

Intro

This morning we're confronted with our motivations. Why do we do what we do? We all have goals. We all have agendas. We all have some longings, some desires that shape the general direction of our lives. Whether we're conscious of it or not, the things we love, the things we really want drive our actions. The problem is when our loves are misguided. When we long for the wrong things, we can misuse the good things God has blessed us with.

A common challenge we face is the temptation to do things for our own glory. So that people will think much of us. It could be a child trying out for the school play. They don't want to work behind the scenes. No, they want the lead part. Why? Because they want attention. What they're really after is applause. They want people to think much of them.

Or it could be serving on the church worship team. God may have gifted you with ability to sing or play an instrument. So you want use your gifts in music ministry. But why? It could be because you want to help people worship God through song. Because you want to be a good steward of the gifts God has given you. Or it could be because you like being on stage. You like feeling important. And you love it when people tell you how good you are.

This morning Jesus calls us to examine our motives. And we examine the often unobserved spiritual discipline called fasting. This we're instructed to...

BIG IDEA: Fast for God's reward and because you have spiritual needs

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

We'll explain our passage and examine fasting in Scripture

What sort of fast does Jesus object to?

Point 1: Don't fast for the applause of men (6:16)

Explanation

When you fast...

Jesus was speaking to his disciples and he assumes they will fast. The nature of their fasting is not spelled out. The duration of their fasting is not spelled out. And the frequency of their fasting is not spelled out. But it is assumed that if a person is a disciple of Jesus, they will fast.

do not look gloomy like the hypocrites...

The hypocrites (actors on a stage; people pretending to be something their not; a dig at the scribes and Pharisees) fasted in a particular way: they altered their appearance (“disfigure their faces”) “that their fasting may be seen by others.” It would be like a woman today who normally uses make-up and styles their hair purposely making themselves look disheveled so that people would ask them why they were so poorly groomed. When asked, they could boast about their fasting.

Application

Here we see that they succeeded. They disfigured their appearance to draw attention to themselves and others took notice. They received their reward: others observed their “righteousness” and esteemed them as godly. Sometimes it’s not that hard to trick people. Christian communities can be duped too.

Illustration

In 2007 a Brown student named Kevin Roose went undercover at Liberty University for a semester, enrolling as a student, living in the dorm, and pretending to be a Christian in order to write a book about Christian culture: the worst, the bigotry, the intolerance. In order to succeed, he needed to blend in and convince Christian students he was one of them. This was quite a challenge since Kevin was raised in a very liberal home. Intellectually, he knew nothing about Christianity. He needed to talk like Christians when engaged in theological conversations, and he had to pass the Bible classes he enrolled in. For example, participating in debates about evolution, the rapture, etc. To catch up, he read “The Bible for Dummies.” Behaviorally, he had to quickly conform with moral standards. There was the 46 page Liberty Way manual for conduct. For example, no drinking, no smoking, no R-rated movies, no cursing, no sexual activity, and no hugs longer than 3 seconds. A particular struggle was eliminating curse words. If you were caught cursing, you were fined \$10 each time. So he bought “Thirty Days to Taming Your Tongue,” a book from the 70’s. He learned to substitute curse words with “mercy” or “glory be.” Students thought he was a secluded homeschooler, but his cover wasn’t blown. Kevin fit in and was accepted as a fellow believer. He attended Friday night Bible studies, joined the church choir, did spring break evangelism at Daytona Beach, and got on staff at the student newspaper. He even got a one-on-one interview with Jerry Falwell. The article was printed two weeks before Falwell died. In the end, Kevin’s mission succeeded. He convinced the Christians he was one of them and got the material he needed.

What’s the point? Convincing people we’re godly is an attainable goal. It’s possible to carry out spiritual disciplines for the wrong reasons and receive the reputation we desire. But that’s all we’ll get. If your goal is your own reputation, the Father won’t reward you.

So how should we fast?

Point 2: Fast secretly for the Father’s reward (6:17-18)

Explanation

But when you fast...

