



Sermon Transcript January 13, 2019

Seeking God in the Secret Place An Inward Heart of Repentance Matthew 6:1, 14-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 13, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Matthew 6:1, 14-18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Introduction

In Matthew 6, Jesus is talking about how we go about practicing our faith. Last week, we likened the *practice of righteousness* to a triangle. The lines of the triangle are the most visible part of the triangle. They represent the things that we do that everyone sees. So we see you here this morning—*practicing your righteousness*—through corporate worship. What we are doing this morning is an important part of practicing our faith. But the point Jesus is making in our passage is that—*practicing your righteousness*—is something that should also show up in the secret place of your life. The angles of the triangle represent the things we do that no one sees. When we give attention to the secret place of our lives, like the angles of the triangle, it gives shape to our faith. Three times in Matthew 6, Jesus says, “*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” The warning Jesus gives in this passage is to make sure that when you *practice your righteousness* that you don’t just do the things that are visible to others. And furthermore, make sure you don’t do them with the purpose to be seen by others. Instead, make sure you also *practice your righteousness* in the secret place of your life. It is the place where only God sees. But it impacts the life everyone sees.

What Jesus calls “*practicing your righteousness*” we tend to call “spiritual disciplines.” Michael Wilkins says that these disciplines are “external activities of the ongoing process of transformation to be more like the heavenly Father.”¹ In other words, these disciplines are what God uses to change us. James Smith calls these spiritual disciplines “habits” and he says that our hearts are shaped by our habits. He says, “These aren’t just things we do; they do something to us.”² These habits recalibrate our hearts to love God and to love others.

In 1914, not too long after the sinking of the *Titanic*, Congress convened a hearing to discern what happened in another tragedy at sea. In January of that year, in thick fog off the Virginia coast, the steamship *Monroe* was rammed by the merchant vessel *Nantucket* and eventually sank. Forty-one sailors lost their lives in the frigid winter waters off the Atlantic. Osmyn Berry, captain of the *Nantucket* was held responsible for the accident and arraigned on charges. After all, it was his ship that struck the steamship *Monroe*. However, during the trial, the other captain, Captain Edward Johnson was grilled on the stand for five hours. During his cross-examination it was discovered, as the *New York Times* reported, that Captain Johnson “navigated the *Monroe* with a steering compass that deviated as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. He said that the instrument was sufficiently true to run the ship, and that it was the custom of masters in the coastwise trade to use such compasses. But his steering compass had

never been adjusted in the one year he was master of the *Monroe*.” This faulty compass that seemed adequate for navigation eventually proved otherwise. This realization partly explains a heartrending picture recorded by the *Times*. “Later, the two Captains met, clasped hands, and sobbed on each other’s shoulders.” The sobs of these two burly seamen are a moving reminder of the tragic consequences of misorientation.³

Smith uses this illustration to make this point. “The heart is like a compass . . . We need to regularly calibrate our hearts, tuning them to be directed to the Creator, our magnetic north.”⁴ Our culture offers us rival visions of what it means to flourish—what it means to live the good life. These rival visions are competing for our heart. David Foster Wallace, one of the great American novelists of our time, gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005. At best, I would say that Wallace was fascinated with Christianity. But what he clearly understood is that “Everybody worships.” That is what he told the graduates sitting before him. He said, “If you worship money and things . . . then you will never have enough. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they plant you . . . Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay . . . Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.” Then he said this, “The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they’re evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They’re the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day.”⁵ What he is saying here is that if we don’t adjust our compass towards God, our hearts will naturally worship something else. It was his assessment that these things we tend to chase instead of God “will eat you alive.” They can’t deliver in the end. Often you don’t realize that your compass is leading you the wrong way until you are shipwrecked. Tragically, three years after Wallace gave this speech he took his own life at the age of 46. I know he battled depression. But I can’t help but wonder what was really “eating him alive.”

These practices Jesus gives us are a gift to help us stay on course. It is both the public and the secret practices of righteousness—the spiritual disciplines—that calibrate our hearts towards God and produce within us a love for God and a love for others. They transform us to be more like our heavenly Father and they do something to us. As we begin 2019, we want to “seek God in the secret place.” We want to “work the angles.” We want to tend to the disciplines—the *practices of righteousness*—that calibrate our hearts to love God and to love others.

