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CHRISTIAN FASTING (Mt. 6, 16-18)

The immediately striking point is that Mt. 6, 16-18 is found only in Matthew's gospel. The reason for this becomes apparent when we consider the general emphasis of the first gospel. It has long been acknowledged that of the synoptic writers, Matthew is the one who is most concerned with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism.¹ It is Matthew who is most clearly concerned to show that Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. It has even been suggested that a large part of his gospel is built around a number of written Messiah-texts which circulated as a unit within the early community, and is to a great extent a commentary on them. Be this as it may, Matthew is certainly concerned not only with the fulfilment of the Old Testament by Christ; he is also greatly exercised to show the consequences which this article of faith has for the daily life of Christians. Thus Dupont² states that the gospel material which is proper to Matthew consists especially of passages which define the relationship between the gospel message and the old law, between Christian justice and that of the scribes and Pharisees. But this is only part of the truth. Matthew wants to show the meaning of the Old Testament traditions in their Christian context; but he is at the same time concerned with a living problem—the relationship between the young Christian community and contemporary Judaism. That the Church which forms the living backcloth against which the first gospel must always be viewed was greatly concerned about its relationship to the Judaism of its day seems clear enough. That Matthew intended to contribute towards a solution of their problems also seems clear. Thus Hummel³ maintains that the conflict with Judaism is a thread which runs through the whole of Matthew's gospel; while the problem is sometimes treated directly, as in the use of direct speech to the Jewish opposition (for instance in the forceful condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in Mt. 23) it also appears indirectly, as in large parts of the Sermon on the Mount and parts of the gospel which are of an apologetic character.

Davies⁴ goes even further when he states "it is our suggestion that one fruitful way of dealing with the Sermon on the Mount is to

¹ G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Oxford 1946. P. 107 "Bacon has convincingly developed the view that the Gospel is the new Law, and that the fivefold division of Chapters 3-25 is a deliberate imitation of the Pentateuch. The mountain of the Sermon on the Mount is meant to recall Sinai, and Jesus himself is a greater lawgiver than Moses. Hence Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and revises both it and the oral tradition".

² J. Dupont, *Les Beatitudes*. Louvain 1954. P. 55.

³ R. Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Mattheusevangelium*. *Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie* 33. München 1963.

⁴ Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*. Cambridge 1964. P. 315.

regard it as the Christian answer to Jamnia. Using terms very broadly, the Sermon is a kind of Christian, Mishnaic counterpart to the formulation taking place there". In other words, for Davies, the Sermon on the Mount (of which 6, 16ff. forms part), is a Christian parallel to the renewal of Judaism which was currently taking place at Jamnia. However one regards this view, there seems no doubt that Matthew is concerned to show Christianity to best advantage over against Judaism. It is therefore easy to understand why a passage such as 6, 16ff. should be found in Matthew and not in the other synoptic gospels.

This short consideration of Matthew's motives for including our text can be of some assistance when we come to consider its meaning. For we shall now expect to find in it some indication of the relationship which Matthew understood to exist between the Christian gospel and the Jewish tradition; and also an indication of the Church's use of the Old Testament tradition, as well as an insight into the difference which Matthew saw between the Christian Church and the Judaism of his time. Bearing these reflections in mind, we can now go on to consider the text.

All critics agree that the immediate context of Mt. 6, 16 is a literary unit, built up of three parallel sections. In form this unit is typically rabbinic.⁵ 6, 1 states a general principle: we are not to practise righteousness before men in order to be admired by them, or we shall not have a reward from our Father who sees in secret. Then follows a threefold illustration of this principle: vv. 2-4, 5-6, 16-18. This is in accordance with the rabbinical method of teaching doctrine, a method in which the general principle involved (*'abh*—father, or *kelal*—universal) and the application of the principle (*toladha*—descendant, or *perat*—the detailed rule) are related to one another according to a well defined system. This is not a Greek form, as Daube⁶ notes, but Hebrew. Examples are already to be found in the Old Testament. An example is Lev 18, 1. "You are not to do as the Egyptians and the Canaanites do" is established as the general norm, and then follow examples of what is not to be done. Granted that in this case the introduction is of later origin than the details, our point is not affected, for the author of the prefix certainly intended the structure to appear.

