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Mercy vs Sacrifice (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In a discussion, Steve Gregg compares the concepts of mercy and sacrifice in the Bible, referencing Luke 5 and Matthew 12. He explains that while mercy is a characteristic of God's love, it is important to understand the context in which it is appropriate to fast and mourn. Gregg notes that self-discipline, including certain dietary restrictions, is a part of Christian practice, but neglecting the body is not. He highlights the importance of balancing personal self-discipline with appropriateness and practicality in daily life.

Transcript

Alright, let's turn to Luke chapter 5. We're actually going to be looking at two different Gospels today, two different books. We're going to look at Luke for the first segment of what we have to study, and then we're going to turn to Matthew simply because Matthew has a more complete account of the things that are taken in the latter part of this session. We're in Luke chapter 5, and where we technically need to pick it up is at verse 33.

Now, it would be good, I think, for us to look a little bit at that portion that we covered last time simply because we were out of time by the time we got to it last time. That was the call of Levi and the subsequent feast at which Jesus was criticized for associating with tax collectors and sinners. That was in verses 27 through 32.

I'm interested in mentioning Jesus' response here. We mentioned it, but we were out of time to comment about it. Verse 31 of Luke 5 says, And Jesus answered and said to them, Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Now, it might have been wiser, as I look at it now, to have had you look at this in Matthew's version because it is a little fuller. In any case, now that we've looked at Luke, I'll just supplement it with what Matthew has included. There is an inclusion in Matthew that is not found in the other Gospels, and that is in Matthew 9, which is the parallel to this, and verse 13.

There's just one line that Jesus says in Matthew that is not in the other Gospels, but it's a

very significant one, and it becomes significant when we come to the later material that we're studying in this day's session as well. In Matthew 9, verse 13, right after Jesus said, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, he said, But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

You can see that that's exactly like Luke, with the exception that Matthew inserts this statement. But go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. And it's important that I call this to your attention because a little later we're going to be looking at Matthew chapter 12, and Jesus reminds them that they should have learned what this means, I will have mercy and not sacrifice.

This is a quotation from Hosea chapter 6 and verse 6. And that is a place where God is saying that he's not so much concerned about people's religious actions as he is about their moral character, particularly their being compassionate people. When God says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, this doesn't mean that when Hosea made this statement that God was now abolishing the sacrificial system, and God no longer wanted sacrifices to be offered, it didn't really mean that. What it meant was that God desires mercy above sacrifice, rather than, more than, sacrifice.

Now, mercy, of course, is a character trait and it's a function of love. A person is not loving if he's not a merciful and compassionate person. How can anyone have love, or claim to have love, and not have compassion on those who are hurting and wish to relieve them? That's what mercy amounts to, really.

And therefore, what God is saying is, I want you to live in relationship as merciful or loving people. And I desire this more than I desire for you to offer your sacrifices. Now, sacrifices were something that God commanded to be done in the Old Testament.

And, as I said, Hosea was not announcing that this sacrificial system was now being repealed by God, but he was saying that sacrifices and the whole liturgical, ritual, ceremonial aspects of the law do not in any sense strike at the heart of what God cares most about, in any way resembling his concern for your need to love, and to be merciful, and to have, you know, the right God-like attitude in relationships toward others. To paraphrase this, he could say, I desire that you be loving more than I desire that you keep the rituals. Now, that's a very important thing as we go into the next portion of the life of Christ.

Jesus, of course, uttered this statement in Matthew 9, verse 13, in the context of his being criticized by the scribes and Pharisees for associating with people who had been social outcasts. The Pharisees remained meticulously aloof, and clean, and undefiled from such contacts, but at the expense of being compassionate and merciful people. They were not compassionate.

They did not care for these people. They wrote them off and figured, if you can't live up to the standards of our religious system, then go somewhere else. We've got nothing to do with you.

We'll just consider you a lesser breed without the law. They didn't care for their souls. This is obvious from the preceding story, where a man who had been lowered through the roof because he was paralyzed, had received the announcement from Christ that his sins were forgiven him, and then was healed.

