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Sermon: March 1, 2015  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“ACTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: FASTING”**  
**Matthew 6:16-18**

? {Php 3:8} Are our good works of value to God, or are they so much **“dung”**?

? Are our spiritual practices of prayer, study, and worship worth it, or are they a waste of time and energy?

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 6:16: **“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”**

📖 Biblical fasting is going without food for a certain period of time for a religious or spiritual purpose.

Messiah says, **“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do.”** Elsewhere, he identifies two strains of the disorder we call hypocrisy.

⊖ One is the hypocrisy of behavioral inconsistency, which is a considerable contradiction between *faith claim* and *action*. It is saying one thing but doing another.

{Mt 23:2-3} Christ Jesus advises, **“Do everything” “the Pharisees” “tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”**

Is that the case here? Are these hypocrites claiming to abstain from food but pigging out behind locked doors?

Imagine you are a first century Jew.

{Mt 6:1} Since early childhood you have been taught that fasting is one of the three principal **“acts of righteousness”** (the other two being almsgiving and

prayer). If you desire to conduct yourself in a righteous manner, you *will* fast.

Since early childhood you have been taught that righteous deeds, in combination with the Law of Moses and ethnic traditions, are what set apart the people of Israel from the nations. If you want to be recognized as fully Jewish, you *will* fast.

Since early childhood you have been taught that God unfailingly rewards those who do righteous deeds on a quid pro quo, tit-for-tat basis. If you wish to receive blessings from the LORD, you *will* fast.

Not only so, you will fast *regularly* and *often*.

Scripture requires only one fast per year, on the Day of Atonement. Lev 23:29 commands, **“Those who do not deny themselves on that day must be cut off from their people.”** Everyone interprets that language of denial as shorthand for fasting.

There are other situations in which fasting is customary: the death of a loved one and the realization of a grievous sin are the most common.

However, fasting has become so important in Hebrew faith that very few limit it to those occasions. Anyone who is the least bit religious fasts every Monday and Thursday, week in and week out, *and* in major crisis, *and* on the Day of Atonement.

The large majority of first century Jews are convinced that righteousness, Jewish identity, and divine favor depend to a significant degree on fasting. What are the chances that anyone is making a show of fasting without actually doing it? They are slight, indeed!

⊖ The other strain of hypocrisy is false motives, which is a major discrepancy between *action* and *intent*. It is doing the right thing but for the wrong reasons.

{Mt 23:5} Elsewhere, Jesus remarks that **“Everything [these hypocrites] do is done for people to see.”**

That is what is going on here. How does Messiah describe these fasters in verse 16? **“They disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.”**

☑ {Barclay} **“They disfigure their faces.”** They take pains to project a look of hunger and weakness. They go out in public **“with their hair deliberately unkempt and disheveled”** and their **“clothes deliberately soiled and disarrayed.”** Some go so far as to **“deliberately [whiten] their faces to accentuate their”** natural **“paleness.”** They do everything but wear a sandwich board that screams **“LOOK AT ME! I’M FASTING!”**

The problem is not that they are *lying* about fasting. It is that they are fasting so *everyone knows it*.

One would think these biblically literate people might recall YHWH’s words in Zechariah 7:5: **“Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted’”**

? **“Was it really for me?”** Was it really for God?

This is the crux of the matter. Are you fasting for God or for a human audience?

It is easy to suppose Matthew 6:16-18 is not for us. We fast so rarely that if someone comes to church looking pale and disheveled, we are not impressed by his or her spirituality; we wonder if they are ill.

We are mistaken in our supposition about this text. The teaching in this text could hardly be more relevant!

⊕ Jesus frames hypocrisy as falsity of motive. It follows that his judgment is not narrowly limited to fasting; it relates to any religious action or spiritual discipline that is undertaken for the wrong reasons (or, if you will, for the wrong person).

Therefore, when he critiques hypocrites who fasting **“for people to see,”** I need to ask myself some questions:

When I pray in a restaurant is my attention on God or on human beings who might observe me?

When I have a conversation about spiritual matters is my focus on glorifying God and loving my neighbor, or on appearing holy, knowledgeable, or bold?

When I participate in a worship service is my aim to draw near to God and worship him, or is it just to satisfy human expectation?

When I usher, read Scripture, or sing in the choir, am I doing it for God or for someone else? When I preach, am I acting in devotion to God, or to impress you?

If we do these things mainly **“for people to see,”** then we are to be pitied! The hypocrites in verse 16 make every effort **“to show others they are fasting”** – and they succeed. Observers cannot help but notice what they are doing.

But what does the Lord say about them? **“They have received their reward *in full*.”** Human attention and approval are all that they will gain from fasting.

✈ The solution to self-centered display is easily achieved. In a word, it is concealment.

■ Matthew 6:17-18: **“But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face”** – maintain normal hygiene, or put in a little extra effort as if you are going to a party – **“so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”**

{Mt 5:16} Sometimes it is good to **“let your light shine before others.”** A friend might benefit from hearing your testimony, or if you journal a brother or sister might pick up some good tips.

✈ In such cases, intentionally keeping the focus on God can make all the difference. We can emphasize his mercy, his generosity, and his help more than our plea, our prayer, and our effort.

📖 Alas, exhibitionism is not the only indicator of false motive! There is also instrumentalism, which is using religious action or spiritual discipline for selfish purposes.

It is possible to do things quietly, subtly, so no other human can possibly notice – and still not do them for God. Many in verse 16 fast, not only **“to show others,”** but also as a way to *get* God’s attention (“Look at me!”), rather than a way of responding *to* God’s attention (“O God, you are looking at me!”).

Many fast as a way to make God forgive their sins, rather than a way of participating in God’s grief and anger over sin and the damage it inflicts.

Many fast as a way to earn God’s favor, rather than a way of expressing desperate need for God.

Many fast as a way to persuade God to do something, rather than a way of surrendering to God’s will.

In short, many use fasting as a mechanistic equation or calculated technique or manipulative instrument. This, too, is hypocrisy of false motives.

? What about us? When we pray or journal or study or worship alone and out of sight, is it really for God? Do our spiritual activities have the look, sound, fragrance, feel, and taste of genuine desire, not mainly for what God can give to us and do for us, but for God himself?

Do you remember the Pharisee in Luke 18 {10-12}? He goes to the temple and prays: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”**

Of course, he wants others to know how good he is. Yet his priority is to catch God’s eye: Look at me LORD, **“I fast twice a week”!** Look at me LORD, **“I... give a tenth”!**

{Lk 18:14} He foolishly presumes that he has swayed YHWH by his efforts; but he has not favorably influenced God. Contrary to his assumptions he is neither **“justified”** nor more highly esteemed.

This is hypocrisy of false motives. Any “reward” that might come from it is not from God.

✈ The solution to spiritual instrumentalism is seeking God more than his blessings. We can read the Bible, pray, and fast as a means, not of pleasing God but of setting the table for a meal with God. We can do acts of justice and mercy, not to earn God’s love but to share God’s love. And so on.

{Ps 42:1-2} What does the psalmist say?

**“As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for”** your blessings?

No! He cries out,

**“As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, my God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God?”**

{Mt 6:33} **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things”** – the rich blessings that flow freely in a relationship of love with God – **“will be given to you as well.”**

- ▣ **“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that**

**you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”**

Matthew 6:16-18 is the word of the Lord.