

Fasting for the Reward of the Father

by John Piper

Fasting for the right reasons means seeking God's approval, not the praise of men, and seeking the Lord's prayer, which is God's glory, kingdom, and will.

Duration: 27:10

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-8, Matthew 6:16-21, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 9:15, Matthew 16:16-18

Topics: "Fasting", "Spiritual Discipline"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the topic of fasting and how it should be done with the right intentions. He warns against being like hypocrites who fast to be seen by others. Instead, he encourages a genuine and private fasting that is done solely for the sake of pleasing God. The speaker emphasizes the importance of having a deep and authentic relationship with God, where our actions are not driven by the desire for applause from others.

Transcript

The text of the morning begins at verse 16 of Matthew 6. If you didn't bring your own Bible, please reach for the one in the pew rack, and you can turn to page 1147, and follow along as I read verses 16 through 18 of Matthew chapter 6. And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

Carl Lundquist was the president of Bethel College and Seminary for almost 30 years. He died about four years ago of complications with a terrible skin cancer, some of you remember. In the latter years of his life, he devoted a lot of energy to promoting and studying the devotional life and the life of the disciplines of the Christian walk.

He began a little organization called the Evangelical Order of the Burning Heart, based on that passage in Luke 24 where they said, did not our hearts burn within us when we heard the word open to us? And he began to discover things that he had not practiced much of his life, and he, to his great credit, built them into his life in those latter years and taught them and wrote articles in Our Standard about them. In issue number 16 of the letter called the Burning Heart Letter that he was sending out month after month, and I was getting them and benefiting from them as God was teaching him because I had a great admiration for Carl Lundquist. He wrote about his first beginnings of taking fasting seriously.

Let me read you a couple of paragraphs, so you'll hear how one man probably, well it was 1980, I can't remember what age Carl Lundquist would have been in 1980, but you listen. My own serious consideration of fasting as a spiritual discipline began as a result of a visit with Dr. Joon Gong Kim in Seoul, Korea. Is it true, I asked him, that you spent 40 days in fasting prior to the evangelism crusade in 1980? Yes, he responded, it is true.

Dr. Kim was chairman of the crusade, expected to bring a million people to Yeouido Plaza, but six months before the meeting, police informed him they were revoking their permission for the crusade. Korea at that time was in political turmoil, and Seoul was under martial law. The officers decided they could not take the risk of having so many people together in one place, so Dr. Kim and some associates went to a prayer mountain and there spent 40 days before the Lord in fasting and prayer for the crusade.

Then they returned and made their way to the police station. Oh, said the officer when he saw Dr. Kim, we have changed our mind and you may have your meeting. As I went back to the hotel, I reflected that I had never fasted like that.

Perhaps I have never desired a work of God with the same intensity. His body is marked by many 40-day fasts during his long spiritual leadership of God's work in Asia. Also, however, I haven't seen the miracles Dr. Kim has.

And then he told later on in the letter about a Burning Heart retreat that he and Nancy would lead periodically, and at one of them he noticed a seminary senior not eating lunch, and he asked him if he was okay, and was able to draw out of him with some coercion that he was just drawing to the end of a total 21-day fast for the discerning of God's leading in his life as a seminary graduate. And Dr. Lundquist said that in his later years, on the basis of experiences like these, he began to build into his life a regular fast of a weekly nature, and he described it like this, instead of taking one hour for lunch, I use the time to go to a prayer, this is one day a week, to go to a prayer room, usually the flame room in nearby Bethel Theological Seminary, and there I spend my lunch break in fellowship with God and in prayer, and I have learned a very personal dimension to what Jesus declared, I have had meat to eat ye know not of. Now that's very similar to what I'm calling the Fasting 40, to do one day a week, every week for one month, all the cards disappeared last week, you all know who you are, others are joining with you, two meals, a breakfast and a lunch, so a fast for a 24 hour period, for the kinds of things mentioned on the prayer card, or the Fasting 40 card, and anything else for awakening, and for the extension of the kingdom that God brings you to your mind.

