

## HOW NOT TO FAST

Matt. 6:16-18

***When you fast, don't put on a sad face, as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces, so that all men may see that they are fasting. This is the truth I tell you--they are paid in full. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that to men you may not look as if you were fasting, but to your Father who is in secret; and your Father, who sees what happens in secret, will give you your reward in full.***

To this day fasting is an essential part of the religious life in the east. The Mohammedan strictly keeps the fast of Ramadan, which falls in the ninth month of the Mohammedan year, and which commemorates the first revelation which came to Mohammed. The fast lasts from dawn--when it is light enough to distinguish a white thread from a black thread--until sunset. Bathing, drinking, smoking, smelling perfumes, eating, every unnecessary indulgence is forbidden. Nurses and pregnant women are exempt. Soldiers and those on a journey are excused, but must at some other time fast for an equivalent number of days. If for health's sake a man must have food, he must make good his breach of the law of fasting by giving alms to the poor.

The Jewish fasting customs were exactly the same. It is to be noted that, as we have said, fasting lasted from dawn to sunset; outside that time normal meals could be eaten. For the Jew, in the time of Jesus, there was only one compulsory fast, the fast on the Day of Atonement. On that day from morning to evening, all men had "to afflict themselves" (Lev.16:31). The Jewish scribal law lays it down: "On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, or to drink, or to bathe, or to anoint oneself, or to wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse." Even young children had to be trained to some measure of fasting on the Day of Atonement so that, when they grew up, they would be prepared to accept the national fast.

But, although there was only the one compulsory, universal day of fasting, the Jews made great use of private fasting.

There was the fasting which was connected with mourning. Between the time of death and burial mourners must abstain from all flesh and wine. There was fasting to expiate some sin. It was said, for instance, the Reuben fasted for seven years for his share in the selling of Joseph: "He drank no wine or other liquor; no flesh passed his lips, and he ate no appetising food" (The Testament of Reuben 1: 10). For the same reason, "Simeon afflicted his soul with fasting for two years, because he had hated Joseph" (The Testimony of Simeon 3: 4). In repentance of his sin with Tamar, it was said that Judah to his old age "took neither wine nor flesh, and saw no pleasure" (The Testament of Judah 15: 4). It is fair to say that Jewish thought saw no value in fasting apart from repentance. The fast was only designed to be the outer expression of an inward sorrow. The writer of Ecclesiasticus (Sir.31:30) says, "A man who fasts to get rid of his sins, and goes again and does the same thing--who will listen to his prayer, and what profit is there in his humbling himself?"

In many cases fasting was an act of national penitence. So the whole nation fasted after the disaster of the civil war with Benjamin (Judg.20:26). Samuel made the people fast because they had strayed away after Baal (1Sam.7:6). Nehemiah made the people fast and confess their sins (Neh.9:1). Again and again the nation fasted as a sign of national penitence before God.

Sometimes fasting was a preparation for revelation. Moses in the mountain fasted for forty days and forty nights (Exo.24:15). Daniel fasted as he awaited God's word (Dn.9:3). Jesus himself fasted as he awaited the ordeal of temptation (Matt. 4:2). This was a sound principle, for when the body is most disciplined, the mental and the spiritual faculties are most alert. Sometimes fasting was an appeal to God. If, for instance, the rains failed and the harvest was in jeopardy, a national fast would be called as an appeal to God.

In Jewish fasting there were really three main ideas in the minds of men.

(i) Fasting was a deliberate attempt to draw the attention of God to the person who fasted. This was a very primitive idea. The fasting was designed to attract God's attention, and to make him notice the person who thus afflicted himself.

(ii) Fasting was a deliberate attempt to prove that penitence was real. Fasting was a guarantee of the sincerity of words and prayers. It is easy to see that there was a danger here, for that which was meant to be a proof of repentance could very easily come to be regarded as a substitute for repentance.

(iii) A great deal of fasting was vicarious. It was not designed to save a man's own soul so much as to move God to liberate the nation from its distresses. It was as if specially devoted people said, "Ordinary people cannot do this. They are too involved in work and in the world. We will do this extra thing to counterbalance the necessary deficiency of piety in others."

