

Text: Mt 6.1-21

So far in our study of fasting, we've considered these topics:

- Defining the term
- The one fast that God commanded (the Day of Atonement)
- All the instances of fasting in the Old Testament, with admonitions

Today I want to look at the passage where Jesus *intentionally* taught about fasting. There is another passage where Jesus taught about fasting, but it came in response to a challenge. In our passage today, Jesus brought the subject up.

Our passage is the Sermon on the Mount, and we will be looking at Mt 6.

Read Mt 6.1-21

Obviously, Jesus is dealing with more than fasting in this passage but fasting is certainly part of it. The other matters help us understand what Jesus is teaching about each of the topics he mentions, including fasting.

One more preliminary remark: Jesus isn't *prohibiting* fasting; he is correcting an abuse of fasting. So, though the passage sounds negative, Jesus isn't entirely negative about the subject.

Proposition: All Christian disciplines ought to follow God's guidelines with an eye to heaven rather than earth.

I. The Lord's proposition statement (1)

- A. The Sermon is about *exceeding* the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5.20)
- B. The section we are in is about *practicing* righteousness
 1. Three practices are mentioned
 - a. Giving
 - b. Praying
 - c. Fasting
 2. We must conclude that these are at least *acceptable* ways of practicing righteousness
 - a. God doesn't prohibit them
 - b. There is spiritual value in practicing them
 - c. There is the possibility of "reward with your Father"

C. The issue under attack is practicing righteousness *to be seen of men*

Our topic is simple, and we can hardly imagine someone doing this, but we still need to pay heed.

II. How biblical giving and prayer teach us about fasting (2-15)

A. The proper practice of giving (2-4)

1. The negative example: blowing a trumpet to announce your giving (2)

a. This is hard to imagine, but it may have some historical reference

1) The priests blew trumpets in the Temple when collecting for some special need

2) The gift box in the temple had a “horn” where the coins would drop down into the box

Remember the contrast between the widow and the Pharisee – the Pharisees gift called attention to itself.

3) One commentator says that some Pharisees would blow a little trumpet in the street to call the maimed, the lame, the blind, so they could make a show of giving to them

b. Jesus says: they have their reward in full

2. The instruction:

a. Give secretly (don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing)

b. Trust the Father to give the proper reward

We endeavor to keep our giving in the church secret. It's not about us.

B. The proper practice of prayer (5-15)

1. The negative example: again, showy self-promotion for one's great piety

a. This is not a condemnation of public prayer!

Christians should grow in spiritual confidence, so they have no fear of leading other Christians in prayer.

b. The issue is the object: “that they may be seen of men”

2. There is also a negative example of “vain repetition” — as if God will act if you keep talking long enough (pagan practice)
3. The instruction
 - a. Make your prayers in private
 - b. Make your prayers intelligent (that’s what the Lord’s Prayer is all about – a biblical pattern of prayer)

III. The Lord’s corrective of fasting (16-18)

A. We learned some of the reasons for fasting in previous messages

1. In preparation for some solemn decision
2. In sorrow and repentance for some failing
3. In a spirit of devotion to commune with God

B. The “hypocrites” (*i.e.*, the Pharisees) put on a “pinched look”

1. A gloomy face, neglected appearance
2. The Pharisees had a custom of fasting twice a week
3. It seems on these days they adopted some doleful appearance to appear pious

“On ordinary fast days only food and drink were prohibited, while on the important ones washing (for pleasure), anointing, the wearing of shoes (for pleasure), and cohabitation were also forbidden. People also refrained from work on these days (some, who were stricter, considered work to be absolutely prohibited (TJ, Ta’an. 1:6, 64c)) and shops were closed (Ta’an. 1:5–6). It was also customary for some to sleep on the ground (II Sam. 12:16).”¹

C. The correction

1. When you fast, dress up and act cheerful!
2. Again, the emphasis is on secret worship, secret devotion

¹ “Fasting & Fast Days,” accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/fasting-and-fast-days>.

Note: some make a big deal of “when” you fast as if this assumes disciples *must* fast. Remember, no fasting commanded in the NT, only one commanded in the OT.

Fasting is between you and God (those who teach it as a command are in error)

IV. The goal of practicing righteousness (19-21)

A. There is such a thing as treasure in heaven: we ought to seek it

1. “Practicing righteousness” (giving, praying, fasting, and such like activities...) in God’s way gains God’s approval and reward
2. There is a powerful spiritual benefit: your heart is where your treasure is

Col 3.1-2 ¶ Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

B. There is also the matter of earthly reward

1. The showy givers “have their reward in full” (2)
2. The showy pray-ers “have their reward in full” (5)
3. The showy fasters “have their reward in full” (16)

I have a note on this in my Bible program: “They have their reward in full, Jesus says. Their price is cheap, if all they seek is the notice of men.”

Conclusion:

Proposition: All Christian disciplines ought to follow God’s guidelines with an eye to heaven rather than earth.