

Forgiveness and Fasting

by Dick Woodward

Jesus teaches that forgiveness and fasting are essential spiritual disciplines that should be done unto God, not unto men, in order to increase our spiritual awareness and deepen our relationship with God.

Duration: 21:01

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-12, Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 5:43 - 6:18

Topics: "Forgiveness"

Description

In this sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, the teacher focuses on Jesus' teachings about fasting and forgiveness. He emphasizes the importance of not being like hypocrites who make a show of their fasting, but rather to fast in secret and look to God for reward. The teacher also highlights the significance of the spiritual part of human beings, stating that man does not live by bread alone but by every word from God. He references Deuteronomy 8 to explain the purpose of fasting, which is to remind us that our sustenance comes from God's word.

Transcript

We are glad you have joined us for another practical lesson from the teachings of Jesus that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Today our teacher will help us understand Jesus' teaching about fasting and the importance of forgiveness. There is much for us to learn in today's lesson from Matthew chapter 6 verses 14 through 18 about fasting and forgiveness.

Now, let us join our teacher. Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with the sad countenances, 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. I have just read verses 16 through 18 of Matthew chapter 6 where Jesus is continuing to tell us about the spiritual disciplines that enable us to look upward. In the Sermon on the Mount, he challenged us to look inward and by the grace of God to find in our hearts these beautiful attitudes that are his profile of a disciple.

We have called it the character that is Christian. The crises involved in becoming a Christian is pictured for us in the setting of this sermon, as was the strategy of the sermon and the context in which it was given.

Then the Beatitudes profile for us the character involved in being a Christian.

The rest of Matthew 5 had to do with the challenge involved when that kind of character impacts the culture. In other words, the largest part of Matthew 5 was application. In the Beatitudes, Jesus challenged us to look inward, and then in the rest of Matthew 5, he challenged us to look around.

By the time he finished telling us what we should find when we look inward and what should take place when we look around, we were ready for chapter 6. In chapter 6, Jesus said that if you're going to be what you're supposed to be when you look inward and when you look around, you simply have to look upward. You cannot relate to your brother, to your adversary, to women, to your wife, to your neighbor, to the evil person, to the enemy in the way that he wants us to relate unless we look upward and receive grace from God. And we will never have these attitudes in our hearts unless we have grace from God.

So we were ready for chapter 6 when he tells us to look upward. When we look upward, there are spiritual disciplines that must be in place if we're going to have an upward look and maintain that upward look and to cultivate that upward look. The first is the discipline, the spiritual discipline of giving.

The second discipline Jesus taught in chapter 6 was the discipline of prayer. In the context of that discipline of prayer, he gave the great teaching to his disciples about the manner of prayer. In the context of that manner of prayer, we have the disciples prayer, which is not only a prayer as we have seen, but a manner of praying, perhaps an outline for our prayers.

Now many people have questions about the disciples prayer. I would like to address one of them before we go on to the third spiritual discipline that Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 6, which is the discipline of fasting. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

We are told to pray in Matthew chapter 6 and 12. And then when the prayer teaching has been given, Jesus gives this further explanation. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, then your Father will not forgive your trespasses. People say that it seems like Jesus is teaching that one must forgive to be forgiven. That doesn't line up with the rest of the New Testament theology, because the New Testament clearly says that the basis for our forgiveness is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

When Jesus died on the cross, he cried, it is finished. And so we refer to the finished work of Christ on the cross. And we like to point out, of course, consistent with the teaching of the scripture, especially in a theological masterpiece like Paul's letter to the Romans, that when Jesus Christ finished that work of redemption, he accomplished everything that had to be accomplished so that sin could be forgiven.

It is impossible to add anything to the finished work of Jesus Christ. The question we like to ask is, do you think he did enough? Or do you think you have to finish the job? Do you think you have to add something to what he did? The clear answer in scripture, of course, is that you cannot add anything to the finished work of Christ. As the book of Hebrews says, there could be no more offering for sin in light of the fact that he, Jesus, gave up his own life as the supreme offering to God so that sin can be forgiven.

You cannot offer anything more in addition to what Jesus did. Then how can we explain a teaching like, forgive us as we forgive? And then we have Jesus's statement, if you do not forgive, then you are not forgiven. I think the answer is something like this.

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus gave a great teaching about forgiveness and the importance of our being forgiving people. Matthew 18, beginning at verse 21, says this great parable was prompted by a question Peter asked. It says, then Peter came to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? I understand that the rabbis taught that you should forgive them seven times.

Jesus said to him, I don't say to you up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven. Some scholars say that what he meant was literally 70 times seven. Some even say that what he meant was seven multiplied by itself 70 times, which could be an infinite number.

Of course, having given that answer to Peter, Jesus accompanied his answer with a parable. The word parable comes from two words, para and balo. The Greek word balo is the word for throwing and para means alongside of.

