

The Sermon on the Mount

"When You Fast" (Matthew 6:16-18)

INTRODUCTION:

- I. When Jesus sat down with His disciples on a hillside in Galilee and began preaching what we call The Sermon on the Mount, He laid out the basic principles that He expected to govern the lives of those who would be His disciples.
 - A. In fact, we're told that the mission of Jesus was to declare the message of the coming Kingdom.
 1. In the verses immediately before Matthew's record of The Sermon on the Mount we're told: **Matthew 4:23** – *Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom...*
 2. Jesus was declaring the fundamental principles that would be the foundation for the gospel of Christ.
 - B. So, in essence, we could call all the teachings of Jesus, Kingdom Principles.

1. These are the principles that would guide the lives of those who would declare their faith in Jesus as the resurrected Christ – the promised Messiah, the Lord of lords and King of kings.
 2. More specifically, in the portion of The Sermon on the Mount we've been studying – in **Matthew chapter 6** – Jesus continues to expound upon the proper way to offer praise and devotion to God.
 3. In each instance, Jesus warned that our acts of righteousness should not be for the purpose of drawing attention to ourselves – to merely be seen by others – but to be from a heart whose sole purpose is to bring praise, honor and glory to our Father in heaven.
- C. Up to this point, we've looked at two areas where Jesus warned His followers against doing righteous acts for the purpose of being seen by others.
1. The first was in the manner in which we perform charitable deeds.
 2. The second was in the manner in which we pray.
 - a. In fact, we just concluded a detailed examination of how Jesus instructed His disciples in the proper way to pray.
- II. Now Jesus turns His attention to another way we can express our praise and devotion to God.
- A. This is a practice that was a regular part of the lives of both Old Testament and New Testament men and women of God.

1. Unfortunately, it has fallen out of practice among many Christians today because we either feel the practice is not necessary, or because we don't understand why, how or when this particular act of righteousness should be done.
- B. Therefore, let's turn our attention to the sixth chapter of Matthew and take a close look at the teaching of Jesus with regard to fasting.
1. He introduced the subject with these words: **Matthew 6:16-18** –
*"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.
17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."*
- C. The subject of fasting naturally raises questions in the minds of a lot of Christians, such as:
1. What is fasting and why was the practice so prominent during Biblical times?
 2. Were there particular reason why people fasted?
 3. And is this a practice we should engage in today?
- D. Therefore, to help us understand this subject better we're going to do a couple of things:

1. First we want to look at the IMPROPER way to fast, and then look at the PROPER manner to fast.
2. And second, we want to examine the practice of fasting to understand why it was done and see if this is something we need to be doing today as well.

BODY:

- I. As Jesus continues His warnings against doing acts of righteousness merely for the purpose of being seen by others, He once again shows that even the act of fasting was done in a hypocritical, phony manner by many in His day.
 - A. He says many were fasting simply "TO BE SEEN OF MEN" (**Matthew 6:16**)
 1. In fact, Jesus describes the manner in which many "hypocrites" fasted, which is more than likely a reference to the scribes and Pharisees (the religious leaders of His day).
 - a. He said they display a "*sad countenance*" and "*disfigure their faces.*"
 2. Albert Barnes, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount said their sad countenance meant their expressions were "sour, morose; with assumed expressions of unfelt sorrow".
 3. Barnes continues to explain how they disfigured their faces: "...they do not anoint and wash themselves as usual: they are uncombed,

filthy, squalid, and haggard. It is said that they were often in the habit of throwing ashes on their heads and faces; and this, mixing with their tears, served still further to disfigure their faces".

4. The entire practice was merely to draw attention to themselves as devout, pious, godly men who fasted more often than others.
5. In fact, it was just such a person Jesus had in mind in His parable about the two men who went up to the Temple to pray – one a Pharisee and the other a Tax Collector and sinner.
 - a. **Luke 18:10-14** – *"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"*
 - b. Jesus concluded by saying: **Luke 18:14** – *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*
6. Fasting twice a week were NEVER commanded under the Old Law, and to my knowledge was never practiced by anyone except the

Pharisees who did it only to draw attention to themselves – if in fact they actually DID fast twice a week.