One of the texts that moved Dr. Lundquist was Matthew 16, 6 to 8, 16 to 18, I'm sorry, Matthew 6, 16 to 18, and the verse that arrested him and convicted him, it's one thing to base your life on people's experience, that's not a very reliable basis, it's another thing to base it on the word of God, and what he saw are the words, and whenever you fast, and like so many of us including most of the books you'll read on fasting, he noticed it did not say if you fast, Jesus didn't say if you fast do it like this, he said when you fast, or whenever you fast, and Dr.

Lundquist and I and many commentators conclude, Jesus is not teaching us to fast, he's assuming we're fasting, and he's teaching us how not to do it, and how to do it, it's what Matthew 9, 15 said, when the bridegroom is taken away, then they will fast, so you don't find a command to fast in the New Testament, you find an assumption of fasting in the New Testament, when the bridegroom is taken away, they will fast, or Matthew 6, 16, when you fast, do it like this, not like that, Jesus is teaching how to do it, and how

not to do it, not whether to do it, if fasting is going to be built into our lives as people, and as a church for the rest of our lives, then we need to know how not to do it, and how to do it, what are the perils of fasting, I'm going to have John Bloom copy this sheet,

this is notes from a physician, that we were given down in Orlando, at the beginning of December, a doctor who has made a special study, and focused during his life on fasting, gave this little talk, and some of you have said to me, if we are really serious about this, and some of us make an attempt, at a 21 day or a 40 day fast, you better tell us how not to kill ourselves, and that's what this paper is for, it gives the kinds of practical warnings, and guidelines from a physician's medical, physiological perspective, and I encourage you to pick one up next week, but more important than that, more important than that, is the spiritual dangers of fasting, that's what Jesus is talking about in this text, the spiritual dangers of going about it the wrong way, or having a wrong mindset about

fasting, so that's what we want to look at for a few minutes, first he tells us what not to do, and then he tells us what to do, verse 16 he says, don't be like the hypocrites, whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance, in order to be seen fasting by men, so the mark of the hypocrites it seems, is that they want to be seen, fasting by other people, oh everybody in this room knows, what that tastes like, it tastes so good, oh it's built right into the fabric, of the fallen human heart, that we want people to notice our accomplishments, and tell us how good they are, it is better than all the food you could eat, and that's why you can fast to get it, it's better than anything, people will just go to any lengths, if they can get

the applause of people, if they can get the commendation, of a very significant person in their life, something in this fallen heart, craves to be made much of, by other people, and Jesus knows that, and therefore he talks a good deal about it, in his gospels, and especially right here, in the last part of verse 16 he says, here's the warning, truly I say to you, they have their reward, in full, in other words, if the praise of men, if the applause, or the esteem, or the commendation of other people, is what you're after, you'll get it, and that's all you'll get, so the danger of fasting like this, is that it works, it succeeds so horribly, that's the danger, if you want the reward, of other people's recognizing, your discipline, and your devotion, and your piety, it will work, it will

succeed, and that's all it will succeed at, it's just a devastating success, God protect us from the success of fasting, the way the hypocrites fast, so Jesus says you want that reward, you want the reward of people's praise, you'll get it, period, success is a dangerous thing, when you're aiming at the wrong thing, but now I ask myself this question, why is that hypocrisy, they're fasting, they want to fast, and they are letting the world know, that they want to fast, they're being transparent, and candid, it's the hypocrites who wash their hair, and their face, and walk around like they're not fasting, when they really are fasting, those are the hypocrites, right, why not, why is it hypocritical, if you're fasting, to let people know you're fasting, I mean tell it like it is, I'm

fasting folks, that's not hypocrisy is it, but Jesus says, these are hypocrites, you see you got to scratch your head, and just go a little deeper here, it's not very deep, to figure out what's going on here, what's wrong, why are these people hypocrites, when in fact, they look like what they're doing, they're not covering it up, the problem is this, here's why they're hypocrites, fasting means hunger for God, not hunger for people's applause, that's the meaning of fasting, therefore, if you put forward a fasting demeanor, it means to the world, I want God, and if that's not what you want, you're a hypocrite, and that isn't what they wanted, they put forward a fasting demeanor, which says in the religious parlance of

