

To Be Seen By Men, Part III - Fasting

Call to Worship: Psalm 91

1st Scripture: Matthew 9:14-17

2nd Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18

Hymn #32- *The God of Abraham Praise*

Hymn Insert- *In Christ Alone*

Hymn Insert- *O Church Arise*

Introduction

We've been working through this section of the Sermon on the Mount, where our Lord has been addressing the ungodly *behaviors* of the religious leaders, most particularly, related to acts of worship. We've completed our consideration of "charitable deeds" and "prayer," and this morning, we move on to consider the matter of "fasting." And again, as we have been seeing in the previous examples, our Lord will first address the ungodly, self-serving actions of the religious leaders, before describing the proper way, in which, His followers (those who are truly part of His kingdom) should fast. And all in all, we will continue to see the general principle that our Lord is seeking to bring out, which ought to govern all of our acts of worship and service to God.

I. What is Fasting?

Now, for a moment, let me just explain what fasting is, and how it is relevant to the Christian life. Very simply, fasting involves denying yourself food for an allotted period of time. To some extent, we can all say that we fast, in the sense that, generally speaking, there is a certain point in the evening, where we no longer eat any food for several hours. And then, in the morning, at some point, we "break that fast," and eat what we call, "break-fast." Some diets utilize weekly fasting periods for various health purposes, such as cleaning out the body, and rebooting the digestive system, by missing, at least, a full day of meals.

From a spiritual standpoint, throughout history, the people of God would utilize periods of fasting, as a means of seeking God in a very unique way. In a sense, the individual who is fasting for spiritual reasons, afflicts his/her body in this way, for an allotted period of time, as a means of expressing a sense of fervency in seeking the Lord. They are denying their bodies (setting aside) the most basic of their natural desires, as a means of expressing their dependence

upon, longing for, and humiliation before God. To this end, fasting is generally “focused” in nature, on some particular matter of urgency, which the individual is seeking to set before God. Some important matter has arisen; perhaps a war is about to begin against enemies, or maybe the individual is undergoing some form of prolonged and painful affliction, or perhaps the individual has sinned in some very grievous way, and he/she deprives himself of food for a time, with the intent of pursuing God with all sincerity and seriousness.

The Israelites would fast for various reasons, especially when facing a much stronger enemy in battle or when bearing the weight and guilt of their sins against God (King Hezekiah, when the Assyrians had already conquered many Judean fortified cities, and were preparing to take Jerusalem). Recall, as well, when David had refused to eat, when God had declared that his son (through his adultery with Bathsheba) would soon die. David had hoped that as he mourned in repentance before God, that God might just spare his son. On the Day of Atonement (“Yom Kippur”), every year, the Jews would have to hold a solemn fast, as they reflected upon (and mourned) their sins, and pondered the special grace that God would grant them through that yearly sacrifice, as they put into practice all that God had commanded for the event.

Now, how long should a fast be? There really is no set amount of time, which ought to be dedicated to any particular fast. A time of fasting can go anywhere from missing one meal, to missing several meals, to missing a few days of meals, to continuing until a particular event has transpired which compelled the fast (a battle, a surgery...etc). Moses and the Lord Jesus Christ both fasted for forty days, something I would not generally recommend, as they served a unique purpose as mediators of their respective covenants.

Finally and obviously, because of the reality of “denying one’s natural hunger,” which is involved in fasting, it can be a difficult thing to do, and is not naturally enjoyable or desirable... unless you are seeking the praises of men, which brings us then into our text.

II. Ungodly fasting (vs. 16)

“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (vs. 16).

And so, what were the religious leaders doing, concerning this matter of fasting? For one, they took a sacred act and made it a weekly practice, which was completely uncalled for. But, even more so, they did it, in such a way that they could show off how pious and self-righteous they were. They went out of their way to ensure that everyone knew that they were denying their own bodies, as a means of showing their impeccable commitment to God. They put on the sad and long face, they intentionally disfigured and embellished their faces, so that they would look gaunt, pale and deprived. They exaggerated and used creative means of ensuring that everyone knew that they were fasting.

And so, once again, we see that their motive were self-serving, and they had no real concern for seeking God with any state of fervency or sincerity. It was all a “sham-show.” And therefore, once again, our Lord states, “They have their reward.” Their desire for fasting was not to reach God, but rather, to gain the praises and admiration of men. And therefore, they could expect nothing from God, in response to such a hypocritical act of worship.

III. Godly Fasting (vs. 17-18)

In contrast then to the hypocritical fasting of the Scribes and Pharisees, our Lord then states, “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (vs. 17-18).

And so, the idea here, put forth by our Lord, is that fasting should be done in such a way that would not be evident to those around you. Generally, it should be a personal matter, between the individual and the Lord, as the individual pursues God and His will. Now, this is not to rule out corporate fasting. At times, a church may call a fast, for some particular reason, when we are seeking God’s wisdom, guidance and help, concerning a serious matter, but even that should be done discreetly and not in a flashy manner. The idea of anointing the head and washing the face, is meant to convey, that conscious steps should even be taken to keep others from knowing that you are fasting, rather than, flaunting it, as some means of declaring your piety. In this sense, the sincerity of the individual and his/her confidence in God is all the more

validated, because there is nothing else to gain, when all who are visible, are unaware of what you are doing.

