

Fasting

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Date: 12 May 2019

[0 : 00] through 18. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and we ask that you would open it to us now, that you would help us to understand. Lord, as we consider this subject of fasting, and perhaps even more deeply, the subject of true righteousness and hypocrisy, that you would help us to understand the meaning of your word, that you would apply it to your hearts by your spirit, and that we would be changed by it. And Lord, we pray that as we see your word open before us, that our hearts would be drawn more deeply into your worship, that you would be glorified. We pray in Christ's name.

[1 : 06] Amen. As we look at our text today, it really is a continuation of what we've been seeing already in Matthew chapter 6.

In particular, going back to verse 1, it's really a continuation of the same thought. So let's look back to chapter 6, verse 1. So if we were to take that as Jesus' major premise in this section, then everything we've seen so far has really been an illustration of this idea.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people, in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. So what are the examples? Look at verse 2.

Thus, or therefore, when you give to the needy, and he goes on to expound about giving to the needy, again we see the same idea thereof at the end of verse 2. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

Look at verses 5 and 7. And when you pray, so a continuation of that same idea. Thus, when you give to the needy, and when you pray, 5 and 7, and then we can even see the Lord's Prayer as an illustration of the second illustration, and then the third illustration in verse 16, and when you fast.

[2 : 31] And so each of these has been an illustration of the principle that's given to us in verse 1. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people, in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

So he's still addressing the same issue that goes even further back to Matthew chapter 5, when Jesus said, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So what Jesus has been expounding in the Sermon on the Mount is, what does that kind of righteousness look like? What is the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees? And so here he's done it by contrast.

The Pharisees look really righteous on the outside, but they're the ones in particular who are practicing their righteousness before other people in order to receive their praise.

And Jesus is warning us, don't have that kind of righteousness. And so he's giving us examples of giving, of prayer, and now he says, and when you fast.

[3 : 35] And I would notice even in, just in the introduction, as we begin looking at this, that notice that he says, and when you fast, Jesus doesn't say, and if you fast.

Maybe we'd expect him to say, if you fast. My guess is that, maybe most of you have fasted at some point, but, I don't imagine fasting as a normal part of your spiritual life. But Jesus, you'll notice, seems to assume, that his disciples will be fasting.

It's a good thing, and it's a thing that disciples will be doing. They will be fasting. So Jesus isn't teaching this passage, whether we should fast or not.

He's already taking that as a basic assumption, as Christians, fasting will be a part of our spiritual life. Rather, he's, the object that he's getting at in this passage, is to further illustrate the larger

point, of righteousness and hypocrisy.

What does true righteousness look like, and what does false righteousness, or we could again call it hypocrisy. What does true righteousness look like, and what does false righteousness look like? How do we discern the two?

[4 : 43] How do we evaluate our own hearts today, to say, which do I have? Do I have a true righteousness from God, or am I practicing a false righteousness before others?

So I want to, today, look first at how not to fast, which would be the example of the false righteousness, the example of hypocrisy. And then, to look at how we should fast, which is an example of righteousness.

And then finally, consider the reward mentioned. And even as I do so, I'll acknowledge that, the sermon, I've entitled just fasting, but it really isn't, focused primarily on the subject of fasting. There's probably a much deeper study you could do, on what does fasting look like? And how do I go about it, in a medically safe way? And what are the benefits of doing it? And that's not been my goal to expound, here's how you ought to fast.

What I want to show you is, what is Jesus teaching us, through the example of fasting? So I think his primary point is not, ultimately, the subject of fasting, but rather, as we've said already, false righteousness, hypocrisy, true righteousness, and then finally, the reward.

[5 : 52] So let's look first, at the false righteousness, of hypocrisy. So notice the warning, of Jesus, about the spiritual danger, of fasting in the wrong way.

Jesus warns us, in verse 16, not to be like, the hypocrites. And when you fast, do not look gloomy, like the hypocrites. For they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. Maybe even as I've said the word, you might be asking, what is a hypocrite? How do we define hypocrisy, and what a hypocrite is?

