

Fasting that Pleases God

Matthew 6:16-18

Halifax: 16 May 2004

Today I continue with our series in Matthews Gospel.

- What a blessing it is for us to have our Lord's Sermon on the Mount recorded for us in such fullness here.
- What a blessing it must have been for those who first heard Him speak these words.
 - Those whose hearts the Spirit had changed to welcome God's word must have been delighted!
 - Like us, they surely had many questions about their own lives before God and the lives of those around them...
 - They knew there were certain things that were not quite right, but they could not quite put their finger on it...
 - How refreshing it must have been to hear God's word brought to them and to know that it was God's word...
 - What assurance and comfort it must have given them to know that they were hearing truth from heaven to answer their deepest questions!

Surely the section of the Sermon on the Mount that we are studying now must have had that effect.

- For years, the religious hypocrites had been held in high esteem among the people...
- Yet, those with renewed hearts surely knew that there was something wrong with their piety—
 - There they were, decked out in their religious garments, standing on the street corners praying and giving alms to the poor; fasting twice a week and doing all sorts of other religious deeds.
 - What could be wrong with this?
 - Why was it so hard to attain to the level of these spiritual giants?
 - But now Jesus comes and preaches this great sermon...
 - He begins by saying that the blessed ones in His kingdom are the ones who don't see themselves as having it all together!
 - They are the poor in spirit who mourn over sin and hunger for righteousness.
 - And then, in what we call chapter 6, he begins to talk about the hypocrisy that is back of all those highly esteemed religious deeds that are being displayed in the community.

In a very real way, Jesus is showing that true faith is not about religious attainments, but about sinners earnestly seeking God and looking to Him for salvation.

- It is about living an honest life before the face of God,
 - and about wanting to live such a life while painfully recognising that we don't.
 - It is not about resigning ourselves to the fact that we don't and being content with that...
 - but it is about coming before God with humility to deliver us from what we are and make us into what we should be!

Jesus has shown that almsgiving that pleases God and prayer that pleases God is almsgiving and prayer that is brought before the face of God,

- not that which is put on display for men to see.
- And now in verses 16-18 He goes on to speak about fasting that pleases God in the same way.

It is very plain that fasting is something that pleases God when it is done rightly.

- The Bible talks about fasting quite a lot, and mostly it talks about it in a very positive way.
 1. In our text, Jesus assumes that His disciples will fast.
 - a. He does not say, "If you fast," but He says, "When you fast..."
 - This is just what He said about prayer...
 - He was not condemning fasting any more than He was condemning prayer; He was condemning the way prayer and fasting were being done...
 - He says "When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites..."

TRANS> Elsewhere, Jesus also shows that He expects His disciples to fast...

- b. When He was asked why His disciples did not fast regularly, He did not say that fasting was to cease, but He said:
 - Mt 9:15: "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."
 - The main reason for fasting when Jesus came was because God had promised to send the Messiah and people were asking God to do it.
 - Now that He had come, it was the time for rejoicing, not for fasting!
 - To keep fasting for the Messiah to come when He was there was to miss the point.
 - But Jesus says plainly that after He is gone away, then His disciples will fast...

TRANS> And that is exactly what we find.

2. Fasting is exactly what we find Christ's disciples doing all through the ages.
 - a. We find it in the scriptures...
 - In Acts 13, we find the church fasting before they sent out Paul and Barnabas to minister to the Gentiles...
 - In Acts 14, we find Paul and Barnabas fasting as they appointed elders in the various churches...
 - In 1 Cor. 7:5, Paul speaks of it as a common practice for husbands and wives to agree to abstain from sexual relations in order that they might devote themselves to prayer and fasting for a season.
 - This is spoken of as something that was done all the time.
 - b. We find fasting in the subsequent history of the church...
 - The Di-da-che, (a church manual that was probably written in the first century) commends fasting twice a week...
 - The early church fathers often speak of fasting...
 - The fathers of the reformation (Luther, Calvin, Knox and many others fasted).

And so you see that fasting is something good, just as prayer and almsgiving are good.

- But just as with prayer and almsgiving,
 - it is not the act that counts, but the motive behind the act.

And so today, I want to speak to you about proper motives for fasting...