7. The practice of fasting twice a week, or of fasting with phony expressions of grief, pain and tears might impress MEN, but it didn't impress God.
8. Jesus concluded by saying: **Matthew 6:16b** – *"Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward."*
 - a. In other words, the ONLY reward these hypocrites will receive is the praise of men. They CERTAINLY won't receive any praise from God.

B. In contrast to fasting to be seen of men, Jesus explains the proper manner to fast where we are fasting only to be "SEEN OF GOD"

(Matthew 6:17-18)

1. Jesus said when we fast it should be done without ANY CHANGE in our outward appearance.
 - a. The person fasting should anoint their head and wash their face.
 - b. It was a common practice in the days of Jesus for people to apply pleasant-smelling oils to their hair every morning. This would not only help protect the scalp from drying in the arid climate, but would also give off a pleasant aroma throughout the day.

- c. Therefore, Jesus is saying when we fast we should look just like we look every other day of the week when we get up and make ourselves ready to go out into the world – we shower or bathe and fix our hair.
 2. Jesus concluded by saying our fasting should not be done in a way where we appear to men to be fasting.
 - a. **Matthew 6:18b** – *"...but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."*
 - b. Since fasting is generally associated with prayer, Jesus meant that only God will see your fasting and He will reward you openly by answering prayers that were offered while fasting.
 - C. The teaching of Jesus concerning fasting is easy to understand.
 - 1, But what about Christians today – should we fast?
 2. If the Lord expects us to fast, then we want to consider:
 - a. Why we should fast.
 - b. When we should fast.
 - c. And finally how we should fast.
- II. So what about Christians today? Should we fast?
- A. To answer that question we can begin by looking at the teachings and the example of Jesus Himself.

1. After being baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, and before He began His ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness of Judea and there fasted for forty days. **(Luke 4:1-2)**
 - a. Jesus was about the begin His mission for coming to this earth – to demonstrate beyond any doubt that He was the promised Messiah, the Son of God, and to eventually offer Himself on the cross for the redemption of all mankind.
 - b. But before He began that mission, He spend an extraordinary amount of time fasting.
2. As far as the teaching of Jesus on fasting is concerned, we've just seen that Jesus said "WHEN you fast," not "IF you fast." **(Matthew 6:16-18)**
 - a. Jesus not only taught His disciples the proper WAY to fast, He also taught that fasting in the proper manner gains the attention and the approval of God our Father.
 - b. When the disciples of John came to Jesus asking why His disciples didn't fast, Jesus told them His disciples would fast after He was gone – fasting in sorrow following the crucifixion.
 - (1). **Matthew 9:14-15** – *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" 15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the*

bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

(2). In other words, Jesus taught these disciples that there ARE times when fasting is APPROPRIATE, and OTHER TIMES when fasting is NOT appropriate, or is not NEEDED.

c. Jesus also taught that fasting alone is not always as meaningful OR as POWERFUL as fasting coupled with prayer.

(1). **Matthew 17:20-21** – When the disciples of Jesus were troubled by the fact that they could not cast a demon out of a young boy, Jesus said the reason was: *"Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. 21 However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."*

B. Not only do we have the teachings and the example of Jesus regarding fasting, we also have several examples of Christians fasting during the first century.

1. **Acts 13:1-3** – *Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger (NY-ger), Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (ma-NAY-an) who had*

been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

- a. Prophets and teachers prayed and fasted as part of their work of ministering to the Lord.
 - b. And, they fasted and prayed prior to commissioning Barnabas and Saul to begin the all-important work of going forth to preach the gospel – in much the same way as Jesus fasted prior to beginning His mission.
2. **Acts 14:21-23** – *And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*
- a. Fasting and prayer accompanied the selection of elders to serve as the spiritual leaders of the local congregation.