I think I hear, still often, people outside the church say, the church is full of hypocrites. I forget the exact quote, but I thought Rich Mullins did, a great job answering that one time, and just saying, the church is full of sinners.

In some ways, what are you going to expect? You know, we're full of sinners. We're not going to be, perfectly practicing all the time, what we preach. And I want to clarify that that's not how Jesus defines hypocrisy.

[6 : 59] The faithful Christian who's living his life by the doctrine of what God presents in his word, who says this is how we ought to live, but knows he doesn't measure up all the time. Maybe even a lot of the time, he doesn't measure up.

That's not hypocrisy. And so I want to start by, even as Jesus gave us counter examples, let me start by giving what I would say is a false definition of hypocrisy.

I think oftentimes, when the world looks at the church, they say, they're sinners just like I am. Well, yeah, we are. But we're sinners who are leaning, who are depending upon God's grace for forgiveness.

We're not depending on our own righteousness, but we're depending on the righteousness of God. And so, I would say, that's not hypocrisy. What is hypocrisy? Hypocrisy. Well, let me say, hypocrites are people who who do their spiritual disciplines to be seen by man.

They're doing it for the sake of the reward that's spoken of here, that others would see them, that they would praise them. So hypocrisy is a false spiritual act, a false spiritual discipline, discipline, a false righteousness that's done for the sake of the praise of man.

[8 : 17] The reward the hypocrites are after is this, that they may be seen by man, even as it says in verse 16. We have probably all, at some point, felt the benefit, the reward of that.

Maybe you've done something that other people have admired and they've admired your discipline or your zeal or your devotion in some way. And in truth, that's gratifying.

It's rewarding. Right? We want that righteousness to be there and sometimes we find ourselves being too happy when other people see it too. And that may or may not be hypocrisy.

Sometimes people see it and they praise and there's nothing really you can do about it. But the hypocrite does it for the goal of that reward. that they can have that feeling, that they can know other people think that they're righteous, that they're holy.

And that's what they're after. In truth, few things feel more gratifying to us in our hearts, especially as fallen people, than being made much of our accomplishments.

[9 : 27] People praising any of our accomplishments. We like to be praised. And especially, this is true, when it's religious accomplishments, when it's spiritual things. we enjoy that type of praise.

And verse 16 tells us that if that is the reward that we're aiming at in what we do, then that's the only reward you're going to get. That that's all the reward there is.

And as nice as that may be, what Jesus is pointing us to in each one of these examples is, there's a greater reward than the praise of man. Don't settle for the praise of man.

That's not enough. Strive for a greater reward. Now, look at verse 17. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.

Anointing your head isn't some special spiritual ride. It wasn't going to, it's not like they put some oil on their head that's going to put off a fragrance that everyone knows. Oh, that's the fasting fragrance. What he's basically saying is, wash your head.

[10 : 28] Shampoo. Right? Do everything you would normally do. If you normally anoint your head, then anoint your head today. Don't not anoint your head. Like, don't go around with your head all greasy.

Stop washing your hair just because you're fasting. You're hoping someone's going to notice. Hey, why is your hair such a mess today? Oh, I'm sorry you noticed, but it's because I'm fasting. Right? No, wash your hair. Ladies, if you wear makeup, don't stop wearing makeup when you're fasting. You're fasting. do everything you would normally do so that there's nothing that stands out about you that people would be drawn to it and think, oh, they look worse today than they normally do. Why do you look worse? Don't do things that would draw attention to you. But Jesus is calling them hypocrites because the heart that motivates fasting is supposed to be a heart for God.

The motivation for fasting is we want God. Think about what fasting is. If we think of it in the very simple definition, I know we can expand fasting to say it could be going without other things and maybe there's some truth to that, but in general, the idea of going without food.

[11 : 40] Why would you forego food? Well, part of it is that hunger, that craving we feel when we're hungry. It's meant to remind us of the hunger we're supposed to have for God.

And we're saying something that God means more to me than food. Than the day-to-day needs that I have. I'm willing to forego this because I'd rather have God.

Think of Jesus' words. I have bread that I'm eating that you don't know about. That we're feeding on God. That He's our desire. That there are greater things to be had than the day-to-day needs and necessities of life.

