

- c. Jesus' final example illustrating Israel's religious hypocrisy involves its practice of **fasting**. Like alms-giving and public prayer, fasting was a centerpiece of the Jews' practical piety and so, too, was well-suited to those who desired to parade and promote their religious status and public image. Also like its counterparts, the Law of Moses didn't explicitly command fasting (hence Jesus: "*Whenever you happen to fast...*"), but it did demand on certain occasions an inner disposition and conduct consistent with it.

By the time of Jesus' birth, fasting was an important component of the Jews' religious practice, being most closely associated with appointed times of prayer, but to a lesser degree, also with the giving of alms. Jesus' treatment of fasting, then, provides a fitting capstone to the context, for a Jew could hardly think of acts of charity and public prayer without fasting coming to mind. Together these three practices were the epitomizing embodiment of Israel's public piety.

- By tradition, the Jews observed many fasts, but the only one associated with the Law of Moses was the fast of **Yom Kippur** (the Day of Atonement) (Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:26-32; Acts 27:9).

The Day of Atonement was the highest of all of the holy days appointed by God. Though He required the daily morning and evening sacrifices, God conveyed to Israel the insufficiency of those sacrifices (even when combined with the regular sin and trespass offerings) by appointing one, supreme annual sacrifice of atonement.

Yom Kippur was also the most solemn event in Israel's religious life; it brought the symbolism of sin and sacrifice together in one series of atoning actions by which the whole Israelite kingdom – priests, people, and even the sanctuary itself – was purged of its uncleanness and symbolically restored to God. In the Leviticus contexts detailing the Yom Kippur observance, the children of Israel were commanded by God to "*utterly afflict their souls*" in preparation for it (ref. 16:29, 23:27), and this ritual self-abasement found expression in a national fast.

In this regard, one may say that the fast of Yom Kippur, though not a matter of explicit divine command, was virtually inevitable. The ordinance recorded in Leviticus 16 and 23 demanded only the worshipper's *absolute self-abasement*, not his abstention from food. But what person, when his heart and mind are consciously pressed under the unbearable weight of constant failure and spiritual uncleanness, can even give a thought to eating (2 Samuel 12:1-23; cf. also 1 Samuel 1:1-8, 20:25-34; etc.)?

This highlights a crucial principle respecting the practice and purpose of fasting: *True, spiritual fasting is a natural consequence of a person's inward conviction and contrition; conversely, fasting as the means to contrition or humiliation in an appeal to God is the hypocrisy of "magic."*

There are indeed times and circumstances that naturally lend themselves to fasting, as in situations of great difficulty or need when a person is seeking the Lord with exceptional focus and intensity. Such fasting has marked God's people in the age of fulfillment as well as the time of preparation under the Old Covenant (ref. Ezra 8:21; Daniel 9:3; Acts 13:1-3, 14:23). But, while fasting is consistent with a person's single-minded focus in coming before God in prayer, the fast doesn't *effect* or even *facilitate* intimacy with Him, nor does it, in itself, provide greater clarity or insight to the one praying.

- In the centuries preceding the coming of Christ, four annual **public fasts** commemorating the captivity and exile became a part of the religious life of the Hebrew people. Some scholars have linked the origin of these fasts to the scriptural precedents from that period (ref. Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1; Daniel 9:3; etc.), but the post-exile prophet Zechariah seems to indicate that these fasts actually originated during the seventy years of the Babylonian exile (Zechariah 7:1-8:19).
 - 1) In the fourth month, the Jews observed a fast commemorating the breach of Jerusalem's walls by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and the interruption of the daily sacrifice
 - 2) There was a second fast held in the fifth month (the ninth of Ab) that recalled the destruction of the first (and later the second) temple and the city of Jerusalem following its capture.
 - 3) The third fast occurred in the seventh month in memory of the murder of Gedaliah and his associates. (Gedaliah was appointed by the king of Babylon to govern the cities of Judah after he completed his conquest of Judah and Jerusalem) (2 Kings 25:21ff).
 - 4) The final declared fast occurred in the tenth month of the year in commemoration of the commencement of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign (588 B.C.)

