t it interesting that the majority of the world’s Christians, then, mark their chief yearly fast (the beginning of Lent) by getting ashes smeared on their face? Jesus said not to do this. But so often, we, His followers, can think we know better than He did.

Yes, it is a mark of hypocrisy to change your outward appearance so that people can tell just by looking at you that you are fasting. If you are doing this, then you are by definition a hypocrite.

Now, none of you have tried to impress me with your fastings. I haven’t heard about a single person in this church fasting, ever. So how do we apply this warning against hypocritical fasting? The same way we applied previous warnings: to the future. Let’s be sure we don’t become hypocrites. Let’s be sure that if we ever do fast, we do it for the right reason. Let’s be sure that we aren’t doing anything else for hypocritical reasons. Do you lead family worship just so that your kids will think you love Jesus? Or do you do it because you actually love Jesus? Do you talk about spiritual things at the dinner table, or with unbelieving friends, because you genuinely care about God’s kingdom? Or is there some element of “I hope they notice how godly I am” somewhere in your heart? Again, it’s not wrong to want your neighbors to know that you love God; what’s wrong is wanting to impress them rather than wanting to honor God. Whatever religious activity you’re doing, if you’re doing it to be seen by other people or even to be seen by yourself, rather than to be seen by God, Jesus condemns it as sheer hypocrisy.

B. Its Reward: Being Thought Pious

The reward of doing your fasting to be seen by yourself, or to be seen by others, is to be thought pious. Your reward is impressing other people. We’ve talked about how ephemeral that is — how fame does not translate into lasting care and affection. Jesus says that if you do things to impress people, you will have the reward of their adulation. It won’t last. It’s not actually worth anything. But it’s nice while you have it. Effectively, He’s saying, “If the only thing you get is people’s applause, then you haven’t gotten anything.”

Imagine a musician. This guy loves applause. We could say he lives for applause. He enjoys nothing more than to hear the crowd roar after an especially moving song. Yet does that motivate him to give away concert tickets for free? Do you know any musicians who pay the costs of setting up a concert and touring around the nation, and spend all that money not so they

can sell tickets but just so they can get applause? Of course you don't. We intuitively recognize that you can't live on applause. Musicians and other performing artists recognize that too. They sell tickets. Do they like applause? Of course. But if that's the only reward, then they will get out of the performing art business.

So don't be a hypocrite. Don't live for applause.

IV. Christian Fasting, vv. 17-18

No — Jesus says to seek a better reward.

A. Its Necessity

Notice, first off, how necessary it is to fast. Jesus says "When you fast," not "if you fast." He assumes that we will fast. Now, if Jesus plans on you doing something, and gives you instruction on how to do it correctly, then you'd better listen.

Could you say, in all seriousness, "When I fast . . ." ? Is this a part of your life? Obviously, you may be a diabetic or nursing or have other physical realities that make it inadvisable for you to abstain from food. But most of us are perfectly capable of fasting. Do you fast? If not, you should begin to do so. Jesus never says how often, or how long. But He does assume that we will do it.

B. Its Method: Normal Hygiene

Now, we need to understand that putting oil on our heads is not some super-spiritual component of fasting. Rather, Jesus is saying, "Prepare yourself for the day like you normally do." If you shower daily, don't skip it because you're fasting. If you powder your nose daily, don't skip it because you're fasting. The point is not your daily routine, but that you don't change it when you're fasting. Don't do anything that says, hypocritically, "I'm fasting because I'm so pious and I love God way more than I love food, unlike you scummy gluttons." Obviously, the only change in your daily routine should be that you don't eat. Some people fast from coffee and tea; others don't. The point is not how you do it, but simply that you do it — that you don't eat at a time when you ordinarily would have eaten, not ostentatiously, but furtively, so that as few people as possible know that it is a fast day for you.

C. Its Goal: The Father's Pleasure

Once again, Jesus says that the Father is in the secret place. The Father is not to be found in that place where everyone admires you because you're so holy. The Father is found in the secret place, in the place where it is just Him and you, enjoying each other.

Do you fast to make God rejoice in your love for Him? If you're motivated by legalism, or by the idea that "Well, I heard a sermon on fasting so I'd better do it," then you've missed the boat. The idea is that you do this ultimately because you love God and enjoy Him. Now, you may not enjoy obeying God the first time around. To say, "I don't enjoy God enough to fast" is not an excuse; it's an admission of guilt. You should fast because you love God and want to please Him — but if you don't love Him and want to please Him, then you have bigger problems than not wanting to fast. Indeed, if you don't really care about the Father's good pleasure, then

you really need to fast and pray hard, asking God to make you care about such an important facet of the Christian life!

D. Its Reward: The Father's Bounty

Finally, the Father's bounty rewards everyone who fasts rightly before Him. We've talked about this, too. Think about all the things God has created in the natural world. Think about the bounty He has showered upon you in the man-made world. In some countries, people abstain from food every day because they don't have enough! Yet here, we all can afford enough food to get fat and stay fat. Think, too, about God's plenteous blessings on you in spiritual things. You have a loving church family. You can come and hear a Sunday School lesson and two sermons prepared and preached especially for you each and every Sunday. You can listen to more than a million other conservative, Bible-believing sermons at any time of the day or night with nothing more than your computer or cell phone. You can read instantly, for free, any one of hundreds of spiritual and theological classics, using the same technology. All of these things belong to you. Do you think that God will suddenly stop being generous, suddenly stop keeping His word, if you believe and obey Him by fasting?

Brothers and sisters, don't be in it for the applause. Don't be in it for the ticket sales. Be in it for this: the opportunity to walk with and enjoy God. Applause won't satisfy. Money won't satisfy. Food won't satisfy. Only the true and living God Himself can quench the longing of our souls. Seek Him through prayer and fasting, and you will find Him. Amen.