

March 1, 2017 - Ash Wednesday
Sermon Manuscript

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

"The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. 2 And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. 3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. 6 So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. 7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

(Jesus said,) ¹ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you...

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Clarifying Fasting

Tonight we are continuing with part 9 of our series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And again I'll be drawing on Dallas Willard as we complete our passage on allowing our religious actions to be motivated by being praised or admired by others.

This past Sunday we looked at the first part of our Gospel passage on giving to the needy and prayer. And there Jesus reveals that when we do good deeds in order to be seen, what we are seeking is human admiration *rather* than the glory of God. And God certainly allows us to do this – after all, he's given us all free will. But Jesus was teaching that, when we do this, we cut **God** out of the situation, which has two effects.

First, because giving to the needy or praying for the praise of others cuts God out of the situation, it is not reasonable for us to expect God to bless it. So if we're motivated by human praise when we give to a needy person, we shouldn't expect them to be impacted in any eternal sense by what we're doing or to recognize it as God blessing them. And if we're motivated by human praise when we pray, we shouldn't expect such prayer to be very effective. Instead, **the most** we should expect is the reward we are actually seeking, namely the admiration of others.

But since we may get exactly what we're seeking – that is, the sense of people admiring how holy we are – the effect for us is that while this may feed our ego temporarily, the true effect of operating outside of the kingdom is that it shrivels our souls.

Now, these truths Jesus is revealing are certainly sobering, but the good news is he is bringing them up because he **wants** to use us. He wants us to keep him involved in the good that we do so that he can bless others through us!

But the question is: how can we put ourselves in a position for him to do this? Well, in verse 3 Jesus says, "*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.* " and in verse 6 he says "*when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.*" But these are not laws Jesus is giving. What is important is our intent: "not are we seen doing (these things), but are we doing (these things) in order to be seen." If we keep our focus on God and operating under his kingdom, that's when the things we do for the needy and our prayers will begin to emerge from us more organically and become life-giving for us and others. ##

Well, as we shift our focus tonight to the end of the passage, we find Jesus applying these same principles to fasting. In verse 16 Jesus says, "*And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*¹⁷ *But when you*

fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

So, again, when our fasting is motivated by drawing attention to ourselves, whether it's so people will admire us *or* pity us, as Jesus says, "*Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward,*" By seeking our reward from the world, rather than God, we are cutting God out of what we're doing. So, first of all, when we fast for attention, we can pretty much be sure we're going to be miserable and hungry!! But also, again, it may feed our ego, but our souls will shrivel and our fasting won't bear good fruit.

But the question that remains, is what is the aim of fasting? I mean, here Jesus is revealing that fasting *for attention* will be ineffective fasting, but what are we supposed to do with that if we don't understand the purpose or value of fasting in the first place? And I will confess that for most of my Christian life I haven't really understood the purpose of fasting. I think I've kinda understood it since becoming an Anglican, but it always felt like something I was *supposed* to do at certain times. But it was never really something I desired to do until I read Dallas Willards explanation of fasting.

Willard teaches that fasting is an experiential way that God teaches us about his complete *sufficiency* for us. If you think about it, the primary reason we humans eat is *for energy*. Through the process of digestion our bodies convert food into energy that allows our bodies to function. So, "our physical needs are met through the physical means of food." But scripture teaches us that our real source of energy is God. Now Christians often acknowledge this: "of course all good things are from God, and God provides the sun and the rain, and God gives us the ability to work and earn money to buy food," and so on. But Willard challenges us to think about God as our source of energy more directly, because God has unlimited supplies of energy that he can deliver to us via food *or other* means.

