

Fasting!

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So this evening we're going to turn back to the same chapter we read but the third section, just that third section which is from verse 16 to 18, on fasting. That's what it's entitled and it's part of that trilogy of giving and praying and fasting and it's an absolutely volcanic trilogy that we hear, I've hear from Jesus. It doesn't seem like that we've all sat nicely and comfortably and we've read it and everyone's warm and fuzzy feeling and yet when Jesus originally spoke these words it would have been simply like dynamite to the people who heard it. He's rocking the pillars of Judaism, of practical religion in Judaism, the three public outward areas where they worked out their faith and he's rocked them to the very core. Difficult to compare but if Jesus came in here, putting aside all the complications of that happening and Jesus saying, your preaching is absolutely dire now, no comment. Your hospitality is a sham and your worship is dreadful. We'd be taken aback by that. These are three areas that are really important in our Christian community, the preaching of the word, the hospitality that we share and the worship when we come together as a community in worship. We would be taken aback if Jesus were to challenge these three things in our lives but that's exactly what he's doing here because the religious leaders and those who he classifies here as hypocrites, they had completely shifted the focus of what were good things. They were good religious practices but they were making them into bad religious practices. They were completely shifting the focus from the heart in their faith to their eyes, to what they were in private, to what they could be shown to be in public and so Jesus say they're mask wearers, they're hiding what they really are by through their religious practice. They're coming across as really nice, generous people in the way that they give to the poor and needy. They make themselves out to be very spiritual in their prayer life, in their public expression of that prayer life and they make themselves to be serious and somber about sin in the way that they fast. But it's all a show, it's all outward, it's all to impress God and to impress the people around them and so Christ is really rattling their cage. Sometimes I think when I come to preach, it would be really nice to preach a really nice sermon, really nice, sweet, gentle, warming, happy sermon, take you to a happy place and then you could all go home. But I always seem to find that Christ just rattles our cages in the most loving and gracious way because he cares and it's always challenging and it should always be for us, I think, coming under Jesus Christ, challenging so that we move beyond being nice, just simply outwardly nice, public, well rounded, good Christians in the outside and that we allow His Spirit to work in our own hearts and to allow Scripture to be a powerful mirror into our soul, like searing us like a hot iron in many ways and it's done like the great surgeon, it's done with great desire to heal us and to enable us to know wholeness and life to the full.

So here we come to the section on fasting and Jesus says, you know, don't look gloomy like the hypocrites, they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others, they've received the reward but when you fast and on your head wash your face, go about your business, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your father who is in secret, your father who is in secret will reward you and these words come across in the three sections, God who is in secret will see you.

And very much the fasting here, there were different expressions of fasting and they happened at different times in the Judaistic culture and religion but here is very much to do with fasting of repentance, it's linked in with prayer and with the wearing of sack cloth and the rubbing of ashes on your face, you know, we hear a lot in Neal Testament about going about sack cloth and ashes and that was a visible outward sign of repentance and it was linked often with fasting and with prayer and the Pharisees were engaging in that practice of wearing sack cloth and ashes, they were disfiguring their faces so it was very obvious publicly what they were doing, sack cloth, the material that was worn by the poorest and ashes, just a public, a visual symbol of the dust from which we have come, it was all to do with being dependent on God, being sincere, being humble, being repentant for the sins that separated you from the God on whom we were dependent.

So this fasting was very much to really reflect a humble spirit, the hypocrites were making it completely, making it completely opposite, they were using it to feed their pride, it wasn't a humbling thing, they were fasting to be seen, they wanted people to be seen, they were proud of what they were doing, their religious actions and it was insincere, they weren't really doing it humbly and sincerely dependent on God, they were doing it to see if God was watching them and to see if others were watching them because it would make them look good.

[7 : 07] Now I have tried hard not to use footballing and allergies in the pulpit, much though you know how much I love the game but I will use one tonight, I won't use one for a while, what really annoys me sometimes in modern day football is when you see players who are tackled in a fairly innocuous way and they just dive to the ground and roll around 30 or 40 times and then they put their hands over their eyes and then they kind of look up just to see if their effedys looking or if the crowd are looking and the cameras of course catch that all now, you can tell you know whenever you are injured you never have the ability to roll 30 or 40 times and you certainly don't look up just to make sure someone is looking.