In Matthew 6, Jesus gives us a triangle—three angles for us to work. Last week, we were introduced to the first angle, the “upward angle of prayer.” Jesus called us to find a secret place of prayer and in giving us the Lord’s Prayer, he taught us what to pray. It is a prayer that gets us on board with God’s agenda. It is a prayer that first changes us. It puts our focus on God and on others. This morning we are going to consider another discipline of the faith, namely, the “inward heart of fasting and repentance.” Next week we will look at the “outward heart of generosity.” The final week we will consider how these practices are ongoing disciplines that define what it means to “*seek first the kingdom of God.*” Upward—Inward—Outward—Onward.

Lets Talk about Fasting

The spiritual practice at the forefront of our passage this morning is the spiritual discipline of fasting. Again, it is the assumption of Jesus that his disciples practice this discipline. Two times he says, “*when you fast.*” Fasting was one of the three pillars of Jewish piety. An observant Jew fasted.

Lets begin by asking the simple question, “What is fasting?” Brad Young gives us insight as to what fasting meant in Jewish thought and practice. Simply, “fasting almost always involves abstinence from eating food and drinking liquid. The person who fasts must wholly concentrate on God.”⁶ Typically, when they fasted it would last for one day. It would start at sundown and end at sundown.

It is interesting to note that there was only one prescribed fast found in the Old Testament. During the Day of Atonement, a day of repentance, they were to fast. Over time, other days of fasting were added to the Jewish calendar. These other required fasts would often commemorate significant events in their history. For example, one of these required fasts was designed to remember the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BC.

I find it fascinating how fasting is described in Leviticus 16:29. As they observe the Day of Atonement, they are given these instructions regarding fasting. “*And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves . . .*” In Psalm 35:13, the psalmist said, “*I afflicted myself with fasting.*” I find that to be an appropriate description of fasting. It involves self-denial. It is not easy. It costs something. You feel hunger pains. In Isaiah 58, the worshipers are complaining to God because they denied themselves—they afflicted themselves—and God didn’t come through for them the way they thought he should. They complained,

“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” It is in God’s response to this complaint that we learn something about the kind of fast God delights in and accepts. It gets to the heart of the issue in Matthew 6. You can go through the motions of fasting and never really observe the kind of fast that calibrates your heart to God.

Matthew 6 is part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Most likely the Sermon on the Mount is not a sermon Jesus preached at a given time and a given place. In the front of your sermon transcript it says that this sermon you are listening to was first preached at WEFC on Sunday, January 13, 2019. With the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew is not claiming to have found a transcript of a sermon Jesus preached on a given date. Rather, many scholars tend to think that the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of the teachings of Jesus over the span of his ministry. That being said, they also believe that this portion of the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew 6:1-18—was “an uninterrupted stretch of material Jesus taught in one sitting.”⁷ These three practices are meant to go together.

Almost every time you see fasting in the Bible it is coupled with prayer. When you go for a blood test, often you need to fast for twelve hours. That is not a biblical fast. Fasting is not just ceasing from eating. Biblical fasting is coupled with prayer. In Psalm 35:13, it says *“I afflicted myself with fasting.”* The next words read like this, *“I prayed with head bowed on my chest.”* In addition to that, the reason the fasting in Isaiah 58 was not a “true fast” is not because they failed to abstain from food. They did. It is not because they failed to pray. They did. God says of their *“practices of righteousness”* in verse 2, *“Yet they seek me daily . . . they ask of me righteous judgments.”* What was missing? They failed to practice generosity. God responded to their complaint by saying, *“Is this not the fast I choose . . . 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 him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh.”* A pre-Christian writing—Tobit 12:8—captures how the three angles of the triangle go together in Jewish thought and practice. It says, *“Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness.”*

Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament does not prescribe for us a “day of fasting.” But we do know that Jesus fasted. Before he went into the wilderness to be tempted he fasted forty days and forty nights. We know that the early church often fasted. It was while the leaders at the church in Antioch (Acts 13) were praying and fasting that the Spirit of God set apart Paul and Barnabas to go on their first missionary journey. I think it is safe to say that Jesus anticipates that we will practice fasting as a

discipline. He said in Matthew 9:15, *“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* As the bride of Christ, we await the return of the Bridegroom, and fasting is part of our waiting. Wayne Grudem makes this observation about fasting: “Most western Christians do not fast, but, if we were willing to fast more regularly—even for one or two meals—we might be surprised how much more spiritual power and strength we would have in our lives and in our churches.”⁸

Why is that? It is because it calibrates our hearts towards God. Here is what fasting does for our hearts. It increases our sense of humility and dependence on the Lord. When you feel that hunger pain, it reminds you of your weakness and your need for God. When tempted to turn the stone into bread after forty days of fasting, Jesus responded by saying, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* This was the irony of the point Jesus was making in his teaching about fasting. Here was something that was meant to be an act of humility and by drawing attention to themselves when they were fasting, it became a source of spiritual pride. And so Jesus said, you don’t need to let others know when you are fasting. Simply let it create within you a humble dependence on God.

