



Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 20: The True Heart of Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

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In the Sermon on the Mount so far Jesus has described what a true follower of His will look like and He has described for us the righteousness that will characterize that life and how it will be lived out. And what a beautiful and blessed life that it is. A life that will be salt and light to the world. A life that is not characterized by unrighteous anger, lust and has a healthy view of marriage that reflects Christ and the church. It is a life that loves and speaks the truth and does not seek retaliation or revenge when treated unjustly but a life that loves his enemies. And Jesus has given us a warning in chapter 6 verse 1 to beware of practicing this righteousness before other people to be seen by them. If that is our goal, to be seen by others, then the recognition we get from them is the only reward that is coming our way. There will be no reward from the Father in heaven. Beloved, we see here that motive matters. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, He will look at the intentions and motives of our heart and it matters.

Here, it is important to note that Jesus is not speaking against fasting just as He didn't speak against giving to the needy and praying. But what He is doing here is exposing the abuses of fasting and the dangers of doing so. Jesus doesn't speak against fasting here but by what He says He reveals His expectation that His true followers would fast. Jesus says "when you fast" and He says it twice. He does not say "if you fast" but "when you fast." Jesus here expects us to fast and He tells us how to do it based on the assumption that we would. Jesus fasted and He expects that we will too.

Well, think about the three areas that Jesus chooses to expose hypocrisy---giving, prayer and fasting. We emphasize sacrificial giving and seek to practice that. We know the importance of prayer and we stress that and we seek to practice prayer and communion with God. But what about fasting. Do we emphasize that? Do we seek to practice fasting? Have we forgotten about it? Does it seem strange to us? Maybe it's just because we don't understand it. Maybe

we just need to be educated on the heart of fasting and then we would seek to practice it. Or maybe it's because we see other religions that practice it legalistically and we don't want to be associated with that so we don't practice it at all. Or---or maybe our desire for the Lord has dimmed. Maybe, it could be that we have nibbled at the table of the world for so long that we are stuffed with so many small things that we don't have room for the great and glorious. I don't know but what we learn here is that Jesus expects His followers to fast. And if Jesus expects us to do it then we need to understand it better. And that leads to the first thing this morning.

1 – What is fasting all about?

The Greek word for fast is *nesteuo* (nace-tyoo) and it basically means to abstain from food for a spiritual purpose. And when we think of fasting we automatically think of not eating food. But this definition can be extended to abstinence from other things for spiritual purposes.

Martin Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

“Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.”

-Fasts can be individual, corporate, partial or for different periods of time. This is why the first meal to the day is named breakfast. We are breaking our fast from not eating during the night.

-The Jews were commanded in the Old Testament to fast once a year and that was on the Day of Atonement.

-““And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall

be clean before the LORD from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.” (Leviticus 16:29–31, ESV)

-The word used here to afflict carries the meaning of fasting or to humble or submit one’s self in self-denial and self-mortification.

-There are many reasons found in the Bible for fasting.

-Repentance and brokenness before the Lord

-In Nehemiah 9:1-2 we see the people of Israel gather together in sackcloth and fasting and they were broken over their sins and were confessing them.

-In Jonah 3:5 we see Jonah preaching to Ninevah about the judgment of God and the people believed God and they called for a fast for all of them and repented.

-In Daniel 9:2 we see Daniel, fasting and in sackcloth, interceding for his people and confessing the sins before the Lord.

-We see in Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus that after His encounter with the risen Lord and realization of his sin that he neither ate nor drank for three days.

-We see fasting to humble ourselves before the Lord. To fast and to humble one’s self are equivalent terms.

-Ezra in preparation for the journey back to Jerusalem declared a fast.

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek for help from him.” (2 Chron 20:3)

-David speaking of the reproaches of those who reproach God falling on him as well said:

“When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach.” (Psalm 69:10, ESV)

-We see that fasting declares our dependency upon God.

-We see Jehoshaphat (2 Chron 20:1), after finding out that the Moabites and Ammonites were coming against him to battle, set his face to seek the Lord and he proclaimed a fast in all of Judah to seek help from the Lord because they were totally dependent on Him.

-We see Esther (Est 4:16), after learning about the plot to kill the Jews and her need to approach the king, ask Mordecai to gather all the Jews and hold a fast for three days on her behalf---approaching the king was a matter of life and death and she was totally dependent upon God for that.

-Again in Ezra 8:21 we see Ezra proclaim a fast to seek from God a safe journey for him and the exiles and they were dependent on God.

-We see the early church in Acts 13:1-3 fasting and praying before they send Paul and Barnabas off to share the gospel.

-We see Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14 returning to the churches to appoint elders and they committed them with prayer and fasting.

-We see that fasting makes it possible to share with the needy.