Again, fasting is assumed.

anoint your head and wash your face...

In other words, when you fast make yourself presentable. Don’t try to get others to notice you’re fasting. Why? “That your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.” As with prayer

and giving, our motive is preeminent. Why do we do what we do? Do we do it for our own reputation? Or do we do it for the Father?

Application

Public righteousness isn't bad, but doing it for applause is. After all, we're called to let our light (righteous deeds) shine before men (Matt 5:13-16). The issue isn't doing righteous deeds publicly. The issue is doing righteous deeds publicly for sinful reasons.

This reveals a common temptation we all face as sinners: at times we desire to enhance our reputation and receive praise from others. What this reveals is a wrong life aim. It also reveals we've missed the point of fasting. Fasting doesn't exist to enhance our reputation. Fasting exists for our spiritual good.

Well, I'm guessing we probably don't consciously fast only for personal reputation. We probably don't dress in a scraggly way so that people will ask us questions and so that we can tell them all about our devotion to God. We probably care about our spiritual good. We probably want to please God. But maybe we struggle with mixed motives? Maybe we have good intentions when we serve in the church but we still yearn for man's praise? Maybe we struggle with a preoccupation with our own reputation? Maybe we long to be noticed?

For example, you might pray a lot so you can tell people how much time you spend in prayer. You value prayer. You believe in prayer. You turn to God for help. You truly pray for the good of the church, the good of its people, and the good of lost people. You really care. You really trust God. But you also yearn for recognition. How do we beat this selfish preoccupation? How do we rest in the Father's approval?

We need to recognize that Jesus was critiquing the scribes and Pharisees who cared more about perception (do people think I'm godly?) than pleasing God (is my heart pure before God?). If we are concerned about pleasing God and not just people's perception we are not in the same category as the scribes and Pharisees.

The key in today's passage is desiring God's reward instead of man's reward. God tells us what we should be seeking: his reward. The problem was that the scribes and Pharisees were seeking something else when fasting: a reputation for themselves. Why we do what we do, why we fast, why we pray, why we teach, why we sing, why we serve is in reality a battle at the level of our desires, our loves. Do I want man's praise? Or do I want to please the Father? Do I cherish my own reputation? Or do I cherish the Father's reward?

What we need is a right goal (the Father's reward) and a right understanding of fasting (fasting is designed for our spiritual good, not for man's applause). With the right goal, and the right understanding of fasting, we recognize what it is not for: enhancing our reputation. We also need to love the right things. Jesus calls us to desire the Father's reward, not man's applause. As we'll learn later, we should also fast because we desire time with God.

For example, preaching. I should preach for the Father's reward. He evaluates my instruction and rewards me accordingly. Is the passage rightly interpreted? Is it clear and understandable? Is truth applied well? Preaching should have as its goal to help those who are listening. That you will be helped to trust God and live for him. My goal cannot be that people will say I'm a great speaker. If that's the case I need to confess my sinful motives and ask God to help me realign my purpose. My goal must be to help you process truth, embrace truth, and respond to truth well. What's my goal today? That you would use spiritual disciplines for the right reasons. And that you'll actually fast. Next week we'll cover "treasures in heaven" and spell out exactly what this reward is that the Father is calling us to desire.

Well, Jesus assumes we'll fast, but why? Or when, should we fast?

Point 3: Fast when life requires focused attention on spiritual priorities

Explanation

In Scripture, people fasted at various occasions:

1: When expressing grief

Nehemiah 1:3-4 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." ⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

2: When expressing repentance

Nehemiah 9:1-2 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. ² And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

3: When seeking deliverance or protection

Ezra 8:21-23 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. ²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him." ²³ So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

4: When preparing for a major test

Matthew 4:1-2 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

5: When seeking guidance from God

In 2 Chronicles 20, a great multitude from Edom was coming to attack Judah (20:1-2).

2 Chronicles 20:3-4 Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

Jehoshaphat cried out to the Lord in prayer that ended with this line:

2 Chronicles 20:12 O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. **We do not know what to do**, but our eyes are on you."

