

Jesus on Fasting/Treasures/Anxiety
Matthew 6:16-34; Luke 11:34-36, 12:22-34, 16:13

“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. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! “No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Many of the most pious people fasted without water two days a week, especially during the dry seasons. Such fasting was considered meritorious. Jewish fasting required abstinence not only from food, but also from other pleasures, which would include the usual practice of anointing one’s head with oil to prevent dry skin. Avoiding these practices made fasting obvious.

- Ancient teachers, like Hillel, generally acknowledged the corruptibility of earthly treasure. Because thieves could dig through walls and steal a strongbox in one’s home, well-to-do people usually tried one of several other methods to safeguard their wealth; e.g. investing money with moneychangers, depositing it in a temple for safekeeping (even most robbers balked at “robbing gods”) or burying it in the ground or caves, where moth (for expensive apparel) or rust (coins) could destroy its value in time.

- Jewish texts spoke of “laying up treasure” with God (Tobit 4:7-10). Sometimes this meant that the generous person could trust that God would help him in time of need; sometimes it referred (as here) to treasure in the world to come.

- Jesus speaks literally of a “single” eye versus a “bad” or “evil” eye. This saying may involve several plays on words. A “single” eye usually meant a generous one, but also sets readers up for 6:24. A “bad” eye in that culture could mean either a diseased one or a stingy one. Many people believed that light was emitted from the eye, enabling one to see, rather than that light was admitted through the eye. Although here Jesus compares the eye to a lamp, he speaks of “diseased” eyes which fail to admit light - a symbol for the worthlessness of a stingy person.

- Two masters rarely shared slaves; when they did it always led to divided interests. “Mammon” is an Aramaic word for possessions or money, and Jesus seems to be personifying it as an idol.

- Most people in antiquity had little beyond basic necessities, like food, clothing and shelter. Because their acquisition of these necessities often depended on seasonal rains or (in Egypt) the flooding of the Nile, they had plenty of cause for stress, even about food and clothing.

- Some ancient philosophers taught about or drew morals from nature as well as philosophy. Many Jewish teachers said that God’s concern in the laws of the Bible was only for humans (although it was clear that God watched over all creation (Psalm 104:27). But Jesus’ argument was a standard Jewish “how much more” argument: If God cares for birds (rabbis agreed that God sustained all creation), how much more does he care for humans?

- The perishing of grass and flowers as they dried up in each year’s summer heat was a natural image for human mortality (Psalm 103:15-16; Isaiah 40:6-8).

Questions:

- + What are some ways that people fast? What are some reasons why?
Do you fast? If so, why and when do you fast? If not, why not?
According to Jesus, how important are motives when fasting?
- + What does Jesus mean when he says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth?”
What earthly things do you treasure most, and why? How willing are you to give them up?
- + Jesus says a healthy eye is full of light, but a bad eye is full of darkness. What does he mean?
What must happen for you to see more of God’s light and less of the world’s darkness?
What area of spiritual darkness is most enticing to you? How will you deal with it?
- + Jesus says, “Do not be anxious about your life.” How is this possible in the world of today?
What causes you the most anxiety? How do you deal with it? How should you deal with it?
- + When Jesus says, “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” what does he mean?
What must happen for you to seek God’s kingdom and his righteous ways first and foremost?
When Jesus says, “all these things will be added to you,” what things is he talking about?