

Sermon on the Mount—Fasting

Matthew 6:16—18

As we work our way through the Sermon on the Mount we see Jesus calling out the remnant of believers from Israel. He has set the qualifications for entering the Kingdom very high—be perfect as my Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). It will be impossible for any man to live up to this requirement by his own power so those entering the Kingdom will need to trust Christ completely. Christ has been pointing out the difference between the proud Pharisee who self-righteously gives alms, prays and fasts with the true believer who humbly comes to God knowing he is not worthy. The Pharisee is receiving his temporal reward with the praise of men while the true remnant believer will have to wait to receive his eternal reward. It even appears that the Pharisee will receive a greater damnation for his actions on earth (Matthew 23:14).

Luke records a parable of Jesus aimed at the Pharisees and Scribes, those who trusted in themselves thinking they were righteous but yet despised others (Luke 18:9). A parable is not just a made-up story to make a point, it is always based on real events. Jesus compared the heart of a publican with the heart of a Pharisee and found the heart of the Pharisee to be hypocritical and not ready to enter into the Kingdom. Notice Jesus hits the Pharisee in three areas: prayer, fasting and tithing.

Luke 18:11—14 ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹²I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. ¹³And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Fasting

Fasting is mentioned many times in the Bible and is often associated with grief and mourning. It was also done by those who were imploring God's will or seeking His forgiveness. On the other end of the spectrum fasting was used by the Pharisees to show how pious they were as they went around with long faces to show how much they are suffering for the Lord in front of men.

Interestingly, God never commanded anyone to fast. It seems that not eating naturally goes along with periods of great emotional turmoil and may have been one reason that it was done. It would in effect show the sincerity and depth of their grief or repentance. Today people fast for the same reason and perhaps even with the idea that it may be a way to get God's attention or to gain His favor.

Isaiah gives us an interesting view of how God sees the practice of fasting. Verses 1—5 view the Pharisaical form of fasting while verses 6—12 shows what God expects when fasting from a pure heart.

Isaiah 58:1—5 ¹Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. ³Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. ⁴Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

These verses are dripping with sarcasm and directly target the Pharisees and Scribes that piously fast so others can see how they suffer for the Lord's sake. While steeped in sin they outwardly go through the motions of seeking God daily and being careful to fulfill even the smallest part of the Law—as if they were a part of a righteous nation. They take pride in their temple service and in their fastings and in their afflictions but are puzzled that God does not seem to notice all that they are doing to please Him.

According to verse 4 they are fasting for the wrong reason. It is all done for their glory instead of being a way of humbly approaching God. This is not the type of fast that God wants. God now explains what He considers a proper reason to fast.

Isaiah 58:6—10 ⁶Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? ⁸Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward. ⁹Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; ¹⁰And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day:

I believe the fast spoken of here has a very specific focus, that of the Tribulation. Verses 8 and 10 speak of the future light, a reference to the Kingdom as mentioned in Isaiah 60. The first reason for fasting is for freedom for those in captivity. This certainly could apply to those who were taken into captivity during the Assyrian and Babylonian sieges during the time that Isaiah was a prophet but in the end looks to the ultimate siege by the Antichrist in the Tribulation. The believing remnant of Israel, who fled for their lives at the halfway point of the Tribulation, will be praying and fasting for those who are in spiritual darkness and under the control of the Antichrist. Those remaining in Jerusalem at that time will either be killed or need to give allegiance to the Antichrist by worshiping him and taking the mark of the beast. Many in Israel will decide it is easier to take the mark than to trust Christ even though He promised them that He would take care of them (Matthew 6:25, 31). Just as they didn't trust God in the wilderness, many will not trust Him in the Tribulation. The believing remnant of Israel will flee when they see the Abomination of Desolation (Matthew 24:15—22) and they will, I believe, be praying, fasting and imploring God to save those who did not flee at that time.

Notice how this remnant will help those who are not believers in verse 7. It says that one purpose of fasting in the Tribulation is so they will be able to give food to the hungry and clothe the naked. They will not hide themselves from their fellow Israelites who are not believers. They are to reach out in love in the hope that they will come to believe. During the first 3-1/2 years the believing remnant will sell all they have and put all things in common. After the midpoint of the Tribulation it will be impossible for them to buy or sell because they will not have the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:17). They will use this stockpile of goods not only for their own sustenance but also for supplying unbelieving Israelites.

Verse 9 promises that God will hear their cries for help and they will experience the glory of the Lord at the Second Coming.

This all fits in with what John wrote about loving their brother.

1 John 3:17—19 ¹⁷But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? ¹⁸My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. ¹⁹And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

The believing remnant (John calls them Little Children) will prove their love for God by good works directed to unbelieving Israelites. Any Israelite who sees and ignores a fellow Israelite is not truly saved. If they say they have faith but do not do the works to prove their faith then they did not have a faith to begin with. James emphasizes this point and helps us understand what Isaiah was writing about.

James 2:14—17 ¹⁴What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? ¹⁷Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

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