

Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian
Sunday 17th October 2021
FOCUSED
Preacher: Hamish Galloway

Text: Matthew 6: 16-24

Fasting

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Treasures in Heaven

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Eye Health

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy,^[a] your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy,^[b] your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Introduction

On Radio NZ every Thursday afternoon, Jesse Mulligan has a competition called Link 3. He plays a song after the 1, 2 & 3pm news and asks listeners to come up with the thing that links all 3 songs. This came to mind as I grappled with this text from the Sermon on the Mount. There are what seems to be at first sight 3 quite randomly different targets – fasting, wealth and eyesight. Were they just random bullet points in a rambling sermon, or did something link them?

What do you think – what is the link between these 3 topics:

Fasting (v16-18)

Treasures in Heaven (19-21)

Eye Health (22-23)

It took me a while to work it out. The conclusive clue for me came when I read that the word translated as ‘healthy’ or ‘sound’ as in ‘if your eyes are healthy/sound’, is more literally from the Greek ‘single’. Literally speaking then, it means having eyes with a singly positive and holy focus! Strong’s concordance says of this word, haplous:

Single, without folds, referring to a single focus, without a ‘double agenda’ which prevents an over-complicated life.’

‘Which prevents an over-complicated life’.... That brought to mind a person I have heard of who travelled a lot for work. For many years he had been running 2 families, one in Auckland and one in Christchurch, each unknown to the other! Imagine that! How difficult that must have been on so many levels! And in the end became totally unraveled!

So I am suggesting that the thing that links the 3 sayings here is the importance of a single focus and the potential damage of being distracted into double vision!

This was then backed up for me by one commentator who placed these sayings in the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount:

'Following the parts of the sermon dealing with the Law (5:17-48) and worship (6:1-18), the rest of the sermon deals with single-minded service and trust in God..... in a poetic form.' (presenting 2 contracting choices or ways of seeing things.) (Francis Foulkes)

So we see this theme not only in the call for single vision but also in the call for God-focused fasting that is not mixed up with egotistic demonstration of personal piety *and* the call for a focus on heaven values that last rather than fleeting earthly treasures. The theme that links the 3 is fully revealed at the end of the passage: 'No one can serve 2 masters.....' And is confirmed in the very next passage where Jesus calls us to 'seek first the Kingdom of God'.

I want to first talk about the principle of having a clear and certain focus. Then I will dig into the 3 examples Jesus gives: fasting, treasures and eye-sight.

Focus

There is a Chinese proverb that says 'a person with a leg in each of 2 boats will fall in the water!' it is a compelling image, a leg in each boat and the feeling of being pulled in 2 directions until losing balance and splashing into the water!

And then there is research that lies behind a very effective business tool called *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. That research shows that if you have 11-20 goals none will be achieved with excellence. If you have 4-10 goals, 1-2 will be achieved with excellence. If you have 2-3 goals then 2-3 will be achieved with excellence. The book puts it this way:

'Focus is a natural process. The sun's scattered rays are too weak to start a fire, but once you focus them with a magnifying glass they will bring paper to flame in seconds!'

'The 4 Disciplines of Execution' is focused on business success. The Sermon on the Mount is focused on discipleship success! That is, a Christ-like life, living out the fullness of our God created self! But the principle of focus applies to both areas. Jesus here applies it to the process of sanctification – becoming more like Christ. He gives 3 examples:

(a) Fasting

The Jews had one compulsory day of fasting, the Day of Atonement. There were other popular reasons the Jewish people of Jesus' day fasted, including

- Times of mourning
- Need for forgiveness
- Praying for the nation
- Preparing the heart for revelation

They believed fasting drew God's attention, was proof of serious intent, and helped focus their attention to the matter at hand – attending to grief or sin or national issues or desires for guidance.

