

Finer Grounds Mini-Series

Matthew 6

Lesson 3: Matthew 6:16-18

Moving right along with our study of Matthew chapter 6, don't forget what the main theme of Jesus' entire sermon is (see Matthew 5:20). Remember within chapter 6, Jesus is contrasting the scribes and Pharisees' righteousness and how it was focused on gratifying themselves, with the kind of righteousness God wants which is centered on Him. So far we have examined how Jesus wants us to do charity (vv. 1-4), and how Jesus wants us to pray (vv. 5-15). This week we will look at the last area of righteousness that Jesus warned us to "beware" of practicing before others to be noticed by them (vv. 16-18).

Read Matthew 6:16-18

As you read these verses it is quite obvious what the area of righteousness is. Yep... it's fasting! At first it seems like this topic is out of place. Ask yourself, "How many Christians do I know (myself included) who pray as a result of their faith?" We could also ask, "How many Christians do I know (myself included) who do charitable deeds to please and serve God?" I am sure you could think of many examples of both yourselves and other Christians you know who regularly engage in these acts of righteousness as a result of their faith. Now what about fasting? This is probably not a topic that is discussed a lot in Sunday lessons or Bible study groups, so let's try and dig through this short passage. After all, Jesus brought it up in the same section as prayer and charitable deeds so there must be something to this topic.

Since fasting is not often practiced or discussed much today, maybe what we should ask is "Why did people fast in the Bible?" To answer this question we

will have to go outside our text in Mathew. First, let's look at several passages from our Old Testament...

Read 2 Samuel 1:12. What reason did David and his men fast for?

Read Ezra 8:21-23. Why did Ezra and the Israelites fast?

Read Nehemiah 9:1-2. What were the Israelites doing here in conjunction to fasting?

Read Daniel 9:1-11. What was Daniel doing while fasting?

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As we look all throughout the Old Testament we see God's people fasting during times of mourning, in times of great need before a difficult or dangerous task, for repentance, and for times of intense prayer. It is no wonder Jesus mentions fasting as a righteous deed in this section following His teaching on prayer in verses 5-15. Let's also look at some examples in the New Testament regarding reasons for fasting.

We know from Matthew 6:16 in our main text that the Pharisees fasted, although they did it for show as we will discuss later. Remember from previous studies we have identified that Jesus is referring to the scribes and Pharisees when He says "hypocrites." It also seems like the Pharisees made a regular practice of fasting (cf. Luke 18:12). They would require fasting twice a week to appear more righteous than everyone else. Let's look at some other examples in the New Testament where fasting was used the way God actually intended it to be...

Read Acts 13:2-3 and Acts 14:23. Why were Christians in these gentile churches fasting in these two different events?

It is important to see how and why fasting was used appropriately according to God's righteousness instead of the false righteousness that the Pharisees pursued. It is obvious that God's people throughout history have used fasting as a means of growing closer to God by giving all their energy, thought and time to Him instead of their physical desires.

Now it is important to note that fasting was not just a Jewish custom. We can see from the examples in Acts that Gentile Christians were fasting. In Acts

13:2-3 it was the Gentile congregation in Antioch engaged in fasting. In Acts 14:23 it was Gentile congregations throughout Galatia including Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. So we know fasting wasn't something that was only for Jews, but also for Gentile Christians many years after the New Covenant was established.

Before we get into our text in Matthew 6, let's briefly look at some of the benefits of fasting. Fasting can have physical, mental and spiritual benefits when done properly. Physically, fasting can be a method for ridding the body of toxins as well as provide relief for chronic skin conditions, cardiovascular diseases such as high blood pressure and hypertension, and arthritis (Fuhrman). Fasting to aid in the relief of some of these serious conditions should only be done with consultation and supervision from a physician. Mentally, fasting can provide us with the confidence and self-restraint to be able to resist the temptation of food. If you can master these temptations, this confident will power can also help resist negative temptations as well (things like alcohol, gossip, and anger) as we see in 1 Corinthians 6:12. Fasting is more rewarding when spiritual benefits are the main goal. When fasting, it is difficult not to focus on how hungry we are. Usually we get more upset and cranky when all we do is focus on food. However, when that time is used to focus more on the bread of life (cf. John 6:48) than a loaf of bread, the rewards can be great. It is helpful to spend meal times in prayer and study in God's word. All that extra time we gain to grow closer to God helps us reflect on our own shortcomings and brings us to a deeper sense of dependence upon God.