- But I want to do it in a way that recognises where the church is today...
- Jesus spoke to a society that held fasting in high esteem so that people were tempted to do it to gain a pious reputation...
 - We don't have much of that temptation...
 - We live in a time and place where fasting is not esteemed very highly at all...
- It probably something most of you have thought very little about.
 - But here it is in God's word—
 - It is something you need to think about.
 - And since our Lord's burden in this passage is that people would fast in the right way,
 - I want to spend a good bit of time talking about what the right reasons are for fasting—

- I will begin with the best reason for fasting...
- Then look at the second best reason...
- Then at the worst reason...
- And finally at what is even worse than fasting for the wrong reason.

I. The best reason for fasting is because you take God seriously.

A. Fasting is something you rightly do when you believe there is a matter that ought to take up your full attention...

1. When there is some great spiritual cause that is so weighty that you feel you must concentrate entirely upon God.

- The ideal kind of fasting is fasting that occurs when you are so caught up with something pertaining to God's kingdom or your relationship to Him that eating would seem to get in your way.

2. This only happens when you take God and His kingdom seriously.

- If religion is just a nice thing to do—
 - If it is just a good way to get out of the house or something important for the kids...
 - And you don't really believe what God says about heaven and Hell,
 - about the state of the church and the importance of the church,
 - about the souls of those outside His kingdom...
 - And if you don't really take seriously His promises and His warnings...
 - Then you will never find yourself in a condition where eating would seem to get in the way of seeking Him.
 - You know nothing of the conflict I spoke about a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 86...
 - The raging battle that is going on between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light...
 - And so "saying your prayers" is never a very big deal to you— certainly not something that would keep you from eating!

B. But I want you to see that the examples that are given to us in scripture of proper fasting were in times when people took seriously what God had said.

1. It is something people did when they realised they were under God's judgement.

a. One of the first examples that comes to my mind is, of all places, Nineveh!

- Nineveh, that proud, wicked city that oppressed God's people without mercy!

- Jonah went (with great reluctance) to preach to them of God's coming judgement.
 - The people of Nineveh took Jonah's words seriously and they devoted themselves to prayer and fasting!
 - They realised that God Almighty was displeased with them and that He was going to crush them...
 - They were absolutely terrified—and so they should have been!
 - They could think of nothing else!
 - And so they prayed and fasted, and you will remember, God heard them.
 - He was pleased with them.
- b. And that reminds me of an ungodly man that did the same thing—Ahab!
- 1) By the encouragement of his wicked wife, Jezebel, Ahab had acted the part of a pagan king.
 - He had actually taken the life of one of the members of God's kingdom because he wanted that man's vineyard.
 - He acted like the people and the land belonged to him instead of to God!
 - 2) But do you remember what happened when Elijah came to him with God's word?
 - Elijah told him, Thus say the Lord:
 - 1 Kings 21:21-22 'Behold, I will bring calamity on you. I will take away your posterity, and will cut off from Ahab every male in Israel, both bond and free. 'I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked *Me* to anger, and made Israel sin.'
 - But look: Ahab took God's word seriously:
 - 1 Kings 21:27-29: So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house."
 - He didn't hear this pronouncement of judgement and laugh or mock or start making threats at Elijah!
 - He believed God's word...

- And because he believed, he had to go before God with all his soul and plead for mercy.
 - He fasted because he took God's word seriously.
- c. Another example of fasting because of judgement is that of David when God threatened to take the life of his child that he got by adultery with Bathsheeba.
- David wept and fasted and prayed to God for the life of the child...
 - But you will remember that God did not give him the life of the child.
 - You must not ever think that fasting means God is always going to do what you want...
 - Nevertheless, it was right for David to humble himself with fasting under God's judgement...
 - He showed his faith because he too took God seriously when God spoke.

