May 29, 2016

“The Heart of Fasting”

Matthew 6:16-18

**FCF**: Our motivation for fasting

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ calls His followers to fast.

(magnet) But we must do so in the right way.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Why do we do the things we do, even the good things? You may respond, “*Who cares? Isn’t it enough to do good things, to do what’s right?*” Ah, but Ethics 101 demands that we do the right thing for the right reasons. That’s what makes it truly right and noble, truly good.

So, why do we do the things we do, even good things? A few weeks ago, my wife texted that it would be good for me to pick up a Papa Murphy’s take-and-bake pizza on my way home. That’s code for “*it’s been a hard day*”. Wanting to save the day, I picked it up, put it in the oven, and somehow managed to burn it. From the response of the natives, I had clearly made things worse. And, because of that response, I got angry. Eventually, I came around and was able to salvage things. But why my response? Because, ultimately, this wasn’t about my wanting to serve others. This was about my wanting the praise of others. My motives had been exposed.

Jesus is very interested in our motives. Even the motives for the religious and spiritual things we do. Perhaps even especially so there. And, for our sake, He wants us to consider this.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

According to AAA, it’s going to be a big summer for road trips. Road trips and sermon series have something in common. With both, it can help to take time to stop and get your bearings. Put another way, where are we? Moving through Matthew’s Gospel, we are in one of five major teaching sections. This one, chapters 5 through 7, is called the Sermon on the Mount.

With the Beatitudes, at the start of chapter 5, Jesus speaks of Christian character. From there, with the image of salt and light, Christian influence. After that, the depths of Christian righteousness. This continues into chapter 6 but with a shift from moral to religious righteousness, from inner attitudes to outer practices. Which is hardly surprising since good trees bear fruit. It’s to be expected. But, as a good gardener, Jesus is interested in healthy trees.

(READ Matthew 6:1) That then sets the tone for what follows. Over the last few weeks, we’ve looked at what Jesus says about prayer, the second of three areas of outer righteousness that Jesus addresses – first giving, then prayer, now fasting. Here’s what we need to wrestle with. Jesus calls His followers to give, to pray, but also to fast. He calls us to each of these things. That said, we must do them in the right way. This morning we’re looking at fasting.

To get a handle on this, we’re going to look at this in two stages. First, the background to fasting and our hunger for God. And, second, the two distinct ways that Jesus puts before us.

1. **FASTING AND OUR HUNGER FOR GOD**

So, first, the background to fasting and our hunger for God. For it’s safe to say we could use some information and explanation on just what Jesus means when He mentions fasting.

1. *Definition*

And, as with so many things, a good place to start would be with some definitions.

1. Simple

A simple way of defining it is “*the act of going without food for a certain amount of time*.”

1. Fuller

But that hardly covers fasting for a follower of Christ. So, pushing further, we could say (READ Piper quote) “*a temporary renunciation of something that is in itself good, like food, in order to intensify our expression of need for something greater; namely, God and his work in our lives*.” Now that is a much fuller definition that speaks to what we’re to do and why we’re to do it.

1. *Practice*

What do we see in the Scriptures in terms of practice? What are some examples?

1. Old Testament

In the Old Testament era, we see this in several ways. Moses commanded fasting in connection with the Day of Atonement. In the years of exile, we see calls to regular fasts of remembrance. Besides this, there were others. Some of these fasts were corporate and some were individual.

1. New Testament

This is the context as we move into the New Testament era. Jesus regularly fasted. And, as we see here in our text, He assumes His disciples will do the same. Note the phrasing. Just as with giving and prayer, Jesus says not “if” you fast but “when” you fast. And, just as with giving and prayer, in clear references in Acts and Paul’s letters, we see the early church doing just that.

1. *Purpose*

But what is the purpose for fasting? How do we see that in the biblical texts?

1. Case studies

Looking at some case studies, we can see four occasions for fasting. First, as a deliberate doing without for the sake of having more to give to others. Second, as a means of growing in self-control, of mastering our appetites and disciplines. Third, as an act of penitence for past sin and a thoroughgoing expression with the whole self of a sorrowing heart, mourning the grief we’ve caused our Savior. And, fourth, with a spirit of utter dependence upon the Him for a present need, a time where the demand to lean upon the Lord is all the more apparent – whether for His wisdom and guidance. Or for His supply of spiritual strength and material provision.

1. Common theme

Those are four occasions we see in the Scriptures calling for a time of prayer and fasting. And in those, there is a common theme. As John Piper notes, it is nourish our hunger for God and reduce our hunger for the world. Not that the pleasures of this life are evil. No, for they are gifts of God. The problem comes in that our desires for those gifts are twisted and warped. So fasting can be a means by which we demonstrate and declare, “*Lord, you alone are my strength*.” Fasting can be a demonstration and declaration. And also a heart’s means towards that.

That then is something of the background to fasting and our hunger for God.

*Illustration:*

Let me come back to fasting as a heart’s means towards saying “*Lord, you alone are my strength*.” The fact is that the heart and the mind can follow acts of the will and the body. There are times we need to be reminded that love is a verb. If you say, “*I have no feelings for that person*” then you might well hear me say, “*Then act towards them in practical ways as though you did*.” And, if you’re not careful, in time, you will. For the heart can follow such actions. There can be something of that dynamic in play in fasting as well. And it’s worth considering.