The Rabbis made use of this already ancient form and developed it greatly. An example is *Mishna B.Q.* 8, 1 "If a man wounds another he is liable on five counts, for injuring him, for pain, for healing, for loss of time, and for the indignity inflicted." The text then goes on to deal with each item in detail.⁷

⁵ D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. London 1956. P. 63ff.

⁶ A. Georges, 'La Justice à faire dans le secret'. *Biblica* 1959. P. 590ff.

⁷ Daube. *Op. cit.* P. 64.

CHRISTIAN FASTING

The close literary parallelism between the three sections is evident on a consideration of the text.⁸

When you give alms sound no trumpet . . . as the hypocrites do that they may be praised by men	when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites that they may be seen by men	when you fast do not look dismal like the hypocrites that their fasting may be seen by men
Truly, I say to you They have their reward But when you give alms in secret	Truly, I say to you They have their reward But when you pray . . . to your Father who is in secret	Truly, I say to you They have their reward But when you fast your father who is in secret
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you	And your Father who sees in secret will reward you	And your Father who sees in secret will reward you

In the first section, a clear connection with the general rule given in v. 1 is established by the use of *oun* (thus, therefore); *de* is used in the third member, and implies some kind of contrast, very probably with the final phrase of v. 6, "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you", an attitude to which the hypocrites' consideration of men's opinions mentioned in v. 6 forms a very real contrast.

On the other hand, when we come to consider vv. 7-15 we are immediately on different ground. Here there is question of "the Gentiles" instead of the hypocrites, and their error lies in thinking that they will be heard by reason of their many words. There is no mention of a desire to be seen by men. There is of course the logical connection that in each case the external conduct alone is insufficient. However, the motivation here is not the same as that of the other three sections, and to affirm that it is of the same form as theirs is to force it into a pattern to which it clearly does not belong. The conclusion here is different too: there is no need to use many words, "for your Father knows what you need before you ask him". There is no suggestion that they have already received their reward. Another difference is the use of "your" Father instead of "thy" Father: a usage which corresponds to that of the "Our Father" but not to that of the triptych which we are considering.

We must therefore conclude that vv. 7-8 do not originally belong to the unity formed by vv. 1-6, 16-18. The same is true, and even more clearly so, of the *Our Father*.

Apart from the literary unity which is evident here, the mention of almsgiving, prayer and fasting together is not coincidence, but springs from a Jewish outlook which saw in them a theological unity. They are found together here due to their common origin within the

⁸ Perry, 'The framework of the sermon on the mount'. *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 1935. P. 103ff.

context of the contemporary approach to religious life within Judaism. In this context, justification was seen to be essentially dependent on man's behaviour with regard to the law. Every action was considered to be one which brought either merit or guilt in its train. Actions in accordance with the law meant an increase of merit, actions not in such accord meant an increase of guilt. No man could be entirely free from actions which produced guilt; the task of the man who wished to be just was to ensure that the total of his meritorious actions outweighed the total of his guilty actions. This could be done in two ways—by increasing merit or lessening guilt, a twofold objective which was attained by the performance of good works. The three classical good works were almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

Since our text belongs to the section 6, 1-6, 16-18, of which it is a component and subordinate part, it must be interpreted in the light of the whole section and particularly of the introductory v. 1, which influences the whole.

The first question which arises is whether this introductory verse was included at the time of the first formation of the literary unit which we have been discussing, or whether it was added later. Descamps⁹ considers that the whole section has a transparently oral character: by its parallelism and the rhythm of the three sections it stands out as the very type of a semitic discourse. He goes on to say that v. 1 cannot have been originally external to the section, as we have no right to refuse an orator the possibility of giving a general title to a piece of eloquence. Of course one cannot refuse an orator this right—but this is scarcely the correct way to approach the question of the origin of this verse. It certainly is not unlikely that three such texts which have all the appearances of having been handed down together in the oral tradition should have had such a general title attached to them in the tradition. But there is all the difference in the world between a title and this particular title. The question we must ask is whether the verse bears the marks of Matthean redaction to such an extent that we are led to conclude that its present form is due to the evangelist. If we answer this question in the affirmative, then it matters little whether the section originally had a title or not. On the other hand if the title does not bear the marks of Matthean redaction then we may justifiably conclude that in its present form it goes back to a pre-Matthean form of the tradition.