Such then was the Jewish theory and practice of fasting.

## HOW NOT TO FAST

Matt. 6:16-18 (continued)

High as the ideal of fasting might be, the practice of it involved certain inevitable dangers. The great danger was that a man might fast as a sign of superior piety, that his fasting might be a deliberate demonstration, not to God, but to men, of how devoted and disciplined a person he was. That is precisely what Jesus was condemning. He was condemning fasting when it was used as an ostentatious parade of piety. The Jewish days of fasting were Monday and Thursday. These were market days, and into the towns and villages, and especially into Jerusalem, there crowded the people from the country; the result was that those who were ostentatiously fasting would on those days have a bigger audience to see and admire their piety. There were many who took deliberate steps to see

that others could not miss the fact that they were fasting. They walked through the streets with hair deliberately unkempt and dishevelled, with clothes deliberately soiled and disarrayed. They even went the length of deliberately whitening their faces to accentuate their paleness. This was no act of humility; it was a deliberate act of spiritual pride and ostentation.

The wisest of the Rabbis would have condemned this as unsparingly as Jesus did. They were quite clear that fasting for its own sake was valueless. They said that a vow of abstinence was like an iron collar which prisoners had to wear; and he who imposed on himself such a vow was said to be like a man who found such a collar lying about, and who misguidedly stuck his head into it, thereby voluntarily undertaking a useless slavery. One of the finest things ever said is the Rabbinic saying, "A man will have to give an account on the judgment day for every good thing which he might have enjoyed, and did not."

Dr. Boreham has a story which is a commentary on the wrong idea of fasting. A traveller in the Rocky mountains fell in with an old Roman Catholic priest; he was amazed to find so aged a man struggling amidst the rocks and the precipices and the steep passes. The traveller asked the priest, "What are you doing here?" The old man answered, "I am seeking the beauty of the world." "But," said the traveller, "surely you have left it very late in life?" So the old man told his story. He had spent nearly all his life in a monastery; he had never been further outside it than the cloisters. He fell seriously ill, and in his illness he had a vision. He saw an angel stand beside his bed. "What have you come for?" he asked the angel. "To lead you home," the angel said. "And is it a very beautiful world to which I am going?" asked the old man. "It is a very beautiful world you are leaving," said the angel. "And then," said the old man, "I remembered that I had seen nothing of it except the fields and the trees around the monastery." So he said to the angel, "But I have seen very little of the world which I am leaving." "Then," said the angel, "I fear you will see very little beauty in the world to which you are going." "I was in trouble," said the old man, "and I begged that I might stay for just two more years. My prayer was granted, and I am spending all my little hoard of gold, and all the time I have, in exploring the world's loveliness--and I find it very wonderful!"

It is the duty of a man to accept and enjoy the world's loveliness, and not to reject it. There is no religious value in fasting undertaken for its own sake, or as an ostentatious demonstration of superior piety.

## THE TRUE FASTING

Matt. 6:16-18 (continued)

Although Jesus condemned the wrong kind of fasting, his words imply that there is a wise fasting, in which he expected that the Christian would take part. This is a thing of which few of us ever think. There are very few ordinary people in whose lives fasting plays any part at all. And yet there are many reasons why a wise fasting is an excellent thing.

(i) Fasting is good for health. Many of us live a life in which it is easy to get soft and flabby. It is even possible for a man to reach the stage when he lives to eat instead of eating to live. It would do a great many people a great deal of physical good to practise fasting far more than they do.

(ii) Fasting is good for self-discipline. It is easy to become almost completely self-indulgent. It is easy to come to a stage when we deny ourselves nothing which it is in our power to have or to pay for. It would do most people a great deal of good to cease for some time each week to make their wishes and their desires their master, and to exercise a stringent and an antiseptic self-discipline.