*Application:*

Going back to the case studies and the times of sorrow for past sin and dependence on the Lord for present need, we all face such times. It’s not a matter of “if” but “when”. And in such significant moments, the Lord is calling us to intentional times of prayer tied to fasting.

Let me give you three practical suggestions here. First, do this with care. If you have a medical condition, you need to mind that. Second, do this corporately. Yes, as we’ll see in a moment, we are to do this secretly. But it is certainly appropriate to do this with others. And, third, do this creatively. Think about when and how long. And consider that it may not always involve food. No few of us need an iFast. The point is that, in our fasting, we are saying with our whole selves, “*Lord, we would not be enslaved to anything but you. You are all we need*.”

Christ calls His followers to fast. That said, we must do so in the right way.

1. **FASTING AND THE TWO WAYS AHEAD**

Which brings me to the second point, fasting and the two ways ahead. You may have noticed this is phrased just as with Jesus’ words on giving and prayer. There are but two ways.

1. *The Way of the Hypocrite*

The first is the way of the hypocrite (READ Matthew 6:16). What’s going on here?

1. The reason

Behind this lies who these folks are – hypocrites. Literally, play actors who wear masks and pretend. They do so to be seen and noticed, to be admired and praised for their performance.

1. The pattern

How does that play out here? They make themselves look gloomy and sad. They disfigure their faces, literally “causing to vanish”, becoming unrecognizable – likely by smearing ash and dust.

1. The result

So that’s the reason and pattern for such an approach to fasting. The result? You’ll be paid in full. You’ll get just what you asked for – the praise of men. And absolutely nothing else.

This is Jesus’ description of the way of the hypocrite. And it is a warning to us.

1. *The Way of the Disciple*

But there is an alternative way, the way of the disciple (READ Matthew 6:17-18).

1. The reason

Again, the reason is tied to who is fasting. This would be a disciple of Jesus, walking in His ways. This would be a child wanting to please his heavenly Father, secure already in His love.

1. The pattern

How does this play out here? Jesus speaks of anointing the head and washing the face. This may sound unusual to us but these were normal parts of personal hygiene at the time. The point being, when you fast, don’t do anything to call attention to yourself or what you’re doing.

1. The result

And the result? No one else will see or know but God, your heavenly Father. And He will then reward you. Not by your merit but by His mercy. Not because of your deserving but His desiring to give and to provide for you. And what would such a reward mean? The very thing we long for – an increased desire for and satisfaction with God alone, the giver of all gifts, above all else. That is our great longing in this time of denying ourselves. And that is His reward.

This is Jesus’ description of the way of the disciple. And it is an invitation to us.

*Application:*

What do we do with this? First, we need to hear the warning. Don’t fast for the sake of appearances. That is to twist this into something it was never meant to be. I know the irony of preaching on this on a Fellowship Lunch Sunday. Don’t go through the line without a plate.

Hear the warning. And hear the invitation. Note the historical precedents. Pay heed to the pattern. Lay hold of the promise. Delight yourself in good things, in life’s simple pleasures. But know from whose hand they come. Trace that back to His hand and His heart for us.

Fasting is for our finding our deepest delight in God. God, in his delight in us, has provided the means to deepen our delight in Him – times set aside for prayer and fasting.

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**CONCLUSION:**

Here at the close, let me ask this question. Why do we hesitate here? We understand that followers of Christ are to give and to pray. Why not to fast? Part of it is our misconceptions and confusion. We wonder if this is like a fast before a doctor’s examination. We know that such a ritual is one of the pillars of Islam. We’re suspicious of the way others have practiced it. And, frankly, there is a sad disconnect in what it means to be created with a body and a spirit. But I think another cause of our hesitation is the assumption that fasting was for another time and place. That was for then but this is now. But we should consider what has really changed.

I am a fan of *The Andy Griffith Show*. One of the earlier episodes involved a high school class reunion. This would be a chance to catch up with old friends and perhaps even to strike up old flames. So Andy and Barney worked their plan. Things didn’t turn out so well for Barney. Ramona had gotten married and didn’t even remember him. But Andy had time to dance long and talk softly with Sharon. And while the old spark was still there, it became obvious what it was that had driven them apart. They had different desires and dreams. Sharon loved the big city. And Andy loved Mayberry. Yes, much was different. But nothing had really changed.

That’s often the way it is with people. And it’s the same with the call of Jesus. Yes, much is different. But nothing has really changed. Let me take you back to Jesus’ own practice. Preparing for major moments and turning points in His ministry, facing significant decisions, going through great pressure, or even on the heels of great success, Jesus – the sinless Son of God – needed to fast. As one author I read recently put it, Jesus needed to gain strength through fasting. How much more do we? How much more do we? Again, what has really changed?

Jesus calls His followers to fast. That said, we must do so in the right way. And that right way means a fasting from the heart. For the heart of fasting is fasting from the heart.

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