

SERMON ON THE MOUNT #7 - MATTHEW 6:1-6 & 16-18:

¹“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6: 1-6.

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 secret, will reward you. Matthew 6: 16-18.

James Boice comments, In Matthew chapter six, Jesus shifts his focus slightly. In Chapter five, he teaches his disciples to look inward, to their character and their motives. In Chapter six, he teaches us to look upward, to live to please God rather than to please ourselves or to impress our neighbours. If we seek God and please him, he will grant the finest reward, his presence and his power.

In verses one to six Jesus condemns the religious leaders of the day who manifested their faith to be seen and gain popularity. The followers of Jesus are to practice humility to such an extent that our giving should be secret. Giving in secret ensures that we lose our overpowering sense of self. Jesus suggests in verse three that our giving should be characterised by a kind of forgetfulness, ³ **But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.**

Now, we must clarify Jesus' teaching. He does not mean we must always hide our good deeds. He does not say that it is wrong to be seen praying. Rather, it is wrong to pray in order to be seen. He does not say it is wrong to be seen giving a gift to the needy. However, it is wrong to give in order to be seen giving.

Here, I like the contribution of Daniel Doriani, **the person who gives to the poor, not so much to help them as to be seen helping them. The person who prays, not so much to commune with God as to be seen on their knees. The person who fasts not so much to devote himself to God as to be seen fasting.**

I do not mean to suggest that there was never such a thing as a gift to the poor in pagan lands prior to Jesus' coming. However, before Christ's time there were no homes for the sick or poor, no orphanages. There was a world of turmoil and poverty, unwanted children, slavery, great hunger, side by side with great affluence and appalling indifference. After Christ came there was an instant and sacrificial love of believers for each other. This was followed by care for the poor, hospitals, reform laws in the status of women, the establishment of labour laws and much more.

It is evident from this spirited defense of the early Christian church, that it had a real effect on their contemporaries. Their awe of it is the best evidence that true charity entered the world with Christianity. There was of course other giving. However, it was largely to increase one's reputation. Only with the coming of Jesus did motives change and only in the power of the spirit did charity flow from a divine love welling up inside of those who followed Christ.

True giving is spiritual giving. It comes from a life that has been surrendered to God. That lives out, "not my will but yours Oh God". Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, **And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 2 Corinthians 8: 1-5.**

Here was a church who a few years early lived their lives according to the values of the Greek and Roman world. What made the difference? The answer is at the end of this scripture, **They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.**

He does not say, *if* you give to the needy. Rather he says *when* you give to the needy, when you pray and when you fast. These come with a warning in verse one. **"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.** Why because any service, any prayer, any fasting whatsoever should be focused on God alone. Our lives are for his Glory and not our own.

When Jesus says, ³**But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, Matthew 6: 3,** he adds something different. I like Daniel Doriani's comment on this, **not only should we avoid telling others about our righteous deeds, but we should also not even tell ourselves. We should have a blissful lack of self-consciousness because self-consciousness can lead to self-righteousness.**

Now, I want to be clear. It's important that our public acts are seen so that our light can shine. Our private acts, giving, praying and fasting must be private so that the glory goes to God and not ourselves. What I love about our church is that no one is in this category. We have been blessed with people with abundant gifts that give, pray, fast and serve without any of us knowing. Without any fuss.

According to these Scriptures, your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. You may be thinking that the promise of a reward reintroduces selfish motives. If we are following Jesus' teaching, why should we be interested in a reward. A focus on the reward at worst is wholly selfish, a manipulation of God for selfish reasons. It pollutes an act of kindness. It makes the right hand think hard about what the left hand is doing.

So, Jesus has covered off giving and prayer, he moves to fasting. 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 secret, will reward you. Matthew 6: 16-18.**

We need to listen to Jesus' warning about fasting with an improper motive. Jesus invites us to imagine a scene where someone is fasting and does something to draw attention to their fasting. It could be sitting at a meal with others and not eating. Deliberately waiting for the questions that will follow to display spiritual superiority over others by saying, “Oh. Yes, you see, I am fasting so I can't enjoy this meal with you”. Jesus says, ¹¹ **The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Matthew 23: 11-12.**

Now, the purpose of fasting in the Old Testament was always connected with mourning for sin and repentance. The entire Hebrew nation was to fast on the day of atonement for this was the day in which they were to mourn for their sin and look for reconciliation which was provided through sacrifices. It was also to fight injustice and feed the poor. In Isaiah the people of Israel reminded God that they had fasted but complained that fasting had not produced the results they were seeking. God answered them.

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have

we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself. Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes. Is that what you call a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶ Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-when you see the naked, to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Isaiah 58: 1-7.

After Jesus came there was a different reason Christians fasted. Here I like how James Boice in his commentary on the sermon on the mount, **The reason was their desire to set aside the normal distractions of this life in order to seek God's clear direction for their lives. It was a discipline by which they waited upon God while asking him to reveal his will to them.**

Now, having established the purpose of fasting, it is true that the essence of fasting can be achieved in other ways. It can be achieved by abstaining from things and for many this may be more important than not eating. Sometimes our fasting will lead us away from such things as entertainment, perhaps Television. Even further in today's world, a complete fast from all things online and even our phones.

I do not know how all of this will apply to you. Whatever your daily routine or habits, there are undoubtedly some things that you may want to lay aside temporarily to spend time with God. Probably you will not tell people about it. That's all right, but you have the promise of Jesus that the father, who sees in secret will reward you.