It is the opinion of the present writer that v. 1 bears the marks of Matthean redaction to such an extent that in its present form at least we must regard it as proper to the evangelist.

⁹ Descamps. *Les Justes et La Justice dans Les evangiles et le christianisme primitif*. Louvain 1950.

First of all we have the use of the term *dikaiosune* (justice or righteousness). This word is not found at all in Mark, and only once in Luke—and that in the canticle of Zachary, which is wholly under the influence of the Old Testament manner of expression. Matthew uses the word seven times, in places that are without synoptic parallels. It would therefore appear that it is a clear sign of Matthean emphasis and redaction.

Dupont¹⁰ argues that since v. 1 is a title or general principle we must attribute it to the first redactor of the Sermon on the Mount, the one who gave it its structure. We cannot here go into the whole question of a pre-Matthean redaction of the Sermon taken as a whole. It is sufficient for us to point out why we consider that v. 1, at whatever stage it was inserted, is later in origin than the formation of the triptych which it introduces, and shares an outlook which is typical of the Sermon and of Matthew. V. 1 is foreign to the rhythmic structure of these verses; it brings in a concept—the practice of righteousness—which is not found in the rest of the unit; a concept which is practically exclusive to Matthew among the synoptics, and the use of which in the Beatitudes is admitted to be redactional by Dupont. It qualifies “Father” by “who is in heaven”, something which is not found in the remainder of the unit, though it is used in 6, 9, part of *Our Father*, and a verse which is admitted by all to be external to the triptych with which we are dealing. It seems clear therefore that this verse has been inserted by a writer later than the one who formed the unit which it introduces, be he Matthew himself or the “original redactor of the Sermon”.

Another argument in favour of the redactional origin of v. 1 comes from a consideration of the *Didache* 8, 1. Here also we have an instruction about fasting. The disciples are not to fast on the same days as the hypocrites. Here there is no mention of righteousness, no general heading or introduction. Now if we are to accept the conclusions of Audet in his study of the *Didache*¹¹ we may take it that the “quasi-identity of form” in Matthew and the *Didache* arises from a common origin in a relatively homogeneous milieu and tradition. In other words it is reasonable to believe that both the Matthean instruction and that of the *Didache* rest on the same tradition of the words of the Lord. Granted the inevitable differences which result from the different methods and objectives of Matthew and the author of the *Didache*—gospel writing and practical instruction—we have here the same basic opposition. Christians are not to fast as the hypocrites. Since there is no mention in the *Didache* of the practice of righteousness as the general

¹⁰ Dupont. Op. cit. P. 63.

¹¹ J. P. Audet. *La didache. Instructions des Apotres. Etudes Bibliques*, Paris 1958.

category into which Christian fasting falls, it is surely likely that the author of the *Didache* knew of the tradition about fasting in a form which did not relate it to the practice of righteousness—that is, in a form in which our present introductory v. 1 did not appear. We are thus led once more to the conclusion that v. 1 is not due to the preceding tradition, but to either the first redactor of the whole Sermon or Matthew himself.

Now if the redactor has placed his instruction on fasting under such a general heading, it is clear that he sees the practice as essentially relevant to this verse, and vice versa. Of course if the introductory verse had been attached to the triptych in the tradition which the redactor used, it would still remain true that by his very acceptance of it and his transmission of it in this place he would have meant it to be seen as relevant to what follows. Our conclusion that v. 1 is redactional serves to underline this fact even more, and to make it quite clear that fasting has to be seen in the context of the ideas and notions in the midst of which Matthew has purposefully placed it.

