



Matthew 6:16–18

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in se-

cret, will reward you.”

Reflection

In the first half of Matthew 6 Jesus sets about reforming Jewish religious practices in light of the kingdom of God. His focus is on giving to the needy, prayer and fasting. He signalled as much in the first verse of the chapter when he introduced the topic of how we practice our righteousness. By this Jesus means our outward expression of righteousness, our right actions that flow out of a heart that is in a right relationship with God. In contrast to the practices of the Jewish religious leaders and the gentiles Jesus is teaching his disciples and the vast crowds how members of the kingdom of God should give to the needy, pray, and in today's passage, fast.

At the outset we have to bear in mind that Jesus is reforming Jewish religious practices and Matthew's gospel has a distinctively Jewish flavour so as Jesus teaches on fasting, he is teaching people to whom fasting was one of the pillars of their religious piety. The Old Testament Law required only one fast a year – on the day of Atonement – but zealous Jews would fast periodically throughout the year. There were also different types of fasting. For a normal fast a person would abstain from all solids and liquids except water, like Jesus did when he fasted in the wilderness for forty days at the beginning of his ministry. A partial fast involved a partial restriction of your diet like Daniel did when he mourned for three weeks in Daniel 10. An absolute fast was abstaining from all food

and water like Paul did for three days after his dramatic conversion in Acts 9. Occasionally, and in times of national emergency, the people of God might fast as a nation as they urgently seek God's help.

In Leviticus, the original intention for fasting was to 'deny yourself' or to 'humble your soul' before God and in addition to abstaining from food the Israelites would also humble themselves by wearing sackcloth, mourning, and praying. As time went on fasts multiplied for other legitimate reasons which came to include repentance, mourning, seeking guidance from God, or urgent prayer imploring God for his help in a particularly intense way.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees who saw themselves as religious purists, and were

looked upon by the people as leaders of the Jewish religion, had adopted the habit of fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays because Moses is said to have gone up to Mount Sinai on those days when he received the Ten Commandments and Old Testament Law. They felt in doing so that they were adopting Moses' rigorous approach to God and his holiness.

But in our passage today Jesus sees through their hypocrisy. In verse 1 of chapter 6 Jesus warned his disciples and the crowds not to make an outward show of their righteousness and Jesus is scathing today of how the Pharisees fast in full view of the public eye. Listen to him,

“When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they

disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”

We picture poor, dishevelled religious leaders, pain on their faces, limping around in public for their lack of strength, every Monday and Thursday showing off their righteous dedication to fasting, obviously at great personal cost; how superior they are in their devotion to God! Jesus says that these type of antics might elevate them in people’s eyes but as far as God is concerned this is no righteousness at all. Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart, and their hearts are proud, conceited and vain.

Instead, says Jesus, disguise your fasting, hide it, just as he has also taught us about

giving and praying in private. Don't let anyone know you're fasting, dress nicely, wash your face, comb your hair, walk about happily, go through life normally and your heavenly Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. This is how righteous men and women fast. When you're deeply convicted and sorry for your sin, or earnestly imploring God to come to your urgent aid in prayer, or heart-broken and mourning the loss of a loved one, or in desperate need of God's wisdom for an important decision, these aren't concerns for the general public, they are between you and God, so no hypocritical mixed motives, fast privately and you will be heard, fast for public show and the public show will be your full reward.

All this leaves us with the observation

that verses about fasting are largely overlooked in modern evangelical circles. Few Christians fast anymore. What are we to make of this? There is no question that fasting is a foundational religious practice in the Old Testament as well as the New. It is clearly a Jewish practice, and yet Israel's heritage is our heritage. Jesus says in the passage before us, not 'if you fast' but 'when you fast' – he's addressing his disciples and the crowds who no doubt were predominantly Jewish, however there still would have been plenty of gentiles there as well. Jesus fasted, Paul fasted, many of the church leaders in the New Testament fasted and yet there is no explicit teaching on fasting in the New Testament letters. Where does this leave us? It would appear that the bible endorses, even encourages the practice of fasting, but does

not prescribe it. It is a good thing to do, but whether you personally fast or not is an area of Christian freedom.

Think

Have you ever thought much about fasting? In the times that you are stricken with the conviction of deep repentance, or times of heart-broken mourning, or times of sudden disaster, or times of life-changing decision making the bible seems to encourage us to combine fasting with our prayers. Take some time now to consider fasting in our day an age as you meditate over Jesus' words in this passage. Also think about the wider point Jesus has been making about the private nature of giving, praying and fasting. Be careful of outward show, be careful of the motives

of your heart, be serious and devoted to God in your giving and praying and fasting, it's between you and him and no-one else. Are there any areas of hypocrisy in your public Christianity? Areas of outward show and inward emptiness?

Pray

Then spend some time praying. If you're unsure about fasting why not try it out? Pray to God about this. And as this section of the Sermon on the Mount comes to a close perhaps recommit to God the way you give, the way you pray, and the way you fast (if you fast), asking him to keep all these areas of your life holy, and uncontaminated by sin's effects that they might be most effective and bring most glory to God.