

Godly Fasting

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] This lesson finishes the Sermon on the Mount section where Jesus warns us against being like the Pharisees who hypocritically practiced their religion for show.

! In the section from Matthew chapter 6 verses 1 through 18, Jesus has taught us about godly giving and godly praying. The second section comes in verses 16 through 18, and in those verses Jesus teaches us about godly fasting.

Consider how the three examples fit together. Giving pertains to our relationship to others. Praying pertains to our relationship to God.

Fasting deals with our relationship to ourselves or our own spirituality. Matthew chapter 6 verse 1 served as the section introduction.

That's where Jesus said, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

[1 : 11] With that verse in mind, let's go ahead and read tonight's text. Again, that's Matthew chapter 6 verses 16 through 18. Jesus said, Here's the main idea for tonight's lesson.

Although no longer commanded, godly fasting honors God by focusing on Him. Again, that's although no longer commanded, godly fasting honors God by focusing on Him.

Before we get into the verses themselves, let's look at the only time in the Bible that fasting was commanded. That pertained to the Day of Atonement, also known as Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur commemorates when Moses prayed for God to forgive the Jews for worshiping the golden calf. Exodus chapter 32 verses 30 and 31 tell us about that day.

Those verses say, Leviticus 16 is where God provided the detailed requirements for the Day of Atonement.

[2 : 58] This is a long cross-reference, so you may want to turn to Leviticus 16. We're actually going to read the entire chapter, and we'll pause in the middle for some commentary.

God was very detailed about what He expected on the Day of Atonement, and part of the reason why we're looking at the whole chapter is we need to see how detailed that was.

So starting with Leviticus 16 verse 1 and going all the way through the chapter, here's what the chapter says. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they drew near before the Lord and died.

And the Lord said to Moses, Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the holy place inside the veil before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die.

For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. But in this way Aaron shall come into the holy place with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

[4 : 00] He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body. And he shall tie the linen sash around his waist and wear the linen turban.

These are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering.

Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering.

But the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

[5 : 04] Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small.

And he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony so that he does not die.

And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side. And in front of the mercy seat, he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.

[6 : 13] And so he shall do for the tent of meeting which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. No one may be in the tent of the meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the holy place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement for it and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar all around.

And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel. And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sins.

And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of the man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

[7 : 29] Let's pause there for a second. The section we just read about the goat is where we get the term scapegoat. So that actually is a biblical term when you hear the term scapegoat.

So let's resume reading Leviticus 16 now and we're starting with verse 23. Verse 23 says, Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting and shall take off the linen garments that he put on when he went into the holy place and shall leave them there.

And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place and put on his garments and come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people.

And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar. And he who lets the goat go to Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water and afterward he may come into the camp.

And the bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire.

[8 : 39] And he who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water and afterward he may come into the camp. And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you and you shall afflict yourselves.

It is a statute forever. And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement wearing the holy linen garments.

He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. And he shall make atonement for the priest and for all the people of the assembly.

And this shall be a statute forever for you that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins. And Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses.

[9 : 48] It's interesting we have such detail and then it sums up in the last sentence with and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. Where verse 29 says that people should afflict themselves, that's considered to be a command for fasting.

Other things that the Jews avoid doing on that day include wearing leather shoes, applying lotions or creams, bathing or having conjugal relations.

Because the day of atonement is observed on the Jewish calendar's tenth day of the seventh month, it falls somewhere between September 14 and October 14 each year.

And this year's day of atonement was October 5th. Next year's will be September 25th. Remember that the Jews consider the day to be from sundown to sundown.

So the day of atonement officially begins at sundown on the night before the day of atonement. We see that God imposed strict penalties for failing to observe the day of atonement.

[10 : 56] And we hear that in the shorter summary of the day of atonement. These verses are from Leviticus chapter 23 and they're verses 26 through 32.

Leviticus 23, 26 through 32 say, And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Now on the tenth day of the seventh month is the day of atonement.

It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the Lord. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God.

For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people.

You shall not do any work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations and in all your dwelling places. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves.

[11 : 58] On the ninth day of the month, beginning at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your Sabbath. Verses 29 and 30 there say that the penalty for failing to be afflicted is to be cut off.

