

The Sermon on the Mount

Session 9 – “Fasting and Stewardship” – Matthew 6:16-24

Jesus now gives the third comparison between “the hypocrites” and true believers. (The first two dealt with giving to the needy and prayer.)

Verses 16-18...*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

1. Do you remember the origin of the word “hypocrite”? If not, see last week’s study. Jesus assumed His followers would fast. Note, it doesn’t say “If you fast...” but rather, “Whenever you fast...” The implied question is, “What is your motive? Why are you doing this?”

Fasting is never to be just for its own sake. Fasting was/is traditionally viewed as abstaining from food for some spiritual end. As with praying and almsgiving, the choice is between a temporal reward (public acclaim) and a spiritual reward.

2. What do you think is the purpose of fasting? In Islam, there is the practice of “fasting” for the month of Ramadan. During that month, they fast from sunup to sundown.

In Judaism, although the idea of fasting was well known, there was only one compulsory fast which was on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Other reasons for fasting were mourning, expiation of sin, preparation for revelation and an appeal to God.

Joel 2:12, fasting was a part of God’s call to His people to repentance: *“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”* When the people of Nineveh repented in response to the preaching of Jonah, they did so with fasting (Jonah 3:5). The people of Israel fasted at the death of King Saul and his son, Jonathan (1 Samuel 31:13).

Isaiah 58:3-12 talks about the abuse of fasting hundreds of years before the time of Jesus. This, along with a number of other passages in the Prophets, were to remind people that outward rituals were meaningless apart from a proper attitude of the heart.

Jesus was once asked why His disciples were not fasting (Matthew 9:14-15). *Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them?”* That is, the disciples did not fast because fasting implied sorrow, and the years of Jesus’ earthly ministry were joyous. Early Christians were aware that their sin had been forgiven, so they did not fast for their sin. Their reason was rather to set aside the normal distractions of this life in order to seek God’s direction for their lives. Thus, the spiritual reward is God’s presence and the revelation of His will.

Following Pentecost, fasting was linked to the two most important advances of the Gospel in the New Testament. The first was the presentation of the Gospel to Cornelius through the Apostle Peter (Acts 10). The second was the beginning of Paul’s missionary journeys. We read of the church at Antioch in Acts 13, and

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in verses 2-3, we read, *While they were worshiping the Lord and **fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had **fasted** and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

As I was reading this, it occurred to me that some churches are turning their worship space into "coffee shops" with beverages and pastries. Maybe we need to "fast" at least during the time of worship, so we can concentrate on the things of the Lord!

3. At the time of Jesus, eating was one of the greatest pleasures, and a major focus of everyday life. In our time, there are other things that are a part of our daily lives, so there could also be other legitimate types of fasting. Can you think of some?

A period of abstinence from anything that is a part of our normal routine can be used as a time to seek God's will and direction, a time for prayer and the reading and studying of God's will.

In the book [The Cross and the Switchblade](#), David Wilkerson tells of how he sold his television set so he could really fast from TV. It was during this extra time of prayer that God led him to begin his ministry to teenage gang members in New York City.

Verses 19-21...*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

It used to be said that you could tell a lot about a person by looking at their checkbook register. Perhaps now it would be their credit card bill. But the truth is you can tell a lot about a person by what they possess and how they view and use their possessions.

There are several examples of people in the Bible who were brought to ruin because of their love of money and possessions.

- * After the victory of the people of Israel at Jericho, they failed at Ai because of the sin of Achan. (See Joshua, chapters 7 and 8.)
- * Solomon allowed the love of money and multiple women to ruin his spiritual life.
- * Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Lord about money from the property they sold (Acts 5:1-10).

James Boice writes:

"Now, someone will ask, 'Didn't the Lord Jesus instruct the rich young ruler that he was to sell all that he had and give to the poor?' Yes, he did. But we must also note that He did not say it to Mary or Martha or Lazarus or to John the evangelist or to Zebedee. He said it to the 'rich young ruler' because his chief obstruction to a life of following Christ lay in his possessions.

Some important principles about possessions:

(1) All things belong to God

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Psalm 24:1

(2) People are more important than things.

(3) Wealth is a subordinate good.

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For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 1 Timothy 6:10

(Many people quote this verse without “For the love of....”)

The Bible nowhere teaches that money itself is evil.

(4) How were things gained?

(5) How are they used?

The three most common sources of “wealth” in Jesus’ day were the three things to which Jesus refers, and they remind us of the problems with possessions.

(1) Clothing – which could wear out or be damaged by moths. Garments wear out, and we should not put our trust in things that will wear out or non-tangible pleasures that offer diminishing returns.

(2) Stores of grain – the word for rust literally means “eaten up”. Grain could be infested by insects that would eat it up. In our modern world, we most understand this in terms of inflation, or even a stock portfolio that loses value.

(3) Household possessions – which could be easily stolen. Homes in those days were not secure; windows were open and doors might only be a flap of hide. There were no banks.

Anything material can be lost in one way or another. Even if the possession is not lost, their pleasures often fade.

3. How do you think a person “stores treasures in heaven”?

An important part of storing treasures in heaven, is looking to the future, not just seeking pleasure in the now. There is an old story about a sailor who was shipwrecked on a south Pacific island. He was captured by the natives who made him king. He discovered they had a custom to make a man king for a year. Each year they had a new king. He began to wonder what happened to former kings? He found out they were banished to a deserted island, where they starved to death. Since he was the king – an absolute monarch – he ordered men to work building boats, building houses and other buildings on the banishment island, transplant fruit trees, and plant crops. When the year was up and his kingship was over the sailor was banished, but not to a barren island, but to one of abundance! He didn’t just “enjoy the present moment” as the others had done.

Deeds of kindness on earth become treasure in heaven. In the early church, there were rumors that the believers possessed great wealth. Once a Roman officer raided a church and demanded, “Show us your treasures!” The leader pointed to some orphans who were being cared for, some sick people who were being nursed and poor who were being fed. “These,” he said, “are the treasures of the church.”

Treasures in heaven are also linked with character. The question is, “Where is your heart?”

4. Read Matthew 6:3-4. What does this say about a person’s character? Verses 22-23... *The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*

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5. How do you view the world? How does that view effect your life? How is this related to verses 19-21?

This is also dealing with our possessions, and what we hold as important from the standpoint of what are we looking at, or where is our attention?

"If your eye is healthy..." the word "healthy" is referring to "morally healthy", but it can also mean "generous". Have riches clouded your spiritual vision? The answer may be in your generosity.

Verse 24...*No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

We lose a bit of the force of this verse today, as we tend to think of it as working for two employers (which many people do). It is literally, "No one can be a slave to two masters." "Master" means to have absolute ownership of. (Elsewhere, the word is translated "Lord.") The point of this passage is that God will not tolerate rivals or conflicting loyalties.

The first two of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) are *"I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me"* and *"You shall not make for yourself an idol..."*

Jesus here warns against accumulating riches which can become an idol. "Wealth", sometimes rendered "mammon" was an Aramaic term for profits or material possessions. It came into Hebrew from a root word meaning "to entrust," or to place in someone's keeping. As time passed, the word shifted from the passive sense of "that which is entrusted" to the active sense of "that in which a person trusts."

A certain man was shown through a huge mansion with beautiful grounds. At the end of the tour, his guide said, "What do you think?" His response: "These are the things which make it difficult to die."

6. What would you say he was really expressing? The bottom line is the question: Who owns your possessions? Either God owns them and you serve Him, or your possessions own you, and you serve them.