It's hypocritical, they are wearing a mask and that is exactly what the hypocrites that Jesus is speaking of you, it was mock solemnity, they had one eye open to see if God would reward them for what they were doing and Jesus says well you have your reward and that was that they felt good about themselves, that was the reward, it was self congratulatory, they did what they did, they performed their religious acts, they gave to the needy so that everyone could see them, they prayed in public in the streets and they fasted in a very ostentatious and deliberate way and they had their reward, they were self important, they were righteous in their own eyes and they felt good about themselves as a result.

What Jesus is pointing out in these three, this trilogy of exposure that he gives here of damning religion or he dammed religion is that at least this personal repentance, this fasting is a private matter.

He is speaking of the importance of heart religion and you know I will be repeating what Corey said and what Tom said in the other sermons also, that the foundation of fasting, of repentance particularly of being sorry for sin is something that we must do privately in our lives as Christians, we move behind the scenes to have an audience with the Trinity, with our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, with the teaching and power of the Holy Spirit exposing in His light the darkness of our own hearts and that is the private work that we engage in as Christians where His light exposes us and there is honesty and pain and humility and healing and love and joy in His presence.

We sung the two different aspects there in the Psalms of coming into God's presence and repentance and coming from God's presence with great joy but it is a, I will use this word a few times tonight, the paradox is that we go privately into the presence of the omniscient God, seems a strange thing to do doesn't it?

[10 : 33] He is all knowing, He is omniscient and yet He wants us to be private in His presence and recognise that there are no pretense before Him, He knows our hearts before we come to Him and He wants us to allow His light to shine and expose the darkness that will allow us to genuinely repent and no healing and that is where the blessing, spiritual blessing comes for us, where the reward comes as it were.

It's not something we go out to seek like the hypocrites did here but rather it's almost a byproduct, the reward of God in many ways is a byproduct of understanding an individual private personal heart walk with Him, a relationship with God absolutely privately.

So that, and this might be a provocative statement but authentic, an authentic Christian walk I think will nearly always be understated, it will nearly always be something that's not primarily public, it may have very public elements to it but it must be understated, it must be what we are and what we do in our relationship with Christ in private but the evidence of that will become public, the blessing will flow from that because it will turn our lives upside down, it will turn our churches upside down and it will turn our communities upside down because we will live out the walk of love, the walk of grace and the commandments of God which are to love Him and to love one another.

It's kind of paradoxical that this private reality will become a public blessing. So Jesus is marking here a radical shift possibly back but also forward to genuine religion, genuine faith in Him from the external observance where the religious leaders of the day had taken good things and so externalised them that there was no foundation behind them, there was no private personal faith behind them, they were only religious exercises, they were only external observance.

Now isn't that the worst thing ever, isn't just external religious responses to God that don't come from the heart but just come from mimicking what's going on around us, the worst thing ever.

[13 : 26] He's reminding us that it's the difference between sticking plaster and major surgery in our lives, that the outward observance is mere sticking plaster on its own but when we come to Christ he's wanting to remake us from the inside, we are born again through his great work.

So the difference between a lick of paint on a room and a complete rebuild and sometimes we are content with just a lick of paint spiritually in our lives that are covering over the cracks that don't allow the Holy Spirit into the places where we need healing and wholeness and Jesus is speaking against that here.

He's reminding us of the danger of an only public Christian life. Now we must have a public Christian life because we are people together with a body, a community, a family but he's warning against that as the only spiritual life we have or living only to somehow seem to impress God or impress others and sometimes it can be with, well maybe not with fasting or disfiguring our faces but it can be in a modern parallel with undue solemnity.

It's somehow they think if we're really solemn and serious when we come to church or even we sit at the Lord's table that we're really solemn and serious outwardly that that is making clear to everyone how serious I think sin is.

Now it may be that that's the case but it also may just be a show. It may be just to impress others that we think very seriously about sin but really with the rubber hits the road is what we do with our sin, not with how we look when we think about sin because often God doesn't get into the real you and me.

