

The Sermon on the Mount, Part 9: Matthew 6:1-34

BACKGROUND

In 6:22-23 Jesus talks about the eye as the “lamp” of the body, saying “if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.” Here “healthy” is *aplous*, or “single,” in the sense of single-mindedness. This same expression was used to refer to generosity and righteousness, and to translate the Hebrew term for “perfect” in the Septuagint. By contrast, the “unhealthy” or literally “evil” eye was both stingy (or jealous or greedy) as well as one that could not see properly. “Body” (Greek *soma*) was idiomatic in Jewish thought for one’s whole self. Putting these together:

generosity/single-minded devotion to God	⇒	a healthy self and spiritual perception
stinginess/lack of single-mindedness	⇒	distorted spiritual perception and darkness

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PRACTICING PIETY

1. The three examples “righteousness” [*dikaiosyne*; generally translated “acts of righteousness” (NIV) or “piety” (NRSV)] to which Jesus applies his principle are positive ones. The principle can as well be applied to the more general category of things we do to “keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas 1:27). This often consists of things we avoid: coarse language, questionable clothing or company, materialism (the big TV, or any TV; the BMW; the cruise; etc.), worldly TV shows, books and movies, and so on.

What do you do to distance yourself from the “world”? Can you think of decisions an RCRC Christian might make due to Christian peer pressure which Scripture and conscience don't (or don't always) prohibit? Is there a danger an unchurched visitor might mistake these for a new “law”?

2. Michael Green describes fasting as “the third of the great devotional characteristics of Judaism at its best which Jesus takes over and underlines for member of the kingdom. Notice that he does not say, 'If you fast...' but '*When you fast...*' He takes it for granted that they will fast.”¹ Dallas Willard in his *Spirit of the Disciplines* refers to fasting as “one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial required of *everyone* who would follow Christ (Mt 16:24)” [p. 167]. Richard Foster writes that “Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that could never be had in any other way” (*Celebration of Discipline*, pg. 52). Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, on this passage,

Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life. Such customs have only one purpose—to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done. Fasting helps to discipline the self-indulgent and slothful will which is so reluctant to serve the Lord, and it helps to humiliate and chasten the flesh. By practicing abstemiousness we show the world how different the Christian life is from its own. If there is no asceticism in our lives... we shall find it hard to train for the service of Christ. [*Cost*, 188]

1 *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 2000), p. 102.

In the OT we see fasting used to “seek a safe journey” (Ezra 8:21+); in preparation for a difficult task (Esther 4:16); in order to share the resources with the needy (Job 31:16+; Isa 58:1+); when seeking discernment (Dan 9:3); to humble ourselves before God (Ps 35:13; Isa 58:3, 5); and when in mourning (Ps 35:14).

From a somewhat different perspective, Gary DeLashmutt writes,

[Jesus] does not mean that we should emphasize literal fasting! Unlike the above two practices [of prayer and almsgiving], which are emphasized in the Bible, fasting is not even emphasized ([it is only required] only once per year in Old Testament [on the Day of Atonement]; [it is] never prescribed in New Testament; [it is included in narratives] comparatively rarely; [and] no reasons [are] given for [it]).

He argues that while fasting is “increasingly prescribed by key evangelicals today as one of the keys to a close walk with God and/or worldwide revival,” it may be a useful tool for some occasions, it needn't receive the same attention as prayer or giving.² Indeed, while Jesus does say his disciples will fast after the ascension (Luke 5:35), and the disciples are described as fasting in Acts (13:2-3; 14:23), fasting *per se* is curiously absent from the epistles, whereas charitable giving and prayer are strongly encouraged.

Should fasting be an occasional or regular part of Christian living? How would you advise a younger Christian to employ fasting?

3. Jesus warns against praying like the pagans, who “think that they will be heard because of their many words” (6:7). Which of the following does this prohibit: liturgical prayer; praying multiple times about the same issue; the Jesus prayer³; prayer through song as in worship; the rosary?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: OUR TREASURES, OUR WORRIES

4. Blomberg writes, on 6: 19-21, “...Jesus' followers must set their affections on and strive after spiritual treasures. Again, the term must be defined broadly to embrace all that persists beyond the grave...”⁴
 - (a) If you had only the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, what would you conclude were heavenly treasures (20)?
 - (b) We work for career; we contribute to church; we invest in our children we pursue physical health and financial stability; we allot time to interests, hobbies and personal enrichment; etc. Will the things which primarily occupy your daily thoughts and energies “persist beyond the grave”?

2 Sermon on Mt 6:1-18, “Two Different Forms of Spirituality.” Blomberg agrees: “So it does not appear that fasting played a central role in the like of the earliest church, and Paul will later note the danger that such ascetic practices can mask, at times leading to even greater cravings and subsequent indulgence (Col 2:23)” [*Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 46 (2004), 1].

3 An Orthodox meditative prayer entailing repetition of a phrase such as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

4 Craig Blomberg, “On Wealth and Worry: Matthew 6:19-34—Meaning and Significance”, *Criswell Theological Review* 61 (1992) p. 77.

5. This passage (6:19-34) creates two associations:

storing up treasures on earth (19-21)	storing up heavenly treasures
a stingy outlook (22-23)	a generous outlook
spiritual perception (22-23)	spiritual blindness
loving money and earthly treasures (24)	loving God
despising God (24)	despising earthly treasures (or their demands)
anxiety about basic needs (25)	pursuit of the kingdom and God's righteousness (33)
unsafe investments (19-21)	secure investments

(a) What are the signs that you are drifting too close to the left column?⁵

(b) As Jesus' disciples—as humans—we are prone to anxiety about our needs, and the pull of the physical world and its pursuits. What positive advice does Jesus give to address these? What else have you found that helps move toward the column on the right?



Fun fact: "...later Jewish teachers prohibited prayers for birds, considering this a trivialization of prayer (m. Ber. 5:3)." Good thing God's keeping track of them. [Craig Keener's Matthew Commentary, p. 235]

⁵ Blomberg suggests two answers from the passage: First, we know we are inappropriately storing possessions "when we accumulate that which is not being used (19b)"; Second, "material possessions may be considered 'earthly treasures' if they gain one's steadfast allegiance" (1992), p. 77.