-Isaiah tells us:

-“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:6–7, ESV)

-And we see that fasting is rooted in a hunger for God and His presence. We see this in some more very important teaching of Jesus concerning fasting.

-“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. ” (Matthew 9:14–15, ESV)

-Why did Jesus disciples not fast---because He was with them. They were in the very presence of God in the flesh. There was no need to fast. But Jesus teaches us that the days will come when He will be taken away from them and then they will fast. Some believe that this passage is only speaking of the time in the grave before the resurrection. If that is the case then why did the early church fast. And yes, I know that Jesus is with us as He reigns in the hearts of His people but we still see through a stained glass. We don't behold His glory fully nor do we see Him face to face. We are walking now by faith but a day is coming when we will walk by sight and behold Him fully. And we should be longing for that day and waiting for it with anticipation (Heb 9). And we fast to create more of a hunger for that full presence.

-We fast to show that we have a hunger for Him that exceeds our hunger for food or this world or anything (not just food) that would threaten our hunger for God.

-We fast as a weapon to protect our hearts from being satisfied with only the gifts of God and not God himself. And the danger here is that when we are satisfied with just the gifts of God and not God himself, our idolatry is hard to detect but that is what it is---idolatry.

-We fast to nourish our hunger for God and reduce our hunger for the things of this world. Remember before that one of the reasons we have forgotten about fasting is that our hunger for God has been subtly replaced with the nibblings of the innocent pleasures of this world. We must guard our hearts against this and fasting helps us do that.

-Fasting says that "I do not live for my appetites but I set aside my physical desires so that I may seek God as my treasure."

-Fasting says that we do not live by bread alone but by the very words of God.

-Fasting says that even though our bodies are weak we declare that God is our strength.

-Fasting is a longing, aching, anticipation of the full presence of God in our lives.

-Fasting is ultimately a homesickness for God.

-Fasting is an issue of our hearts---it is internal not external. This is what Jesus has been dealing with so far---the internal. The root question is this---Is God my treasure? Is it God that I truly long and ache for?

-Fasting is NOT:

-A means for us to manipulate God for the blessings that we desire.

-A means to obligate God to answer your prayers---prayer is a privilege not a right. God is not obligated to us for anything and He will not be mocked---He knows our heart.

-A means to draw attention to yourself and seek the glory that only belongs to God. This leads us to see...

2 – What had the Pharisees done with fasting to make it hypocritical? (16)

-Well, scripture says that the Pharisees looked gloomy. What does that mean? The Greek word here carries the meaning of a mournful appearance or a sad countenance. The Pharisees wanted people to notice their affliction. You know people like this. Every time you see them they are gloomy. Oh woe is me. If something has happened to you or you are dealing with an issue they always have it worse. They love being miserable. That is the countenance spoken of here.

-They disfigured their faces. The word disfigure in the Greek carries the meaning of “to make disappear.” They would neglect hygiene so that people would look at them and notice their fasting and their condition. They would do this so that when people would look at them they would say “Look at how he is suffering for his devotion to God---he is so spiritual.”

-The Pharisees fasted twice per week---remember the Pharisee and the tax collector---in his prayer he made sure he told God how many times he fasted a week. They did this so that people would realize how much they exceeded the requirements of the law of the annual fast on the Day of Atonement. They fasted on Mondays and Thursdays which just so happened to be the major Jewish market days. Why is that important? Because they would have a larger audience to notice their gloom and disfigured faces with ashes so that they would receive more of the accolades of men that they so desperately sought.

-Oh how they wanted “to be seen by others.” The Greek word there is theathenai which is where we get the word theatrical. Their fasting was like they were in a theater giving a performance. Their religion was a public spectacle to gain praise for themselves.

-What started as something good and spiritual turned into a display of self-promotion and self-righteousness. It was nothing more than religious camouflage. The righteousness that Jesus has described that characterizes a true follower of His should never turn into a false piety. We must guard our hearts against that. And it is not just the public nature that is the issue. Public righteousness is not bad but doing things to be noticed by men is bad and the danger of doing spiritual things just to be noticed by men is that most times it is successful no matter the motive. The danger is that almost anything that is an outward sign of an internal attitude can be cheapened by hypocrisy and no practice of righteousness is ever to become an occasion for self-promotion. Guard your hearts against this!