This is all good and godly stuff and fasting remains an excellent spiritual discipline in the discipleship toolbox. But there was a problem with some of the religious leaders who had fallen into the trap of mixed motives around fasting – yes, they understood the spiritual value, but in their culture people were esteemed for the depth of their religious conviction. So to be seen to be fasting boosted their reputation. Mixed motives – for God and for my ego. It got so bad that some would use a paste to whiten their faces so that they looked sallow and wasted away as if their fasting was spectacularly committed!

Mixing these motives hugely diminished the spiritual value of fasting. It resulted in a loss of Godly focus.

I am challenged by that because I know about mixed motives. My supervisor often explores this issue with me. Questions like, when you sacrificially go the extra mile in pastoral care is it because I genuinely care or is it about my need to be needed? Because if that gets mixed in there it undermines and compromises any care given!

The question is – when I am doing things with God and for God, what is motivating me? How pure are those motives?

(b) Treasures

In the ancient world there were 3 main categories of highly treasured possessions:

- Fine clothes
- Grain and corn
- Gold

The problem was that even the finest fabrics were susceptible to becoming moth eaten! And stored grain or corn to rats, mice and worms that nibbled away at it. And gold was vulnerable because of the flimsy walls of their houses, easily knocked in by thieves.

‘Moths, vermin and thieves,’ as Jesus puts it!

Compare that, says Jesus, with the eternal things of God, heavenly treasures. My mind goes immediately to 2 Corinthians 13:13 – ‘there are 3 things that are eternal, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.’

Do we focus on things that are permanent and eternal or things that are flimsy and fleeting, things like the cheap toys that abound at Christmas time only to be discarded by new Year’s Day. Or, as Robbie Burns puts it in his famous poem Tam O’Shanter:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, it’s bloom is shed;
Or, like the snow-fall in the river,
A moment white, then melts forever.

Jesus here addresses the issue of values and treasures by drawing attention to where our heart is focused! The Jewish idea of heart is that it is the seat of thinking, emotions and will. So in this case the question is about what we treasure in life – what is our mind-set, our emotional attachment, because that will in turn direct our behaviour.

I have a resource I use in marriage preparation that deals with attitudes to money and asks how the couples view money. Is it primarily a vehicle of status? Or the pathway to happiness? Or the platform upon which we can then do the things that really matter, things of faith, things that bring hope and love?

Money and earthly possessions then become simply the staging for the real action, where the focus is on eternal value! That amazing Sydney-sider, Arthur Malcolm Stace, who, following a dramatic conversion to Christianity, dedicated himself for the next 35 years to writing the word ‘Eternity’ in chalk on the streets of Sydney – his heart was in the right place.

The question is – is my heart in the right place here? I heard recently of a young couple whose marriage has broken up because of a disconnect of heart values – for him the property portfolio was number 1, for her it was his love that, above all, her heart craved! What a sad end that was!

(c) Eye Health

Have you ever had blurred sight or double vision? Following a bungy jump some years ago, my left eye had a bleed that caused foggy, blurred vision in that eye that required 2 years of laser treatment and steroid injections to recover as much focus as possible!

So it is, too, that God wants us to have good eye health. The Hebrews believed that the eye was the window to the soul. They believed that the eye both took in and gave out. The image here to develop this idea is a favourite of Jesus, light and darkness. Some things that we look at will bring light to our soul, others will cause a dark cloud to descend, a cloud filled with temptation, pathways to negative behaviour, and the mist of guilt and disappointment to descend! The more light, the less darkness, the clearer the vision!

The question is around what I read, what I watch, what I listen to? How does it impact my walk with God and my love for others. One video resource I used with teenagers around this very issues was entitled *Garbage In, Garbage Out*. Apt!

Conclusion

The passage contains an interesting allusion to 'rewards'. It comes in the first bit about fasting – the hypocrites 'have received their reward in full' and God will see the godly things you do in secret and 'will reward you.' And the next bit talks about building up treasures in heaven! At one level it smacks of earning our way into heaven or into God's good books, and that flies in the face of the grace message of the gospel. Rather, I see this as the hugely rewarding 'life in all its fullness that comes from a God-focused life!'

The question is, where is blurred focus robbing me of the fullness of that reward????