(iii) Fasting preserves us from becoming the slaves of a habit. There are not a few of us who indulge in certain habits because we find it impossible to stop them. They have become so essential that we cannot break them; we develop such a craving for certain things that what ought to be a pleasure has become a necessity; and to be cut off from the thing which we have learned so to desire can be a purgatory. If we practiced a wise fasting no pleasure would become a chain, and no habit would become a master. We would be masters of our pleasures, and not our pleasures masters of us.

(iv) Fasting preserves the ability to do without things. One of the great tests of any man's life is the number of things which he has come to regard as essential. Clearly, the fewer things we regard as essentials, the more independent we will be. When all kinds of things become essentials, we are at the mercy of the luxuries of life. It is no bad thing for a man to walk down a street of shop windows, and to look in at them, and remind himself of all the things that he can do without. Some kind of fasting preserves the ability to do without the things which should never be allowed to become essentials.

(v) Fasting makes us appreciate things all the more. It may be that there was a time in life when some pleasure came so seldom that we really enjoyed it when it did come. It may be that nowadays the appetite is blunted; the palate is dulled; the edge is gone off it. What was once a sharp pleasure has become simply a drug which we cannot do without. Fasting keeps the thrill in pleasure by keeping pleasure always fresh and new.

Fasting has gone almost completely out of the life of the ordinary person. Jesus condemned the wrong kind of fasting, but he never meant that fasting should be completely eliminated from life and living. We would do well to practise it in our own way and according to our own need. And the reason for practicing it is,

"So that earth's bliss may be our guide, And not our chain."

## THE TRUE TREASURE

Matt. 6:19-21

***Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth. where moth and rust destroy them, and where thieves dig through and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy them, and where thieves do not dig through and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.***

In the ordinary, everyday management of life it is simple wisdom to get to oneself only those things which will last. Whether we are buying a suit of clothes, or a motor car, or a carpet for the floor, or a suite of furniture, it is common sense to avoid shoddy goods, and to buy the things which have solidity and permanence and craftsmanship wrought into them. That is exactly what Jesus is saying here; he is telling us to concentrate on the things which will last.

Jesus calls up three pictures from the three great sources of wealth in Palestine.

(i) He tells men to avoid the things that the moth can destroy.

In the east, part of a man's wealth often consisted in fine and elaborate clothes. When Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, wished to make some forbidden profit out of Naaman, after his master had cured him. he asked him for a talent of silver and two festal garments (2Kgs.5:22). One of the things which tempted Achan to sin was a beautiful mantle from Shinar (Josh.7:21).

But such things were foolish things to set the heart upon, for the moths might eat at them. when they were stored away. and all their beauty and their value be destroyed. There was no permanence about possessions like that.

(ii) He tells men to avoid the things that rust can destroy.

The word translated rust is brosis (GSN1035). It literally means an eating away, but it is nowhere else used to mean rust. Most likely the picture is this. In the east many a man's wealth consisted in the corn and the grain that he had stored away in his great barns. But into that corn and grain there could come the worms and the rats and the mice, until the store was polluted and destroyed. In all probability, the reference is to the way in which rats, and mice, and worms, and other vermin, could get into a granary and eat away the grain.

There was no permanence about possessions like that.

(iii) He tells men to avoid the treasure, which thieves can steal by digging through.

The word which is used for "to dig through" (the Revised Standard Version has "break in") is diorussein (GSN1358). In Palestine the walls of many of the houses were made of

nothing stronger than baked clay; and burglars did effect an entry by literally digging through the wall. The reference here is to the man who has hoarded up in his house a little store of gold, only to find, when he comes home one day, that the burglars have dug through his flimsy walls and that his treasure is gone.

There is no permanency about a treasure which is at the mercy of any enterprising thief.

So Jesus warns men against three kinds of pleasures and possessions.

(i) He warns them against the pleasures which will wear out like an old suit of clothes. The finest garment in the world, moths or no moths, will in the end disintegrate. All purely physical pleasures have a way of wearing out. At each successive enjoyment of them the thrill becomes less thrilling. It requires more of them to produce the same effect. They are like a drug which loses its initial potency and which becomes increasingly less effective. A man is a foolish man who finds his pleasures in things which are bound to offer diminishing returns.