Grudem suggests other ways fasting can calibrate our hearts towards God.⁹ He says that it allows more time for prayer. As we sacrifice comfort—as we afflict ourselves—we learn to live a life of sacrifice for God and others. It also helps us with self-discipline as we daily wrestle with temptation and have to say “no” to desires of the flesh. It heightens our spiritual alertness as we focus on God. All this to say, accompanied with prayer and with a lifestyle of generosity, fasting helps us adjust our compass towards God. Give it a try.

May I also say, that the instructions of Jesus does not mean that as a church we can’t enter into a church-wide fast. Or as a community group you can’t do this together. The words of Jesus do not mean that when fasting it must be a secret and not known to anyone else. It is more about the attitude. It is more about the motive. When the exiles of Israel returned to Jerusalem, they came to the prophet, Zechariah, with an interesting question. *“Shall I weep and abstain in the fifth month as I have done for so many years.”* In other words, “now that we are no longer in captivity and that we are back in the land of Israel, do we need to keep on fasting on the fifth month of every year? I love the response of God through the prophet. He simply asks them in Zechariah 7:4, *“When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh month, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?”* That is the point of what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6. When we fast, we do so not because it is something we do. But because when God is

the object, it does something to us. It calibrates our heart to God. It humbles us before God.

Lets Talk about Repentance

Why would we be drawn to talk about repentance in the context of talking about fasting? In the Old Testament, fasting is often coupled with repentance. For example, in the book of Jonah, the people of Israel gave demonstration to their repentance through fasting. In Jonah 3:7, in response to the message of Jonah, they were not to taste anything, rather sitting in sackcloth they were to repent of their sin. So closely was fasting associated with repentance that some rabbis would say “fasting is repentance.” Or, repentance is a substitute for fasting. As we noted, fasting can help create the posture of humility that comes with repentance. But when Jesus is calling us to practice our fasting in secret, he is calling attention to the heart of contrition and not just the public show of it.

I already mentioned that when it comes to practicing fasting in the New Testament, there is more that is implied than commanded. I can imply that fasting is a good and an anticipated practice of the Christian faith. At the same time, I can't point to chapter and verse in the New Testament that commands us to do so. At the same time, if repentance is at the heart of fasting, then I can say “that is an angle that we must constantly work at practicing.” We see it in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*” If you don't feel particularly moved or convinced to practice fasting, I get that and I don't think there is enough there to command you to do so. Is it implied? I think so. Is it assumed? I think so. Is it commanded? I can't find it. But there is still an angle for us to work from this passage as we calibrate our hearts to God. And what is that angle? It is regular repentance.

I am reading a book on prayer by John Onwuchekwa. He says that “if we do adoration right, then confession becomes the reflex of our souls.”¹⁰ In other words, the more we keep the glory and the attributes of God in front of us, the more our natural cry should be, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” I believe fasting can help accentuate that reality. But whether you choose to fast or not, this humble posture needs to constantly be our posture before God. Onwuchekwa suggests that when we hear other people confess, we ought to be saying to ourselves, “Me too.” It is so easy for me to make much of someone else's sin and less of my own sin. But when I hear others confess their sin, I need to say, “Me too! Me too! Me too! And I've done worse than what they've said.”¹¹

Here is the thing we know about God. God loves to forgive. Rabbi Yose has a saying about repentance that goes like this. “God has declared, ‘make for me an opening as an eye of a needle, and I will open it for you so wide, that armies of soldiers with heavy equipment can enter through it.’”¹² Do you know what he is saying? Brad Young clarifies for us what this rabbi is saying about repentance. “Repentance has an explosive impact upon God; God is highly sensitive to repentance. He responds vigorously to repentance even at the slightest hint of it, even if a person has committed terrible sins.”¹³

I proclaim to you that the eye of the needle of God’s forgiveness has been opened wide because of the cross of Christ. Through Jesus and his death on the cross, our “Day of Atonement” has come, once and for all. Do you know what that means? We can be honest with our sin. We can be transparent with our sin. We can repent and confess our sin. It is God’s kindness that enables us to be humbly say, “have mercy on me, for I have sinned.” God is highly sensitive to that kind of a prayer. This makes us glad because it reminds us that our joy is in Christ. Repentance is an angle we need to work as we *practice our righteousness*. It calibrates our heart towards God.

