

Matthew 6:16-24 ¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

“Fasting and Storing”

One of the most persistent pop-culture questions these days is how to have a fulfilled life. Seminar after book after seminar after book by life strategists leaves us quite stuffed with advice. Suze Orman thinks you'll find fulfillment in living your life to maximize your financial assets. Deepak Chopra thinks you can do it with an interesting mix of quantum physics, ancient Hindu medicine, meditation, and the herbs and oils he sells. Oprah, well, Oprah is a little flippant but I like the way she is so generous. And then there's Dr. Phil and his straightforward program of behavioral modification: "Your issues are obvious. Here in my book is what you got to do about it. Do it." He had to be the oldest sibling in his family. Only the first in the birth order think like that.

What makes for fulfillment is a troublesome issue these days in Western culture. The reason I believe is wealth. Just fifty years ago, fulfillment was not much an issue partly because it was defined as fulfilling your role in the family or at work. Fulfillment was found in duty. But since World War II and Western society having become so prosperous our definition of fulfillment has been linked to achieving a higher social status through wealth rather than in fulfilling our duties. Moreover our concept of fulfillment has become very individualistic. To talk about fulfillment today is to talk about self-fulfillment. Oddly enough, this pursuit has left many people, both wealthy and poor feeling largely unfulfilled. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I have a lot but I amount to so little."

We will have this problem of lacking fulfillment as long as we see the world with eyes that are full of the darkness of materialism and consumerism, which in biblical terms are mammon. Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body." This means how we look at life is what shines light into our hearts. If our eyes are full of darkness, which means we have a warped perspective, and we all do on account of sin, so we see and pursue only that which makes us unfulfilled. Indeed, the pursuit of self-fulfillment is a warped perspective all together. It's like looking at the horizon through a magnifying glass. The pursuit of self-fulfillment only leaves us with an even more diminished capacity to see beyond ourselves.

Jesus talks about the eye, about how we see things, after having taught his disciples about almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and not storing up treasures for ourselves on earth. This should clue us in that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are how we store up treasure in heaven and they are conducive to forming a good eye a healthy way of looking at life. As I've said these past two weeks, the reward for these practices done in secret so only the Father can see them is an ever-deepening knowing of our Father in heaven and his loving-kindness and there begins the healing our sin warped, inward turning eyes. When speaking about a good eye the word translated as good is better translated as healthy, simple, or singular. The good, healthy eye sees the world as Christ Jesus sees it; through the singular and simple focus of the loving-kindness of the Father. We know his loving-kindness so we look for it and for ways to share it. This is looking at life with a good eye that lets light shine into hearts.

To maybe shift gears a bit. We need yet to look at fasting. I think that disciplining ourselves with a fasted life may offer us an alternative to our pursuit of self-fulfillment that might actually have a more satisfying reward. When we think of fasting what comes to mind is either self-denial or self-discipline with respect to food. In a culture in which one of the driving motifs is self-fulfillment it should not surprise anybody that eating disorders are rampant; disorders that lead both to obesity and to self-inflicted starvation. Because of the latter I do not recommend anyone skipping meals for religious reasons. I rather say discipline yourself with moderation with respect to eating. But that is neither here nor there. When we take a look at what the Bible has to say about fasting we find that it's scope is much larger than just eating habits.

We have to go to the Old Testament to learn about fasting for the New Testament says very little. What becomes obvious when in the Old Testament is that people fasted to get God to notice them. If you want God to see that you are sincerely sorry about something you have done, then fast. If you need direction from God, then fast. By Jesus' day, the ultra-religious people had developed a program of fasting twice a week and went out of their way to get people to notice their misery. They were overly concerned about sinfulness and wanted everybody else to be just as concerned. It is important to understand that these examples of religious fasting are human attempts to get noticed by God. I could find no place where God specifically told the people to fast. There are times when God commanded the people to deny themselves, but this had to do with more than just food.

The Old Testament prophets reflect that God actually was displeased with fasting from food. In several places the word of the Lord is that fasting must be about equitable and just living. Through the prophet Isaiah in chapter 58 of his book, the Lord hammers the people for their showy display of fasting and then states what true fasting is: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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 them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before

you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard...The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 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 live in.” This sounds a lot like “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.” And, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” True fasting is to live an equitable and just lifestyle. It is to live simply using only what we need and sharing our excess rather than being driven by the pursuit of wealth defined fulfillment.

Moving on, it should not surprise us that immediately after Jesus mentions the discipline of fasting he says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” A few weeks ago in a sermon I remarked about how we Westerners like to save up for retirement and how that can easily become a mask for greed. I don’t want to give a lecture on economics, but it seems we have a global economic system built on the hogging away of resources, which in turn enables the rich to grow richer while denying basic resources to the poor. In the world of economics this is called neo-Liberalism or “trickle-down economics.” Wealth tucked away in a world of limited resources necessarily means a limitation gets placed upon what’s left to meet everybody else’s need. If one person has more then everybody else has less. This is not supposed to happen among the disciples of Jesus Christ.

The economics of the early church were that nobody had private ownership of anything. Wealth was shared and there were no needy among them (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Paul eased that up a bit and taught that within the church there should be fair balance with respect to wealth so that “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).” A just and equitable lifestyle, a life of simplicity is the true life of fasting. That’s what I believe the Lord expects of us with respect to our wealth. We may look back on the early church and say the way they lived was idealistic and short-lived even then but today it is impossible. That may very well be, but the fact remains that they set the standard for how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live in this world – according to justice and equitably. Micah 6:8 reads, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” My friends, take to heart what Jesus is teaching. Search your life and honestly try to answer the question “What is enough for me and my family” and pray about the excess. Do this so that your eye may be full of light and “your light shall break forth like the dawn” and “others will see and praise your Father in heaven.”