To this end, let me just make a few more comments about fasting, before we bring this section on “worship” to a summary conclusion:

1) There is a place for mature believers to fast, when there is a need to seek God, concerning any number of urgent matters. From a private standpoint, this might involve personal struggles, suffering, serious family concerns, wrestling with some form of besetting sin, repentance over a particular grievous sin, and any other personal matter that compels an individual to seek God with a unique sense of fervency and urgency. From a corporate/public standpoint, fasts might be called when seeking God concerning the direction of the church or a particular ministry, mourning over the moral condition of the country, seeking to appoint new elders and/or deacons, wrestling through church schisms and other significant matters, in support of missions, and probably a host of other reasons, surrounding urgent circumstances.

2) Spiritual fasting should not be so regular that it loses its sacred value. It shouldn't be normative, but rather, it should be for extraordinary and unique circumstances, especially involving matters of urgency. There is nothing inherently holy about fasting, in and of itself. God is not impressed by the act, simply because we do it.

3) Fasting ought always to be accompanied by prayer. The whole intention of fasting is to express a sense of urgency, humility and dependence upon God. It is, in fact, an urgent seeking of God, centered upon some matter of urgency. And so, if you fast without praying, you've pretty much defeated the whole purpose of fasting. Fasting, in itself, does nothing to move God in some way, anymore than the heathen's repeated chants or cutting of themselves moved God. Fasting is a means of preparing our own hearts, to seek God with a sense of urgency, humility and God-dependence.

4) When fasting, one should ensure that he/she drinks sufficient water. Fasting should never include cutting off the water supply as well. That would be called “fainting” at the very least, and “suicide” at most. Furthermore, women who are pregnant or nursing young children, people taking various medications, people with various kinds of disabilities...etc, should certainly exercise great care when committing to any type of a fast for any period of time. And if you've

never fasted before, you might not want to start out with a seven day fast, or anything like that. Even missing a meal or two can help get a sense of how well your body is going to cooperate with you, when you fast. You can always increase the time at a later point, if the occasion calls for it. All in all, use wisdom.

Fasting does hold a place in the life of the Christian, and probably most of us could do it a bit more, but again, if and when you fast, do so, discreetly, focused and with good reason.

IV. Bringing it All Together

In our consideration then of the ungodly actions of the religious leaders, seen first in these three areas of worship, “charitable deeds, prayer and fasting,” once again, we come back to the general principle that our Lord is seeking to convey, which is meant to cover all of our acts of service and worship before God. And the general principle is this: Those who are truly in the Kingdom of God will sincerely strive to live in such a way that would bring glory to God, and not to themselves. To this end, they strive to serve in such a way that would draw people to God and not themselves. In some way, you can say that we all have a “John the Baptist” mission, in this regard. Our respective ministries and services should be ever governed by the desire to “decrease” while Christ “increases.”

The religious leaders of our Lord’s time, ironically, though seemingly the most holy and religious people in the land, were really the most ungodly and wretched. At least, the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners were not pretending to be religious, nor were they using the things of God, as a means of glorifying themselves.

To this end then, brethren, we ought to be highly motivated, out of love for Christ and out of distrust for our own natural, fallen propensities, to consciously consider the motives that drive all that we do, when we seek to serve the Lord. None of us are perfect, and our motives are always tainted with some degree of imperfection, but there ought to be a real and sincere sense that we are doing all that we do, because we want to see God glorified. Though our God is invisible and often untraceable to our physical senses, we truly know that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him in truth. We don’t invest in the praises of men. We invest in the Kingdom of God and His Christ, laboring to please and glorify God and not men.

We gladly exchange the present absorbing of the worship of men, for the future declaration of God, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!” And to this end, those around us ought not to feel distanced from us, as the average Jew would have felt around the Pharisees and Scribes. We don’t present an “alleged” unreachable righteousness that we have, which others cannot attain, which would drive them to hopelessness and despair. We come alongside of sinners, as fellow dependents upon the grace of Christ, pointing them to the same wonderful Savior who saves to the uttermost, and who has condescended so low to save us! All in all, one of the most egregious offenses of the religious leaders, was that, by their self-righteous, ungodly actions, they actually barred others from coming to experience the free grace of God. They presented a salvation that was based on their own merits, bound to their hundreds of outward, cardboard, traditional practices, which pushed everyone else out of the kingdom of God. That is why our Lord stated, that which in many ways would sum up the main theme and message of the Sermon on the Mount (and Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, for that matter), “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” God has always been concerned about the heart. He doesn’t desire robotic, ATM machine, plastic, heartless, rote, worship...He’s a personal God. And He is Spirit. And those who worship Him, must do so, in spirit (in sincerity; from the inside/out) and in truth (in accordance with all that is prescribed in His Word).

V. The Gospel

If you are not a Christian here, this morning, this entire truth; all that we have been going over concerning the heart, is so relevant for you. From a negative standpoint, you must understand that if you die in your sins, you will remain forever condemned, and you will bear the fierce wrath of God forever. And God is not interested in mere religiosity or outward works to try to merit His favor. God is interested in the heart. Unless your heart is changed, and your sins are paid for, you cannot stand before the judgment seat of God, and be declared righteous. The Scriptures clearly teach that you need to be “born again.”

But, the good news is that everything God righteously requires of you, He provides in His Son, Jesus Christ! All that the Lord Jesus speaks about in this Sermon on the Mount, can only exist in the hearts of those, whom He has changed, by His Spirit, from the inside out. And so,

you must abandon all of your confidence in yourself, in your good works, or in anyone or anything else. And you must come to Jesus, by faith, trusting in Him alone to save you from your sins, and to grant you the heart that you need. Everything you need to be right with God, and to gain eternal life, and to experience the true peace of God in the present, can be found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. He Himself, the eternal Son of God, became man, so that He could merit and provide us with, all that we need to gain eternal salvation! Repent and seek Him now, while you still have breath!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25