Lets Talk about Forgiving as we have been Forgiven

Stuck between what Jesus says about prayer and what Jesus says about fasting, we find the most challenging words of Jesus in this passage. Quite frankly, it is not hard to figure out how to “work the angles.” I can learn to pray. I can practice fasting. But again, I can just go through the motions. These aren’t just practices for me to do. These are things that do something to me. They are there to change me. And verse 14-15 help me evaluate to what extent these practices are changing me. When it comes to living out our faith, there aren’t too many things harder than these verses. “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*”

The fact that these two verses are stuck between prayer and fasting tell me that it takes prayer and my own practice of repentance to give me the strength to forgive. Offering forgiveness to others is hard. I know that I am speaking in general terms this morning, while some of you are living with deep wounds that are hard to forgive. So I don’t want to ignore that fact when I hold out this ideal. But even still, this is where our practice of faith needs to lead us. Fasting and repentance of our own sin are humble *practices of righteousness* that give us the strength to do what seems impossible to do.

When we work this angle of fasting and repentance, here is what we discover. We need grace as much as the next person. Consequently, Onwuchekwa says, “We not only give

space to be sinned against, but we expect it.”¹⁴ What a relief! As you come into this community of redeemed sinners, expect to be sinned against from time to time. I don’t mean to make light of it. But it will happen. I need to remember that God offered his forgiveness to me long before I offered him an apology—repentance. Therefore, I don’t even have to wait for an apology to offer my forgiveness to the one who sinned against me. We may need to work it out. We may need to process it together. But may we respond with forgiveness just as vigorously to each other as God responds to us when we turn to him.

Conclusion

This is why we need to constantly work the angles. We want our community here to be a gracious community that reflect the grace of Jesus. That doesn’t come natural. So we pray what Jesus has taught us to pray. Why? It changes us. It gets us on board with loving God and loving other. And so we also work this angle of fasting and repentance. Why? If I am ever going to be a person who forgives, I need to be humble. Fasting is designed to make me see my own weakness and my need for Jesus. My need it total. My need for Jesus is no less than anyone else. And so I become empowered to offer the same grace freely offered to me in Jesus.

Are you having trouble forgiving? Let me encourage you to work these two angles this week. Pray that the ideals of the Lord’s Prayer would mark your heart. Try fasting. Try one meal or a whole day. But couple it with prayer. With each pain of hunger, be reminded of how much you need Jesus. Then express that humility by extending the same grace you enjoy in Jesus. But you must adjust your compass towards God. He will give you grace to forgive.

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- ¹Michael Wilkins *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 270
- ²James K. A. Smith *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016) 21
- ³"Monroe Steered by Faulty Compass," *New York Times*, February 12, 1914
- ⁴Smith
- ⁵David Foster Wallace, "Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2008
- ⁶Brad Young *Meet the Rabbis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) 15
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 15
- ⁸Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 391
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 390-391
- ¹⁰John Onwuchekwa *Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2018) Kindle Reader Location 949
- ¹¹*Ibid.*
- ¹²Young, 23
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 23
- ¹⁴Onwuchekwa,

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**COMMUNITY
GROUPS**

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share something that is currently going on in your life that you can celebrate. Share something that is currently going on in your life that is a challenge.
2. Have you ever fasted? What was it like? What do you think about fasting?
3. What is one thing that stuck out to you from the sermon this past week?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 58:1-12. Can you identify the three practices of Matthew 6:1-18 (charity, prayer, fasting/repentance) in this passage? Where do you see them? Which of these three practices do you think is most neglected in your life? Why?
5. Read Acts 13:1-3. What do you learn about fasting from this passage? What implications do you think this has for WEFC and church planting?
6. Read Exodus 34:6-7. What does this passage tell us about God? The goal of repentance is that we would reflect the character of God. Describe what it looks like when a church reflects this kind of character. What role does repentance play in forming this kind of character in us?
7. Read Matthew 6:14-15. What do you find most challenging about these verses? Can you think of a specific situation where you need to apply these verses?

Taking It Home

8. Consider doing some form of fasting this week and report back to the group what you learned.
9. Share one thing with the group that you are taking with you from your discussion.