Well, I mean, they should be rejoicing like the multitudes were. What was the reaction of the religious leaders? They were angry. They sought to plot against Jesus because they were so upset that he had violated their code.

He had said things that they thought were technically blasphemous, although there's really nothing about what he said that was in itself blasphemous. But they were concerned that Jesus wasn't, in their opinion, dotting the I's and crossing the T's properly in the way that they thought religious people should talk and act. And yet they ignored the fact that here a man who had been paralyzed was now leaping and praising God.

I mean, they were just missing the whole point. They had no compassion whatsoever. They were concerned about upholding and enforcing the doctrinaire and traditional liturgical aspects of their religion.

And Jesus said, you need to go and learn what this means. And it's in your own Bible in Hosea. It's in the Old Testament.

God has already told you that he desires more that you be merciful than that you keep the sacrificial system. And that would stand for all the aspects of the ceremonial law because sacrifice was probably the central ceremony of Judaism, but it was in a class with other ceremonies. In fact, we're going to see Jesus making this same dichotomy between that which is loving and that which is ritual in religion.

In not this story, but in the one that will come up in Matthew 12, which we'll look at soon. But the point here is that the Pharisees, like so many religious people, had reduced religion to a set of meaningless ceremonies. Now, I don't mean to say that the ceremonies that God gave the Jews were meaningless in themselves.

They had great meaning, but the Jews did not perceive their meaning. Therefore, to them, they were meaningless. To them, it was just a matter of jump through these hoops and whoever can do it is acceptable to us.

But they had forfeited long ago any claim to being merciful or compassionate people. And Jesus said, you'd better go back to your own scriptures and learn what this means. And in fact, his expression, go and learn what this means, was an expression the rabbis themselves used frequently and somewhat contemptuously.

Whenever somebody who didn't have adequate religious training was inquiring about a religious matter which the rabbi thought should be manifestly obvious, the answer, and with a certain tone of contempt in answering a person's question and citing some passage of scripture or some writing of the rabbis, they'd say, go and learn what this means. In other words, it's almost like, don't even ask me the question until you've done your homework. Don't come to me until you've read the basic texts on this subject.

You go and learn what this means. And Jesus turns upon the Pharisees and gives this very same expression the rabbis used. You go and learn what this means.

Now, they were criticizing Jesus and asking for an answer. Well, they were doing it behind his back, talking to his disciples. They said, why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners? He answered them and said, you'd better go and learn what this means.

Which must have been a very humiliating thing for them to be told to do, because they were the learned ones. They were the ones who had paid their dues. They had been through the educational system.

They had learned, they thought, what things mean. And Jesus is saying, you haven't learned what this means, and this is a fundamental thing. Hosea said it, God desires mercy rather than, more than, sacrifice.

The application to religion in our own time, of course, we can expand on at great length if we had the time, which we do not. But it's quite obvious that this is not a problem that the Pharisees alone had. It is typical of the religious mind.

Typical of religiosity. Typical of the religious nature of man. Once a person has ascertained what things are religious, then to begin to judge other people on the matter of whether those persons have performed those religious duties or not.

Now, this is entirely contrary to the spirit of Jesus. Now, I realize that you might be saying, well then, are we not to be judgmental? Are we not supposed to judge people? We are. We are supposed to judge people.

But Jesus said, do not judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment. In, what, John 7, 24, I think it is? Right around there? Don't judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment. In other words, don't judge on the wrong basis.

Don't judge on surface things. Judge on the basis of reality. Yes, we should proclaim sin to be sin.

We should proclaim injustice to be injustice. We should proclaim that immorality is immorality. But that's a very different thing than judging people because they haven't jumped through the religious, ritualistic hoops.

They haven't paid tithes. They haven't gone to church every Sunday. They haven't gone through this or that ritual that is attached to our particular religious community and what we consider to be necessary for, to be a member in good standing.

There is a difference between morals and religion. And Jesus was concerned about morals. Jesus was concerned about morals because morals are a love issue.

To do anything that is immoral is to neglect the command to love God and to love your neighbor, which are issues to Him. Those are the issues, the only issues to Him. And morality can be defined in terms of those things which affect your obedience to those two commands.

