



In today's passage, Jesus gives us profound insights into the nature of spiritual disciplines, namely fasting, as practiced by Jesus' followers. In these verses, Jesus emphasizes the importance of authenticity and humility in our spiritual disciplines, fasting discreetly rather than seeking the admiration of others. As seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount, today's passage points to the attitudes and behaviors that characterize genuine righteousness. By instructing His followers to anoint their heads and wash their faces, Jesus contrasts sincere devotion with religious practices motivated by the recognition of others. Today, we dive into the context, theological significance, and practical applications of Jesus' teachings on fasting, inviting us to reflect on our motivations regarding spiritual practices.

Key Passage: Matthew 6:16-18

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Jesus mean when he says, "when you fast," and how does this imply an expectation for his followers? What role has fasting played in your spiritual life?

When Jesus says, "when you fast", He's implying that fasting is a regular practice for His followers. Using "when" rather than "if" indicates that Jesus assumes we will engage in fasting as a part of our spiritual discipline. Within Jewish tradition, fasting was a common practice for repentance, seeking God's guidance, and deepening one's spiritual life.

2. In what ways can fasting become a means of seeking approval from others rather than a spiritual discipline?

In our passage today, Jesus warns us against public displays of discomfort or suffering, such as looking gloomy, to highlight to others that we're fasting. This can be a way to gain recognition and admiration from others. Additionally, we're warned not to announce our fasting openly to others, which is often done to make others aware of our sacrifice and dedication. Today, we might be tempted to share that we're fasting by posting on social media to seek recognition from others, which may become a primary motivation.

3. How does fasting in secret align with the theme of humility and sincerity in the Sermon on the Mount?

By addressing how fasting should be conducted, Jesus underscores that the act is not in question but rather the attitude and intention behind it. He calls for a sincere and humble approach, emphasizing that fasting should be a private act of devotion to God rather than a public display seeking recognition from others.

4. What are the implications of the phrase "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you"?

This phrase has significant implications for the nature of God and the authenticity and motivation of our spiritual practices. First, it highlights God's intimate awareness of all our actions and intentions, even those hidden from others. The assurance that God sees what is done secretly should encourage us to focus on genuine devotion rather than external validation. Secondly, this phrase emphasizes the importance of sincerity in our spiritual disciplines. Jesus is saying that true spirituality is not measured by outward appearances but by our heart's intention, which should cause us to examine our motives to ensure they are directed toward pleasing God rather than impressing others. Lastly, the promise of a reward from God reminds us of the value God places on authentic worship. The reward mentioned is not necessarily material or immediate. Still, it signifies the deeper spiritual blessings and a closer relationship with God that results from sincere, humble devotion.

5. In light of today's passage, is corporate fasting wrong? Doesn't Jesus warn us to do it in secret? If it's not wrong, what is its corporate benefit?

There are numerous examples in the Bible of corporate fasting, where people fasted together for a common purpose. For instance, in the Book of Esther, Queen Esther called for a corporate fast among the Jews (Esther 4:16). Similarly, in the Book of Acts, the early Christians fasted and prayed together before making significant decisions (Acts 13:2-3). These instances show that corporate fasting has a place in biblical practice. Corporate fasting can help foster a sense of unity among believers. It allows us to come together with a common purpose, seek God collectively, and support each other spiritually. As we've seen in today's study, the key factor is our intention behind fasting. Whether individual or corporate, fasting should be done with a sincere heart, aiming to draw closer to God, seek His guidance, or intercede for a specific cause. Corporate fasting can be spiritually enriching if the motive is genuine and not for public recognition or self-promotion.

6. How can we ensure that our fasting (or practicing other spiritual disciplines) is motivated by a focus on God? What role does intentionality play in fasting and other spiritual disciplines?

Fasting and other spiritual disciplines should be carried out to draw closer to God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus highlights that the attitude of the heart is more important than outward actions. Regarding spiritual disciplines, when our purpose is clear and rooted in a desire for spiritual growth, we are more likely to maintain these disciplines regularly and with dedication.