(ii) He warns against the pleasures which can be eroded away. The grain store is the inevitable prey of the marauding rats and mice who nibble and gnaw away the grain. There are certain pleasures which inevitably lose their attraction as a man grows older. It may be that he is physically less able to enjoy them; it may be that as his mind matures they cease in any sense to satisfy him. In life a man should never give his heart to the joys the years can take away; he should find his delight in the things whose thrill time is powerless to erode.

(iii) He warns against the pleasures which can be stolen away. All material things are like that; not one of them is secure; and if a man builds his happiness on them, he is building on a most insecure basis. Suppose a man arranges his life in such a way that his happiness depends on his possession of money; suppose a crash comes and he wakes up to find his money gone; then, with his wealth, his happiness has gone.

If any man is wise, he will build his happiness on things which he cannot lose, things which are independent of the chances and the changes of this life. Burns wrote of the fleeting things:

"But pleasures are like poppies spread: You seize the flower, its bloom is shed; Or like the snow falls in the river, A moment white--then melts for ever."

Any one whose happiness depends on things like that is doomed to disappointment. Any man whose treasure is in things is bound to lose his treasure, for in things there is no permanence, and no thing lasts forever.

## TREASURE IN HEAVEN

Matt. 6:19-21 (continued)

The Jews were very familiar with the phrase treasure in heaven. They identified such treasure with two things in particular.

(i) They said that the deeds of kindness which a man did upon earth became his treasure in heaven.

The Jews had a famous story about a certain King Monobaz of Adiabene who became a convert to Judaism. "Monobaz distributed all his treasures to the poor in the year of famine. His brothers sent to him and said, 'Thy fathers gathered treasures, and added to those of their fathers, but thou hast dispersed yours and theirs.' He said to them, 'My fathers gathered treasures for below, I have gathered treasures for above; they stored treasures in a place over which the hand of man can rule, but I have stored treasures in a place over which the hand of man cannot rule; my fathers collected treasures which bear no interest, I have gathered treasures which bear interest; my fathers gathered treasures of money, I have gathered treasures in souls; my fathers gathered treasures for others, I have gathered treasures for myself; my fathers gathered treasures in this world, I have gathered treasures for the world to come.'"

Both Jesus and the Jewish Rabbis were sure that what is selfishly hoarded is lost, but that what is generously given away brings treasure in heaven.

That was also the principle of the Christian Church in the days to come. The Early Church always lovingly cared for the poor, and the sick, and the distressed, and the helpless, and those for whom no one else cared. In the days of the terrible Decian persecution in Rome, the Roman authorities broke into a Christian Church. They were out to loot the treasures which they believed the Church to possess. The Roman prefect demanded from Laurentius, the deacon: "Show me your treasures at once." Laurentius pointed at the widows and orphans who were being fed, the sick who were being nursed, the poor whose needs were being supplied, "These," he said, "are the treasures of the Church."

The Church has always believed that "what we keep, we lose, and what we spend, we have."

(ii) The Jews always connected the phrase treasure in heaven with character. When Rabbi Yose ben Kisma was asked if he would dwell in a heathen city on condition of receiving very high pay for his services, he replied that he would not dwell anywhere except in a home of the Law, "for," he said, "in the hour of a man's departure neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones accompany him, but only his knowledge of the Law, and his good works." As the grim Spanish proverb has it, "There are no pockets in a shroud."

The only thing which a man can take out of this world into the world beyond is himself; and the finer the self he brings, the greater his treasure in heaven will be.

(iii) Jesus ends this section by stating that where a man's treasure is, his heart is there also. If everything that a man values and sets his heart upon is on earth, then he will have no interest in any world beyond this world; if all through his life a man's eyes are on eternity, then he will evaluate lightly the things of this world. If everything which a man counts valuable is on this earth, then he will leave this earth reluctantly and grudgingly; if a man's thoughts have been ever in the world beyond, he will leave this world with gladness, because he goes at last to God. Once Dr. Johnson was shown through a noble castle and its grounds; when he had seen round it he turned to his companions and said, "These are the things which make it difficult to die."

