

Dan Tuggy
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Authenticity in Spiritual Exercise Matt 6:16-18

Main Idea: God is looking for authenticity in our spiritual exercises.

At a time when being “green” was reaching a fever pitch in American society, I read an interesting article in which the author used an intriguing term – “conspicuously green”. Where the majority of the houses on the north side of the street had solar panels on the street-facing south sloped roofs, there might be a particular house on the south side of the street that had a solar panel on the north facing slope, specifically so that the solar panel would be visible from the street side. It had no solar panel on the south slope facing the back yard where the panel would be much more effective. But that home owner wanted everyone to know that he was totally on board with the environmental movement. He proclaimed his stance by that ineffective street side solar panel. That home owner was “conspicuously green.”

In that same era, car companies like Honda and Toyota developed some cars whose main redeeming factor seemed to be that they were very fuel efficient. To communicate their fuel efficiency to environmentally conscious clients, the car companies designed them with a completely different look from any other car on the market. So a strange, tiny, Prius shaped car became the essential ride for a “conspicuous greenie”. After all, how else could people figure out that you deeply cared about the greenhouse gas problem? The marketing strategy was hugely successful because that basic shape and some of those very cars like the Prius have become mainstream. For you auto history buffs, I know that the Volkswagen beetle preceded these cars and that it was also pretty fuel efficient, but it is hard to look pretentious driving a bug!

In Matt 6, Jesus warned about conspicuous religiosity, about religious grandstanding which is much like a football player doing his strut or his dance in the end zone after making a touchdown. Verses 16-18, the verses we are going to concentrate on this morning, speak of “fasting,” that is, depriving oneself for a given time, of that which in and of itself is legitimate. Fasting often is used in connection with food, but the term can be used to speak of self-deprivation of other legitimate things or activities. To understand verses 16-18, you have to look back at the first verse of chapter 6.

1 *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed (theatrical term – “to show oneself off”--think “conspicuous religiosity”) by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*

Verses 2-15 that we have looked at the last few weeks mention specific practices of giving alms and praying as examples where it is easy to practice conspicuous religiosity. Then verse 16 goes to the third example:

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16 "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. **17** "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face **18** so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

"*Whenever you fast...*" This is something the religious Jew was very used to doing. Remember that in Luke 18:12, the Pharisee's prayer as he proclaimed his righteousness before God, he said, "I fast twice a week." This was in addition to the fasts God proclaimed for feast days. Jesus said, "*Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.*" The word translated "hypocrite" is also a theatrical term that refers to putting on a mask to play a part.

The conspicuously religious of that day would give up pleasantness and smiling when they fasted. They would take on a mournful appearance, distorting or disfiguring their faces into a pained expression in order to communicate to a watching world how much they were suffering as they fasted. In a quote from some old Jewish writings, we read: "In the public fasts every one took ashes, and put upon his head. They say of Joshua Ben Ananiah, that, all the days of his life, his face was black by reason of his fastings. Why is his name called Ashur? (1 Chron. 4:5). Because his face was black by fastings."

On the fast days, the religious leaders... "...brought out the ark into the street of the city, and put burnt ashes upon it, and upon the head of the prince, and upon the head of the president of the Sanhedrim, and every man upon his own head." (Misn. Taanith, c. 2. sect. 1) So putting on a severe, distorted, or unsightly blackened mask of a face would publically communicate the merit the conspicuously righteous seemed to have before God!

Jesus acknowledged that those publically proclaiming their religiosity in a conspicuous way did have a reward; it was the recognition, the praise of men. "*They have their reward in full.*" But that is where their reward stopped.

In contrast to the public display the conspicuously religious put on, Jesus instructed, "*But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face...*" Jesus' words assume that you will fast and He is contrasting this fast from the former. He is not arguing for or against fasting as we know it and He definitely is not commanding that we fast in this verse. Jesus' emphasis in modern English is, "Clean up! Wash your face and comb your hair! Don't show the distress of going without food. Get rid of the mournful appearance. Smile. Act normally. Don't put on a mask of public religion." WHY?

"So that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret." Fasting so that men notice has its own reward, men's adulation. Doing your fasting in

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front of God alone makes Him take notice. God is "*in secret*" in the sense that He is unseen. Then... "*Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*" God who is in secret (invisible) rewards the true fast. He sees the work of grace in secret (hidden, private) fasting. He delights in that display of His grace in you and He rewards that authentic religious exercise with His glory! Those who are conspicuously religious often capture honor from men, but honor from God Himself is infinitely greater than the praise of men.

The message of these three verses is simple so there isn't much point on prolonging the exposition, but I'd like to turn your attention to the application of the text. The most obvious thing is that Jesus wants authenticity in religious exercise. He is not interested in public piety that has no basis in fact before God. The God who is invisible sees what is invisible to man. He can judge the authenticity of what we are doing. It doesn't matter if it is giving, praying, fasting, or any other religious exercise; God can see through your motives and your focus.