-But we say to ourselves---isn't what the Pharisees doing the opposite of hypocrisy. They are showing the reality of what's going on and not trying to fool anyone. They just want people to know what the reality is---right? Wrong. This is where the difference between external and internal is so important. Fasting is not just an external reality but a reality of the heart. Fasting is a heart issue and the heart is what Jesus is dealing with here. The hypocrisy is that the Pharisees heart in fasting was not for a desire for God's presence but to gain the reward of men's praise and glory toward them and not God. Their fasting was not out of spiritual conviction but self-gratification. Yes, self-gratification. The hypocrite is not obsessed with other men but with only himself and what he can get from other men to promote himself. The only reason we want to please those around us is so that we can please ourselves. True fasting is from a heart that hungers for God and His glory not the accolades of men and their praise. The Pharisees heart was as hypocritical as hearts get. And this is what Jesus is getting at here---a test of the heart! Being seen fasting and fasting to be seen are two totally different things and it is a basic issue of the heart. Who do you admire most---God or yourself! Whose reward do you want---man's or God's? Who is your audience---many men or the one true God? Who do you want to please---yourself or God? Is it enough for you that only God would know what you do?

-A true follower of Christ will be concerned with an audience of only one---God himself. And we need to guard our hearts here by thinking that if we only practice righteousness in private we will be ok. Because even in private if we are trying to please ourselves then we can put on a

show for ourselves. True righteousness is self-forgetful---true righteousness chooses God as its audience and desires His approval only.

-So what do we do? How should we do this? Jesus tells us.

3 – How are we to fast? (17-18a)

-Remember Jesus expects us to fast because He says when and not if. And if Jesus expects us to do it then we need to know how to do it and He tells us.

-Now Jesus tells us to anoint our head and wash our face---is Jesus leading us to the other extreme from the Pharisees and promoting a hypocrisy in the other direction? Absolutely not!

-The Greek word used here for anoint carries the meaning of anointing with joy. This would be done at Jewish feasts and you would anoint your head in token of joy not gloom and disfigured faces. Jesus is not telling us to do something here that is unusual. He is telling us to just be normal. Today it would be to brush your hair and wash your face and be normal and don't do something different just to bring attention to yourself. True fasting is not to advertise yourself or to gain a reputation but to express humility before God and to desire His presence. Yes, some people will inevitably know such as family etc. but remember that being public is not the issue but our heart is the issue. If the audience we seek to please is God then we will not care about everybody knowing that we are fasting so they will think something of us for it.

-So how do we do this rightly? We become so conscious of God that we cease to be so self-conscious and we are concerned with pleasing Him only and not with pleasing man. True giving, praying, and fasting are by nature self-forgetting and self-denying.

-The effect of hypocrisy is to destroy the heart of practicing righteousness for the reward of men. So Jesus has contrasted the piety of the Pharisees with the true piety that He desires for

His followers. The Pharisees fasting was public and in vain and sought the reward of men. True Christian fasting is in secret and in humility and seeks the reward of God. This leads us to one last question.

4 – What is the reward for true fasting? (18b)

-If we concentrate on the English word reward we could be deceived. When we think of that word in English we automatically think of wages for performance or being given something that we have earned by what we have done. The Greek does not carry this connotation.

-The Pharisaic reward was the recognition of men. God had no place in their motives or thinking and thus, He had no part in their reward. Fasting does not earn a reward from God but rather God may choose to grant a reward by grace. And the reward of true fasting that is from a heart that desires God is nothing other than God Himself. What better reward than to get our heart's desire which is God Himself. Whether it is answered prayer, repentance or whatever, our reward is the hunger for God and a desire for intimacy with Him which He grants to a heart for Him. To be able to seek God Himself and commune with Him is the greatest blessing ever and that is our reward. To see Him high and lifted up and made much of is the reward that we should seek after.

John Piper put it this way:

“How then should we think about God’s rewarding those who fast not for the praise of men but to be seen by God? God sees us fasting. He sees that we have a deep longing that is pulling us away from the ordinary good uses of the world in order to fast. He sees that our hearts are not seeking the common pleasures of human admiration and applause. He sees that we are acting not out of strength to impress others with our discipline or even out of a desire to influence others to imitate our devotion. But we have come to God out of weakness to express to him our need and our great longing that he would manifest himself more fully in our lives for the joy of our soul and the glory of his name.”

-The heart of fasting is a heart for God and God alone.

5 – Application

A – Ask yourselves some questions:

-Do I hunger for God? Do I long for Him or am I satisfied with just His good gifts? Who am I trying to please with my practice of righteousness?

-When our heart is not right, our fasting is a sham and a mockery. The real beauty of righteousness is never to be marred by sham.

B – How do I fast?

-Regularly---verse 16. Jesus expects us to do this.

-Prayerfully---we can pray without fasting but we cannot fast without praying.

-Secretly---(16-18) Practice the core part of your fasting secretly (principle applied to all of your practiced righteousness) or it may be that our acts of righteousness may be secretly done to please man.

-Creatively---God knows if you can't fast from food. Fast from anything that would threaten to replace God in your life.

-Jesus is calling us to a God-centered life in all that we do.

May 1 Corinthians 10:31 be the reality of our heart.

-“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31, ESV)

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