

Prayer & Fasting

The Jewish teachers of the law considered themselves as the guardians and true interpreters of the law, but as we saw in Matthew 5, Jesus shows the superficiality of their 'righteousness'. The true heart-demands of the law were far too difficult to keep, so the scribes had laid them aside and replaced them with a great many petty rules and regulations that were do-able. True heart obedience is impossible to measure and evaluate. External religious actions are much easier both to do and to measure, but these are not what God wants. This is not what the law is about at all.

As Dave shared last week, the scribes and Pharisees did exactly the same with their worship, replacing true heart devotion with outward show. Everyone was well impressed with their demonstrations of 'piety'. Ordinary people didn't even try and imitate them; they were a class apart. They wore special robes, little boxes with scriptures on their foreheads (phylacteries), and they performed many ritual acts, ritual washings, praying, giving and fasting; the way they worshipped was pure theatre. It might have impressed the people, but it didn't impress Jesus or his Father, but rather angered them, because they not only imagined they were pleasing God, but taught others to do the same!

Dave dealt with the first five verses very well last week on the subjects of *Worship and Giving* and this week we are continuing this theme by looking at *Prayer and Fasting*. I am not going to go through the Lord's Prayer as we have already spent six weeks on Wednesdays going through it section by section. So today we shall simply look at the context in which we find this model prayer.

v 5-8 Instructions for prayer.

Jesus said, 'When you pray', not if you pray. Prayer is as vital as breathing - when you breathe not if you breathe! It is the only way of maintaining a relationship with God our Father. It's a personal, private interaction between us and our God. So Jesus says go into a private place, your inner room and pray 'in secret'. Although Jesus speaks about giving, praying and fasting as being secret, elsewhere Jesus speaks strongly against keeping secrets - our secrets will be shouted from the rooftops! Whatever you think of Wikileaks, they are shouting secrets from the rooftops - well, publicly on-line. It all sounds very biblical and has upset those governments who have had secrets made public. We only keep secrets because we have vested interest and critical opinions and

because we are not in clear open relationships with other people and parties. Integrity, honesty, openness and truthfulness are biblical values. So I find it very difficult when I ask someone an innocent question, such as "Missed you last Sunday, where were you?" and they get all cagy and refuse to answer me, as if what they were doing was secret and why am I poking my nose into their affairs! Eh? What's that all about? So when Jesus speaks of secrecy here he does so in contrast to the theatrical show of the scribes and Pharisees. It is not about secrecy, it is about privacy; about our being alone with the Lord. Just like Jesus, who didn't usually have an inner room to go into where he could shut the door, so he went out into 'lonely places' so he could be alone with his Father. Our walk with God is not secret - we need accountability to one another in things such as giving, prayer, fasting. It might be a good thing to make ourselves accountable to a friend or leader if we are struggling to make time to be alone with God. They might be able to help us and encourage us.

Our private devotion to God is where our spiritual life comes from. There is private prayer and there is public prayer. At ABC we are responding to God's call to become a **community of prayer** and the key to this is our private and personal prayer. We can never become a *community of prayer* if we are not praying and developing our personal private prayer lives. Our corporate prayer life is the sum of our personal prayer lives.

Praying together adds an even more powerful dimension to our personal prayer. United praying with one accord, agreeing together, is hugely powerful. We pray individually to God and we 'get our reward', but corporate prayer has immense power. Imagine what can be accomplished when we prayer with one accord! So we will be gathering all this week to join our personal prayers into a 'concert of prayer', each individual contribution makes wonderful harmony together like instruments in an orchestra. If private prayer has the promise of God's reward, what can we expect when we pray together, as a body, in one accord?