These appointed national fasts memorialized the tragic demise of David's kingdom, and the sons of Israel dutifully complied with the obligation of ceremonial mourning. At the same time, many failed to recognize that God had destroyed the kingdom because Israel had failed to fulfill its identity and calling as covenant "son." Some did listen to the prophets and so acknowledged Jewish culpability in their nation's conquest and desolation, but the general expectation among the Jews was that David's kingdom would be recovered in its Israelite form. The nation's fasting expressed its sorrow over the loss of the kingdom and its longing for the day of restoration, but it fell short of its proper messianic dimension (cf. Zechariah 7:1-8:23 with 6:9-13; Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-8; etc.).

Lacking an accurate perception of the coming messianic kingdom and the way in which Yahweh was going to usher in all righteousness in His Servant, the Son of David, Israel's historical fasts came to focus more on the expectation of the triumph of the Jewish state over Gentile occupation and oppression than contrition and repentance toward God.

- In addition to Israel's corporate fasts, the Jews also practiced *personal fasting* in connection with private concerns. But regardless of whether the person's fasting was associated with penitence, petition, etc., *it was to reflect his sense of lowliness before God* (cf. Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1-3; Esther 4:3; Daniel 9:3; 2 Samuel 12:16-23). Perhaps one of the greatest biblical portraits of fasting – and one which well captures its significance – is attributed to Nehemiah. When, from his exile in Susa, he learned of the continuing desolation of Jerusalem some 70 years after the temple had been rebuilt, Nehemiah recounted that he “*sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven*” (Nehemiah 1:1-4).
- As another expression of personal fasting, the Pharisees established during the second temple era a regimen of *twice-weekly fasts* which they faithfully observed during the periods between Passover and Pentecost and between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). Not only did they themselves scrupulously observe these fasts, they encouraged others as well, viewing them as an important measure of one's piety and devotion to God (Luke 5:33, 18:12; cf. Mark 2:16-18). Israel's national fasts fostered the nation's sense of ethnic pride and confidence; its personal fasts accomplished the same thing at the personal level.

And so, while fasting had biblical precedent and had historically been a part of the Jews' posture toward God in times of solemnity, danger, difficulty, calamity, or loss (1 Chronicles 10:1-12; 2 Chronicles 20:1-3; Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 3:12-4:16), this practice predictably followed the course of all religion, becoming merely another ritualistic device – a tool of manipulation for securing personal benefit, whether the praise and favor of God or of other men. Instead of the spontaneous, unsolicited response of a burdened heart, fasting was reduced to the servant of pride and self-preoccupation (ref. Isaiah 58:1-6; Jeremiah 14:1-13, 36:9-24).

- 1) The preceding discussion provides the backdrop for Jesus' instruction regarding fasting. His Jewish audience was well aware of the historical bases and significance of their various fasts, and they had regularly observed the behavior Jesus was rebuking (6:16). This was especially true because the two days set apart for the weekly fasts – the second and fifth days of the week – just happened to coincide with the market days in Jerusalem. Of course the Pharisees needed to justify this selection, and they did so by claiming that those were the days that Moses ascended and descended Mount Sinai when God gave him the second tablets of the Law.

Their apparent spiritual concerns notwithstanding, the Pharisees' fasting on those days insured that their piety would be observed by multitudes of people who would otherwise not be available to witness it. This practice makes Jesus' indictment all the more powerful: When the hypocritical religious elite fasted, they "*put on a gloomy face*" and "*neglected their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men.*"

- Fasting was supposed to reflect a heart heavily burdened, humbled and filled with deep contrition. A heart weighed down in this way would tend to express itself in a *downcast countenance*, and the hypocrites made sure that they presented such a face to all onlookers. They wanted everyone to take note of and be moved by their deep piety: What holy men, that they should suffer so greatly in their spirits because of their burden over sin, their love for God and zeal for His truth and will! How their hearts beat with His!
- In similar fashion, and for the same reason, Israel's hypocritical elite *neglected their appearance*. In case the crowded marketplace kept some people too far away to be able to see their agonized expression, the hypocrites were careful to maintain a disheveled appearance that no one could fail to notice. These men sought the praise of men, and they had their reward in full.