And so, when you fast, what you're proclaiming is that you have a heart for God. I love God more than I love food. And some of you are thinking, well, you know, He loves food a lot.

Right? Okay. Like, some of us love food a lot. But we're saying, I love God more. I'm willing to forego things that I love, things that I need to live on to deprive myself of this because I'd rather have God.

[12 : 47] And again, I said I wasn't getting into a lot of the practical aspects, but part of the reality of fasting is that the time that you were committing to eating, you're now able to spend in prayer to God. And I've said already, the hunger that you feel is meant to remind you of the hunger you should have for God.

And so there's practical ways in which this works. But you're professing that you have a hunger for God. And so fasting is a hunger for God in your heart. It's a hunger for God within your soul. But the heart motivating the fasting of the hypocrites is not a heart for God at all, is it? What motivates them?

What's going on in their heart? Their motivation is their heart is driven by human admiration, the praise of other men. And so now we're beginning to see what's false about this.

What makes this hypocrisy? Why does Jesus say hide these natural things? Why does he have a problem with hypocrisy? Because it's inconsistent with what you're proclaiming.

[13 : 51] You're saying you have a heart for God, but the reality is you have a heart for the praise of men and not really and truly a heart for God. So here they are, they're being open and transparent about what they're doing.

They're proclaiming to the world around them, look, I'm fasting. Look how bad my face looks. Look how poor I'm dressed. I don't really, look how sad and gloomy I am. It's because I'm fasting.

And so they're proclaiming broadcasting with a billboard. I've got such a deep heart for God that I'm going to fast. But the reality is they have a heart for the praise of men, not for God at all.

And so there are two dangers that these fasting people have fallen into. One is that they're seeking the wrong reward in fasting. Namely, they want the esteem or praise of other men. They love the praise of man and that's what's driving them. But the other is that they hide that false desire with a pretense for a love for God. So they love, which is wrong, they love the praise of man. [14:59] But they hide their love for the praise of man by faking like they love God. You see the problem with that. The hypocrisy of that. So fasting means a love for, a hunger for God and they don't have it.

With their actions, they're saying they have a hunger for God. But on the inside, they're hungry to be admired and to be approved by other people. That's the God that they're worshiping. That's the God that satisfies them. And it's this kind of false righteousness that defines hypocrisy and with which God despises. But Jesus also presents us a positive of how we ought to fast. So look at verses 17 and 18. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. So in verses 17 and 18, Jesus gives us an alternative way of fasting. The way it ought to be done.

[16:02] Now there are all kinds of public fastings in the Bible including in the New Testament. You can look, for example, Acts 13, 1-3. There's a fasting seeking God's direction again in Acts 14, 23.

So we have examples of public fasting. It's just like what I said about prayer. Jesus isn't saying the only time you can pray is in private. There can be no corporate prayer. Well, we know God calls His church to pray together.

And we know that's a part of the public worship of God. So likewise, I want to encourage you that if someone finds out that you're fasting, you haven't sinned. Right? It's not a sin if someone finds out that you're fasting.

Even more than that, I think God's Word supports the idea that it's even possible for us to fast together. We could declare as a church we're going to have a church-wide fast for some purpose. And we could all spend a day fasting and praying.

And that doesn't somehow nullify the spiritual reward of fasting. So other people knowing about it doesn't necessarily make it sin or take away the benefit or the reward. Now, the way I would distinguish it is this.

[17:11] Being seen fasting and fasting to be seen are not the same thing. Being seen fasting is different than fasting to be seen.

and that's what we want to guard ourselves against. That's what we have to watch out for. That's the hypocrisy we've already seen. Being seen fasting is merely an external event.

It's an external reality. It doesn't necessarily reveal anything about your heart. But fasting to be seen is a motive of the heart that's exalting ourselves.

It's a self-exalting motive. It's saying that's what I'm living for. That's the God ultimately that I'm worshiping. And so Jesus is pushing us to have a real utterly authentic and personal relationship with God.

