

GIVING and FASTING: a question of motive

by Blues Bibleden - Tuesday, February 23, 2016

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Reading: Matthew 6: 1-4, 16-18.

1 [Jesus taught His disciples...] “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. **2** When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth; they have received all the reward they will ever get. **3** But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. **4** Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

16 “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and dishevelled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth; that is the only reward they will ever get. **17** But when you fast, comb your hair (‘anoint your head’) and wash your face. **18** Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

INTRODUCTION

The nominal title of today’s message is “**Giving and fasting**” ... but a more accurate title might be something like: “**Let it be done in secret**”

I don’t watch much TV except football... If I do, however, it’s often a detective programme:

- I enjoy the uncertainty and secrecy element
- The identity of the perpetrator is usually carefully concealed until the last moment when all is revealed!

Secrecy can be sinister but it can also indicate **humility**

The **SINISTER element** is familiar to us...

- Crime tends to be committed during the night or out of sight
- An action is for personal gain or revenge, not motivated by love

Those of us who determine to lead upright lives are appalled when we hear about people who behave in a sinister fashion...

It may be helpful to realise that although people appear to be getting away with it, Jesus said that one day, the wicked things presently done in secret would be shouted from the rooftops!

- **Jesus taught** that just as He is the light, so **we** must also be lights in a dark world... There is no place for **sinister** concealment

The **Humility element** is perhaps less obvious... but Jesus emphasised its importance...

- He taught that **secrecy can be a virtue** if motivated by love and a desire to see God glorified
- To see others benefit, perhaps at our own expense

In **Matthew Chapter 6**, Jesus used GIVING (and also prayer and fasting) to illustrate the point that although money is welcome to support good causes, **the circumstances governing the gift has implications well beyond the act of giving itself...**

The key factor is MOTIVE...

In Jesus' time, some wealthy people were using their money as a means of boosting their egos and influence...

- It was not principally given out of concern for the poor but to ease their consciences (probably) and certainly to draw admiring looks and comments from the bystanders

You might argue that as long as the money is given, the motive doesn't really matter; after all, a pound is a pound!

- True... but the Apostle Paul reminds us in his first letter to the church at Corinth that sacrifice of any sort is only truly worthwhile if it is done from a **heart of love**
- While we look on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart.

It is also true that in some extraordinary way, **God sometimes multiplies our humble gifts** and causes them to 'expand' well beyond their value... like the loaves and fishes

Sacrifice purely for the benefit of others is greatly valued by God...

- Jesus said that there is no greater love than for someone to lay down his or her life for a friend

As we grow older, it is possible to believe that we haven't done much with our lives or that we are not contributing much to society...

- Perhaps we forget all the sacrifices we've made down the years... but God does not forget
- Those occasions of kindness, selflessness and self-sacrifice are recorded in His book and will be disclosed at the Judgement Seat of Christ when He dispenses our (undeserved) rewards

Many people declare that if they **win lots of money, they will give much of it to charity...** research suggests otherwise... some do, many do not!

- Statistically, poorer people give a larger proportion of their income to good causes than wealthier people

How different from **CT Studd** and **Wilbur Chapman**, who gave away **all** their money before committing themselves wholly to God's service!

AND WHAT OF FASTING?

Fasting was important during OT times and was often connected with prayer, study of the Scriptures and meditating on spiritual things.

Sometimes fasting brought deliverance...

- For example, to King Ahab in I Kings 21 ... to Nineveh in Jonah 3

But is fasting relevant today and, if so, what form should it take?

- Prisoners fast who are on hunger strike!
- So do people concerned about their weight!
- **But Jesus is clearly referring to more profound matters...**
- The **period of Lent** is a time that people traditionally 'refrain' from eating or drinking something specific (like chocolate or coffee) or reduce their intake of something they enjoy
- Some people speak of 'giving up' the bus and walking instead
- Or 'giving up' the lift and using the stairs

All these initiatives require willpower and strength of character ...

- Unfortunately, people are likely to revert to their old behaviour once the period of 'fasting' is over! (Rather like a New Year Resolution)

So is 'fasting' still relevant? Yes and no!

- **Yes** because it can force us to concentrate our minds on "things above"
- **No** because we don't need to fast in order to avert God's wrath or curry favour or persuade Him to change His mind

Fasting has a place today ... but God is far more interested in our lives being **TOTALLY renewed**...

- Jesus referred to '**being born again**' ... not to a superficial "makeover" but a "**transformation**" that comes when His Spirit resides in our lives

As with giving and praying, **FASTING must be for a God-honouring purpose...**

- Strengthening willpower... focusing our attention on spiritual things... to achieve a specific outcome such as healing, guidance or release from a habit

One way and another, God's pronouncement in **Isaiah Chapter 58 verses 6-7** should burn in our hearts:

Is not this the kind of fasting that I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke; to set the oppressed free and break every yoke (chain)? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter... when you see the naked, to clothe them and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Jesus made it clear that **MOTIVE** determines the acceptability of every action, statement, decision and response...

- Whether we give, fast, pray, preach, talk, respond or employ our talents, God is looking for men and women to live lives that please Him and glorify His name

So in respect of **FASTING**...we may not be physically able to go without food...

- But we can make sure that we **eat healthily** to take care of our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit
- We can refrain from mindless activities and **use our time wisely**

And in respect of **GIVING**...we may not have a lot of money to give away but...

- We can 'give of ourselves' through kindness, an open heart, a listening ear and a sympathetic word
- We can be rich in good deeds

Whatever we **do** or **refrain from doing**, let's live lives that bring honour to God's name... giving thanks in every situation.

Live as if Jesus died yesterday, rose from the dead today and is coming again tomorrow!