

# Habits

ANCIENT PRACTICES FOR TODAY'S WORLD

## OPENING UP



Most people are familiar with fasting as either a medical or spiritual practice. How have you practiced fasting in the past? What does Jesus want us to know about fasting?

## TEXT



### The Importance of the Right Motives in Fasting | Matthew 6:16-18

<sup>16</sup>"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

## MESSAGE OUTLINE



**Big Idea:** Those who fast for man's acclaim forfeit God's reward.

1. Fasting for show is hypocrisy (v. 16)
2. Fasting should not be shown (v. 17)
3. Fasting in secret is seen (v. 18)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- Habits, like fasting, that are good in and of themselves can be abused and turned into bad things. They can be manipulated into a form of self-worship when some do those things for man's praise instead of God's approval. Why do we like to let others know when we are doing something we consider spiritual? What does practicing secrecy in our times of fasting give us that letting others know about our fasting does not?
- How much of our "religious conduct" is done for others? How much of it is regulated by the opinions and approval of other people?
- Fasting is a "whole-body discipline." When you are fasting, what should denying physical gratification teach you about spiritual things? How does fasting differ from ascetic practices that place value on abuse of the body (Colossians 2:23)?
- Do you ever fast now? Why or why not? Like any spiritual discipline, fasting doesn't start off with devotion, but with consistent and practiced discipline. What occasions ought to prompt fasting on your part and why?
- Those who practice fasting are often thought of as "super-spiritual" or especially devoted. What does Jesus teach us about human evaluations of who is spiritual or what constitutes spiritual greatness? What does exercising self-restraint in fasting do for our relationship with God?
- Does fasting guarantee a blessing? If not, what is fasting about? If it does not predispose God to do what we are asking him while fasting, what is the benefit? What are the "holy moments" in your life that might prompt fasting?

## CHALLENGE



The reward for giving and praying and fasting is found in the giving and praying and fasting. **Fasting and praying and giving allow us to experience more of Him.** And He is everything. Our reward is the intimacy forged in prayerful conversation with the One who stitched us and knows us and sits enthroned within us and over us.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "If there is no element of self-denial in our lives, if we give free rein to the desires of the flesh (taking care of course to keep within the limits of what seems permissible to the world), we shall find it hard to train for the service of Christ. When the flesh is satisfied it is hard to pray with cheerfulness or to devote oneself to a life of service which calls for much self-renunciation."

This week you and I are going to see a need that we can meet — someone we can pray for, someone we can serve, some opportunity to be generous, some opportunity to live out our faith — and we are going to have an opportunity to practice being "in His Majesty's Secret Service." Try doing something to meet a need without telling anyone about how you did it. Now, I'll never find out if you did it or not, so this is on the honor system. But decide this morning to make it your goal this week to serve someone without gaining any recognition or praise in return. Then consider the holy moments that are before you in your daily walk with Christ. Would not a season of self-denial help you to focus on what God is trying to say?

## PRAYER



Lord God, thank you for the way Jesus pointed out my propensity to seek out the attention of men, rather than you, in my spiritual habits. Help me this week to ask the right questions about my motives when I consider my generosity, my praying, or even my fasting. Help me to realize the importance of the One who seeks me when I do these things. Help me to recognize the holy moments in my own life that should prompt me to seek you, even above my daily bread! Help me to do the right things, including fasting, for the right reasons. Lead me to seek you in my daily habits and may my desire for food on a daily basis be a reminder of my even greater need for you!

By your grace and by your mercy you have set me free from my sin. Help me now to honor you in the way I do the smallest and greatest things. Whether I eat or drink or do not eat or drink, I desire to know your will even more than I desire my next meal. Let me find pleasure in denying myself for your glory, in Jesus' name and for his sake!