

Doing Without

I have done things that people might say are God's work. Looking back, though, I don't think that I can honestly say that all those works involved sacrifice on my part – doing without something important in order to do God's work. In fact, I would say that much of the time it's been more a matter of convenience (or minor inconvenience at most).

So what does this have to do with fasting? We'll see this week that spiritually focused fasting is not just a matter of giving up food but a matter of sacrificially orienting our lives to God and what he wants us to do; God wants our work for him to always be done in a manner that gives of ourselves, to him and to others. We may need to sacrifice something (whether it's food, possessions, or our time and strength), but God promises to provide for us always and forever. God's provision is our reward, and it is more abundant than we can ever hope to achieve on our own.

Monday – Fast Cleaning

"They made pretenses to very superior sanctity when they had a mind to disturb everything." Augustine,

1. Please read Matthew 6:16-18. What type of "reward" do you think Jesus meant in verse 16? Verse 18?

Text Insight: The word "hypocrite" comes from a Greek word describing a stage actor, a pretender.

2. Compare Jesus' comments on being clean in Matthew 15:1-11 with those in 6:16-17. Describe what Jesus meant when he referred to cleanliness.
3. Read Luke 11:37-41, John 13:1-11 and Hebrews 10:22-23. Where does true cleanliness come from? How?

Making it Personal: Do you want your life cleaned up for outward show or because of the work of Christ on your behalf? Ask God for strength to pursue the cleanliness that matters.

Tuesday – Fast for the Father

"Hypocrisy desires to seem good rather than to be so; honesty desires to be good rather than seem so." Arthur Warwick, 17th c. English pastor

1. Please read Matthew 6:1-4, 5-6 and 16-18. What common theme do you see? In our day, we may not blow trumpets or pray on the street corners to show off our spirituality, but we do other things. What might some of those be?
2. In Matthew 6:19-21, what types of treasure is Jesus talking about? How does this tie back to verse 1?

Making it Personal: When do you find yourself gathering "treasure" here on earth instead of investing your life in such a way that will result in heavenly treasure?

Wednesday – Really Fast

"Fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal." Andrew Murray, 19th-20th c. South African pastor

1. Please read Isaiah 58:1-7. What type of attitude should you have in a true fast? What types of things should it lead you to do?
2. According to Isaiah 58:8-10, what does God promise those who engage in true fasts? What does this mean about the sacrifice experienced by those engaging in such fast activity?
3. Many of Jesus' listeners in Matthew 6:16-18 would have been familiar with Isaiah 58. How do the two passages together help you understand your responsibility to those around you who are in need?

Prayer Focus: Ask God to move our church to care for those in need without regard for the acclaim of others.

Thursday – Near and Far

"Don't run too far, you will have to return the same distance." French proverb

1. Please read Isaiah 29:13-15. How does Isaiah's prophecy relate to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:1-11 and Matthew 6?
2. How does Isaiah help you understand the proper way to pursue godly things?
3. Read Malachi 3:6-15 and describe the extent of God's understanding of the failures we experience.

According to verses 6-7 and 16-18, what does God desire both from us and for us despite our failures?

Making it Personal: Follow the example of Micah 3:16 and seek out those who will join you to listen to God's word, talk it through, and commit to following God.

Friday –Fast Times

"In fasting we learn what poor, weak creatures we are – dependent on a meal of meat for the little strength which we are so apt to lean upon." Hudson Taylor, 19th-20th c. British missionary

1. Please read Esther 4:1-17. What crisis confronted Mordecai, Esther and the Jews?
2. What obstacle did Esther have to overcome (v.11)? What might Esther have thought upon hearing Mordecai's response (v.12-14)?

Text Insight: The Persian Empire stretched from Greece and Egypt to India. King Xerxes, whom Esther needed to approach, was the most powerful man in the world.

3. How do Esther's request (v.15-16) and Mordecai's answer (v.17) fulfill Isaiah 58 and Matthew 6? Now look at 5:1-2 and describe God's response to them.

Making it Personal: How would you have felt in Esther's place? Pray that God will guide you in the situations he has led you to.

For the Weekend: Read 2 Samuel 12:1-23. How would you have responded to verses 7-9? Do David's actions in verse 16 comply with Matthew 6? Why or why not?