TRANS> If you take God's word seriously when you hear His judgement,

- It will drive you to pray with great intensity and earnestness.
 - But there are also other things to take seriously that are reasons to fast...
2. There is a proper fasting when you take God's promise to the church as whole seriously, especially when you see the church in a sorry condition...
- a. When Daniel understood from Jeremiah's prophecy that the time had come for God to restore His people from captivity, he tells us what he did.
- Daniel 9:3: Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession...
 - Daniel was excited by God's promise of mercy, not to indifference, but to fervent prayer and confession for God's people!
 - He took God's promise seriously, so he fasted and prayed for God to do what He had said.
 - I could give similar examples from Nehemiah and Ezra.
- b. But let us come to the New Testament scriptures where we find the godly widow Anna.
- She knew that the time for Messiah to come had drawn near and she is commended by the Holy Spirit for her response to that knowledge...
 - Luke declares of her:
 - Luke 2:36-38: Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a

husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

- She took God's promise to send the Messiah seriously, so she continued with prayer and fasting before God, pleading with Him to do what He had promised.
- And this was not just an empty routine for her—
 - She did not keep up her prayer for this as a ritual after she saw Him!
 - Her prayers had been answered and she went about rejoicing!

TRANS> When you see the condition of the church and when you see what God has promised for the church, you will be stirred up to pray, and it is appropriate to pray with fasting.

3. A third matter to take seriously is the work of the church...
 - a. One of the most important things is the ordination of elders in the church or the sending out of missionaries...
 - I have already showed you the two examples in Acts 13 and 14 where prayer with fasting occurred concerning this matter.
 - Can we possibly look at the apostasy in the church today,
 - the leaders that have corrupted God's word and led God's people astray...
 - and not be intense about giving ourselves in prayer for this?
 - It is a matter for full attendance upon the Lord!
 - It is a matter for prayer and fasting.
 - b. And here at Covenant Reformed,
 - I covet your prayers for me as your pastor—
 - It is a serious thing to preach God's word and a matter that calls us to devote ourselves in prayer and fasting.
 - Oh that God would give us such a heart to seek His face.

TRANS> But I know that some of you would say (in all honesty),

- But what can I do if I find that my heart is not gripped the way it should be?
- Is it not hypocritical for me to fast when I frankly am not taking God so seriously as to forget my food?
 - And that leads me to the second best reason for fasting...

II. The second best reason for fasting is because you know you *should* take God seriously about these things.

A. One of the main reasons for fasting is in order that you might stir yourself up to a greater seriousness before God...

- and to a greater concentration upon Him...
- We have so many things to distract us today, that we need this more than ever!

1. In other words, you say (for example),

- “I know that my children’s covenant faithfulness is important, but I must admit that I don’t pray for it nearly as I ought.”
- “For this reason, I am going to set aside a day to pray and fast for them. I am going to fast in order that I might better devote myself to God in this matter.”

2. Fasting is a way of concentrating on God when you are finding it hard to concentrate on Him.

- Matthew Henry says,
 - “Fasting is not so much a duty for its own sake, as a means to dispose us for other duties.”
- Likewise, Calvin said:
 - “Fasting is pleasing to God only so far as it is directed to another object: and that is, to train us to abstinence, to subdue the lust of the flesh, to excite us to earnestness in prayer, and to testify our repentance, when we are affected by the view of the tribunal of God.”
 - Part of what Calvin is getting at is that we have these other things (like food) that take up so much of our attention that we neglect the things of God...
 - and fasting enables us to set aside some of those things so that we might devote ourselves more fully to prayer and meditation before God.

3. But is there scriptural warrant for all this?

a. I believe there is...

- It is one thing when you are threatened with God’s judgement and you don’t even feel like eating—don’t even think of it because you feel that you must seek God...

b. But the Bible often speaks of those who **devote** themselves to prayer and fasting.

- In other words, they must discipline themselves to do it...
 - I would suggest that this was the case with Daniel when he says:
 - “I **set my face** toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications with fastings.”
 - It was something he purposed to do and disciplined himself to do.
 - That, I would say, was the case with Anna as well.
 - It was not in the face of immediate danger or threat, but a part of regular duty—it is a discipline.
 - It was very much in the spirit of Daniel’s setting apart three periods of prayer each day...
 - It was something he knew he ought to do and so disciplined himself to do.
- It is not that Daniel and Anna were so consumed with a matter that they couldn’t eat or even that they did not want to eat,
 - but that they knew the matter to be so important that they **ought** to be giving more intense attention to it...
 - And so they set out with purpose to pray with fasting.

