

Monday, November 18, 2019

Acts of Righteousness: Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

- Fasting Before Men (v. 16)
- Fasting Like We Are Feasting (v. 17-18)

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(Matthew 6:16–18 ESV) “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

PRAYER

The last act of righteousness in this set of three from Matthew Chapter 6 is the act of fasting. Before we get into the passage itself though, we should look at fasting itself and first out what it is, who does it, and why. Fasting is “a deliberate abstinence from food for religious, cultural, political, or health reasons”¹ It is a practice that has been done for millennia and not just by Christians or Jews. It is also done by pagans, and political activists, and those with dietary and health concerns. Its purposes are many and depend on who is doing it. It could be done to create political pressure. Many people remember Gandhi who lead long term fasts as a tool in political protect against colonial nationalism in India, seeking independence from Great Britain, which was eventually won in 1947. It has been used by prisoners who are seeking justice in the midst of injustices taking place during their incarceration. It is needed by some for health reasons just to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The form of fasting is generally consistent in historical records from all over the world, but the purpose of fasting has varied by culture and situation.

But why then do Christians and why did Jews fast? The Bible teaches us that:

We fast because we’re hungry for God’s Word and God’s Spirit in our lives, hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

We fast because we long for God’s glory to resound in the church and God’s praise to resound among the nations.

We fast because we yearn for God’s Son to return and God’s kingdom to come.

Ultimately we fast simply because we want God more than we want anything this world has to offer us.²

Sometimes God calls us to fast, sometimes we recognize our need for a fast, sometimes we practice a habit of fasting, but ultimately, for the believer, fasting is about the relationship we have with God.

¹ John Piper, A Hunger For God, Crossway 1997 p.30

² ibid 11

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Our text today will help us see this through the same lens that Jesus has been using in the last two passages. We're going to see that motives matter in this area as well. (Matthew 6:1 ESV) "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus will give us a picture of what it means to be fasting before men, and then he's going to paint a picture of feasting for us which we will then see taking place before God.

The first picture of fasting before men we'll see in verse 16, and the second picture of fasting like we are feasting we'll see in verse 17-18.

Fasting Before Men

(Matthew 6:16 ESV) "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

Here's Jesus's first picture of fasting before men. Again he takes the same formula he used for prayer and giving to the poor and just like in verse 1 of chapter 6, he outright condemns the practicing of acts of righteousness in order to be seen by men.

Practicing righteousness this way isn't practicing righteousness. There will be no reward from heaven, and the pats on the back or accolades or the awe of men will be the only gain you receive. Jesus says, "do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces". Have you ever met someone and said to yourself, wow, they look tired and worn out. This is what the hypocrites are doing on purpose. They are harrying themselves intentionally, saying, "I need to look disheveled, tired, worn out, afflicted, lacking energy so that people will take pity on me." "So that they will notice that something is wrong, so that they'll know that I'm in the middle of a fast."

The heart motive of this isn't what the intent of fasting was ever meant to be. It is taking a beautiful righteous thing and making a mockery of it. Fasting in the Old and New Testaments is always paired with prayer. You fast from one thing, most often food, and instead of eating one dedicates their time to seeking the Lord. The whole point is to be intentionally in the face of God. When we fast, we use our hunger to help us channel our thoughts to God. When I think of my hunger in a fast I use that as a reminder of why I am fasting in the first place. So then the question is why do Christians fast?

As I minored earlier in the introduction, fasting is not a uniquely Christian thing. There have been many other religious and political reasons for fasting. But there is something

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unique about Christian fasting. Christian fasting expects results. Fasting is an act of faith that anticipates something, and that something is an act of God. We'll get into that more in our second image that Jesus helps us see. But the point here is that's not why the hypocrites are doing their fasting

Can you imagine the insecurity of these hypocrites. "I'm feeling a little down today. I want to be more noticed by the people around me. I need my ego stroked a bit to help me get out of the dumps. I think I'll fast again. Nothing like skipping meals really helps me to start feeling better. My neighbors notice that my disfigured face, my gloominess. They'll think better of me then. I'll be noticed and praised for my act of righteousness."

Think about the heart behind those words for a minute. There's nothing about this persons plan for fasting that has anything to do with who God is at all. Rather, their motive is all about their own selfish ambitions. Now, contrast those motives with what we read about Nehemiah.

(Nehemiah 1:3–4 ESV) And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

Nehemiah's heart is broken because his home is in tatters. The city of God, Jerusalem, where the prescribed worship of the one true God is supposed to take place is a ruin. His heart is broken and he fasts and prayer to beseech God to intervene, to make a difference.

