

Pharisees Are Ascetics

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes that true spirituality is not about external disciplines like fasting, but about controlling one's tongue, thoughts, and eyes.

Scripture: Matthew 6:16, Matthew 9:14, Luke 7:34, James 3:2

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "True Holiness"

Description

Zac Poonen addresses the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who emphasized fasting and asceticism as a means to holiness, contrasting it with Jesus' approach, who fasted out of His holiness rather than to appear holy. He highlights that true spirituality is not about external disciplines but about internal control, particularly over one's speech and thoughts. Poonen points out that Jesus enjoyed life, demonstrated by His first miracle of turning water into wine, which challenged the legalistic mindset of the Pharisees. He warns against boasting about fasting or any spiritual discipline, emphasizing that such acts should be voluntary and not for show. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of holiness that transcends mere external practices.

Transcript

"Why do the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" (Matthew 9:14).

Pharisees forced people to fast and pray. They emphasised bodily disciplines like fasting as a means of becoming spiritual and they boasted about it. Jesus fasted even more than the Pharisees. But He did not fast in order to be holy. He fasted because He was holy. And Jesus did not boast about His fasting like the Pharisees. Neither did He ever force people to fast - not when He was on earth and not today. Fasting has value before God only when it is totally voluntary. Otherwise it becomes a dead work.

People of all religions practise some forms of asceticism, like fasting. Some even stop having sexual relations with their wives in order to be holy. But that is not the way for a Christian to be holy. The mark of a perfect man is not that he disciplines himself in matters of food and sex, but that he can control his tongue (James 3:2). Then we must control our thoughts and our eyes.

Jesus could enjoy a good meal. They called Him "a gluttonous man" (Luke 7:34). His very first miracle was making extra wine at a wedding! That looked like one of the most unnecessary miracles that Jesus ever did. Those guests had already drunk so much wine; and Jesus made 600 litres of wine for a wedding party of perhaps 200 guests - which would mean that He made 3 litres of wine per person!! What was the need

to make so much wine for them? We would have thought that Jesus' first miracle should have been a more "spiritual" miracle like raising the dead! One reason why He did this miracle was because He came to demolish a religion of externals that taught, "Don't touch this. Don't taste that", etc.

I have met Christians (in certain denominations especially), who subtly mention their periods of fasting in their conversation. They say words like, "I just want to share with you a precious word the Lord gave me when I was on a 21-day fast recently". Their main point there is to impress you with the fact that they fasted for 21 days. All their other words are secondary. Jesus however told us never to let anyone know when we fasted. But Pharisees boast about their asceticism.

There is certainly an important place for discipline in eating and sleeping and sexual matters in the Christian life. But this is definitely not a matter that we should tell others about or glory in.

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