Anything that is contrary to loving God or contrary to loving your neighbor as yourself is immoral. And anything that is consistent with genuine love for God and love for your fellow man as yourself is moral. Now that, I need to qualify that.

I shouldn't need to, but I do because of our society being as corrupt as it is. To say that anything that is consistent with love is moral, obviously is the kind of statement that carnal people would take and twist and say, well then it's okay for me to live with my girlfriend, it's okay for me to have a homosexual relationship because it's a loving relationship and so forth. Obviously we have to define what the loving thing to do is by God's descriptions of it, not by our sentimental ideas of it.

If God says it's wrong to have a homosexual relationship, if He says it's wrong to have sex outside of marriage, then obviously what He is telling us is that is not something that is consistent with love. It may feel like it, but our ideas are all twisted. Our ideas are all subjective and sinful and fallen, and we need to be informed about what pure love really is, and it does not include such things as any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

Any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage is simply not loving. And so I just say that as a disclaimer because I said, and I stand by what I said, that anything you do that is consistently loving is moral, because that's what morals are based on, whether they are consistent or inconsistent with the character of God who is love. And Jesus was always trying to reestablish this point with His critics because they had turned religion into something where everything that mattered were the things that didn't matter to God.

The things that mattered to them were the things that God didn't care about, didn't care much about. Let's put it this way. I'm not trying to tell you that God didn't care at all about whether the Jews offered sacrifices.

That's not what the idea was. At that point in time it was a requirement, and people did do it and it mattered to God if people obeyed Him or not. But He would much rather have had a person be less than precise in their observance of ritual than less than eminent in

love.

And that's what Jesus is trying to get back to these people. Here He is hanging out with these outcasts who have been eliminated from the synagogue because of their lifestyle choices, but they are now showing an interest in the kingdom of God. They are now attracted to Jesus the Messiah, and everyone should be rejoicing like the angels in heaven that these prodigals have come home, and Jesus is willing to associate with them.

But the Pharisees wouldn't because after all, what would people say about them as religious men if they hung out with people who were less religious than themselves? But Jesus couldn't care less what people said. Obviously He welcomed criticism on these matters. He lived His life in such a way as to incur it publicly by associating with people that would draw this criticism.

But that's because these people had needs and He loved them, and that's how He justified His behavior. He is showing mercy. He may not, according to the strict code of the Pharisees, be doing everything right ritually by hanging out with the wrong kind of people.

Perhaps they would feel He's incurring ceremonial uncleanness by such associations. He doesn't care. He said He's operating on the very principles that were revealed to them in their Old Testament if they would just go back and read it, if they just go back and learn what it means.

And I stress this point because the way it reflects on everything else we're going to talk about in this session, the last thing of which has to do with Jesus repeating this very thing from Hosea, the same line from Hosea. He quotes them again because they didn't go and learn what that means. So, we come to verse 14.

We'll stick with Matthew. I had you turn to Luke, but we're in Matthew now. We might as well stay there.

In Matthew 9, 14. Don't you hate it in your notes? Scratch that out. You don't have to scratch that out.

You know, it's a parallel. You can write in all the parallels and then... So, Matthew 9, 14. Then the disciples of John came to Him saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast? Now, I just want to clarify something here.

It reads just a little bit different in each of the Gospels here. It says in Mark's Gospel, Mark 2, 18, And the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. And they came and said to Him, Why do your disciples and John's disciples... Excuse me.

Let me get that right. Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but your

disciples do not fast? Now, I point out this comparison because it sounds in Matthew as if Jesus was only approached by the disciples of John. However, Mark tells us that the disciples of John together with the Pharisees came with this question.

Luke's Gospel just says, And they came and asked Him. It doesn't say who they are. But we know from Mark's Gospel, they are the Pharisees and the disciples of John.

Also, Mark tells us something that none of the others do. And it's that they were fasting at the time they asked the question. Now, if you have ever fasted or been around people who do fast, one characteristic of people fasting, if they're not spiritual, if they're not in the Spirit, and these people were not, what is one characteristic of somebody who's fasting who's not in the Spirit? You know they're fasting.