That, of course, is a euphemism for being killed. You see that the same penalty also applied for working on that day. As we go through tonight's text in the Sermon on the Mount, keep in mind that the Day of Atonement is the only time that fasting was commanded in the Bible.

By now you may be thinking that tonight's lesson is on Leviticus instead of the Sermon on the Mount. So let's go back to Matthew chapter 6, and we'll see what Jesus says about fasting.

We're going to cover tonight's verses in three sections, and in the first parts of verses 16 and 17, we see the reason to fast.

The reason to fast is your first blank. Verse 16 starts with, and when you fast, and then verse 17 starts with, but when you fast.

[13 : 11] Jesus assumes that times will come when his followers will fast. When Jesus talks about fasting, he's referring to abstaining from food and sometimes water as well.

Today we sometimes hear people talk about fasting from television, fasting from their phone, or sometimes fasting from just a single favorite food. Those types of fasts can have their place if you do them with the right reason in mind, but biblical fasting refers to abstaining from food and also sometimes abstaining from water.

So keep in mind when they were commanded to fast, they were supposed to fast from food. Some people have medical conditions that prevent them from fasting. In those cases, the people should never fast.

However, for those without medical conditions to prevent it, the expectation is that believers will sometimes fast. The reason for fasting is important. The reason for fasting is that we should become so focused on God that we prefer to spend time with him rather than to eat.

Be sure to grasp that point. The biblical reason for fasting is that we become so focused on God that we prefer to spend time with him rather than to eat.

[14 : 29] That's why biblical fasting is associated with worshiping and seeking God, typically through prayer. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, Fasting means an abstinence from food for the sake of certain spiritual purposes, such as prayer or meditation, or the seeking of God for some peculiar reason or under some exceptional circumstance.

Let's look at some biblical examples to illustrate that point. In Esther 4.16, Esther and the Jews fasted before Esther sought an audience with the king to tell him about Mordecai's plot to exterminate the Jews.

In Nehemiah, Nehemiah 1.4 records Nehemiah's response after he heard that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates were destroyed. Nehemiah said, As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Listen to Joel 2.12-13. Joel 2.12-13 say, Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster. Moving to the New Testament, we have examples of fasting in the New Testament as well.

[16:08] Listen to Acts chapter 13, verses 2 and 3. Acts 13.2 and 3 say, While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, for the work to which I have called them.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 14.23 tells us about Paul and Barnabas fasting.

Acts 14.23 says, And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

We could go on to other examples, such as when Moses fasted, when David fasted and prayed for the life of his first son that he conceived with Bathsheba, when Daniel fasted, and of course, when Jesus fasted.

All these examples, like the examples we looked at, are focused on seeking God, typically through prayer. So now you see the reason for fasting.

[17:13] And now that we've covered that reason for fasting, let's look at the things not to do when we fast, and then things to do. The second section of our lesson, at the end of verse 16, covers the wrong way to fast.

The wrong way to fast. Look at Matthew 6.16 again. Jesus said, 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. We spent some time looking at the reason for fasting so that the wrong way to fast would be obvious.

Instead of fasting to worship God, the hypocrites fasted to be seen by others. By the time of Christ, fasting had been perverted and twisted beyond what was scriptural and sincere.

Fasting had become a ritual to gain merit with God and attention from men. Many Pharisees fasted twice a week, usually on the second and fifth day of the week.

[18:26] They claim that they chose those days because supposedly those were the days when Moses made the two separate trips to receive the tablets of law from God on Mount Sinai.

But those days happened to be the two major Jewish market days of the week. Those days were when cities and towns were crowded with farmers, merchants, and shoppers.

They were the two days where public fasting would have the largest audiences. Notice how Jesus warns against looking gloomy and against disfiguring faces.

The word translated disfigure literally means to make disappear or to render invisible or unrecognizable. Those wanting to call attention to their fasting would put on a gloomy face and neglect their appearance.

That way it would be obvious that they were fasting. They even would wear old clothes and sometimes they were purposely torn and soiled. They would even dishevel their hair and cover themselves with dirt and ashes and sometimes use makeup to look pale and sickly.

[19:33] Remember we talked about what the word hypocrite really means. And that comes from a Greek word for the mask used by actors to portray a certain character or mood. With fasting, some Jewish hypocrites literally did resort to theatrics, even using makeup at times to make themselves appear sickly.