And the first example of this is in the Old Testament when God leads the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. In our first lesson from Deuteronomy tonight, Moses describes how God provided for the physical need for energy through something called manna. Now, the Hebrew word "manna" literally means "whatever it is," or "what is it?" It was this "form of physical substance that was unknown, (but) was, in fact, "a digestible form of matter suited to the physical needs of human beings." And, it was produced directly by God's action, or "word," not by a process already in place in nature." As verse 3 of Deuteronomy says, "he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." The end of this verse, of course, is the scripture Jesus quotes when Satan tempts him with bread while he fasted for forty days in the desert (Matthew

4:4). Jesus was testifying that God's means for meeting our physical needs are not limited to food. #

But we can also evidence of this in Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well in John 4. Willard recounts that story like this,

It was late afternoon, and his apprentices had gone into the town to obtain food while he rested from the journey by the town well. They returned to find him conversing with—"a woman"! They were startled that he would do such a disreputable thing. But, as people are coming out of town in response to the reports of "the woman" who had rushed back to tell of him, they urged him to eat of the food they had brought. (But) His reply teaches us much about fasting and about what happens when we are engaged with the kingdom of the heavens. He says, "I have some food you don't know about." The disciples, from their limited understanding of the possibilities of human nourishment, immediately began to ask if someone else had brought him food. Then Jesus explained the heavenly food that nourished him: "My food is to do what the One who sent me wants done and to accomplish his purposes" (John 4:34).

Now, Jesus' words here are interpreted by many as Jesus speaking poetically, saying that when we do God's will, it provides for us in the sense of making us *feel good*. But in the context of that passage the issue Jesus was addressing with his disciples was "the need for physical nourishment and how it might be met." This indicates Jesus was revealing that not only did God the Father provide him spiritually with a remarkable life and ministry, but that physical nourishment too was available *directly* from Him.

We should also remember, it is in the chapter just before Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well that Jesus introduces the concept of being "born again". It is there, in John 3, that Jesus teaches Nicodemus about this *additional* kind of life – a new reality made available in Christ – where the resources of God have become available to us, allowing us to be far more effective than we could be when relying on ourselves. Perhaps we should understand those resource to be both spiritual *and* physical.

Well, this is where fasting comes in, because fasting is fundamentally the affirmation that we live in the world of God where **He** is the source of energy. And it makes sense that God would give us this physical means for learning this, because think about it: none of us learns to trust God *intellectually*, by learning facts about God, we learn to trust God experientially, through trusting him and experiencing him come through for

us. Well, that's what fasting does: it teaches us experientially that God can be relied upon, that he can be trusted to provide for us in *every* way. #

One illustration of how fasting works can work in ways that are so *counter-intuitive* is something Willard shared in an interview of his I was watching. Willard said whenever he was exhausted from doing ministry, that's when he would fast. Now, this is surprising, because when we think about being exhausted, it seems like one of the best things to do would be to get a good meal in us. But by fasting, Willard was demonstrating his need and desire for God to strengthen him in ways that food was insufficient. #

So, as we're thinking about fasting, we need to understand, as Jesus says to us in Matthew, fasting should never be motivated by seeking the praise or approval of others – that will only make us miserable. And fasting should also never be done to earn God's approval – His love and acceptance are a free gift to us in Christ and nothing we do or don't do has any bearing on that. The value of incorporating a discipline of regular fasting into our lives is the power it has to re-acclimate us to relying on God. As it teaches us to rely on God for His provision to our body, it similarly aligns our spirits and will to rely upon him in all ways. Fasting, when done in this way, keeps us operating in the power of His kingdom. ## ## ##

By the way, there are all sorts of ways to fast. Tonight, in the back I'll have a little article available as you leave that describes different methods and approaches to fasting.

But my prayer tonight is that this teaching on fasting will actually make you excited to try it! Perhaps it's a discipline God wants you to experiment with some throughout Lent – there is still time to commit to it! Or perhaps God is just calling you to set aside a day to fast in secret and see what happens.

Our motivation for fasting should never be done to be seen by others. But if our desire is to live empowered by the Lord and operate in his kingdom, fasting can be a tremendous gift!

Amen.

Source used: Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy* and an excerpt from an interview with Willard that can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oocf0eoAy5I>