God responded to Jehoshaphat's plea for guidance. The Spirit came upon Jahaziel, direction was given, and the Lord intervened on Judah's behalf (20:14-30).

6: When committing people to a major task

Acts 13:1-3 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² 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." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Application

We've addressed how not to fast, how to fast, and when to fast, but we haven't addressed this question: what exactly is fasting?

Point 4: Fast by abstaining from food for spiritual purposes

Explanation

"a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes" – Don Whitney

This principle of abstinence for spiritual purposes is found in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5:

1 Corinthians 7:3-5 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

- fasting from sex for a predetermined time for spiritual purposes is analogous to fasting from food for a predetermined time for spiritual purposes

Well, what specific fasting options are there? (Don Whitney, *Spiritual Discipline for the Christian Life*)

Normal Fast

"involves abstaining from all food, but not from water"

- Jesus was hungry after fasting for 40 days (Matt 4:2) "and he ate nothing during those days (Luke 4:2)."
- the body normally can't function for more than three days without water and these verses say nothing about Jesus not drinking = likely the normal fast (no food but drank water)

Partial Fast

"is a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food"

For ten days Daniel limited himself to vegetables and water (Dan 1:12)

Absolute Fast

"is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water"

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, **neither eating bread nor drinking water**, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

So fasting is essentially abstinence from food accompanied by prayer for a spiritual purpose. When we fast we humble ourselves as needy people before God (see 1 Kgs 21:27-29). We practice self-denial by abstaining from food, we break from normal rhythms, we focus on spiritual matters (e.g., grief over the

state of the church or our land, repentance, preparing for a major test, needing wisdom), and we declare our need for God (forgiveness, protection, strengthening during trial, guidance, help with a task).

On the other hand, fasting is not an empty ritual that guarantees God's favor or favorable answers to prayer. We don't fast out of guilt, and we don't fast to manipulate God.

Application

So why does God provide fasting? It's a means to express our grief. Whether over our own sin, the state of our family, the state of our church, the state of the church in America, or the state of our nation. It's a way to seek God by breaking from the normal routines of life. We acknowledge our profound need for God, press pause, and call out to him in prolonged times of prayer. The cares of the world are set aside for a time to focus on God's priorities. We deny ourselves of something necessary to our existence, food, for a period of time for the purpose of seeking God. We take time to hunger for God rather than food. It's a time to take a break and re-center our priorities. It's a time for fellowship with God.

How do I fast? No food all day, but water. How often? Once since I started here. How can we respond to Jesus' expectation that his people will fast? Let's fast this Wednesday and end the day with prayer meeting. This is between you and God alone. If it would be detrimental to your health, don't participate. If you're unsure, get a doctor's opinion. If work is too strenuous to go without food, don't be driven by guilt. Fast on another day. I wouldn't fast on a 12 hour work day at the shipyard. I'd wait till my day off. But determine a day to fast and reset your priorities by drawing near to God.

If your health prevents you from an all-day fast don't feel guilty. Maybe fast for meal and take the time you would have spent eating and preparing the meal to spend with God. If that's not possible because of health concerns, consider fasting from something else. Like TV, social media, sports, etc. for a predetermined time to devote yourself so spiritual matters and prayer (see 1 Cor 7:3-5). Take a break for normal enjoyments to focus on God.

Conclusion

Fast for God's reward and because you have spiritual needs. God graciously provides us with a purpose for living: the Father's reward. And God graciously provides us with fasting as we go about living. Life grieves us, life challenges us, and at times we fail God. We fast because we need God. We need his comfort, guidance, strength, and forgiveness. We fast because we need to press pause. We fast because we need to attend to spiritual matters. What's the wrong way to fast? **Don't fast for the applause of men.** What's the right way to fast? **Fast secretly for the Father's reward.** When should you fast? **Fast when life requires focused attention on spiritual priorities.** What exactly is fasting? **Fast by abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.** So let's fast this Wednesday. If that doesn't work for you, plan another day to commune with the Father through fasting and prayer. He will reward you.