Judaism, and ought to say in Christianity, here's the person who's

hungry for God, and what they were hungry for was man, and his applause, and his approval, and that's why they were hypocrites, it was a lie, they were saying something with their fasting, which they did not feel in their heart, if they wanted to be really free from hypocrisy, you know what they'd have to do, as they left their face all gloomy, and walked around, fasting, fasting, they'd have to put a big sign around their neck, and the sign would say, the bottom line reward for my fasting is your approval, that's what they'd have to wear, and then they'd be openly and non-hypocritically vain, but they did not wear that sign, because they didn't want people to know, that the bottom line reward was applause, they didn't want people to know that, they really did want people to think it was

for God, and it wasn't for God, nobody would applaud them if they wore that sign, so they had to be hypocrites in their motive, now that's how not to do it, here's how to do it, let's go to verses 17 and 18, but you, when you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your father who is in secret, and your father who sees in secret will repay you, now there are all kinds of public fasting in the Bible, public, seeable fasting in the Bible, including the New Testament, Acts 13, a group fasting at Antioch, Acts 14, they fasted before they appointed elders, Luke knew about it, he wrote about it, there's all kinds of public, seeable fasting in the New Testament, therefore I do not conclude from this teaching of Jesus, that if someone notices

that you're fasting somehow, it's ruined, it's benefit is ruined, that's not true, if somebody notices that you skip lunch at work, and they say, are you sick? and you say, no, no, I feel fine, why didn't you eat? well, you could just say some general thing if you wanted to, like, I didn't feel like eating today, or you could just say, I'm fasting today, just seeking the Lord's fullness in my life, that doesn't contaminate your fast, if you say that, there's a difference between being seen fasting, and fasting to be seen, can you all handle that? being seen fasting is an event out there, it's an event that happens, has no moral significance necessarily, to fast to be seen is an inner motive of the heart, and has tremendous moral significance, there's a difference, and what Jesus is saying

is, you're a hypocrite if you fast to be seen fasting, you're not a hypocrite if when you're fasting, somebody happens to see you fasting, and know that you're fasting, it's the heart issue here, that Jesus is talking about, it goes a little bit beyond this though, he takes us further, he wants us not only not to try to be seen by men, but to want to be seen by God, you see that, it says, but you when you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, so that you may, here's the negative side, not be seen fasting by men, and here comes a but, but that you may be seen by your father, who is in secret, so it's not wrong to want to be seen by God, in fact fasting means God see my hunger for you, see me, behold me, let your countenance shine upon me in my fasting, you want to be seen by God, that's

the whole point of fasting, so what Jesus is doing here, I think is giving a test to us, as to the reality of God in our lives, and whether our lives are oriented on the living reality of God, or whether our lives are just oriented on, how we work with other people, what effect, what we do has on other people, and what effect they, is that where we live entirely, just at this horizontal level of interrelationships, or is God so real, now test yourself right now, is God so real, that if he alone knows what's going on in here, even if it's very uncomfortable painful thing, that's all you need, that's all you need, God knows, and then you know if God's real to you, and the reason for this, orientation on God, that he's testing us for, is that we're so easily deceived in good things, let me

try to explain, preaching, praying, attending church, Bible reading, acts of kindness, the tendency, the human tendency, in doing those wonderful things, is that we begin to think, not just that people might praise us for doing them, that's one thing, but something more subtle, namely, we begin to think that, the primary effectiveness, of them, is the effect they have on others who see us do them, like, I'm a father, and I contemplate praying at the breakfast table, having devotions, and I think to myself, if I pray at the breakfast table, and if I pray for devotions in the evening, my sons will watch me pray, and in seeing me pray, they might someday grow up to pray, that's dangerous, because prayer is to God, prayer works like this, here's my son, here's my prayer, and here's God, and