B. Don’t think that fasting is not pleasing to God when you do it as a discipline...

1. A person is not a hypocrite for getting up to go to work when he would rather lay in bed all morning...
 - a. He is only a hypocrite if he pretends that he is so eager to go to work that he wants to get up...
 - and even worse if he pretends to get up when he really didn’t.
 - But doing something you don’t want to do because you know it is right is not hypocrisy—it is sacrificial service.
 - b. You are not a hypocrite if set aside a time of prayer and fasting because you know that you ought to take God more seriously...
 - That is rather an act of devotion and sacrifice...
 - You are doing something you don’t want to do for God.
 - c. Remember that even Jesus did this when He went to the cross.
 - He was not all eager and excited about going to the cross,
 - but He was committed to doing God’s will, whatever that might be.
 - It was an act of honourable sacrifice because even though it was so difficult for Him to do, He did it anyway!

2. There is a sense in which I don't even know if I ought to call this the second best reason for fasting,
 - because this is really a very excellent reason to fast.
 - There is a very real sense in which fasting in order that you might take God more seriously *is* taking God seriously...
 - You don't care that you don't give a matter enough attention unless you are in fact taking God seriously.
 - So in a way, we can say that the right reason to fast is because you take God seriously.
 - You don't count Him and what He says as unimportant or something that can be quite easily set aside!
 - You know that He is the sovereign one who holds the destiny of every creature in His hand, and that it is your business to see Him earnestly.
 - That is the reason for fasting.

TRANS> But now let us consider the worst reason for fasting.

III. The worst reason for fasting is because you only want other people to *think* you take God seriously.

- A. There you are, among other Christians who at least **think** it is important to take God seriously...
 1. And so you want to be known as a serious disciple...
 - So you take it upon yourself to make sure that everyone knows that you are serious for God.
 - And one way you have found to be most convincing is by letting them find out about how you give yourself to frequent fasting and prayer...
 - Probably, there are other ways you found to impress them as well, but fasting is the one we are focusing on today.
 2. But the root of the problem is that you want to impress others with your piety.
 - a. Even if you really do want to please God too,
 - The problem is that you now have mixed motives.
 - You are double-minded, and the double-minded person is always going to be unstable.
 - He has two agendas.

- b. And what Jesus is particularly objecting to is when you start pretending to be more serious than you really are...
 - When you affect the look of seriousness and devotion...
 - when you put it on as an actor...
 - when you play the part without really being the part.
 - He talks about putting on the sad countenance—
 - the person who acts all broken and humble about their sin at church and then goes out and lives the same as always the next week.
 - Jesus even speaks of those who intentionally disfigure their faces to be seen as fasting!
 - Some of them actually put on make up to make themselves look pale and gaunt from fasting.
 - Their whole goal was to appear as those who were fasting.
- c. The problem here is in pretending to be humble and contrite when there is none of that present in your heart!
 - Think how backwards this is!
 - Fasting is supposed to be a humbling of yourself before God, and these hypocrites were actually making it an occasion for boasting!
 - There is always something wrong with a person who boasts about his repentance!
 - Repentance is not a badge of honour for a person who is really broken over his sin...
 - If you see your sin as great, you will never think highly of your repentance...
 - You will always feel that your repentance is inadequate and you will trust Jesus, not your act of repentance...
 - You will boast in the cross, not in your repentance!
 - “Oh, I was so convicted!”
 - Were you?
 - Not nearly as much as you should have been!
 - If you had really been convicted, you wouldn’t be boasting about your conviction as some great thing.
- 3. Let me ask you a question at this point...
 - Let me ask some of you children a question...

- When your parents correct you for wrongs that you have done, do you put on tears of repentance for them...
 - or do you truly repent before God?
- And when you pray,
 - Are you really calling out to God, or are you just praying because you have been told to do so?
 - It is so important to be sincere before God...
 - Do not try to play games with Him...
 - You may deceive your parents, but you will never deceive God!
 - If you are cold and distant toward God in your heart,
 - begin with that in making confession to Him—
 - begin by telling Him “I am cold and distant in my heart, help me to draw near to you.”
 - God won’t receive you if you come pretending, but He will welcome you if you come with a broken and contrite heart.
 - If your concern is to put on a show for other people, you are obviously not broken and contrite.