This is such a far cry from what the hypocrite is doing. He isn't fasting in order to drive himself to his knees seeking God to intervene. His motive is to make himself feel good. These false acts of righteousness, doing righteous acts for the sake of making ourselves feel better are essentially doing the same thing Israel did when they went and worshipped after the gods of their neighbors. This is an act of spiritual prostitution. When we act like the hypocrites, we are bowing down at the idol of self promotion. Instead of seeing our sufficiency in God alone, we are finding our sufficiency in what others will say about us. We are missing God's purpose in our lives and doing what the next passage in this book points to. The earth is going to pass away. The ego stroking and the accolades of men are all going to burn up in fire. In the basement hallway there is a trophy case of softball and basketball and golf and even ping pong achievements. When Christ returns, none of that is going to amount to a hill of beans. In fact it will amount to a hill of ash. Everything will be consumed by fire and a new perfected creation will take its place. These are temporary rewards. They feel good for a little

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while and then are gone. Finding joy in what others think of us is a temporal reward and has no lasting effect. What truly satisfies is knowing who we are in Christ which brings us to the second picture that Jesus wants us to see.

Fasting As Though We Are Feasting

(Matthew 6:17–18 ESV) “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Jesus begins this by saying “WHEN you fast”. This act of righteousness is an expectation. Fasting is something that is expected of kingdom of heaven people. It should be happening. I have to confess, in my own life, I’ve had opportunities to fast, and have intentionally forsaken them for other things. I’ve willingly missed out on the joy of acting in faith and trusting God, and it is something that I regret, and it reminded me of the faithfulness of God despite my unfaithfulness. We are expected to fast. Then Jesus gets into what that expectation looks like.

He says, “anoint your head and wash your face.” This is to be understood as the opposite of what the hypocrites do in looking gloomy and disfiguring your face. Anointing your head and washing your face is basically what you’d do to get ready for a nice dinner. Imagine if Paula invited me to have a special supper with her on Saturday night. And imagine that I’m changing the oil on the car before that. If I finish that job, wipe my hands with a towel and then expect to leave to this nice dinner with Paula she might be rightly offended. I need to wash my hair, clean up and put on clean clothes to go out to dinner with her. It’s just the right thing to do when you’re going out for a nice meal with someone you love.

The point Jesus is making here is to be a polar opposite of what the hypocrites do. They make themselves look worn out so that they will be seen by men. On the contrary Jesus wants us to approach fasting with the same kind of quiet secrecy that based on appearances, no one would suspect that our stomachs are having hunger pains.

Now this brings up a good question about corporate fasting. If as Jesus says our fasting is to be in secret, is he then saying don’t fast corporately? I think the answer to this question is that corporate fasting can be done rightly, but it could also be done with a wrong heart. Jesus has repeatedly been pointing out that we can do right things for wrong reasons. In multiple places of the New Testament we see fasting take place in a corporate manner. Either they were disobeying Christ or we need to apply Jesus words in the proper context, and I believe that the latter is the case. The prophetess Anna was fasting with the worshippers in the temple, waiting for the Lord’s Messiah to

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come. In Acts 13 the church in Antioch was fasting and praying together, waiting for the Lord to speak and give direction. The result of that prayer and fasting was that Paul and Barnabas were called out to be sent into missions. Paul and Barnabas likewise led the churches and elders to pray and fast together waiting on the Lord to provide his leadership to these churches. In every case in the new testaments, the fasting is paired with prayer and it is an act of faith waiting on the Lord to act.

The point of fasting is to make our bodies and hearts submit to God when their desire is to wander. Practicing fasting is a way to practice righteous living. It's the same principle. Our flesh says I want to go after that food. I'm hungry. It smells good, its part of a balanced meal, and you haven't fed me. I want to eat and its your job to feed me so do your job. When we're fasting we respond to our flesh, delight yourself in the Lord body. You can live without food, but you die without God. My hunger reminds me that I'm trusting a faithful God to accomplish his purposes. Likewise, when we are tempted to sin our flesh says I want to go after that sin, It looks good, I desire it, let me have it. And we respond to our flesh and tell it, no flesh, that's sinful, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Fasting is the practice of flexing the muscle of faith and discipling ourselves to yearn for the Lord. John Piper writes "Being seen fasting and fasting to be seen are not the same. Being seen fasting is a mere external event. Fasting to be seen by men, as Jesus means it here, is a self-exalting motive of the heart."³

God knows our motives. The secret places of the heart. I titled this picture that Jesus gives "Fasting as Though We Are Feasting" because I want us to have a right perspective. I think most of us love food at one level or another. For me it's all about meat. I used to be super into sweets, but my palate has changed over time. In the same way that over time our tastes change, we also need to be honing our tastes. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness should be something that increases over time. Our pleasure in who God is and who we are in the eyes of God should be surpassing our love for the world and also our love for food. When we feel the nudge of the spirit moving us toward fasting we should be growing in our love for God to the point that when that nudge comes it shouldn't be an intense battle, but a pleasure to submit to his call on our lives because we know him.

