WATERING OUR GARDEN - THE FASTED LIFESTYLE

1. Introduction

a. Jesus calls us to live out the ***8 Beatitudes*** (5:3-12) as we ***resist 6 temptations*** (5:21-48), and ***pursue 5 kingdom activities*** (6:1-18) that position our hearts to freely receive more grace. The 8 Beatitudes are like 8 flowers in the "garden of our heart" that God wants to fully blossom. These flowers are cultivated as we "weed our garden" by resisting 6 temptations (5:21-48) and as we **"water our garden"** by pursuing 5 kingdom activities (6:1-18).

b. In previous weeks we have considered the values/beatitudes that are the values that evidence the Kingdom of God and have considered the temptations that can prevent these from growing in our lives. Today we are going to look at the five kingdom activities that position us to receive more grace. If we commit to give ourselves to these activities, we will grow in the values of the Kingdom and more easily overcome the temptations that can prevent this.

Garden picture

c. These five kingdom activities help people, move God, and change us over time, even though they are usually small and weak in themselves. Spiritual disciplines don't earn us God's love, but place our cold hearts before the "bonfire of His presence." He does not love us more, but gives more to our heart, when we embrace disciplines.

James 4:5-6 *Do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? [6] But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

d. These five kingdom activities express the eight beatitudes as we commit to them:

i ***Being poor in spirit:*** seeing our need for breakthroughs in our heart, ministry, church, and city

ii ***Mourning for breakthrough:*** being desperate enough to be extreme in pursuing breakthroughs

iii ***Walking in meekness:*** having a servant spirit in the use of our resources (time, money, etc.

iv ***Hungering for righteousness:*** consistently seeking God for breakthroughs of His kingdom

v ***Showing mercy:*** treating others with a tender spirit when they fail, attack, or disappoint us

vi ***Being pure in heart:*** seeking to walk in purity in our thoughts, words, and motives

vii ***Becoming a peacemaker:*** bringing peace or healing to broken relationships

viii ***Enduring persecution:*** bearing the stigma and pressures of standing for righteousness

We will find we experience more of God's heart and grow more like Him as we engage in the five activities described in Matthew 6.

2. A warning and a promise

a. However, before we look at each of these disciplines we need to take note of Jesus' introduction to this teaching.

Matt.6:1 *"**Beware** of practising 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.*

b. Jesus warns us against the hypocrisy of drawing attention to ourselves in our devotion to God and as we look at each activity we will see He continually reinforces this point. Jesus calls us to avoid *sounding a trumpet,* i.e., drawing attention to our devotion and passion for God. Our natural temptation is to sound a trumpet and draw attention to how devoted, passionate, "anointed," smart, diligent, and generous we are. To do this is to walk in a religious spirit and pride – the complete opposite of humility and meekness.

c. We need to value these five small activities that help people, move God, and change us and live before God's eyes, not men's. God values the "smallness" of these five activities and cares about our small works even when men do not notice or care about them.

d. Jesus emphasised that the Father ***will openly reward*** these activities. Some of the rewards are ***external***, as circumstances are changed by God's power. Some are ***internal***, as our hearts encounter Him and are tenderised. Some are ***eternal***, affecting our destiny in the age to come. We engage in these five kingdom activities with ***confidence in His rewards*** (eternal and temporal). We must have confidence that His eyes are on us and that He is responsiveness to us. (Jesus taught much on rewards).

Heb. 11:6 *[6]Without faith [confidence in God] it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

e. Not only just Jesus constantly warn against a religious spirit but also constantly affirms the Father's desire to reward those who give themselves to these activities in the secret place of their own hearts and lives.

Matt.6:4 *… so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Matt.6:6 *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Matt.6:18 *[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.*

a. Which audience are we living before and whose applause are we seeking? Many believers never "shift over" to living before His eyes but this is where power and transformation occur in our life. Paul contrasted two ways of living: living as unto God or unto man, i.e., either seeking the applause of God or of men. Paul is telling us how to live in the Spirit and walk in freedom.

Eph. 6:6-8 ..... *not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, [7] rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, [8] knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord,*

b. We do not want to be those who serve to gain the applause and recognition of people, by serving with greater humility, generosity, and diligence when someone is watching. The key issue is who do we look to and who do we want to look back? Do we look for the applause of Jesus or men, and do we want Jesus or men to look back at us? We know we are looking to men if we get offended after we serve diligently and are ignored or criticised for our service.

c. I believe God has given us a gift in this time to grow in our ability to live before the audience of one. In a time when we are being seen by few are we living our lives to be seen by God.