v 16-18 Instructions for Fasting

Fasting was a regular part of Jewish worship and devotion to the Lord. e.g Anna Lk 2:37. I love the way it describes her, "worshiping day and night, fasting and praying". Fasting is a form of worship. Prayer is commanded in the NT ('pray without ceasing') but fasting is not. Yet Jesus says 'when you fast', again not 'if you fast', do it privately and do not put on a show. The Jews often fasted individually, but fasting was also often communal. In the OT leaders often proclaimed a fast, calling the whole community to

fast together, sometime by blowing a rams-horn, shofar. The teachers of the law held regular fast days, often fasting twice a week, as did John the Baptist and his disciples but Jesus and his disciples did not. They did participate in public fasts such as the Day of Atonement, but Jesus didn't encourage his disciples to get into religious regular weekly fasts, as John did. Jesus himself, fasted 40 days in the wilderness and at other times he went without food saying that his food was to do the will of his Father. So Jesus neither encouraged fasting nor did he teach against fasting. He said that fasting would become part of his disciples 'spiritual disciplines' when he was no longer with them, which we see is exactly what happened on a number of occasions in the book of Acts.

So what is the point of fasting?

Fasting is going without food with the specific purpose of giving undivided attention to the Lord. It shows God that you are serious about him. It is a personal act of devotion to the Lord and is private. (Although it is difficult for it be truly private when you live with others at home.) Please note carefully: fasting does not earn you merit points with God - it is not a way of twisting God's arm to ensure he answers our prayers. But Jesus does promise a reward for fasting privately. What sort of reward? As it is a means of helping us to focus ourselves on God and on prayer, its reward is closeness to the Lord. It was the way that God's people humbled themselves before God's mighty hand at times of repentance and mourning, and it shows God, and us, that we are serious about our walk with the Lord and our dependence upon him. The early Church fasted in order to seek God, they fasted when they appointed new leaders, and I love the passage that says that 'they ministered to the Lord with fasting'. Paul encourages married couples to abstain from sex so that they can give themselves to prayer and fasting. So fasting is a feature of a NT life of faith and should also be a feature of our life with the Lord.

So how do we do it?

Fasting means not eating food. Most of us don't need to eat every day and there are definite health benefits in missing meals and going without food for a day or several days. Forty days is the limit, after which our bodies begin to deteriorate and feel agonising hunger (just as happened with Jesus in the desert) so anything less than this is perfectly safe for most healthy people. It is a beneficial detox, but its main benefit is not physical but spiritual, as it sharpens our minds and heightens our spiritual awareness. Fasting for one day is quite manageable. If you fast for a second you will feel rotten, on the third day you will still feel unpleasant.

But after this your body stops craving food, it loses its hunger cravings and begins to burn up fat reserves. So most of us could easily fast for days without feeling hungry - up to seven weeks! However it is very important that when we fast we must always drink plenty of water and keep active (but not too active).

An alternative to a full fast is a partial fast. This can include missing a main meal, or cutting out breakfast and lunch and just having one main meal a day, eating only vegetables for the duration or doing a liquid fast (drinking light soups and other drinks). If we are doing five days fast this is recommended as it helps us avoid the two and three day 'yucky' feeling. Or just do one full day fasting and then eat lightly the rest of the time. If you choose to just drink water for the week, watch out for caffeine withdrawal. I prefer to cut out all caffeine drinks several weeks before I am going to fast so I can get over the withdrawal headaches before I start fasting.

Giving up chocolate and sweets, cakes or biscuits may be an excellent health choice, but this is not really 'fasting'. Neither is giving up TV or computer games or surfing the net. But, having said that, anything that releases time and concentrates our minds on the Lord and on prayer is valuable, even if it is not fasting. Do it anyway!

- During this coming week of prayer we are proclaiming a fast. We would like everyone at ABC to fast in some way during these next five days. How you participate is totally up to you. But please do combine it with prayer, otherwise there is not a lot of point, and if you can, do join us for our prayer times during the week to make your experience even better. Be part of a wonderful concert of prayer. You can find the details of each evening's topics in the News & Notices. If you have no idea what a *Prayer Maze* is come along and discover it for yourself. Have a great week.

Phil Rogers
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