They want you to know they're fasting. They want you to appreciate the fact that they're fasting. And there's another thing which is somewhat physiological.

And that is they often tend to be cranky. I heard about this one Pentecostal family whose father got it in his head to be spiritual and decided to fast every Tuesday. And, you know, he'd come home from work on Tuesday.

And, you know, all the kids would take cover, you know. By the end of the day, he'd missed two meals already and he was intolerable. He'd walk over and put his hand on the television set to see if it was warm, to see if anyone had been having fun while he was fasting.

If he was going to suffer for Jesus, by golly, everybody was going to. And that is one of the things about fasting that goes along with it unless the Holy Spirit is motivating and empowering you in the fast. Certainly people can fast without the Holy Spirit.

The physical body can go without food for, you know, a long time or without any help from the Holy Spirit. I mean any special help from the Holy Spirit. But it's the attitude of the person fasting.

Fasting does have a tendency to draw out the worst in you if you are not walking in the Spirit. Maybe that's one of the values of fasting. I don't know.

But in any case, these people were fasting. They were upset because Jesus' disciples weren't fasting. What made it worse was that a lot of people were talking about Jesus as if he was closer to God than John was.

And more people were going to Jesus to be baptized than were going to John. People were certainly talking about Jesus as if he was closer to God than the Pharisees were. And yet, he and his disciples were not in the business of fasting, and the others were.

And it's quite obvious that fasting was a spiritual thing to do. Therefore, the question

would naturally arise, especially on a day when those guys were fasting, how come you aren't fasting if you're so spiritual, they asked. And Jesus said to them, Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

Now, I think we've talked about the illustration of the wineskins before, but let's talk about this matter of the bridegroom. Jesus said to them, Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? Now, in referring to the bridegroom, he obviously means himself, and this reference would have probably a particular jab, as it were, at the disciples of John, because once, and this was not in the presence of Jesus that this occurred, but once the disciples of John had come to John and said, Do you know that Jesus said, More people are coming to him than to you. And as part of his answer, John had said to him in John 3.29, in John 3.29, John the Baptist said, He who has the bride is the bridegroom.

So he means that the people are the bride, and the bridegroom should have the bride. He was essentially saying, Jesus is the bridegroom, and he has the bride. Now, there's two things that the disciples of John should have learned from that statement of their own teacher, John the Baptist.

Namely, that Jesus was the bridegroom, and secondly, that it was now time for the feast, for the wedding feast. The bridegroom was claiming his bride. He was taking his bride at this very time.

The wedding feast had come. Now, the disciples of John either didn't remember what John said, or had never put it together in their minds, so Jesus makes an application. Now, the interesting thing, of course, is that Jesus was not present when John made this statement to his disciples, and here he shows himself to have sort of insights into that which has not been made known to him through natural means.

Just as when he saw Nathaniel coming, he said, Here comes an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. And Nathaniel said, Well, how do you know me? And he said, I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you. Obviously, the fig tree, wherever it was, was somewhere out of sight from Jesus, and he showed himself to, in fact, have supernatural insights into things that the man knew from his own recent past, of where he had been and so forth.

So also, Jesus showed that he was aware of what John had said to his disciples, or if not, it's a very great coincidence that both John and Jesus would speak to the same people

and use the same expression, especially since it's not used elsewhere in the Gospels, except when speaking to John's disciples. But he says, Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? He's implying that the most inappropriate time for fasting and mourning is at a festive occasion and a feast. Now, there may be times when it is appropriate to mourn and to fast, but a feast, a wedding feast, which is a celebration, is not one of those times.

And what he's saying is, You guys have missed what your Master was telling you, what John told you. And that is that what I am doing is inaugurating a feast, a wedding feast. This is a wedding.

We don't fast at weddings. Now, we know that Jesus elsewhere, a couple of chapters hence, made this very contrast between John the Baptist and himself, because he says in Matthew 11, verses 18 and 19, For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he is a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Look, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

No doubt referring to what we've just read in chapter 9. That's when they said it. But wisdom is justified by her children, he says. Now, Jesus makes this contrast in this very point between himself and John the Baptist.