Then notice that fasting that the Bible indicates God noticed didn't happen in a vacuum. I've given you some examples of typical times God's people would observe a fast at the back of your sermon notes sheet. Those would include:

- Times of suffering under God's judgment (Joel 1:14; 2:12)
- Times of public calamity (II Sam 1:12)
- Times of affliction (Lk. 5:33-35; Psa. 35:13; Dan. 6:18; II Sam. 12:16)
- Times of impending danger (Esther 4:16)

And there were accompanying activities that one would typically see along with the fasting. I've also listed some examples for you from the Scriptures. They would include:

- Prayer (Ezra 8:23; Dan. 9:3)
- Confession of sin (I Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-2)
- Mourning (Joel 2:12)
- Humiliation (Deut. 9:18; Neh. 9:1)

Then, I've never found any evidence of fasting for fasting's sake in the Scriptures, unless you're possibly talking about fasting as an antidote to gluttony! In and of itself, fasting has no worth; it has no inherent value. There doesn't seem to be any evidence that Almighty God in heaven looks down and is just SO impressed that, for a given time, we can abstain from food or some other legitimate thing that God has given us to enjoy and sustain us.

Yet our text from Matthew 6 affirms that there is a fast which does impress God, a kind of fast He notices, and which He rewards! So what kind of fast does God approve? What kind of fast moves God? What kind of fast does God reward? Scripture shows the fast that moves God, the fast He rewards, to be a lifestyle that includes fasting and not just a religious exercise called fasting. Let me give you a few examples.

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To a people that religiously practiced a ritual fast, God defined a true fast. In Isa. 58:3-7 (NLT), note how this fast is eminently practical, and how it embraces all of life, giving up something (fasting) for others.

*We have fasted before you!' they say.
'Why aren't you impressed?
We have been very hard on ourselves,
and you don't even notice it!'
"I will tell you why!" I respond.
"It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.
Even while you fast,
you keep oppressing your workers.
You humble yourselves
by going through the motions of penance,
bowing your heads
like reeds bending in the wind.
You dress in burlap
and cover yourselves with ashes.
Is this what you call fasting?
Do you really think this will please the LORD?
"No, this is the kind of fasting I want:
Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;
lighten the burden of those who work for you.
Let the oppressed go free,
and remove the chains that bind people.
Share your food with the hungry,
and give shelter to the homeless.
Give clothes to those who need them,
and do not hide from relatives who need your help.
"Then your salvation will come like the dawn,
and your wounds will quickly heal.
Your godliness will lead you forward,
and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.
Then when you call, the LORD will answer.
'Yes, I am here,' he will quickly reply.*

Another great example is found in Matt 4 when the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus fasted for 40 days as He followed the Spirit's leading. He didn't take off after breakfast and then about lunchtime take a time out to go to town to get something to eat as many of us would have been prone to do. Because He had been fasting the whole time, the Spirit's leading Jesus set Him up for the tremendous victory over the Devil's temptation to make bread out of stone. But in that fast, Jesus drew close to the Father, getting His sustenance from Him. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word proceeding out of the mouth of God!"

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In John 4 when Jesus was speaking to the Samaritan woman, He was preoccupied with ministry to her, not food. His disciples couldn't believe it! He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then remember Mary, sitting in rapt attention at Jesus' feet. Martha, her sister, was much more tied to food, thinking about a meal. To her, that meal was the highest priority of the day. Mary didn't have her mind on food at all, and Jesus' affirming words make me think that the difference between Mary and Martha wasn't just metabolism.

Fasting as a lifestyle is rewarded by God because He takes pleasure in the display of Jesus' life in your priorities. He notices your fast because it delights the Father to see His grace bearing fruit in your life as you follow the Spirit's lead, taking no thought for yourself.

Do you want to know if authentic fasting is part of your lifestyle? If so, I'd encourage you ask yourself a few simple questions:

- Is my physical appetite the most important factor in what I do and how I relate to others?"
- Do my appetites rule me when God gives me a chance to do something for Him? How can I know if they do or if they don't?
 - Can I postpone eating so that I can go to prayer meeting or a Committee Meeting?
 - Can I miss a meal to serve a meal under the bridge?
 - Can I abstain, for the sake of someone else, from something God has given for my sustenance and pleasure?
 - Am I willing to give up my meal for someone who needs a meal?
- Have I experienced that God is enough, that He is my sustenance, when I am hungry, just like Jesus did when ministering to the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:31-35)?

Remember that God who is in secret (invisible) rewards the authentic fast. He sees the work of His grace in secret (hidden, private) authentic fasting. He delights in that display of His grace in you and He rewards that authentic religious exercise with His glory!

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Authenticity in Spiritual Exercise Matt 6:16-18

Main Idea: God is looking for authenticity in our spiritual exercises.

Intro: Conspicuous religiosity.

- Play-actors

- The fast of which God approves
 - Secret

 - Authentic

Extra material on biblical fasting:

Typical times to observe a fast:

- Suffering under God's judgment (Joel 1:14; 2:12)
- Public calamities (II Sam 1:12)
- Afflictions (Lk. 5:33-35; Psa. 35:13; Dan. 6:18; II Sam. 12:16)
- Impending danger (Esther 4:16)

Fast accompanied by:

- Prayer (Ezra 8:23; Dan. 9:3)
- Confession of sin (I Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-2)
- Mourning (Joel 2:12)
- Humiliation (Deut. 9:18; Neh. 9:1)