Those hypocrites knew better than to fast so that their supposed righteousness would be seen by others. The New Testament had yet to be written in, but the Jews had the Old Testament.

In addition to the examples we've looked at so far, listen to how much the first four verses of Isaiah 58 sound like Jesus' warning here in our passage tonight.

So here are Isaiah 58, 1-4, and God is speaking to Isaiah here. He says, Cry aloud, do not hold back.

Lift up your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God.

[20 : 44] They ask of me righteous judgments. They delight to draw near to God. Starting in verse 3, he says, They say, Why have we fasted and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. That's pretty clear in the Old Testament, isn't it? That if you fast the wrong way, God is not going to hear you.

So even before Jesus spoke the words that we're studying tonight, the Jews had enough information to know when fasting would be unacceptable to the Lord. In other words, they had no excuse for improper fasting.

Look at Matthew 6.16 again and pay particular attention to the last sentence of the verse this time. Jesus said again, When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

[21 : 54] Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. When the heart is not right, fasting is a sham and a mockery. And those whom Jesus condemned for fasting to be seen by men were pretentiously self-righteous.

Everything they did centered around themselves. God had no place in their motives or their thinking, and he also had no part in their reward. The reward they wanted was recognition by men, and Jesus makes it clear that that was exactly the reward they got, and that was only the reward they got.

So we've seen the reason to fast and the wrong way to fast. You can probably guess what we'll study in the last section of the lesson. In verses 17 and 18, we'll see the right way to fast.

The right way to fast. Listen to what Jesus said in verses 17 and 18. He said, But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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.

To anoint the head with oil was commonly done in those days as a matter of good grooming. The oil was often scented and used partly as a perfume. Like washing the face, it was associated with day-to-day living, but especially with more formal or important occasions.

[23 : 27] Jesus' point was that a person who fast should do everything to make himself look normal and do nothing to attract attention. A.W. Pink put it this way. He said, Fasting is unto God, and our one and only concern must be to perform this duty in a manner which is pleasing unto Him.

We must take every possible precaution to conceal our private devotions from them. If we are to enter our chambers and shut the door when engaging in private prayer, equally necessary is it that we observe the utmost secrecy in connection with our private fasting.

Everything which savors of pride and ostentation is to be rigidly avoided. Whenever we devote a portion of our time to extraordinary private devotions, there should be nothing in our behavior or general appearance to indicate this unto others.

So listen to that last sentence again. Whenever we devote a portion of our time to extraordinary private devotions, there should be nothing in our behavior or general appearance to indicate this unto others.

Let's go back to the Isaiah passage we began looking at earlier. Just as Isaiah 58, 1-4 parallel Jesus' words about improper fasting, listen to how Isaiah 58, 5-12 parallel Jesus' words about proper fasting.

[24 : 54] Speaking through Isaiah, here's what God said in verses 5-12 of chapter 58. Is such the fast that I choose a day for a person to humble himself?

Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house when you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up speedily.

Your righteousness shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer. You shall cry and he will say, Here I am.

If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

[26 : 13] And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

These verses clearly show that the Old Testament also taught that proper fasting would have its rewards. And the passage in Isaiah mentions several rewards, just as Jesus says that people who fast will be rewarded.

But what if we don't get tangible rewards like those in the Isaiah passage? Well, listen to this quote from John Stott. Stott said, The purpose of fasting is to express our humility before God and our concern for others in need.

If these purposes are fulfilled, it will be reward enough. So now that we've looked at tonight's verses, consider this thought.

[27 : 23] We're always driven to fast because we hunger for something more than food. As strange as that sounds, fasting is motivated by the prospect of pleasure.

That pleasure is because we value something more than food at that time. The heart that fast cries out, This is what I want more than the pleasure of food. And this can be the admiration that men give to people with willpower, or it can be the reward we seek from God alone without regard to the praise of men.

As is the case with giving and praying examples that we previously studied in this section, hypocrites like the Pharisees want their religious acts to be seen by others. But the reason goes even deeper than that.

As we wrap up the section from verses 1-18 in chapter 6, let's consider again why people want their acts to be seen by others.