John was a man of austerity. John was a man who was calling for repentance, wearing sackcloth, as it were, camel's hair, living out in the wilderness, a stern, hard message principally. Largely a man rebuking people and trying to bring conviction on them so that they'd grieve over their sins.

It was quite right for his ministry to be characterized by austerity, almost asceticism. But Jesus said, I'm just the opposite. I'm having a party here.

I'm the bridegroom. We're here to have a feast. And people criticized John, and they criticized Jesus, even though they had opposite approaches to religion.

John's was very austere, but Jesus's was very festive. Now, I want to point out to you that Jesus' statement in Matthew, there in verse 15, says, Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn? In the other Gospels, Mark and Luke, he is reported as saying, Can the friends of the bridegroom, or can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? Here where Matthew has the word mourn, the word fast is found in the other Gospels, and seemingly appropriately, because his second part of the statement is, But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast. In all the Gospels, fast is in that place.

Only in Matthew is the word mourn substituted for fast in that first part of the statement. And it raises, of course, questions about fasting in modern times, Christians fasting. The practice of fasting is something that Christians have various opinions about.

Some have, they never think about it, and their opinion is it's not important enough even to consider. Others feel like fasting should be a regular part of the Christian regimen. That to fast at least as often as the Pharisees did would seem to be appropriate.

After all, they didn't even have the Spirit, and we do, and therefore we should be at least as able to put the flesh under as they did. It's a little bit like the argument for tithing for better. If the Jews were required to pay at least 10%, we should do no less.

And there are some Christians who are on a regimen of fasting. I know, I used to be one of them. For some time, for a number of months, I had a once-a-week fast, one day a week, and three-day fast at the end of each month for several months in a row.

There was some blessing in it initially, but eventually it wasn't much of a blessing. It just got to be something where I was watching the clock to see how much more hours in the day there were, you know. And wondering if I might just stay up till midnight tonight, so I didn't have to wait till morning to eat.

Just wait till technically the day was over. It got to be very legalistic for me, and I stopped doing it for that very reason. Even though I was aware of the legalism and sought very hard to avoid it, and to keep my attitudes right and so forth, it just got to be one of those things where maybe I'm weaker than other people in this respect, although I suspect everyone's probably pretty close to being that weak, and have the same problem whether they admit it or not.

I've had many people get upset with me when I suggest to you that Christians do not have to have a regimen of fasting. And I don't even encourage you to have one, although I don't forbid it. How could I? Christ doesn't forbid it.

One thing I will point out, and this is pointed out also by people who advocate fasting, and by the way, I do fast still occasionally, but not on a regimen, not on any kind of a schedule. But those who advocate fasting as an important part of the Christian life point out the same point that I will, namely that Jesus never commanded anywhere that fasting should be done. And for that matter, neither did the Old Testament.

Except on one day out of the year, on the Day of Atonement, which was one day only each year, they were supposed to fast on that one day. It's the only fast that God ever commanded. The only day of fasting.

There was not a weekly or a monthly fast, or twice a week fast in the law. That was a tradition, not something God commanded. Furthermore, in the New Testament, we don't even have so much as one command to fast on any particular time.

The closest thing we have is, A, this passage, where Jesus said, when the bridegroom is taken from them, then they will fast, which does not translate into a command so much as a statement of his expectation that it will happen. It's more of a prediction than a

command. And the other statement is in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus says to his disciples, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites.

But when you fast, do it this way. Again, that's not quite the same thing as a command. But both passages, the one in the Sermon on the Mount I just mentioned, when you fast, and this one before us, they both have the assumption implied that Christians will fast.

But there's no actual command to do so. It is assumed by Christ that his followers will, but the frequency of it is nowhere stated. In fact, there's not even so much as a command that it'd ever necessarily be done.

Now, Paul spoke in his writings of his lifestyle. In 2 Corinthians, he talked about how he was in cold and nakedness and fastings often and watchings often. Watching, by the way, is simply the counterpart to fasting with regard to sleep.