And he gives us instructions that will test our own hearts. He says that when you're fasting don't make any effort to be seen. Hide it. Do your best to look like you're not fasting.

[18:19] In fact, make efforts in the other direction. Anoint your head. Wash your face. So that as few people as possible will know that what you're doing is fasting.

Now, why does Jesus say that? Why does that matter? Well, he says that our goal is to be seen by God and not by man. And so what Jesus has done in reality is that he's testing the reality of God in our lives, the reality of our worship of God in our lives.

and so he tests our hearts to see if God himself will be sufficient for us. So what happens when you take away all the other motives for fasting? Just like prayer and just like giving.

What happens if no one else is going to know about it? Do you still want to do it? Is it really about God? So he's giving us a way of testing this in ourselves. If you're doing the spiritual act that no one's ever going to know about, no one's going to praise, you get no glory for it.

Do you still want to do it? And especially fasting, which is a deprivation of food. You're depriving yourself. It's hard. It's costly. Are you willing to do what's hard?

[19:34] Are you willing to pay the price? If only the Lord knows about it. If you're not going to receive the reward. So by removing the reward, Jesus is testing our hearts to say, what's driving us?

What's motivating this spiritual discipline? And as I've said, he's pushing us to have that real, authentic, personal relationship with God. If God's not real to you, then it's going to be miserable to endure something difficult with God the only one who knows about it.

If God's not your motivation, then you don't want to do that. It's all going to seem very pointless. It's going to be very inefficient because the whole range of the horizontal possibilities of praise have been removed.

They're nullified. No one's going to know what you're experiencing. All that matters is God and who he is and what he thinks and what he will do.

And does that really matter to you? Is that your motivation? So he's giving us, as it were, a test for us to evaluate our hearts. Anytime we do spiritual disciplines, it doesn't have to be fasting.

[20 : 56] We've talked already about giving and praying, attending church, coming to Wednesday night prayer meeting, growth groups, whatever it may be. What is your motivation for doing it?

Is it that other people will see me, they'll know I'm there, can check it off the list? What if that were taken away? What if no one else knew? What if it was only in secret, would you still be doing it? Are you doing it for the Lord? Spurgeon says, to look miserable in order to be thought holy is a wretched piece of hypocrisy.

And as it makes fasting into a trick to catch human admiration, it thereby destroys it as a means of grace. It's exactly what Jesus is saying. If you're doing it for the praise of other men, you have your reward.

You've pulled your trick, you've done it, but as a means of grace, it's destroyed, it's nullified. You don't get the other reward. You miss out on that. It's a wretched piece of hypocrisy.

[22 : 02] Now, verse 18 does mention the reward. So does 6-1, 6-2 that speaks of giving, 6-5 and 7 about prayer.

Over and over again, we're faced with the possibility of reward or the promise of reward. So in the last part of verse 18, we see the reward. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

So Jesus makes a promise about what God will do for those who focus on him and do not need the praise of other people to make their devotion worthwhile. If it's authentic, if you're doing it for the Lord, there's a reward to be had in that.

God will reward you. Now, maybe we're asking, what's the reward? Well, I think that's harder to answer, but I think part of what's being hinted to or pointed to in the idea of fasting is that our reward may well be God's gracious response to that act of faith and prayer in our fasting.

Now, I want to be careful because I don't want to twist the reward and say, well, if you pray while fasting, then God's always going to answer your prayer. That's not exactly what I'm saying. But if your fasting is authentic, as is your prayer, then there's spiritual reward to be had there in our own hearts, and it may well be God's gracious response to our prayer.

[23 : 27] John Piper says, in dealing with this reward, he says, God sees us fasting. He sees that we have a deep longing that is pulling us to fast.

He sees that our heart is not seeking the ordinary pleasures of human admiration and applause. He sees that we are acting not out of our strength to impress others with our discipline, but out of weakness to express to God our need and our great longing that he would act.

And when he sees this, he responds, he acts. Now again, I want to be careful not to say 100% of the time, but you see what he's saying. There's an authenticity to that, that is directly contrary to what we see in the life of the hypocrite.