Practicing fasting helps us get there, and the reasons that it does is that we gain a better perspective. A better vantage point and a lens to look at the world through. I love God more than food, or tastebuds, and will therefore give myself to the thing that I

³ Piper 71-72

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love the most... “and your father who sees in secret will reward you.” He gives us more of himself.

We don’t need more of the accolades of man, we don’t need more of the worship of humans. What we need is more of God. If we needed more of mans praise then that’s what God would give us isn’t it. Because James tells us he gives good gifts. Every good and perfect gift comes from above, from our steadfast father who never changes. So the fact that he isn’t rewarding us with public praise means that public praise isn’t what we need. What we need his more of him, and that ultimate reward is what we are waiting for.

Heaven is coming.

Application

So how do we do this practically? We need to be practicing these acts of faith. Giving to the poor is a sacrifice of the resources we would otherwise use to supply our own needs. Praying is calling out to God to provide what we need, and fasting is showing God that our faith is in him so enter into whatever our situation is and act on our behalf. That’s what David did, and Nehemiah did, and Daniel did. That’s what Anna did, and the new testament church did, the committed their bodies to live out the fact that God is their greatest desire, and food comes second.

They put their faith in the God who loves us more than we love ourselves. We think that we care about one another, and its true, we do. And we think that no one could care for ur kids as much as we do and its true, but the deeper reality is that God loves you more than you love yourself. God loves your kids more than you do. If he is who he says he is, and if he loves us with that kind of love like he says he does, then we can turn to him with our deepest prayers and longings and practice our act of faith that he is supplying and will supply all our needs.

So what might this look like practically? When you find yourself in a situation where you need God to intervene, consider practicing an act of fasting. This doesn’t have to be a big deal. Fasts can take so many forms. The first meal of the day is called breakfast because we break a fast of the night by eating a bowl of corn flakes. Fasting might be one meal in a given week. It might be two weeks with no food at all. Some people fast and drink only water and juice for a period of time. Some for medial or health reasons are unable to fast from food so a fast for them might be from some other activity or pleasure like fasting from watching football or using social media. The Bible also points to a fast from intercourse, but the point of any kind of fast would be to rather dedicate that time and those efforts to prayer instead, beseeching God to act.

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In an effort to make this kind of thing part of our lives at grace, I am instituting a monthly fast that anyone who desires is welcome to participate in. I've shared it with the elders already and we are going to make a monthly corporate fast available to any who would desire to join us. The first Tuesday of every month, 12 times per year, we will gather to pray and fast together. One the back of your worship folder, the calendar already has it there for you. We will start out meeting in the Pulse classroom in the basement of the church. Starting at 6:30am and going till 7:30am so that those who need to be at work by 8 o'clock are able to do this, we'll gather to pray and seek God for the church, its' leadership, members, attenders, for our community, and for God to work in each of them. We'll skip breakfast and instead spend time in prayer together once a month. If you can't fast from a meal, come anyway, if we are following Christ's instructions you won't be able to tell who is fasting and who isn't anyway. If you can't make it to the church, join us in spirit from your own location. We are discipling ourselves to remind ourselves of what we know is true already. We need the Lord. We seek him, his help in Christ, through the Holy Spirit and we desire that we would be changed because of it, that we would grow in our faith and be transformed.

If you don't know that kind of faith today, we want to pray with you about it, that God would bring it about in your life. That you would know his saving grace and the freedom that we have in Christ. He came to earth and suffered and died for all our sins so that we could be with him. His sacrifice of his own life for our sins is what gives us our freedom and makes us righteous in God's eyes. This is the beginning of faith, believing that Jesus Christ is your Lord and savior. He is coming back to judge the world and that's one of the reasons that we fast. We fast in anticipation of that return, and we pray that he would come quickly. Salvation is available for you today.

PRAYER

Benediction

(Philippians 4:11–20 ESV paraphrased) I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ...My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.