3. The fasted lifestyle: embracing voluntary weakness

a. It is not enough just to resist the negative (Mt. 5); we must also pursue the positive (Mt. 6). Jesus highlighted five kingdom activities we are called to:

   i to serve,

   ii to give (including money),

   iii pray,

   iv bless our adversaries, and

   v fast.

b. This is the lifestyle of the kingdom and we often refer to it as the *fasted lifestyle* because it is actually a call to embrace voluntary weakness to experience more of God's power. Jesus spoke of the paradox in Paul's life of embracing weakness so as to experience more strength in the Spirit. He was not referring to moral weakness, but to Paul's godly choices to embrace voluntary weaknesses.

2 Cor. 12:9 *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

c. There are five types of "fasting" in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:1-18). We fast **food, time**, **energy, money, and words** by **giving, serving, praying, blessing enemies, and fasting food.** Each is a form of fasting, in which we voluntarily embrace weakness to experience more of God's power. In giving, we fast our money and financial strength. In serving and prayer, we fast our time and energy, investing it in others and in intercession. In giving up food, we fast our physical and emotional strength. Blessing our enemies requires that we fast our words and reputation.

d. Possibly the greatest enemy of the fasted lifestyle among believers is the false notion that fasting is *radical Christianity* and is optional for healthy Christianity. It is not. Fasting is normal and basic to the Christian life—it is Christianity 101. It is not possible to live biblical Christianity without being committed to a lifestyle of praying, fasting, giving, serving, and blessing enemies.

Luke 9:23-24 *[23] And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. [24] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*

4. CharItable deeds: called to serve and give (Mt. 6:1-4, 19-21)

a. We are called to ***serve and give*** (charitable deeds: service and/or money (Mt. 6:1-4, 19-21). Charitable deeds refer to acts of servanthood and financial giving. They include more than ministry to the poor, but encompass investments of time or money to serve people in God's will.

Mt. 6:2-4 *"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [3] But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4] so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

b. Later, Jesus further develops the importance of giving money

Mt. 6:19-21 *[19] "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, [20] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. [21] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

c. Giving financially to others is an expression of *fasting* our money. Serving involves *fasting* our time and energy by investing it in others. Jesus warned us to not let our "left hand" know what our right hand does, i.e., to not "congratulate ourselves." Not all giving in the early church was hidden (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35; 5:1-10; 11:29-30). The point is to be as unobtrusive as possible.

5. Called to pray (Mt. 6:5-13)

a. We are called to pray (Mt. 6:5-8). Prayer has many forms and often includes meditation on the Word. Jesus taught us how to pray by giving us the Lord's prayer (Mt. 6:9-13).

Mt. 6:5-6 *[5] "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [6] But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

b. Prayer is an expression of voluntary weakness that fasts our time and emotions. Instead of using all our time for the advancement of our status or success, we use some of it to seek God for ourselves and for others. Instead of using most of our free time being entertained by media, we pray. In this, we forego opportunities for wordly gain through relationships and activities.

c. Part of the reward that God gives is in greater intimacy with Him; part of it is in increased productivity and fruitfulness that may only be seen decades later. Jesus was not banning corporate prayer meetings—the early church prayed together (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 12:5; 16:13). He was warning us not to draw attention to ourselves related to our prayer alone or in worship meetings.

6. Called to bless (Mt. 6:14-15)

a. We are called to bless our adversaries as part of expressing the fullness of forgiveness (Mt. 6:14-15; 5:44). This is connected with the call to resist passive love (Mt. 5:21-42). Jesus elaborates on the implications of forgiving our enemies

Mt. 6:14-15 *[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.*

b. The call to actively love our enemies includes our words (bless), actions (do good), and prayers. Our enemies are adversaries, who seek to hurt or hinder us, or who hope to see us fail.

7. Called to fast (Mt. 6:16-18)

Mt. 6:16-18 *[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.*

a. Jesus said, "*When* you fast" not "*if* you fast," implying that it should occur in the regular course of a disciple's life. We do not fast to motivate God to love us, but to increase our spiritual capacity to receive and feel more of His heart, Word, and power. Jesus called us to fast because He knows that its rewards will far outweigh its difficulties.

Col.3:23 *[23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.*