

Title: Treasure #3: Fasting**[Slide 1]****Text: Matthew 6:16-18****Showing Off****Bumper Stickers and other signals of supreme virtue:**

Ever notice that Vermont is the land of bumper stickers. We may have outlawed billboards back in the 1960s, but we've found more mobile ways of broadcasting our politics, our dietary preferences, even our gender identities!

All you need is a Subaru of a certain age to serve as a canvas. Then you load it up with stickers. You might have one that spells out "Coexist" in religious symbols. You might have another that commands everyone to Eat More Kale. How about, "Make Love Not War." That one never seems to get old to some people. Or what about the one that says that supports the right to Arm Bears. That would make a walk in the woods a bit more interesting.

What all of these pronouncements have in common is that they *signal virtue*. They let us know that the person behind the wheel in the car with the stickers has the "right" (or maybe it's the "left") values.

And of course, people on the other side of the political and social spectrum have their own ways of signaling their virtue as well. It can be done with a word or a phrase. Just let it slip that you saw something on Fox News and you've signaled your conservative credentials.

Humans, it seems, just can't help but let others know that they are virtuous!

The Practice of Fasting:

Virtue Signaling was all the rage way back in Jesus' time. He lived in an overtly religious society where your status and worth as a person was defined by your piety. If you didn't keep the rules, you were designated as a "sinner." To be a sinner was to be at the very bottom of the ladder.

So a whole class of people adopted elaborate ways of signaling just how holy and devout they were. Jesus called them hypocrites – people play-acting instead of being their true selves. As with giving and prayer, this play-acting carried over to the third pillar of Jewish piety: Fasting.

This is how Jesus called it out:

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Matthew 6:16 NIV

"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."

To show just how sad they were, people smeared ashes on their faces and messed up their hair. No mistaking that message! No lack of virtue here.

Showing Off:

Jesus said that all such activity was just showing off: putting on a play to try to impress others. It had no value whatsoever in terms of God. And when it comes to receiving a spiritual reward, you might as well hold out a tin cup for a few coins from the passers-by.

How tempting to think that we can become more virtuous by merely *signaling* our virtue to others. It's so much easier than doing the hard work of loving others, forgiving those who have wronged you, seeing things from someone else's point of view, working on stubborn sins in our own lives, or turning away from the endless distractions of our world to seek God's Presence!

Why not just wear a bumper sticker?

True Fasting

The Treasure of Fasting:

So just what is the real treasure that we find in fasting? What treasure is there in going without something that you value or need? How does skipping meals or screen time, for instance, bring a reward from our Father in Heaven?

One way to understand the power of fasting is in its ability to help us *focus* on what really matters. For example, astronomers decided to see what would happen if they aimed the Hubble Space Telescope at a seemingly empty patch of the night sky. They chose a spot in the Big Dipper. It was from our perspective an exceedingly tiny piece of sky: it measured about one 24-millionth of the whole sky. Think of how much sky a tennis ball would block out if it were 100 yards away from you.

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Then they took not one, but 342 different exposures over ten consecutive days. When they put the images together, they discovered almost 3000 galaxies lying out there, some of which were among the youngest and most distant ever seen. For an astronomer this was literally Treasure in Heaven!

But to make this discovery, the Hubble Space Telescope had to “fast” from looking at all the other interesting objects in the known universe! Think of it: 10 precious days dedicated to what seemed like a blank canvas.

The same thing happens when we turn the telescope of our soul away from looking at familiar things, and focus on what we haven’t seen yet.

Not a performance!

Like Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had harsh words for the religious performers of his day. They had perfected the show of fasting. They knew how to look humble and downcast. But they had no clue as to the true purpose of their fasting:

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Isaiah 58:3-5 NIV

*'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?*

*Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'*

*"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.*

*Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.*

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*You cannot fast as you do today
 and expect your voice to be heard on high.
 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
 only a day for people to humble themselves?
 Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
 and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
 Is that what you call a fast,
 a day acceptable to the LORD?*

Sounds a lot like Jesus' critique of His own generation!

Kingdom Work:

Instead, Isaiah reminded his listeners that fasting was about God and His work in the world – what Jesus would have called the work of the Kingdom of God:

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Isaiah 58:6-7 NIV

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
 to loose the chains of injustice
 and untie the cords of the yoke,
 to set the oppressed free
 and break every yoke?"*

*Is it not to share your food with the hungry
 and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
 when you see the naked, to clothe them,
 and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

Here is true Kingdom Work. Notice how nicely this dovetails with the First Treasure of giving to the needy! Fasting should focus us on what God is doing in the world. And when we do that, He can then fill us with His purpose and power.

Treasure #3: Fasting

Fasting's reward:

Isaiah says that if his listeners would conduct this true fast – one which resulted in Kingdom Work – then they would reap a wonderful reward:

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Isaiah 58:8-12 NIV

*Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.*

*Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

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*"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.*

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*The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.*

*You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.*

*Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.*

Treasure #3!

Think of it: God wants you to be called Repairer of Broken Walls and Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. He wants to use you and me to be a well-watered garden and a spring whose waters never fail. He promises to satisfy our needs in a sun-scorched land. He promises to strengthen and heal. Best of all, He promises to be right here with us!

All of this is possible when we take the time to focus on Him and His purpose for our world.

So I challenge you to choose a way to *focus*. Pick something in your life that you will set aside for next several weeks, if you haven't done so already. Pick a time to focus yourself on God instead of the millions of things that call for your attention. Let yourself settle into His Presence, His thoughts, His will, His love.

When you do, you will discover the Third Treasure – the reward that comes through Fasting. You will never be the same!