This is a quote from Martin Lloyd-Jones. He said, Ultimately, our only reason for pleasing men around us is that we may please ourselves. Our real desire is not to please others as such.

[28 : 36] We want to please them because we know that if we do, they will think better of us. In other words, we are pleasing ourselves and are merely concerned about self-gratification.

That is where the insidious character of sin is seen. What appears to be so selfless may just be a very subtle form of selfishness. According to our Lord, it comes to this, Man by nature desires the praise of man more than the praise of God.

In desiring the praise of man, what he is really concerned about is his good opinion of himself. In the last analysis, it always comes to this, we are either pleasing ourselves or else we are pleasing God.

It is kind of powerful to think that we desire the praise of man a lot of times more often than we desire the praise of God.

We need to tie up a loose end though because we read all of Leviticus chapter 16 earlier and you may remember that three of those verses said something very dire as did another cross-reference we looked at in Leviticus.

[29 : 46] Leviticus 16, 29-31 said, And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you and you shall afflict yourselves.

It is a statute forever. And remember, we saw that the penalty for not observing the Day of Atonement was death. Did anybody in here celebrate the Day of Atonement a few weeks ago?

Well, let's ask ourselves a question. Because verse 31 says that this should be a statute forever, why does our main idea say that fasting is no longer a command?

Well, some Christians actually would say that our main idea is wrong. There are still some Christians that observe the Day of Atonement today. However, the Bible is clear that we no longer

need to observe the day.

[30 : 59] The reason is this. Because the validity of the Day of Atonement ceased when Jesus made the once-for-all sacrifice for sins, the single prescribed occasion for fasting has ceased to exist as well.

So once again, because Jesus has made the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, the single prescribed occasion for fasting has ceased to exist too.

Said another way, Christ became the scapegoat for us. Remember we talked about the scapegoat when we read through Leviticus 16. And we'll see how Christ became the scapegoat when we look at some passages in Hebrews.

So here are Hebrews chapter 9, verses 11 through 15. Hebrews chapter 9, 11 through 15 say, But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

So pause there for a second. How long is eternal? That should tell you too why we no longer need to observe the Day of Atonement because it's an eternal redemption that Christ has gotten for us.

[32 : 24] Then picking up again in Hebrews chapter 9, verse 13, it says, For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctify for the purification of flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Therefore, He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

covenant. So we see there that Christ has redeemed from the sins that we've made under the first covenant. Listen now to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 4 through 18.

And again, this is a long cross-reference, but you'll see why the Day of Atonement is no longer necessary to be observed. Hebrews 10, 4 through 18, say this, That's pretty clear, isn't it?

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me.

[33 : 50] In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.

When He said, Above, ye have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings. These are offered according to the law. Then He added, Behold, I have come to do your will.

He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

That's a key verse right there in verse 10 of chapter 10. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Then it goes on to say, And every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet.

[35 : 00] For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. So there's another way of saying that it's an eternal sanctification there.

He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us for after saying this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days declares the Lord I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds.

Then He adds I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. And then in verse 18 of Hebrews chapter 10 it says where there is forgiveness of these there is no longer any offering for sin.

Listen to how Martin Lloyd-Jones says that we can identify what we should or should not do when worshipping God. He said the supreme matter in this life and world for all of us is to realize our relationship to God.

I suggest that the greatest cause of all our failures is that we constantly forget our relationship to God. We should realize that our supreme object in life should be to please God to please Him only

and to please Him always and in everything.

[36 : 18] If that is our aim we cannot go wrong. So hear that last part again. We should realize that our supreme object in life should be to please God to please Him only and to please Him always and in everything.

If that is our aim we cannot go wrong. The main idea is the bottom line. Although no longer commanded Godly fasting honors God by focusing on Him.

Believers should have times when they want to be so focused on God that they never stop to eat but we're not required to have those times. We just need to remember what Jesus said and that's when He said that when you fast anoint your head and wash your face 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.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you again for the reminder in this section of how we should always avoid practicing our righteousness before others so that we can be seen by them and receive recognition from them.

We recognize, Lord, that often we are motivated to seek good things and good words from others. Help us when that happens to avoid letting that drive our actions but let our actions be focused on you instead.

[37 : 43] Be with us as we go through the week. Continue to help us be godly examples for those around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.