Now that we understand a little more about fasting and its importance, let's go back to our main text in Matthew 6. Looking at verse 16 again, the first word we see is "whenever." Just like in verses 2,3,5 and 6 the word Jesus uses is "when" not "if", implying fasting should also be a natural way of life for those

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who practice the kind of righteousness God approves of. Now I want to put out a very important disclaimer here. Is Jesus saying that in order to achieve righteousness we must fast 'x' amount of times? Certainly not! We can't achieve righteousness by keeping a checklist of accomplishments. That is exactly what the scribes and Pharisees were doing, and that is not the type of righteousness we want to practice. For medical reasons, certain people (such as those with severe diabetes) cannot and should not fast. We certainly would not condemn a mute person for not being able to sing in worship; therefore we shouldn't condemn others for medical maladies that prevent them from fasting. However, just like charity and prayer, fasting should be a natural part of all abled bodied Christians lifestyles. Again, not in a checklist sort of way like the Pharisees used it for. Remember Jesus' point throughout chapter 6 is how we can develop a God-centered righteousness. If we do not understand or have a specific purpose for fasting, perhaps we need to evaluate our motives.

From what we saw in Scripture, what would be some righteous motives for fasting today?

In verse 16 Jesus also uses the word "hypocrite" again. If you like to mark repeated words in your Bible, this is a good one (13 of its 17 New Testament occurrences are found in in the book of Matthew)! We know from context that the hypocrites refer to the scribes and Pharisees. According to this verse, why is their fasting hypocritical?

It is clear that the scribes and Pharisees were motivated only by other people noticing them, just like we saw in how they did charity and offered prayer. The purpose of fasting, as with prayer, is to draw closer to God and depend solely on Him. According to our context, what are some of the consequences the scribes and Pharisees will receive from fasting this way?

Jesus says again "they have their reward in full." Staying in the context with the previous passages what is their "reward"?

Read verses 17-18 again

Jesus contrasts the previous statement by saying "but when you fast." Just as before Jesus demonstrated what the scribes and Pharisees were doing was a self-centered righteousness, but now He explains how we can develop a God-centered righteousness in our fasting. First, He says we must "anoint our heads." Does this mean we can only fast after we have poured oil over our heads? Well first we should ask, "What did 'anointing' mean to people at this time?" It was a custom for many cultures at that time to pour oil on their head or body as a means of refreshing or invigorating their bodies (Easton). Today most people don't pour oil on their heads to refresh themselves, but... in a way we still do whenever we shower and wash our hair. Oil was also a comforting and luxurious commodity (just like the perfume and makeup we use today). What would be the wisdom in Jesus commanding them to anoint themselves with oil?

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Jesus also said “wash your face.” We also wash our faces to refresh ourselves, and keep our appearances up. What would be the purpose of refreshing our appearance while we fast?

Jesus states the purpose in the next verse; “so that your fasting will not be noticed by men.” Remember the entire focus of this passage is to develop a God-centered righteousness. In order to do that we must go about our fasting in the exact opposite way the scribes and Pharisees practiced.

We should only want our “Father who is in secret” to notice our fasting. Remember, our purpose for fasting may be due to mourning a sin we have committed, or the death of a loved one. We may fast to clear our minds and focus on God in order to make an important decision, or simply spend more devoted time in prayer. In last week’s passage, we looked at that same phrase “our Father who is in secret.” Unlike most prayers, fasting is a long term continuous action. We don’t go into a room, fast for 30 minutes and then come out again. Fasting may last hours, days or even weeks. If we are hiding the fact that we are fasting from the people around us, then who will notice righteous efforts? Obviously only our Father, who is everywhere! What a comfort to know that God sees our sincerity and love for Him when we set aside even our most principle needs in order to spend more time with Him. Jesus promises once again a reward for demonstrating this God-centered righteousness. What do you think this “reward” is, keeping in mind the context of chapter 6?

Fasting isn’t something we talk about much, and we don’t really hear of people fasting all too often. However, fasting must be important to Jesus for Him to bring it up in His sermon. As Jesus explains, there is a right way to fast (with a God-centered righteousness) and a wrong way to fast (with a self-centered righteousness). Perhaps if this is a new concept to you, you should prayerfully consider privately fasting when an appropriate time and situation comes up in your life.

Works cited

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Fuhrman, Joel. Fasting and Eating for Health: A Medical Doctor’s Program for Conquering Disease. New York: St. Martin’s, 1995. Print.

Note: The author uses the New American Standard Update for all quotations and references.