

November 15, 2015

WHEN YOU FAST

Matthew 6:16-18

In Chapter 6:1-18, Jesus talks about three different types of religious practice that were regularly done by some of the Jewish leaders, but... done wrongly, hypocritically. Fasting is the third. The first two were *"giving to the needy,"* and, praying *"to be seen by others."* *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before others, to be seen by them."* (v. 1) You don't *"announce it with trumpets"* when you give alms. You don't pray *"standing on the street corners,"* nor by *"babbling like pagans."* And *"when you fast,"* do not *"disfigure your faces to show others you are fasting."* The whole idea is that we are not to make a show of ourselves, of our piety, of our faith. To do so, and to be recognized for it, is the only reward, or, blessing you would receive.

Jesus is not telling His hearers *not* to give to the poor, or, pray, or fast. Just don't show off! Don't make your faith a big deal publically. A fourth way that Jesus does not touch on, which can likewise be abused, is in regard to testimonials. When we testify before others, or, witness to what Jesus has done in our lives, we can very easily overdo it. I can remember one man who was virtually bragging about how many people he had *"led to Christ"* by the way he had witnessed to them. They *"accepted"* Christ, repented from their sins, and became believers. But when I asked him how many of them had become regular church-goers, the answer was zero! I asked him, *"How can someone accept Christ into their hearts and not accept His Church, His Body?"* Did the man lead people to a true saving faith? Perhaps. Is there salvation outside the Church? In very rare cases, it's possible, but, for the most part, not if the Church is the Body of Christ, and it is easily accessible. If someone never practices their faith; if they are not going to be held accountable for what they believe and how they behave; and if they do not participate in the fellowship of love and grace...are they Christians? Really?

Let's talk about fasting. Good subject to consider as *"feasting"* is on our minds this month, with Thanksgiving Day around the corner. To fast is to practice a form of self-denial. But it is particularly focused on food. Yes, you can fast from TV, or from certain activities, but that is just a different kind of self-denial. Fasting has to do with food. Fasting is not a matter of just skipping a meal, but of denying that meal in order to focus on spiritual things. That's what makes it a practice of the faith. So it is hypocritical to turn it into a show by virtue of being so somber that it evokes pity for us with our look of emptiness the hollow feeling not eating can cause.

Fasting can include relinquishment or refraining from eating certain foods, like meat or candy (if you call candy a food), for a certain period of time, like Lent, or, on Wednesdays and Fridays. It can be done with a special consideration for those less fortunate in mind. We can identify with them, to some degree, by experiencing what they experience: Hunger! And that's supposed to tweak our compassion for them a bit more. The problem is that if that's what you need to tweak your compassion, then you're just not very awake in the first place.

I think the best way to fast is to give the cost of the meal you skip to a hunger ministry. But never fast just to save money for yourself. And never fast just to lose weight. I do not believe God's will for us is to diminish our health.

Think about this – Do you have a full refrigerator? How well is your pantry stocked? Do you have a freezer full of food? What disaster are you preparing for? Many of us could probably thrive fairly well for some time just on the supplies we already have! And we can get those supplies incredibly easily...if we have the money, and, if we live in the USA!

I can remember as a small child, seeing a special report on TV about an African country where their outdoor market had diminished down to next to nothing due to drought, and the people had no way to get food. I asked my parents, *"Why don't they just go to the A & P?"* I assumed they just didn't

know about the grocery stores. Then it was explained to me that, in some parts of the world, they don't even have such stores, they don't have canned or packaged foods, and they all bring food to a market place like that to share or trade or buy; but they don't have very much money. It was then that I realized that not everyone in the world lives the same way as we do. So I suggested that they all come to the US. We have a lot of food at the A & P!

How fortunate we are to have such abundance! How sad that it is so taken for granted! And how odd that we can't do an even better job of sharing it all! In a way, we need to fast! There is a quote from Gandhi – "The rich must live more simply so that the poor might simply live!" Fasting now and then is a good way for us, the rich, to live more simply; and for us to at least think about those who are hungry in this world.

We live in an area that has been called the bread-basket of the world. How many more people could be fed if, rather than use some of the resources we produce to create junk-food, we created healthy meals for those in drought-stricken, famine-riddled parts of the world?

Does talk like this make you feel guilty? I do. Even though I think I give generously to relief ministries, I know I could do better. Probably all of us could.

Fasting is a way of being faithful, of caring, of loving others as we would want them to love us if we were in their circumstances. When you fast, do it out of gratitude, so that you might better appreciate all the food you do have. Do it to identify, to some degree, with the hungry. Do it as an act of self-denial and substitute that meal with time spent in prayer for the hunger ministries we share.

Just don't turn it into a show. It's not about you. It's not about me. It's not about us. It's about our faithful service to others in need.

Do good, give, pray, fast, ...without seeking some reward or recognition. God, who sees what you are doing, will bring you a blessing. Christ has promised it!