my prayer goes, boom, boom, and if my mindset, begins to think, I'll pray so that I'll do this, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, that, God can just fall out of the picture, I'll have my devotions, in my room, and if my roommate sees me, maybe my roommate, will be convicted of his not reading the Bible, and so on, so the danger is not just that, we want the praise of others, but even a more subtle, more noble mistake, namely, God gradually vanishing out of the picture, of the vertical dimension of life, growing dimmer and hazier, while this, for God's sake we say, and for religious reasons, is still happening, they'll see me pray, they'll see me read my Bible, and they'll see me give my tithes, and in doing all of that, they will be moved to pray, and they will be moved to give their

tithes, and they will be moved to read their Bible, and pretty soon, what's the vertical dimension of my life?

Is there any reality? Am I communing with the living God in my Bible reading? Am I giving for His sake? Does He enjoy seeing my giving? Now, don't misunderstand, the Bible clearly teaches, that all that we do, in the sight of others, has a good effect on them, when it's good. It's not a bad thing, for my sons to learn to pray, by watching me pray. It's not a bad thing, for the roommate, to feel pricked in his conscience, when his roommate reads the Bible, and he doesn't.

What I'm pointing out, is that we're, we're spring loaded, to be deceived and corrupted, and we need to be vigilant. Jesus is calling, for a radical orientation on God, in our fasting, and He tests us, by saying, comb your hair, wash your face, and don't even let anybody else know, and then you will be tested, to see whether you can carry this through, with only God, only God knowing it. When I have done things, that Noel doesn't know about, my boys don't know about, you don't know about, that are intended to be good things, the temptation, to want to slip your card, out on the table, so people know you did that, you know, you made that visit, or you made that hard call, or you didn't eat that meal, the temptation to bring it up, in a subsequent conversation, is absolutely tremendous, which shows how hungry I am, for your approval.

It's so dangerous, it is so dangerous, whom are we hungry for, folks? So He tests us, and He wants a radical orientation on God. One last question, what's the promise, the reward? Is it the praise of men? You fast towards God, and when you're done with your fasting, and your hair's all combed, and your face is washed, and the fast is over, people then praise you. Wrong.

Is it money? The very next verse says, don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, doesn't matter whether God gave the money, or the devil gave the money, don't let your fasting be a fasting, for the accumulation of earthly riches. I think the reward is the Lord's prayer. Just a few verses earlier, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

That's what we want to happen. If we fast, and nobody's watching, and we say, oh God, what I long for is for your name to be glorified, cherished, loved by me, and my family, and my church. What I long for is your kingdom to manifest itself now, and bring itself to consummation in the world.

What I long for is for your will to be done in my boys, and my church, and this city, and when I see people doing your will the way the angels do it in heaven, with that much sleepless energy, and joy, and zeal, I will be satisfied. The Lord will give those kinds of things to us as we seek him, without any care about the praise of men. So I invite you to press on this year.

I don't want this to be a flash in the pan. You find your own pattern. You fasting 40, you be the leaven for us in this church in February.

You know who you are right now, and I call you to be urgent, and to pray your heart out for the rest of us, and that we might know what it means to be free from this built-in craving to be applauded by other people, and may our relationship to the living God be so sweet, so assured, so deep, so free, so non-condemning, so accepted, that we just revel in him as the audience of one who knows what we're doing, when we do it, and it doesn't matter if anybody else knows in all the world. Get that real with God. Get that real.

With God. Let's pray. Oh Lord, I pray now as we close, and as the prayer team stand here, and as we want to support one another in prayer, and help each other get real with God, and get over the obstacles that make us have an undue fear of you, or a sense of distance from you.

Lord, help us just bring people to the prayer teams now, and just may we pray for one another, that there might be an authenticity, and a reality, and a depth, in our personal vertical union with you, that gives us a peace when nobody knows our alms, our prayers, our fasting. Lord, work this now, I pray. And all the people said, Amen.

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