"They employed all the usual tokens of deep affliction and mental distress. They covered their heads with dust and ashes, veiled their countenances, neglected their dress, and deformed their features by contracting them into the most gloomy and dejected looks. They studiously exhibited all the external appearances of humiliation, while their hearts were lifted up in spiritual pride." (Brewster)

- 2) As it is with acts of charity and prayer, so it is with fasting: In the context of man's alienation from God, every dimension and component of human existence is self-referential and ultimately self-serving. Even in instances where people are sincerely burdened over the evil in the world and in their own hearts and the disastrous consequences it brings, *they still process and respond to that burden in a manner consistent with their fallen condition*: They perceive, consider, judge, and act in accordance with their own corrupted sensibilities, convictions, and goals.

Not every person is like the arrogant, self-seeking and self-assured hypocrites in Israel who brazenly feigned humility and contrition, but all who remain estranged from God are nonetheless incapable of the inward attitude and disposition that authentic fasting reflects. So the person who recognizes his own needy and unhappy state may perhaps cry out to God, but even then his misery will be self-focused and his petition for help self-seeking; such a one seeks relief and remedy rather than reconciliation.

Because of what it represents, true fasting – fasting that reflects a God-centered humility, contrition and dependence – has its foundation in the renewing and restoring work of the Holy Spirit. *Like charity and prayer, true fasting exists only within the kingdom of heaven*; it is practiced by those who inhabit that kingdom as partakers in the Spirit’s renewing grace.

Here again Jesus conveyed this truth through His description of how the sons of the kingdom fast: Rather than parading their fasting, they make it a matter between themselves and their heavenly Father (6:17-18). Fasting is a practice that concerns their own personal relationship with God, and that is where they are to keep it. But as with alms-giving and prayer, the issue isn’t anonymity (secrecy), but authenticity: What distinguishes the citizens of the kingdom in their fasting is the fact that it is simply one more natural expression of their intimate communion with God as sons in the Son.

More than a physical act, fasting speaks to the disposition of the heart. A man can remove himself to a hidden place where no one else can observe him fasting, but, as with his charity, he is always able to see himself. Even when completely isolated from other people, the one fasting can praise himself for his self-denying piety. For the sons of the kingdom, fasting is *reflexive* and *vertical*: For them, fasting isn’t a means to a self-centered outcome, but the natural response of a deeply burdened heart that has God Himself and His purpose and glory in the world as its chief concern.

And so it is that, in fasting (as with every aspect of his life), the citizen of Jesus’ kingdom has no interest in the gaze or accolades of men. *In fact, he finds in them great danger, for he knows too well how readily they inflame his remaining pride* – the pride that undermines his holiness and holds his heart away from his Father. Having been delivered from his self-enslavement and brought into spiritual union with the triune God, he lives his life according to that reality; as a subject of the kingdom of the new creation, his joys and sorrows, affliction and relief, anguish and consolation, tribulations and triumph are all “*in Christ*.” In all things he acknowledges and embraces the goodness and mercy of his heavenly Father and carries his burdens of praise and petition to His throne of grace.

Thus Jesus’ exhortation to lowliness before God is not a call to self-pity or a melancholy spirit. A humble and lowly state expresses itself in joy and exultation because it is life lived in the truth. It is life in accordance with the profound paradox that sorrow is joy, struggle is peace, weakness is strength and emptiness is full sufficiency. Paul knew the power for living bound up in this paradox and sought to impart it to the saints: “*And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (ref. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; cf. also 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; Philippians 4:10-13).