Christian fasting therefore, if we are to understand it with Matthew, is a particular way of practising righteousness. So we cannot see Matthew's understanding of fasting in proper perspective without considering his idea of righteousness.

Dikaïosune in the New Testament generally, apart from Paul, means human behaviour in harmony with God's will; thus it is clearly related to the Old Testament by its constant references to God and a vital connection with His mighty acts.¹² According to Mt. 6, 33 *Dikaïosune* is something to be sought in addition to the kingdom of God. That which Christians are to seek is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (5, 20). It is evidently not a justice by which God justifies us, nor is it an eschatological justice by which we are enabled to stand before the judgement.¹³ Rather is it a justice by which we strive to reach the kingdom of God. *Dikaïosune* in our text, as for the Rabbis, is the essence of the true life lived according to the will of God. It is not a mere ethic, but the ideal form of a life which is pleasing to God in every respect. It is not a form of life in which those who practise it are just, but in which they strive to become just. If the goal of all life and all action is the Kingdom of God, the presupposition of this kingdom is a justice which is greater than that of the Pharisees. The justice of which Jesus speaks is more perfect and more elevated than that of the law; it is nevertheless in the same line as that of the law. While it is not to be practised ostentatiously in order to gain the praise of men—the

¹² G. Schrenk. *Theologisches Wörterbuch z. Neuen Testament*. II. P. 199ff.

¹³ Trilling. *Das Wahre Israel. Studien zur Theologie des Matthäusevangeliums*. München 1964.

demands of the new justice do not concern only external actions, any more than the old justice when correctly understood, they extend also to the intention—but we are still in the line of a justice which consists of observing the law: the line is merely perfected.

It will be of value to point out here the parallel between Mt. 5, 17 and Mt. 3, 14-15. Dupont considers that 5, 17-19 are a redactional development of 5, 20 where it is asserted that “if your justice does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”. Now in v. 17 Jesus has stated that he has not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. If, with Dupont, we take it that v. 17 is a redactional development of v. 20, and a commentary on it, it seems clear that there is a relationship between fulfilling the law and the prophets and the practice of a justice which exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. In other words the practice of justice is something which of its nature is related to the Old Testament scriptures.¹⁴ This is all the more clear when we bear in mind Matthew’s insertion in 3, 14-15 where our Lord is said to fulfil all justice. Here we have the same verb *plerosai*, used as in 5, 17, and to “fulfil all justice” corresponds to “fulfil the law and the prophets”. Thus the practising of justice is clearly made out to be the perfection and “accomplishment” of the Old Testament law.

A corroboration of this may be found in Mt. 21, 32 where John the Baptist is said to come “in the way of righteousness”.¹⁵ Probably v. 32 does not form part of the preceding parable, which ends in v. 31, but is inserted because of a certain analogy of subject matter. The parable of the two sons shows that obedience to the will of God does not consist in saying that one will obey, but in actual obedience. The example of John the Baptist given in v. 32 must then be taken as showing an attitude of real obedience to God’s will in practice. This obedience consists in the fact that he came “in the way of righteousness”. If we ask what this means, we must admit that the text in hand does not enlighten us further, but we are immediately reminded of another text, a very similar sentence in another context—the application of the parable of the capricious children Mt. 11, 16-19. “John came neither eating nor drinking”. The introduction *elthen gar ioannes* is identical to that of 21, 32; John’s conduct is pointed out—neither eating nor drinking, which corresponds to “in the way of righteousness” of 21, 32; and in each text the third element, though differently expressed, amounts substantially to the same thing. John is not believed, he is rejected. Granted this clear parallelism it is hard to come to any other conclusion but that 21, 32 is basically the same text as

¹⁴ Dupont. Op. cit. P. 254.

¹⁵ Id. P. 255.

11, 19 in a slightly different form. Mt. 11, 19 does not, obviously, mean that John ate nothing at all—it is a generalised picture of a life of penance. This general picture reappears in 21, 32 in a still more general form—it becomes an existence “in the way of righteousness”. We cannot therefore doubt that by this usage of *dikaiousune* is meant a life of penitential works or perhaps of good works in general.