The hypocrite's faking it. They're pretending that their desire is for God when truly their desire is for human praise. And basically what Jesus is saying in every one of these illustrations is there's a reward and there's a reward that drives all of us and all of us get a reward but it's an either or.

It's not a both and. You get a choice between two rewards. Either you can have the praise of man or you can have God's reward. Maybe we can say even God's praise.

[24 : 46] God's approval, let's say. You can have the approval of man or you can have the approval of God. But it's never both. You can't have them both. So you have to choose. What is it that's driving your spiritual disciplines?

What's driving your spiritual life? And I think it's good for us to evaluate our hearts today. Why are we here? Why are you sitting through this sermon? Why did you come to worship today?

Why do you pray? Maybe parents, you sometimes do devotion just so your kids will see it. So they'll think you're holy or you'll teach them to be what you're not.

Is it truly a desire for God that drives our spiritual lives? And so we're being called to evaluate these things. And I want you to see that in some ways Jesus has presented us with some negatives. He's pointing us over and over again to here's what the hypocrites do. But these negatives are an important way of pointing us to something positive. Something that Jesus wants us to have.

[26 : 00] So the negatives are meant to drive us to something far greater. Jesus is calling us to have a transparent righteousness. A genuine godliness.

A true holiness. An inward piety. Not the fake stuff. Not the stuff on the outside. Stop being whitewashed tombs that look great on the outside. But as we heard earlier, we stink inside.

Four days. Don't open the door. Can you imagine that's God's evaluation of our hearts? Are we doing it for the praise of man, but inside, don't open the door?

You don't want to smell what's really inside. Or is there a genuine godliness? a true righteousness that's driving our spiritual lives? Again, Spurgeon says, we cannot expect to get a reward both from the praise of our fellows and the pleasure of God.

We have our choice. And if we snatch at the minor reward, we lose the major. May it never be said of us, they have their reward.

[27 : 09] And so I really want to close just encouraging you all. To question yourself, to challenge, to ask yourself, what's the reward that I'm seeking? Spurgeon said, may it never be said of us that they have their reward.

The reward we long for is a reward that most of us aren't going to experience here in this life. Most of the time, we won't know in this life. But are we willing to delay the immediate gratification for the eternal gratification, for the joy that's to be had in the presence of our Heavenly Father?

What's driving us? Is it authentic? Is it for the Lord? Is it a true righteousness? Are there some of you in this room today that are like the scribes and Pharisees? And remember Jesus' words, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's not enough to look good on the outside. It's not enough to get the praise of man. If that's all we get, then that's all we get. you have your reward. Are you living for a greater reward, one that will last for eternity?

Are you living for the Lord? Let's pray together. dearly father, we thank you for these examples that have been set before us in Matthew 6.

[28 : 31] Lord, we come before you acknowledging that, Lord, in all of us, there's some tendency toward hypocrisy. That, Lord, we enjoy being made much of.

Maybe it's even part of, in a twisted way, our being made in your image. That, Lord, we are made to live for glory, but for that to be your glory.

And, Lord, we confess that we are oftentimes glory stealers. We want the praise that you so rightly deserve. Lord, forgive us. Lord, we know that there's some in this room, though, who, Lord, all they know is that hypocrisy.

That all the spiritual acts that they do are for the praise of men. Lord, as hard as that reality may be to face, we pray that you would make those who are in that situation today know it, own it for themselves.

And, Lord, we pray that you would bring them to repentance, that instead their faith and trust, their righteousness would be in Christ, in Christ alone. Their hope of salvation, their hope of heaven would be Christ and his righteousness.

[29 : 44] righteousness. And, Lord, we pray that they would live and we would live out of that righteousness. That we would know we have nothing to prove to man. Lord, we have nothing to prove to you of how righteous we are.

We are living upon an alien righteousness that's been given to us through Christ's finished work.

And, Lord, we pray that in the freedom that righteousness brings, that we would live for you, that we would seek your glory in our lives.

Lord, we pray that that would be true. Help us this day to examine our own hearts, that we would live for you with a true righteousness and godliness in our hearts and not just smeared on the outside for the praise of men.

We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.