[15 : 27] He doesn't get into what lies beneath our secret and much of our behaviour can be deflective behaviour, religious observant behaviour that looks good that we even deceive ourselves with because it keeps God at arm's length from our own hearts.

But what Jesus is saying is that genuine relationship with Him must always begin with our heart because He sees and He knows what we are.

So I moved just from that scenario to some general principles about fasting and kind of repeating myself about faith being private at a broader level.

Because He does talk about fasting He says, when you fast do not look gloomy and the presumption is by many commentators that fasting was seen by Jesus as an ongoing reality of the Christian life if not a command.

And I would certainly argue that fasting has abiding spiritual value particularly because it is linked biblically in nearly every case with prayer.

[16 : 35] So at that level it is a great thing, prayer and fasting together. Why then might fasting and fasting is just not eating, presumed you all knew that.

And I am not going to go into any mechanics of that because it is broad and it can be very individualistic. But fasting generally has abiding, why is that?

Because I do think it realigns our perspective. Cody mentioned last week very helpfully about the power and importance of food. In the Lord's Prayer he talks about food and give us this day our daily bread.

And it is interesting that the trilogy here, they all are in one way or another linked to food. Giving to the needy is because the needy do not have food.

The prayer is recognising the importance of food and sharing that and being measured among other things. And fasting of course is not eating food.

[17 : 38] And that is important because food is important to us. But when we fast we are reminding ourselves that we are more than just people who need food.

We are more than just physical people. We are more than just material. And we are saying at any one point in our lives that when we fast we are saying that our need for God is greater than our need for food as believers, as Christians.

In the temptation of Christ in the desert, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And there is this reality that we are more than just material people.

We are more than just men and women with appetites. But that we are spiritual. And that when we fast we are recognising that there is a spiritual hunger that we have and a spiritual satisfaction that comes not from eating minced pies, but from eating the word of God from eating and being in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in John 6, I am the living bread. And he is saying that he is the one ultimately who satisfies us and who reminds us that we are more than just flesh and blood.

[18 : 50] We are more than just animal appetite creatures. That we are people who need Jesus Christ in our lives. And I think at the same level in terms of perspective fasting realigns us because it makes us hungry.

And I think that is an acknowledgement of the brokenness of this fallen world in which we live where many people and not us go hungry.

Where there is astonishing greed, where there is grave inequality and where things are wrong.

Fasting is a kind of recognition of that at one level. Some of you may have seen the figures that came out this week from Oxfam. Others have questioned their methodology and the way they have done things.

And it is very difficult I am sure to measure exactly the wealth of individuals and of nations. And the astonishing figure they came out with was that the 62 richest people in the world have the same amount of financial resources as half, the poorest half of the global population.

[20 : 05] About 3.5 billion people. Now if that is not inequality and if that does not speak of things being wrong and when people say why doesn't God feed everyone, he says there is plenty food for everyone.

It is because of our greed and our selfishness and our brokenness that these things happen. And fasting may be a very simple way of reminding us of our own battle against overindulgence, against materialism, against greed.

And it does speak very much of our need spiritually for self-control because self-control is a very important part of the life and work of the Holy Spirit.

He gives us self-control and generosity and empathy. And I think fasting encourages that. It reminds us that we are not simply machines who need our food at specific times and come what may, hell or high water, we will eat.

So as a value there, I think as a value for encouraging humility because again as fasting with repentance was intended to do, it reminds us that food is a gift that by God's grace we are provided with these things.

[21 : 31] As Corrie mentioned last week, we are thankful for that. We are not masters of our own destiny ultimately that God is the provider that each of us are here this evening because God has enabled and allowed us so to do.

And it gives us that sense of acknowledgement privately in our own lives that we are dependent, that we are not in control of our own destiny and that we need the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives.

A very interesting fact that we are not nearly all the important decisions of the New Testament church that was taken by leaders were accompanied by prayer and fasting. I think it was a recognition that these really important decisions required a seriousness and a focus and a concentration that fasting allowed and a humility that was dependent on Jesus Christ and on his grace and wisdom rather than their own strength and wisdom.