Thus, for Matthew, righteousness and the practising of it consists of good works done in this life, with a suggestion of their penitential nature. This life of good works is related to the Old Testament, in fact it is the perfection of the Old Testament law. It is in other words an external practice, in the same line as the justice of the law, yet one which prolongs this line insofar as it involves bringing the law and the prophets to perfection.

Our text, 6, 16 is quite in harmony with this meaning of *dikaiousune*. It has recently been shown that Matthew has a tendency in his whole gospel to narrow down the meaning of basic theological statements and to make of them particular instructions or *Halacoth*. Our text seems to be a typical example of this. This is a Matthean, and New Testament presentation of the place of good works in their Christian theological context. But to see Matthew's presentation of the matter in proper perspective, it will be helpful to consider very briefly the view of fasting which we find in the Old Testament.

The practice of fasting was deeply rooted in Israel, so much so indeed that it was often taken by outsiders as typical of Judaism.¹⁶ It is not necessary from our point of view to investigate the origins of the practice. But a few points must be made if we are to appreciate the position taken by our text on the subject.

In the Old Testament, penitential practices, including fasting, depend for their meaning on the biblical concept of sin. Since God is both just and all-powerful, all evil must be the just punishment of sin. Fasting, the wearing of sackcloth, the sprinkling of ashes on the head, the rending of garments, the shedding of tears, were all practices adopted by the Israelites in time of distress when they turned to God to beg for relief. But the distress, whatever it was, was the result of sin; in turning to God for relief, therefore, they were always and inevitably turning to God for forgiveness of their sins. God, always aware when sin has been committed, awaits the external acknowledgement by the sinner which would move Him to pity and provide him with the opportunity of manifesting His power and His mercy to His people.¹⁷

In other words, fasting and penitential practices are the external

¹⁶ Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N.T. aus Talmud und Midrasch*. Vol. IV, 1, p. 77ff. ‘*Vom Altjüdischem Fasten*’.

¹⁷ T. Worden, ‘The Remission of Sins’. *Scripture* 1958.

dramatisation of an internal acknowledgement of man's sinfulness; they are ritual actions, expressive of man's needs for God's compassion and help. It is not surprising therefore that in the Old Testament already, fasting and prayer are closely associated.

At first sight it would appear that the view of fasting which is contained in Mt. 6, 16-18 is radically different from that of the Old Testament. Far from seeing fasting as a practice associated with the wearing of sackcloth and the sprinkling of ashes on the head, as a means of proclaiming one's sinfulness and misery before God, Matthew seems to see fasting as something which is to be done with the greatest secrecy. The face is to be washed and the head anointed lest one be seen by men to be fasting. This is the opinion of some writers. Manson¹⁸ for instance, considers that Mt. affirms that Christian fasting must have no external sign. He regards our text as a reference to voluntary, private fasts, and says that outward signs only advertise the fact that one is fasting, with the result that popular admiration is the only reward that one receives. Similarly Huber¹⁹ rejects the idea that external rites might have a place in the Christian practice of fasting. He considers that Jesus accepts fasting as a means of allowing a greater concentration on heavenly things, as a useful ethical training, but that he rejects the external signs as being merely the search of praise from one's fellows. Fasting is the sign and symbol of an interior attitude which does not need a sign or symbol, and indeed in the Christian context, must not have sign or symbol.

Now it seems clear to us that we must not take our text too literally. It would be wrong to see here a new set of regulations for fasting; instead of wearing sackcloth and throwing ashes on his head to proclaim that he is fasting, the Christian must wash his face and anoint his head in order to conceal the fact. Such an over literal interpretation would be quite out of keeping with the general character of the Sermon on the Mount, which is to show the new spirit which must govern the life of the Christian, a life which may well include fasting. Thus it would be wrong to see in our text a new set of rules for fasting as a practice, which would take it out of the public area in which the Old Testament so firmly placed it, and would put it very much in the realm of private life, as something which should be carried on only behind closed doors. It is our opinion that to do this is basically to misinterpret our text. Rather must we see here a correction of perspective.