Fasting is when you abstain deliberately from food, or maybe not deliberately. Sometimes, I mean, you haven't chosen to fast, but you have no food available. You are fasting as long as you're not eating.

And likewise, watching is something, whether deliberately or not, it is not sleeping. Not eating means fasting, and not sleeping means watching. And that's why watching and fasting are mentioned sometimes.

People who are in great grief or great emotional turmoil sometimes can't sleep and don't have any appetite. Some people actually choose to pray all night rather than sleep and to fast from food. That, too, is okay.

There's certainly nothing wrong with that. But the two are connected. Paul said, however, as part of his lifestyle, when he talked about being in cold and nakedness and without any certain dwelling place, he said also, I'm in fastings often and watchings often.

Though, by the context of the statement, it sounds as if he's talking about sort of involuntarily. There's times when, because of the circumstances he's in, he's simply not able to sleep comfortably or sleep at all. He spent overnight in the deep once, couldn't sleep very well there.

And on certain occasions, food was not accessible to him. And I think that we don't have anything in Paul that says that he had a regular fasting routine, but that he did fast frequently and lose sleep frequently, too, though not necessarily as part of his religious regimen, but very possibly as a direct result of his walk with God and the persecution he was experiencing and so forth. Fasting and watching was a part of his life, but he didn't have to put himself on a religious schedule to fit it in artificially.

There's a sense in which all Christians, if they're living like Jesus did, will find occasions

when it doesn't seem appropriate to eat or it's simply impossible to eat because the demands of God on our lives or circumstances prevent it. When Jesus was talking to the woman at the well, you recall, the disciples came back from town with food. Jesus had not decided to fast for religious reasons.

In fact, he probably had sent them into town for the food. But by the time they got back, he was busy. And he said, I've got food you don't know about.

He said, my food is to do the will of my Father. And presumably, he went without a meal on that occasion because of his dedication to the work that he was cut out for. He didn't want to be distracted by eating a meal.

Likewise, one of the reasons that Mark tells us that Jesus' parents thought he was crazy, or not parents, but his brethren, thought he was crazy and sought to take him into custody is because he went several days without taking time to eat or sleep, I think. Now, I don't remember if I can, I don't know how quickly I can locate the verse I want on that. It's possible that, I think it's in Mark chapter 3, but I, it's one of those things I just thought of on the top of my head and I don't, 20 and 21.

Okay, great. There it is. That's, oh, that's right.

He brought it up. That's right. Mark 3, 20 and 21.

It says, And the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. That is, Jesus and his disciples were ministering to the multitude, and the multitude was so pressing upon him on his time, he just didn't have the luxury of taking time out for meals. And it says, But when his own people heard about it, they went out to lay hold of him, for they said he was out of his mind.

Because he was putting ministry above eating, even to the point of probably several days in a row, because the crowds were hard to avoid. Now, Jesus, in other words, except for the 40 days that he fasted at the beginning of his ministry, we have no record of him ever having a deliberate religious desire to fast, except, of course, he fasted often, no doubt, because he found himself engaged in the Father's work, which was more his food, more of his bread and meat, than the food that he ate. Remember what he said when the devil told him to change the rocks into bricks? He said, Well, man doesn't live by bread alone.

He lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Now, I am not saying that you shouldn't, if you do fast on a regular schedule, I'm not saying you shouldn't. But I would like to suggest to you that you keep close track on what's really happening spiritually in that kind of a regimen, because a lot of times it results in putting confidence in the flesh, it results in even being a little bit cranky at people who don't do the same thing, maybe a little self-righteous.

Let me show you something. In Colossians chapter 2, Paul was talking about, well, he wasn't talking directly about fasting. He was talking about other forms of self-discipline, but it included certain dietary restrictions that people would put themselves under that were a little bit strict.

And I have a feeling that fasting may well fall into the general category, too, of what he's talking about. In Colossians 2, verses 20 through 23, it says, Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations? Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle. These were very typical of Jewish regulations.