- b. And from the wording, it seems the practice of praying and fasting prior to the appointment of elders was done in every church.

C. Let's also consider the example of the apostle Paul.

- 1. Paul listed all the things he endured as a minister of Jesus Christ (**2 Corinthians 11:23-28**), including being: *"...in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness..."*

D. Now, does all this prove that Christians MUST fast today?

- 1. Obviously, these passages don't prove that fasting is a MUST for you and I as Christians.
- 2. But, the very least we can say about these passages is that fasting is certainly APPROPRIATE for Christians today.
- 3. Therefore, unless we have some medical condition that would preclude us from fasting, these passages should certainly motivate us to CONSIDER fasting – assuming we are fasting for the right reasons.

III. So, what WOULD BE the right reasons for fasting? In other words, from what we read in the Scriptures, what are the reasons why Christians of the first century church fasted?

A. Today, people fast for a number of reasons.

1. Some fast only during times of grief and sorrow. Others do it for health reasons. And still others fast as a way to gain self-control, or even as a method of losing weight.
 2. However, none of these are reasons why Christians should fast in their service to God.
 3. In fact, the apostle Paul said that acts of self-imposed self-denial in the name of religion do NOT help us in our fight against the flesh.
 - a. **Colossians 2:20-23** – *Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of NO VALUE against the indulgence of the flesh.*
- B. In Biblical times people fasted when they needed divine help.
1. In Old Testament times the people of God fasted:
 - a. In times of war, or at the threat of it (Israel)
 - b. When loved ones were sick (David)
 - c. When seeking God's forgiveness (Ahab, Daniel)
 - d. When seeking God's protection (Ezra)

2. In New Testament times men and women fasted:
 - a. When needing God's help in preparing to face unprecedented temptation (Jesus)
 - b. When needing the Lord's encouragement to go forth to preach the gospel of Christ (Barnabas and Saul at Antioch)
 - c. When needing God's guidance in making the proper selection and appointment of elders (churches in Galatia)
3. And in all these examples – from both the Old and New Testaments – fasting was always done in conjunction with prayer.

C. So when should we fast and pray?

1. On a personal level, we should fast and pray:
 - a. When facing unprecedented or difficult temptations.
 - b. When we need the Lord's help in making life-changing decisions.
 - c. When we need the Lord's help or protection.
 - d. When we're seeking God's forgiveness.
2. On a congregational level, we should fast and pray:
 - a. When we need the Lord's guidance in selecting and appointing the right men to serve as elders.
 - b. When we might be facing external or even internal threats.
3. In other words, we should fast whenever there is a need for intense, steadfast and persistent prayer.

CONCLUSION:

- I. There is so much more that could be said on the subject of fasting and prayer.
 - A. But I hope this at least encourages us to think more about a subject that is often neglected in both our studies and in practice.
 1. Fasting and prayer were a vital part of the lives of first century Christians, and there's no reason why they shouldn't also be a vital part of our lives today.
 2. But the most important thing we need to remember about this subject, as well as every act of praise and devotion to God, is that it be done for the right reason – to bring honor and glory to God.
 - B. Do you honor and glorify God in all you say and do?
 1. The greatest way to honor God is to honor His Son Jesus Christ.
 2. And the greatest way to honor Jesus Christ is by giving your life to Him completely through your obedience to the gospel of Christ, and then living every day of your life as a faithful Christian.
 - C. If you must honestly say that your life doesn't honor and glorify God and Jesus then there are things you can do to change that.
 1. If you haven't obeyed the gospel, then this is where you need to begin to glorify God and His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ.
 2. And if you're a Christian who has allowed things of this world to interfere with your relationship with Jesus Christ, and your life no

longer honors Christ as it once did, then clearing those things out of your life and recommitting your heart to the Lord is where you need to begin.