TRANS> Hear again what Jesus says,

- Matthew 6:16-18 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

B. But there is something that needs to be clarified for us...

1. Jesus is not criticising certain things that are suitable to the duty of fasting and prayer...
 - a. He Himself commanded His people in the Old Testament to put off their ornaments in humility after they had sinned.
 - In a public fast, it is appropriate to wear clothing of humiliation because you are submitting to the call of an authority to fast.
 - b. Moreover, it is very common to find godly men who are presented as examples to us wearing sackcloth and refusing to anoint themselves in private fasting.
 - In Daniel 10:3, Daniel writes:
 - Daniel 10:3: I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.

- This was very appropriate for one who was fasting and praying.
2. Jesus is not condemning those who do these things in private fasting as long as it remains private.
- Ordinarily, a sincere disciple who is fasting in private does not go out of his house while he is fasting...
 - Why should he when his focus is on seeking the Lord and humbling himself before Him?
 - This is not a time to be gadding about town!
 - But if he must go out, let him anoint himself and wash his face...
 - In our day, let him comb his hair and get dressed...
 - Above all, let him not put on a pathetic look or disfigure his face to show everyone that he is fasting!
 - If he is truly troubled about something, he may not be able to hide it, but let him not affect a troubled look in order to appear as one who is fasting!

TRANS> You know how easy it is to fall into this error in our religious deeds...

- As I mentioned in a previous sermon, it is so easy for us to act like the people around us more important than God!
- How offensive this is to God!
 - When we take something that is supposed to be done for Him and parade it in front of men for our own honour!
 - But there is something even worse than this...

I. Worse than this is when you don't even consider it important to take God seriously.

- A. I lament that in many ways the modern church is worse than the hypocrites of Jesus' day!
1. We are every bit as desirous to be admired as the Pharisees were—
 - a. The sorry difference is that we take pride in things that are not even noble and honourable!
 - At least praying and giving and fasting are noble deeds that ought to be esteemed!
 - But in the modern church, these things are not even esteemed!
 - b. The root of the problem is that taking God seriously is not esteemed today!
 - The fashionable thing in religion today is to take His word lightly...

- Not to talk about sin and judgement...especially about Hell!
 - To take pride in our liberty as those who can fudge on His commandments and still smile...
 - To take pride that we are never offended, even if someone blasphemes God...
 - To take pride that we do not fear God or stand in awe of Him, but are entirely familiar with Him.
 - And with these things being fashionable, you can be sure that fasting has no place!
2. The result of all this is that we don't parade ourselves as those who fast...
- Instead we parade ourselves as those who don't fast!
 - And so we have not one, but two problems!
 - We have the problem of trying to please men and do what is fashionable...
 - And we have the problem that the things that are fashionable in religion are not things that are pleasing to God—like fasting and prayer!
 - We should be ashamed that don't fast, but instead we are proud about it!

B. But now then, let me soften this a little...

1. I am not saying that if you have never fasted it means you don't take God seriously.
- a. There are some persons for whom fasting would be detrimental to their health.
 - b. Some of you may never have even thought about fasting because it is not something that is commonly practised today.
 - The important thing is not that you fast or don't fast,
 - but that you take God seriously in all of life.
2. But now I need to be hard again...
- a. The truth is that not a one of you takes God as seriously as you ought.
 - There is not a person in this room that is as serious as he ought to be...
 - as serious about God's threats...
 - and as serious about His promises so that you give yourself to earnestly plead for them with fasting and prayer...
 - and as serious about the work of the church—preaching, ordination, etc... that you ardently seek God for His help.
 - And if you deny that this is so—

- If you are saying, “I take God as seriously as I ought!”
 - Then your problem is so severe that there is little hope for you!
 - That is the hard truth!
- b. But I say, there is wonderful truth to put next to the hard truth!
- 1) And that is that Jesus Christ **did** take God seriously!
 - He took Him so seriously that when God threatened to send us Hell, Jesus Himself was willing to suffer the pains of Hell for us...
 - He knew that if He did not step in for us that God’s threat would come to pass...
 - He came into this world as He lives as man who fully took God at His word in all things.
 - 2) And Jesus did all this for us, a people who don’t take God seriously!
 - He invites us to come and receive His merit for us!
 - He is the true “repenter” for all of us whose repentance is accepted by the Father.
 - He paid for our sins with His own blood!
 - And He gives us His Spirit so that we are awakened to see our need of Him.
 - When He does, we take God seriously enough to come to Jesus for the remission of our sins!