Whether the Colossians were falling into a Jewish legalism or some other kind has been debated by scholars. We don't even have to settle that as far as I'm concerned. He's basically saying that any of those kind of regulations, Jewish or otherwise, about not touching certain things, not tasting or handling certain things, those regulations he doesn't have much respect for.

He says in verse 22, All of those things which all concern things which perish with the using, according to the commandments and doctrines of men. These things, these regulations, touch not, taste not, handle not, these rules, indeed have the appearance of wisdom and self-imposed religion, false humility and neglect of the body. But his assessment is, they are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The flesh, in fact, can be deprived of food for a day, but unless you're walking in the spirit also, just depriving your flesh of food is not going to diminish the net effect of the flesh on your life. The flesh will, like a gopher, if you cover up one gopher hole, he'll just find another way to emerge. He'll dig another hole and come to the surface somewhere else.

And the flesh is that way too. You might say, I'm going to discipline my flesh, I'm going to fast two times a week, and my flesh is going to cry out for food, and I'm just going to laugh at it and say, Ha! I'm going to discipline you, I'm going to put you to death, I'm going to fast. Touch not, taste not, handle not, isn't the way that you put to death the flesh.

That can be, and too often is, simply self-imposed religion, resulting sometimes in false humility, neglect of the body. Neglect of the body is not one of those things that Jesus indicated as spiritual. That's what John the Baptist was doing, but Jesus said, I'm just the opposite of him.

Neglect of the body is not what Christianity is about. Neglect of sin is, of course not only neglect, but renunciation and abandonment of sin is, but neglect of the body, to deny yourself lawful enjoyments of the body, it may be appropriate at times, A, if God leads you to it, that is, if God just puts it on your heart, listen, here's an emergency you need

to pray for, just skip meals and spend the day in prayer. I can see that, or spend the night in prayer, or both.

Certainly the Holy Spirit can lead you to that, and we do find, as Jesus predicted, there were times after he was gone that the Christians did fast. Not on all the occasions that you might think they would, but one case, for example, was in Acts chapter 13, that the five leaders of the church in Antioch are named, and it says, and while they fasted, and sought the Lord, or ministered to the Lord, the Holy Spirit spoke to them, and said, Separate from me Barnabas and Saul, to the ministry that I have called them to. Now they were fasting on that occasion, and we are not told whether it was their regular weekly day of fasting, as if they had one, maybe they did, but we don't know it, or whether they were being led by the Spirit to fast on this occasion, because they sensed that God had some new thrust forward for the church that he wanted them to do, and they wanted to seek the face of God, and they decided to separate themselves from meals in order to spend a day in prayer.

I've known, I mean, in elderships I've been a part of, we've often had times like that, where we'd take a retreat for the weekend to skip meals and just pray together, and I could easily imagine that being what Acts 13 is talking about. I don't know that that's the case, but we do see that fasting was not altogether absent from the practice of the Christians. What Paul is saying in Colossians is simply that rules and regulations about the neglect of the body often commend themselves to our common sense as good ways to really bring the flesh under subjection.

I remember reading years ago a book about fasting, in fact I won't name it because the author, I don't want to, I mean, I disagree with much of what he said, but he was a good author, and I don't want to, well, a lot of people read this book, and probably the most famous book on fasting written by a Christian author. If you know of any books on fasting by Christian authors, probably this one is one you know of, and the title may come immediately to your mind. Its title was a household word among Christians in the 70s, at least the ones I was with.

Anyway, this book basically claimed all kinds of wonderful spiritual benefits for fasting, which is one of the reasons I got into it, one of the reasons I decided to fast. And among other things, he suggested that if you have problems with sexual desire, with sexual cravings and so forth of an inordinate type, that fasting may help you in that, because you basically communicate to the flesh, you give the flesh the message that the flesh is not going to have its way, and that the spirit is going to control your life, and by denying meals when your flesh wants meals, that's a good way of getting that message across, and if you gain control of the flesh in that area, it will give you a general control over the flesh in other areas as well. That sounded good to me, and to many others, and, you know, people could say, well, just because it failed for you doesn't mean that he was wrong, maybe you blew it somewhere.

