

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION PAPER: MATTHEW 6:16-18

Matthew six begins a new emphasis for the Sermon on the Mount. The theme of the Sermon has been righteousness, (dikaisoume). Chapter five dealt with the way righteousness is to be lived before others. Jesus challenged his listeners to "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (5:16) Matthew 5:20 warned of the necessity of greater righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 5:21-47 explained how this righteousness is to be exhibited and then concludes with the command, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (5:48)

Righteousness in this passage connotes conduct in keeping with the will of God, growing out of the new relationship established through Jesus' ministry between God and his own. (Guelich, p. 275) Doing righteousness is indicative of one's restored relationship with God.

The new emphasis for Matthew six is righteousness in the vertical relationship with God. Matthew 6:1-18 deals with the personal expression of one's worship or religious piety in giving alms, prayer, and fasting. (Guelich, p. 300) This passage is concerned most with the motives of righteousness. Righteousness is not an act of piety before others, with the ultimate goal of gaining personal recognition. The difference between true and false piety is in the motivation. Jesus begins with the most prominent practical requirements for personal piety in mainstream Judaism. (France, p. 130)

Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting also make up three of the "Five Pillars of Islam."

Jesus was addressing an audience familiar with fasting. Fasting was a intragal part of Jewish religious life. (Guelich, p. 298) The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. (Luke 18:12) It was seen as an act of penitence and contrition, humiliation before God. It became known as a potent auxiliary of prayer. In the Apocrypha, it was seen as a meritorious religious experience. "Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness," in Tobit 12:8. (Hendrickx, p. 102) Fasting is to be a part of devotions in Judith 8:6 and 2 Esdras 6:31. Fasting is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, especially in response to special times of testing, trial, and struggle. There was one official day of fasting, the Day of Atonement. (Behm, p. 925) (Leviticus 16:29; 23:27)

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus particularly addressed the common practice of fasting. Generally, those fasting wore a sack like garment made of coarse, hairy material, sprinkled ashes over their head, and went unbathed (without anointing). Jesus used a play on words, creating an oxymoron, saying the hypocrites make themselves unrecognizable in order to be recognized. (Davies and Allison, p. 617) Their primary motive was to be noticed by others as well as by God.

As he does in all the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus again called his disciples to be different. Matthew 6:17 assumes the practice of fasting by the disciples. In Mark 2:18-20 Jesus is questioned as to why his disciples did

not fast as the disciples of John and the Pharisees. His answer concludes with the assumption that after his resurrection and ascension his disciples would fast. (Guelich, p. 299) The Didache (8:1) commanded disciples to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, distinguished from the Pharisees who fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. (Davies, p. 284) The New Testament gives no specific command about time, frequency, or method of fasting, but does assume it will be practiced. It appears to have been a practice in the early church. (Acts 13:3; 14:23)

Jesus commands his disciples to anoint their heads and wash their faces, to appear normal, rather than conspicuous. Some things are to be done in the light. (Matthew 5:16) But the acts of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are the secret things of the heart. There is a world of difference between living a conspicuously good and godly life (5:13-16) and striving to gain reputation for personal piety. There is a difference in result: one brings glory to God, the other glory to the performer. There is also a difference in reward: one gets the approval of the Father in heaven, the other the approval of men. (France, p. 131) That which matters is sincerity before God, not purchasing human piety.

There is a tension between feasting and fasting for the Christian. We are children of the kingdom, forgiven and accepted into fellowship with God through Christ. However, we are still part of this evil age, sinners and sinful, often failing to appropriate God's acceptance. Fasting is not to create or insure our relationship with God, but

issues from the need experienced within that relationship. (Guelich, p. 306) Like almsgiving and prayer, the motive is not to gain or maintain a right relationship with God. It is a response to God, not performance.

Fasting is not to manipulate god, or to get God to listen. (Isaiah 58:1-7) It is not for spiritual pride or to purchase human piety. It is not to degenerate into a superstition. We are not putting God in our debt for a blessing. It is not for the purpose of discipline. It is not mechanical ritual, or an end to itself.

Fasting is an expression of a need for our entire concentration upon God and our personal worship of him. Many today stress daily prayer and sacrificial giving, but few stress fasting. (Stott, p. 135) It can be an attempt to embrace a single objective with God. It can become a private means of freeing oneself of certain preoccupations in favor of concentration upon something which for the time at least presents a higher claim. (Stagg, p. )

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arndt, W. F. and F. W. Gingrich. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979.

Behm, J. "Fasting." Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Gerhard Kittel., ed. Trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964ff. vol. 4, pp. 924-935.

Carson, D. A. The Sermon on the Mount. An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978.

Davies, W. D. The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964.

Davies, W.D. & D. Allison. The Gospel According to Matthew. The New International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988.

France, R. T. The Gospel According to Matthew. Tyndale. New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986.

Guelich, Robert A. The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding. Waco: Word, 1982.

Harrison, Roland K. "Fasting." The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Fully revised. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979.

Hendrickx, Herman. The Sermon on the Mount. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984.

Hunter, Archibald M. A Pattern for Life. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965.

Meyer, F. B. The Directory of the Devout Life: Meditations on the Sermon on the Mount. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1904.

Stagg, Frank. "Matthew," The Broadman Bible Commentary vol. 8, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969.

Stott, J. W. Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978.

Vaught, Carl G. The Sermon on the Mount. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.