Jesus never said that this world was unimportant; but he said and implied over and over again that its importance is not in itself, but in that to which it leads. This world is not the end of life, it is a stage on the way; and therefore a man should never lose his heart to this world and to the things of this world. His eyes ought to be for ever fixed on the goal beyond.

## THE DISTORTED VISION

Matt. 6:22-23

***The light of the body is the eye. So then, if your eye is generous, the whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is grudging, your whole body will be in the dark. If, then, the light which is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!***

The idea behind this passage is one of childlike simplicity. The eye is regarded as the window by which the light gets into the whole body. The state of a window decides what light gets into a room. If the window is clear, clean, and undistorted, the light will come flooding into the room, and will illuminate every corner of it. If the glass of the window is coloured or frosted, distorted, dirty, or obscure, the light will be hindered, and the room will not be lit up.

The amount of light which gets into any room depends on the state of the window through which it has to pass. So, then, says Jesus, the light which gets into any man's heart and soul and being depends on the spiritual state of the eye through which it has to pass, for the eye is the window of the whole body.

The view we take of people depends on the kind of eye we have. There are certain obvious things which can blind our eyes and distort our vision.

(i) Prejudice can distort our vision. There is nothing which so destroys a man's judgment as prejudice does. It prevents him from forming the clear, reasonable and logical judgment which it is the duty of any man to form. It blinds him alike to the facts and to the significance of the facts.

Almost all new discoveries have had to fight their way against unreasonable prejudice. When Sir James Simpson discovered the virtues of chloroform he had to fight against the prejudice of the medical and religious world of his day. One of his biographers writes: "Prejudice, the crippling determination to walk only in time-worn paths, and to eschew new ways, rose up against it, and did their best to smother the new-found blessing." "Many of the clergy held that to try to remove the primal curse on women was to fight against divine law:

One of the most necessary things in life is the fearless self-examination which will enable us to see when we are acting on principle and when we are the victims of our own unreasonable and unreasoning prejudices. In any man who is swayed by prejudice the eye is darkened and the vision distorted.

(ii) Jealousy can distort our vision. Shakespeare gave us the classic example of that in the tragedy of Othello. Othello, the Moor, won fame by his heroic exploits and married Desdemona, who loved him with utter devotion and complete fidelity. As general of the army of Venice, Othello promoted Cassio and passed over Iago. Iago was consumed with jealousy. By careful plotting and the manipulation of facts Iago sowed in Othello's mind the suspicion that Cassio and Desdemona were carrying on an intrigue. He manufactured evidence to prove it, and moved Othello to such a passion of jealousy that he finally murdered Desdemona by smothering her with a pillow. A. C. Bradley writes, "Such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man."

Many a marriage and many a friendship have been wrecked on the rock of a jealousy which distorted perfectly innocent incidents into guilty actions, and which blinded the eye to truth and fact.

(iii) Self-conceit can distort our vision. In her biography of Mark Rutherford, Catherine Macdonald Maclean has a curiously caustic sentence about John Chapman, the bookseller and publisher, who was at one time Mark Rutherford's employer: "Handsome in the Byronic fashion and pleasant-mannered, he was exceedingly attractive to women, and he thought himself even more attractive to them than he actually was."

Self-conceit doubly affects a man's vision, for it renders him incapable of seeing himself as he really is, and incapable of seeing others as they really are. If a man is convinced of his own surpassing wisdom, he will never be able to realise his own foolishness; and if he is blind to everything except his own virtues, he will never be aware of his own faults. Whenever he compares himself with others, he will do so to his own advantage, and to their disadvantage. He will be for ever incapable of self-criticism, and therefore for ever incapable of self-improvement. The light in which he should see himself and see others will be darkness.

## THE NECESSITY OF THE GENEROUS EYE

Matt. 6:22-23 (continued)

But here Jesus speaks of one special virtue which fills the eye with light, and one special fault which fills the eye with darkness. The King James Version speaks here about the eye being single and the eye being evil. Certainly that is the literal meaning of the Greek, but the words single and evil are here used in a special way which is common enough in the Greek in which scripture is written.