That's not impossible, but I will say this, I hardly know anyone who is more zealous in spiritual and desires of holiness than I was at the time when I was reading such a book and trying to use fasting as a means of subduing the flesh and so forth. I was in my teens, early twenties, probably one of the more zealous periods of my entire life. I'm not saying that I've cooled down, but I would say my zeal was more demonstrable and visible, and I know my heart had a very youthful excitement about pressing in, which I would like to regain some of that, as a matter of fact, today, and I shall.

But what I want to say is that if I couldn't do it, I don't know who could. When I fasted, it not only did not diminish my other fleshly desires, it only increased my desire for food too, which I'm not one of these people who overeats. I'm not a person who thinks about food most of the time.

This is a difference between my wife's family and mine. My family is all skinny, and hers tend to try to keep... They like food, and they talk about food all the time. When her parents are over... Her parents are great folks, they're great Christian folks, but I'll tell you, if you're driving down from one town to another with them in the car, count on it.

Forty percent of the time to sixty percent of the time, according to official surveys, they're going to be talking about the last restaurant they ate in, and what they had, and how good the food was, or even a restaurant they ate at twenty years ago. They see in an article a name of some town, and they say, remember that little restaurant in that town? Oh, they had the greatest cheesecake. They had the greatest this or that.

I didn't grow up in a home where we talked about food. Food is something you eat to stay alive, and you don't think about it the rest of the time. I don't think about food.

It's not on my mind. But it was when I was fasting. That's the funny thing.

It almost made me eat more fleshly. It aroused sensual desires in me that weren't there most of the time. It was a funny thing.

I don't think about food until it's time really to eat, and sometimes I don't even think about it then, because I'm too busy doing other things that are more enjoyable to me than eating. And there's a lot of those things. In fact, almost everything.

I do enjoy eating when the food's good, but what I'm saying is, I could never count. I could never count, because they would number into the hundreds. The nights or the days where I've gone all day without eating anything, but not because I decided to fast, but because I just forgot that eating was something I was supposed to do that day, because I was so wrapped up in something else I was doing.

And that is, I think, how Jesus was. He just didn't take time out to eat bread. He was ministering so much.

That, in a sense, is fasting. It's an involuntary fast. It's fasting by necessity, because doing the will of God requires that I neglect some other thing that's of less importance.

And when Jesus said, My disciples will fast, I don't doubt that this is the kind of thing he mostly had in mind. Fasts that are upon you because of necessity. Fasts that are there because you simply don't take time to eat, because there's something more important God has you to do with your time.

Very possibly, very frequently. Fasting which is coupled with prayer. In fact, I don't think there's any religious benefit in fasting at all, unless it is coupled with prayer.

And, of course, unless it is also spiritually motivated, not religiously motivated. That's just the point. But in the stories that we're looking at in the life of Jesus at this particular point, including the ones that follow where we're at, the contrast is always between the way Jesus was, in terms of not giving much credence to religious action, and the place where the religious leaders were, who gave credence only to religious action and nothing to moral or spiritual dynamics.

I mean, if they neglected to recognize the need for compassion, when Jesus healed the paralytic, on this occasion they were neglecting to see the call to be joyous, because the bridegroom was here. And it was, you know, people should be rejoicing. But instead they were fasting and mourning.

Now, the fact that Matthew substitutes the word mourning for fasting in this place, raises, of course, the question, did Jesus use the word fast or mourn, or both, in this particular statement? But even if we can't decide which was the actual word he used in this particular case, it certainly suggests that fasting and mourning, in his mind, were connected. Or at least in Matthew's mind, and I think very much reflecting what Jesus taught on this. That he was saying the reason they're not fasting is because they don't have any occasion at this point to mourn.

The time will be when they'll miss Jesus, when he'll be gone, and they will mourn then. They'll fast then. But once again, he's not prescribing that after he's gone, his disciples will slip into a religious routine of fasting that's analogous to that which the Pharisees and the disciples of John were currently practicing.

I think what he's saying is, you just don't lose your appetite when you're having a good time, and having a feast, and so forth, and celebrating. But you do lose your appetite sometimes when you're grieving.