I think there is something significant there for us to consider. And along with that humility and a realignment of perspective I think fasting can help us to cultivate spiritual sorrow in our lives.

To examine it, it can give us the time because we are not deflected by routine and by the normal things we do day to day in terms of eating and meal times to not just not eat, there may be practical value in that, I am not sure if there is spiritual value necessarily, but we are not eating in order to concentrate on a private and personal walk with God and prayer and his word.

[23 : 11] And so it can cultivate a spiritual sorrow that brings healing to us, to examine our hearts. Who is it? Is it Keller? We all quote Queller. Is it Keller that says that food is a, that our hearts are idle factories?

He was probably copying someone else who said it. But food can be that for us, can't it? It can be an idle that we just kind of worship that is really hugely important to us.

But there are many other idols in our hearts that it takes time to expose and deal with and fasting can allow us to concentrate and have that time to appreciate what might be the sin behind the sins in our lives.

The no go areas that we've kept Jesus Christ out of, all our lives, the places in our hearts that say not welcome here Jesus, this is my section of life.

This is where I am Lord and in control. And it enables us then to see these areas and to recognize how black our hearts can be, but how forgiven we are.

[24 : 21] It's not a negative thing. Jesus in Luke 7.47 says, you know, he forgives little, loves little.

And so it's when we don't spend time recognizing how much we've been forgiven, how darker our hearts are, but how transformed he makes them, then that's why we love a little, only a little.

Because we've not really been forgiven that much and we don't need him that much. But fasting can, it doesn't need to be fasting, but fasting can provide the opportunity for us to examine our own hearts and deal with the blockages there to healing and to health so that grace and sin move from being words, just mere words that we incant to become realities.

Repentance is a great thing because it does clear blockages and it does allow us to be whole again. It's a great week here in the church.

When it blasts Sunday morning, there was no heating in the church because the plumber who was working downstairs inadvertently stopped the flow of water into the radiators. Didn't know it's an old system full of complications.

[25 : 37] So he fixed that. But the radiators still weren't working. They were freezing cold. I thought, what are we going to do for today? Then we thought there must be an air lock in them. So he came back and he put the key in and all, every single one of these radiators hissed for minutes while all the air came out of the system.

And as the air came out of the system, the radiators warmed up beautifully. It's a great illustration of the blockage that sometimes can stop the heat from flowing in a building and so spiritually sin blocks the grace and the power and the warmth of Christ's love from seeping through our bones and our lives.

So it can cultivate a spiritual, I think spiritual sorrows and repentance is a great thing. It's kind of unpopular and old fashioned and we don't talk about it much. We're kind of, we're kind of upbeat, happy Christians all the time.

But we're not really, are we? We're not really. If we're not dealing with the things that separate us from Jesus Christ, repentance is a great thing. It's core to a relationship and it's private.

So I'm going to finish with just saying that the fasting is an abiding value, but also that our faith, and I think this comes very much from this passage and from indeed the trilogy here, faith must be private.

[27 : 03] You'll not hear me speaking often about privatization from the pulpit here, but this is one area is absolutely central to our Christian faith that there must be for an authentic real relationship with Christ, there must be a personal private walk of faith.

It's the essence of salvation. The essence of salvation, Jesus Christ says here, not our Father, but he says that you go and you go and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Now that could of course refer to the group also, but there's a reality of the privacy and of the individuality here in all of this trilogy of areas that there must be.

We talk about testimony, don't we? It's not just what I was brought up in the church, my parents are Christians, I'm from a Christian country and a Christian family. I'm a Christian. Jesus is my savior, not just our savior, not just a bulk savior, but my personal redeemer that my sins he's taken, they're nailed to the cross.

There's a private, private personal essential element to our relationship with Christ and that is true self-awareness.

[28 : 39] It's true self-awareness. It's when we really know who we are. You know, there's lots of, there's an identity crisis all over, just all over the world and all over our lives.

When does that? It gives us an identity crisis and people sometimes say, you're a hypocrite to be in the church because you're trying to be what you're not. Isn't that true?