The word for single is haplous (GSN0573), and its corresponding noun is haplotes (GSN0572). Regularly in the Greek of the Bible these words mean generous and generosity. James speaks of God who gives generously (Jas.1:5), and the adverb he uses is haplos (GSN0574). Similarly in Rom.12:8, Paul urges his friends to give in liberality (haplos, GSN0574). Paul reminds the Corinthian Church of the liberality (haplotes, GSN0574) of the Churches in Macedonia, and talks about their own generosity to all men (2Cor.9:11). It is the generous eye which Jesus is commending.

The word which is in the King James Version translated evil is poneros (GSN4190). Certainly that is the normal meaning of the word; but both in the New Testament and in the Septuagint poneros (GSN4190) regularly means niggardly or grudging. Deuteronomy speaks of the duty of lending to a brother who is in need. But the matter was complicated by the fact that every seventh year was a year of release when debts were cancelled. It might, therefore, very well happen that, if the seventh year was near, a cautious man might refuse to help, lest the person helped might take advantage of the seventh year never to repay his debt. So the law lays it down: "Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing" (Deut.15:9). Clearly poneros (GSN4190) there means niggardly, grudging and ungenerous. It is the advice of the proverb: "Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy" (Prov.23:6). That is to say, "Don't be a guest in the house of a man who grudges you every bite you eat." Another proverb has it: "A miserly man hastens after wealth" (Prov.28:22).

So Jesus is saying, "There is nothing like generosity for giving you a clear and undistorted view of life and of people; and there is nothing like the grudging and ungenerous spirit for distorting your view of life and of people."

(i) We must be generous in our judgments of others. It is characteristic of human nature to think the worst, and to find a malignant delight in repeating the worst. Every day in life the reputations of perfectly innocent people are murdered over the tea-cups by gossiping groups whose judgments are dipped in poison. The world would be saved a great deal of heartbreak, if we would put the best, and not the worst, construction on the actions of other people.

(ii) We must be generous in our actions. In her biography of Mark Rutherford, Catherine Macdonald Maclean speaks of the days when Mark Rutherford came to work in London:

"It was about this time that there can be noted in him the beginning of that 'cherishing pity for the souls of men' which was to become habitual with him.... The burning question with him, haunted as he was at times by the fate of many in the district in which he lived, was, 'What can I do? Wherein can I help them?' It seemed to him then, as always, that any kind of action was of more value than the most vehement indignation that spent itself in talk." When Mark Rutherford was with Chapman the publisher, George Eliot, or Marian Evans as her real name was, lived and worked in the same place. One thing impressed him about her: "She was poor. She had only a small income of her own; and, although she hoped to earn a livelihood as a woman of letters, her future was very uncertain. But she was fantastically generous. She was always helping lame dogs over stiles, and the poverty of others pressed on her more than her own. She wept more bitterly because she could not adequately relieve a sister's poverty than because of any of her own privations."

It is when we begin to feel like that that we begin to see people and things clearly. It is then that our eye becomes full of light.

There are three great evils of the ungenerous spirit, of the eye that is grudging.

(i) It makes it impossible to live with ourselves. If a man is for ever envying another his success, grudging another his happiness, shutting his heart against another's need, he becomes that most pitiable of creatures--a man with a grudge. There grows within him a bitterness and a resentment which robs him of his happiness, steals away his peace, and destroys his content.

(ii) It makes it impossible to live with other people. The mean man is the man abhorred by all; the man whom all men despise is the man with the miser's heart. Charity covers a multitude of sins, but the grudging spirit makes useless a multitude of virtues. However bad the generous man may be, there are those who will love him; and however good the mean man may be, all men will detest him.

(iii) It makes it impossible to live with God. There is no one so generous as God, and, in the last analysis, there can be no fellowship between two people who guide their lives by diametrically opposite principles. There can be no fellowship between the God whose heart is afire with love, and the man whose heart is frozen with meanness.

The grudging eye distorts our vision; the generous eye alone sees clearly, for it alone sees as God sees.