

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

The Heart of Christian Fasting, Part 2: Fasting in the Sermon on the Mount

Scripture: Matthew 6:16–18

Code: B110111

After seeing the many good comments following our first post on fasting, I'm happy to return to the topic again today. Your anecdotes show the importance of addressing this subject *biblically*. It provokes the protective side of my pastoral nature when I hear that others, including pastors, have used fasting to manipulate and intimidate you spiritually. So, let's go straight to Jesus and see these things for what they are.

Summary: Jesus' teaching on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount was primarily designed to warn his disciples against the sin of hypocrisy.

Last time we said that voluntary fasting in the Old Testament expressed a mournful, urgent seeking of God in distressing circumstances. That presupposes a sincere spirit, exclusively directed vertically toward God, devoid of ulterior motives in the presence of men. Jesus continues that fundamental approach when He says in Matthew 6:16-18:

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

That passage is part of Jesus' larger teaching against hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. It's crucial for you to see this as you seek to understand the role of fasting in the Christian life.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 6:1).

True worship glorifies God, not the man or woman who proposes to seek Him. Jesus illustrates that point with three examples: giving, praying, and fasting. Notice how he repeatedly exposes the hypocrisy of pretending to worship God while actually seeking the approval of men:

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (Matthew 6:2).

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (Matthew 6:5).

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their

appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (Matthew 6:16).

Jesus repeatedly warns his disciples against calculating outward acts of righteousness so that men will see and praise them. Sinful motives forfeit any reward before God. Hypocrites have the audacity to use supposed acts of righteousness to get the praise of men to feed their sinful pride. What an abomination!

That is Jesus' primary message in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. By contrast, he teaches his disciples to do those acts *privately*, where only God can see, if they are truly seeking God's reward.

But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:3-4).

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6).

But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:18).

It is exceedingly crucial for you to see this overarching point: Jesus taught us to go out of our way to *conceal* these acts of righteousness. Men cannot praise you for what they cannot see. By contrast, God, who looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7), will see the true humility of a shattered heart that is seeking Him, and Him alone. When He sees an undivided heart, that's when He rewards giving, praying, and fasting.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day turned that principle of concealment on its head. Jesus condemned the smug self-righteousness of the Pharisee who prayed, "I fast twice a week, I tithe of all that I get" (Luke 18:9-14). Although the Old Testament required only one fast a year (Leviticus 16:29), history tells us the Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday to multiply their religious observances. The Pharisee in Luke 18 was really saying, "God, I'm more righteous than even *You* require."

Twice a week! One hundred fasts a year! Wow! How impressive is that?

Not impressive at all. They were only adding tasks of their own invention, which they carried out in a way to maximize their attention from men. Looked great on the outside.

Totally rejected by God who looks on the inside. Colossians 2:23 says:

These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

The Pharisees had missed that point entirely. They fasted so others would think they had deep spiritual desires when they really didn't.

They fasted from food and fed their pride.

That's why Jesus said the praise of men was their only reward. Their fasting had no value before God.

I do not hesitate to say that much of what passes for Christian fasting today is equally worthless. Pastors and other Christians who call attention to the nature and frequency of their fasting are violating the most fundamental statements of Jesus about spiritual devotion. They cannot evade the plain meaning of His words: *When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men* (Matthew 6:16-17).

In other words, don't call attention to yourself in any way. Don't exaggerate a gloomy face so people will recognize your fasting. Act and talk like you do when you are not fasting so others won't notice you.

In today's terms, someone needs to stand up to these people and say, *Stop talking about how great your fasting program is and how much fasting has humbled you! Don't talk about how much power you have with God!*

Here's the hard but obvious truth. If these people were **truly** humbled in the presence of God, they would obey Jesus instead of calling attention to themselves.

Having said that, my real concern in this post is not to challenge those people but to strengthen those sincere Christians whom the public fasters try to manipulate and intimidate. Far from submitting to their efforts to bind your conscience to a man-made fasting program, your responsibility before Christ is to *reject* them (Colossians 2:20-23).

Reject their efforts to impose non-biblical standards on your conscience. No man has the prerogative to go beyond what is written in the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Reject their public displays of false holiness.

While those things have the appearance of wisdom and advanced spirituality, they are actually rooted in pride, arrogance, and a dismissal of the plain words of the Master. How could *that* be an indication of true, biblical holiness?

No, beloved. God calls us to a *secret* approach to righteousness that avoids the praise of men. That's true not only in fasting, but giving, prayer, and every other area of your spiritual life. Your motive must be His approval, not the approval of men.

How do you cultivate that attitude in your life? Jesus teaches you to conceal your private devotion from men. Consciously order your life so men *won't* notice your spiritual disciplines. Refuse those inner impulses to drop subtle words about what you're doing.

Instead, devote your exclusive attention in these matters to your heavenly Father who sees in secret.

That cultivates spiritual intimacy with God because you share something with Him alone.

You know what's great about that approach?

“Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

In exchange for private devotion, we get our heavenly Father's reward? In light of *that* promise, who cares what these self-appointed teachers say? I will gladly dismiss their condescending attitudes toward me.

Won't you?

More still to come . . .

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Managing Director

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