**The Sermon on the Mount (Part 12) + Weekly Devotion + 10.23.2024**

**Read Matthew 6:16-18**

*“But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face…” (Matthew 6:17)*

Fasting was a common practice when Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus Himself fasted for 40 days after His baptism. Fasting was done for different reasons: as a spiritual discipline, an aid to prayer, or a form of self-punishment for sin.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 assume that His disciples are giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. He says, “*When* you give to the needy…” (Matthew 6:2), “*When* you pray…” (Matthew 6:5), “*When* you fast…” (Matthew 6:16). He doesn’t say “if,” as if these things are optional. Instead, He says “when.” Christ doesn’t teach us to discontinue acts of piety like prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. He assumes that we’re doing them, though not to make ourselves look good. We do them to the glory of God.

That’s the issue with fasting in Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus says not to look gloomy like the hypocrites who disfigure their faces in order to be seen and praised by others. Instead, He teaches us to let our fasting be done “in secret” (Matthew 6:18). That is, we don’t fast and make a show of it just so other people praise us for it. What matters is that God sees us.

One example of this in the Scriptures is Daniel. Daniel prays on behalf of God’s people, “seeking [God] by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). Thankfully God saw Daniel and answered him, sending the angel Gabriel with a vision of what would happen in the future. The rest of Daniel 9 is one of the most difficult passages of Scripture to understand, but the point here is simple enough. God sees us when we pray and when we fast. Our outward acts of piety don’t go unnoticed.

One of the errors of our time is that we’ve made Christianity so casual. Just go to one of the churches whose interior resembles Starbucks and you’ll see what I mean (I love Starbucks aside from it being outrageously expensive). In our minds, we’ve supposedly eliminated the need for doing good works since Christ has fulfilled the Law for us. If Christ has done everything to save us, what’s the point of fasting? Why pray and give to the needy? What’s the use of outward piety when I can be so casual with my Christianity, even to the point of watching church services at home in my pajamas?

Comfortable, casual Christianity isn’t biblical Christianity. Jesus teaches us what biblical Christianity looks like; it looks like almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Christ has reconciled us to God by His death on the cross, but that doesn’t mean we do nothing. Instead, our lives reflect Christ’s life. We do what He does (albeit imperfectly). And our Father in heaven sees (and even rewards) us!

Prayer: Holy Father, to You belongs all glory, praise, and honor, now and forever. May our deeds reflect Your mercy and Your glory. Amen.