So parabolos or parable was a story Jesus threw alongside of a truth to illustrate that truth. The truth is in his answer to Peter, you do not forgive somebody seven times, but 77 times. Now to illustrate the answer, he throws alongside of that answer to Peter's question, this parable in Matthew chapter 18, verses 23 through 35.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle his accounts, one was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. But as he was not able to pay his master commanded that he be sold with his wife and children and all that he had so that the payment would be made.

The servant therefore fell down before him saying, master, have patience with me and I will pay you all. Then the master of the servant was moved with compassion, released him and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii.

And he laid hands on him and took him by the throat saying, pay me what you owe. So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him saying, have patience with me and I will pay you all. And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not have also had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

So my heavenly father also will do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother his trespasses. The clear teaching of the parable is this enormous debt that is canceled because the one who owes the debt begs for mercy. And then having had an enormous debt canceled, this same servant who had the debt canceled comes across somebody who owes him a small amount and he chokes the man, insists upon payment in full.

When the payment could not be made, he throws the one who owes him the small debt into prison. Now, when the one who canceled the great debt for him heard this, he called the servant back and said, friend, you didn't get the message. I canceled an enormous debt for you, and you wouldn't cancel a small debt for your brother.

I'm changing my mind. I'm throwing you into prison after all. This is a parable.

That's a story thrown alongside of a truth. But here is the application. In the first verse of Matthew 18, it says, this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

The clear application is this. When you come to Christ and you receive your initial forgiveness, when you hear the gospel, when you believe it and are saved, it's as if an enormous debt has been canceled. All your sins, all the ones you've committed or ever will commit have been canceled.

Now, if you really believe that enormous debt of sin has been canceled for you, then when somebody sins against you in some small way, if you really do understand how much you have been forgiven, then would you not be a forgiving person yourself? The teaching seems to be, yes, indeed, you would be a forgiving person. In fact, it goes this far. It says that if you're not a forgiving person, you probably don't understand that you are a forgiven person.

You probably don't even really believe that you are a forgiven person. If you're not a forgiving person, it is only in this sense that Jesus says we should pray, forgive us our debts. And I think it is why he uses the term debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

He is thinking about that parable, the very large debt, and then the one who is indebted just a small amount. If I have been forgiven a great debt, then I should be forgiving when someone owes me such a small debt. And that is why Jesus explains if you forgive men when they sin against you, then you are a forgiven person indeed, because you understand it and you believe it.

But if you're not a forgiving person, you either don't understand the debt that was canceled for you, or you really don't believe it. You must have the faith that you have been forgiven. Our being forgiving is simply a work that is an evidence.

It simply validates the faith, the fact that we understand it and believe it where our forgiveness is concerned. Somebody has said Jesus Christ paid a debt that we did not owe because we owe a debt that we could not pay. This parable in Matthew 18 illustrates that.

Perhaps that will clear up this question that is so often asked about the disciples' prayer. Now, let's move on to this third spiritual discipline that Jesus mentions here in Matthew 6, fasting. Again, the word hypocrite is used.

Again, Jesus is contrasting, as he does in all three spiritual disciplines, the righteousness of the hypocrites, the religious establishment, who were actors on a stage where righteousness was concerned. Jesus is contrasting their righteousness with the righteousness the disciples must have, which must surpass the righteousness of the hypocrites, the religious establishment. Again, you have this thought that the righteousness of the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, the hypocrites, were merely a horizontal kind of righteousness.

When they fasted, it wasn't unto God, as before God. It was unto men, and it was before men that they might appear to be religious as they fasted. These people would disfigure their faces and portray this hungry look.

Then when people would ask them, Is something wrong with you? They would answer, No, I'm fasting. I believe you have the same teaching here that you have both in the spiritual discipline of giving and the

spiritual discipline of prayer. It should be as unto God, not as unto men.

It should be before God, not before men. And if it is, in fact, before God and not before men, men don't need to know that you are fasting any more than they need to know that you are giving, any more than they need to know that you're praying. Here's a teaching that a lot of us would look at and say, Frankly, this is not my favorite passage of Scripture.

Most of us, if we could see pictures of one another, would be judging by our photographs that we certainly do not know very much about fasting. If the coroner examines most of us, he would describe us as well-nourished, because most of us have a well-nourished look. So it may be that we don't know much about fasting.

Is fasting for today? Is it still important? I think it is because Jesus taught it. If we understand the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, as we did in chapter five, then I think we come to understand that fasting is still important for the disciples of Jesus Christ today. What is the letter of the law where fasting is concerned? It is like the Pharisee who prayed in the temple with the publican, God, I thank you that I'm not as other men are.

I fast twice in a week. I give tithes of all that I possess. The Pharisee is thanking God that he's not like all those people he's looking down upon, such as the publican praying in the corner.