Isn't that what people say all the time? You're just a hypocrite because you're listening to what other people are saying and what some kind of God is saying, but you're not being your true to yourself.

You're not being your own individual self, but Jesus tells us and the shows us and we experience that we are uniquely ourselves when we have dealt with the sin that separates us from our Creator and our Maker and when we become what He created us to be and move towards Christlikeness.

We deal with the sin that distorts who we genuinely are, that distorts the true personality that we've been given, the uniqueness of who we are.

[29 : 48] And we will find that uniqueness of who we are when we deal with Jesus Christ in our private lives. You know why people say that about the church, about Christians being hypocrites?

Because that's often what we are. They're dead right. Jesus is dead right and if you look in the mirror, because I know I look in the mirror and I say they're dead right, we are. We often do Christian things because we think it's the right thing to do because we think other people will expect us to do that, but not because we have been transformed and changed from within to that place where we love to do the will of God.

There's an interesting debate on online this week where someone said something about, oh I started this, I shouldn't have started because I probably got it wrong.

Someone said something about, yeah, there but for the grace of God go I. And he said he didn't like that statement. He wanted people to love doing the right thing and hate doing the wrong thing and so hate falling and hate sinning and hate doing what God didn't want to do.

Now that was an interesting debate, people argued one way or another and I think there's probably a balance in it. I think we should always say there, but for the grace of God go I when we see someone else stumbling fall.

[31 : 18] But at the same time, we should also be not excusing that kind of weakness in our own hearts, but we should be seeking to love the right and do the right and serve in the right way.

We're not trying to be better people that that will only lead to hypocrisy. We are honestly coming before God. And so the essence of our lives must be a relationship with Christ in private, your prayer life, the time you spend with him, the time you learn about him, the private ongoing relationship.

That is so crucial. And the amazing, the crucial thing about that for the church is that there will therefore be from that identifiable reward in the community.

There will be blessing as we as as the soil of our hearts is plowed because we are in relationship with God, the fruit will be there for all to see and we will share Christ like this.

Well, this great community impact in other words. So while I talk about privatisation of faith, it has a hugely significant public blessing and reward as it were, where the whole ethic of our Christ likeness is shared in the Christian community and in the world in which we live.

[32 : 51] And there is joy there for us. There is blessing, there is reward in that for us because we live as Christ like people together and that's tough, but it's hugely rewarding for us.

And I do believe each of the trilogy here in speaking of reward speaks of a future reward where there will not need to be any more fasting.

But there will be great feasting and where there will be no more tears, no more inequality and greed and loss and death, but life to the full.

That's what we hope, not with a kind of vague ethereal hope, but with a grounded hope that Jesus Christ resurrection seals for us that we look forward to.

And that perspective changes everything that we are and everything that we do. So fasting, great. Everything we should consider, I wonder, we've always done eating pray.

[33 : 59] Maybe we should do fasting pray as well. That's prayer heads and pray. Heavenly Father, we ask in prayer that you would teach us from your truth that we would learn to know what you do and what you want from us, to realign our hearts to you.

We know it's tough. We know we battle with all manner of idolatry and unhealthy spiritual appetites.

We love the praise of people. We love popularity. We love being self-righteous. We love comparing ourselves with others.

We love finding fault with others. It just makes us feel so good about ourselves and makes us feel that we really have faith worked out and we've got it covered.

And we pray that you would help us to deal with these deep seated issues the only way that can be done is allowing the great surgeon to deal with our hearts, to confess our sins, to seek healing and transformation.

[35 : 18] We pray that you would help us to do that. Maybe encourage each other to do that while it must be a hugely private thing. Maybe not discourage one another, but maybe encourage prayer and accountability and love and grace in our hearts and in our lives together.

We work our socks off at being Christ-like with one another by the Holy Spirit enabling us to be transformed.

Lord help us in these things. Give us wisdom to know where we are doing things wrong and when we're trying to justify ourselves or earn favour with you, help us to see the beauty of grace and the wonder and the freedom that grace offers all the time.

For Jesus' sake, amen.