

## A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS

### XLV. The Sermon On The Mount: False And True Righteousness J. Christ's Righteous Practices In Contrast To Unrighteous Practices 3. Righteous Versus Unrighteous Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)

#### I. Introduction

- A. Christ's great Sermon on the Mount provided valuable insight on God's true righteousness, what Israel's religious leaders greatly lacked as seen in their dead traditionalism.
- B. To illustrate the contrast between the unrighteous practices of the Pharisees with truly righteous practices, Jesus gave six illustrations, with the third illustration regarding the issue of fasting in Matthew 6:16-18. We study this passage for insight, application and edification (as follows):

#### II. Righteous Versus Unrighteous Fasting, Matthew 6:16-18.

- A. Fasting was a Hebrew practice under the Law that was greatly expanded by the Pharisees in Jesus' time:
  1. Christ used the practice of fasting often to illustrate God's righteousness versus the artificial righteousness of the Pharisees in their dead traditionalism:
    - a. Only one fast was commanded in Scripture, the fast of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34). The Hebrews in Jesus' day also fasted on "the day before Purim" in recalling the fast ordered by Esther when she went to petition the Persian king (Esther 4:15-17; 9:20-32) and "the 9<sup>th</sup> before Ab, commemorating the fall of Jerusalem" to Babylon (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Matthew 9:14).
    - b. In addition to these three fasts, the Pharisees added fasting each Monday and Thursday, taking advantage of these days when the Synagogue met so that they could present themselves before the Synagogue assembly as devout worshippers "'in their guise of woe'" (David Smith, The Days of His Flesh, 1911, p. 104, cited in J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, 1991, p. 184).
    - c. Indeed, Jesus did not direct His own disciples to fast, and when He was asked why the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist often fasted opposite the practice of Jesus' disciples, Christ replied that since He as the "Bridegroom," Israel's Messiah, was present to offer the Kingdom, it was unfitting for His disciples to fast as mourners when they should be rejoicing because the Messiah was present, Lk. 5:33-34.
  2. However, Jesus never condemned fasting often though doing so was not ordered in Scripture outside of the Day of Atonement, for godly Hebrews in His day had adopted the practice as an act of devotion to the Lord, a fact that Jesus explained in the practice of the disciples of John the Baptist, cf. Matthew 9:14-17.
  3. Also, the Greek manuscripts at Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:29 where Jesus in the KJV claimed that prayer **and fasting** are needed to cast out a strong demon show that "important representatives of the Alexandrian, the Western, and the Caesarean types of text" did not add the phrase "and fasting" (Bruce M. Metzger, A Text. Com. on the Grk. N. T., 1971, p. 43, 101). This phrase was added later due to an "increasing stress in the early church on the necessity of fasting," Ibid., p. 101.
  4. In the New Testament Church, believers often prayed and fasted as a carryover of their Hebrew heritage (Acts 13:3; 14:23), but fasting was never required for believers in the New Testament.
- B. In summary, then, fasting for believers in the dispensation of the Church is **NOT required** by the Lord, but **one is FREE to fast IF he CHOOSES to do so in expression of his personal DEVOTION to the Lord!**
- C. **IF** a believer today **decides** to **fast** in devotion to the Lord, Jesus' directives in Matthew 6:16-18 apply:
  - a. Christ opposed the Pharisees' way of fasting by disfiguring their faces that they might appear before men to fast and thus to impress onlookers with their alleged piety, Matthew 6:16a. One who paraded his fasting this way already had his reward, that of impressing onlookers, but God did not reward that practice, v. 16b.
  - b. Rather, fasting that God honored was hidden from men and seen only by the Lord, Matt. 6:17-18. "The person who truly fasted would anoint himself with oil and wash his face so that he would not impress men with his piety. The one who fasted before God in this manner would receive a reward" (Ibid., Pentecost).

***Lesson:*** *Though fasting is not required of God for believers in the dispensation of the Church, one may fast as an expression of devotion to the Lord, but he must do so privately before God for the Lord to reward the believer.*

***Application:*** *(1) May we not feel obligated to fast, for God does not require it of us today. (2) Also, in cases where physical illness or limitations make fasting a risk to one's health, fasting would violate God's will, 1 Timothy 5:23! (3) However, if one can fast in God's will, he may do so, but he must practice it in private to receive God's reward.*