The Pharisee is boasting about the fact that he fasts twice a week. That is the letter of the law. And that is a horizontal righteousness again to be seen of men.

But what is the spirit of the law fasting? This is where we see that fasting is still for today. The spirit of the law always gives life when we understand it. By the spirit of the law, we mean, what is the purpose of the law? What is the principle taught by the law? What did God have on his heart when he instituted the law? When you discover the purpose, then apply it to fasting.

What is fasting really about? I think we find the answers to that in Deuteronomy chapter eight. In the first three verses, remember the great sermon of Moses, where he told the children of Israel to look back and remember all the ways that the Lord led them for those 40 years in the wilderness. He says, during those 40 years in the wilderness, God permitted you to experience hunger.

And then he fed you supernaturally with a food that you had never heard of before, and neither had your fathers. In order that God might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that has ever proceeded from the mouth of God. Matthew chapter four and four, and Deuteronomy eight, three.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, do you remember the temptation? Turn these stones into bread. And do you remember the response of Jesus? It is written, man does not live by bread alone. Man lives by every word that has ever come from the mouth of God.

That's a very important spiritual truth, which is simply saying that the key to life is not physical. The most important part of a human being is not his physical part. It's his spiritual part.

We are all made up of two parts. We are physical, and we are spiritual. There is a part of us that is tangible, material, and visible.

You can see it, you can feel it, you can touch it. And there is a part of us that you cannot see, you cannot touch, and you cannot feel. It is the spiritual part of us.

When we die, that means that this real part of us, the spiritual part of us, goes out of our body. Scripture says that our body is like a tent, a tent that the spirit lives in. Second Corinthians chapter four says the body is just a perishable container.

The scripture makes much of a fact that the real part of a man is not the outward man, as Paul calls it in Second Corinthians four and five. But the real part, the external part of us, the important part of us, is the spiritual part. It's what Paul calls the inward man or the inner man.

The inner man, the spiritual man, is more important than the outer man, the physical man. Therefore, anything that sustains the inner man, anything that nurtures and feeds the spiritual part of man, is more important than that which sustains or feeds or nurtures his outer man, the physical man. That is what you prove when you believe.

That is the value you declare when you are fasting. When you fast, you're saying simply that the inner part of a man, the spiritual part of a man, is more important than the physical part of a man. Therefore, to sustain the inner man through the Word of God is more important than just eating food to sustain the physical part of a man, the outer part of a man.

Man does not really live just by eating bread. Is not the life more than meat and the body more than clothes? Matthew chapter six and verse twenty five. Jesus will ask that question in the second part of this chapter, as we will see in our next studies.

What is your life? What is your body? What is the spiritual part of you? What do you really value in these things? Is it your physical part or your spiritual part? Therefore, is it more important to sustain your physical part or to sustain your spiritual part? When you think about these things and focus the values they represent, then you can appreciate the spirit of the law of fasting. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai and fasted for forty days and nights, what he was saying by that act of fasting was, God, I want a word from you that will sustain my inner man and the inner man of your people at the bottom of the mountain for whom I am responsible. I want that word from you that will feed our spiritual parts more than I want to eat.

Have you ever come to that place and your hunger for God and the Word of God and the things of the spirit? That is what fasting seems to be all about. Some doctors recommend fasting is a good health practice. I believe there are some excellent things that have been written about fasting.

You really need to know what you're doing if you make the decision to fast. It's very important to be careful about the last things you eat before you begin to fast for a long period of time. And then when your digestive system goes to sleep, it is very important that you know how to awaken it again.

You cannot begin eating again with a big meal. If you're interested in fasting, really interested, then do some homework, do some research and get some medical facts about it. But what is the spiritual meaning of fasting? What is the spirit of the law of fasting? It seems to be this.

Your spiritual part is more important than your physical part. Show yourself and show God that you understand that the spiritual part of you is more important than the physical part of you by denying yourself physical sustenance at times so you can increase your spiritual awareness. But when you're doing this, Jesus reminds us as he did when he taught about giving and praying, don't let it be done to put on a show.

Fast is unto the Lord, not to appear spiritual to others. That is what Jesus is saying here. If you're fasting, let it be between you and God.

It doesn't have to include anyone else. Make sure it's a vertical act of worship. Make sure it is unto God and before God and for God and not for the praise of men.

So whether it is giving, praying or fasting, it should be a vertical discipline. It is not supposed to be a horizontal discipline. Spiritual disciplines are vertical disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines are before God and not before men. God bless you until next time. We pray that the mini Bible college has helped you get to know God better and to serve him better as you follow him today and that he has filled you with his peace, joy and encouragement to be the faithful disciple that he has called you to be until we meet again.

Our prayer is that you will be more committed to forgive as you are forgiven and to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting as you put God first in your life.

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