According to the first text of the triptych which we have decided

¹⁸ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*. S.C.M. Press 1949.

¹⁹ Huber, *Die Bergpredigt*. Gottingen 1932.

forms the immediate literary and theological context of Mt. 6, 16-18, when we give alms, our left hand must not know what our right hand is doing. There is no mention of our almsgiving not being seen by men—this would be altogether too forced and unreal a statement, and a warning quite out of harmony with the concrete circumstances of almsgiving in Jesus' time as well as our own. Nor, when we take the text dealing with prayer, can we imagine that it means we must only pray behind closed doors. Such a meaning would not only be foreign to the actual situation and practice of Jesus during his life on earth, but also to that of the early Christian community in which the gospel was written. No, there is question here simply and solely of a correction of perspective. It is a commonplace of theological development that when one aspect of the truth has been developed to such an extent that it alone seems to hold the centre of the stage in the minds of men, a tendency arises to emphasise the opposite aspect in order to attain a balance. Thus the Old Testament saw fasting as a means of humbling oneself before men, and therefore before God, as a means of winning the favour and blessing of God. During the social and political disintegration of the later monarchy this view became so common that it was almost the normal thing to approach God with grief and fasting. Thus Jeremiah can mention fasting and lamentation together as the means of winning the blessing of Yahweh (Jer. 14, 12). We find that later on fasting came to be seen as having a value in itself. The correction of perspective which one would expect comes when the prophets begin to insist on the primacy of humiliation of spirit. This attitude must surely have been provoked by a tendency to insist on externals to the detriment of the proper internal spirit.²⁰ The same kind of warning is to be found in the rabbinical writings, where those who fast are warned not to do so to excess.

In other words, once the idea of fasting as a rite by which man humbles himself in order to gain the divine favour has been so far developed that it comes to be regarded as an *ex opere operans* guarantee of the divine favour, the question soon arises as to whether it really means anything any more. The emphasis is now put on the spirit which must animate the practice. Of course this aspect of the predominant importance of the spirit which must animate the practice can also be so far developed that it itself constitutes an abuse. For carried far enough it will reduce to nothing the value of the practice and substitute for it some kind of spiritualised attitude.

It seems to us that such an abuse is present in the Oxyrhynchus papyrus where we read in Pap. 1 Nr. 2, "If you do not fast from the

²⁰ J. Pederson, *Israel: Its life and culture*. Oxford 1946-7. Vol 3-4. P. 460.

world you will not find the kingdom of God, and if you do not observe the Sabbath you will not see the Father". Fasting as such has no value here; it is one's detachment from the world which matters. Matthew on the other hand has not gone the full way to such a development. A comparison with the other two elements of the triptych shows that he could scarcely have meant that fasting, as an external exercise of humiliation, any more than prayer and almsgiving as external practices of devotion, has no place in the Christian order of things. He is rather concerned to guard against the dangers involved. External practice must not degenerate into merely a search for praise. We have to remember that our fasting, just as our prayer and our almsgiving, is something to be done out of concern for the will of the Father, not as a means of earning the praises of men. This is not to reject the external practice, but to restore it to perspective.

A further indication that our text does not contain a condemnation of all external signs in the performance of good works is to be found in Mt. 5, 16, where we are told that our good works must shine before men so that they may glorify our Father who is in heaven. While we may admit that this application of the logion is secondary²¹ it is scarcely likely that the redactor would have included it here had he felt that it was in flat contradiction to Mt. 6, 1ff. It is much more likely that he felt that this logion was quite in harmony with the content of the triptych of Mt. 6, 1ff. And he could only have felt this if 6, 1ff were not a condemnation of all external signs, but simply and solely a call to a proper motive and perspective in the performance of the traditional good works.

An interpretation such as that of Manson, who claims that we have here the condemnation of all external practice does not take account of the fact that the teaching contained in these verses is expressed in terms of metaphor. The behaviour which should characterise members of the community and the spirit which should animate them is defined here in terms of the behaviour and characteristics of the Pharisees.²² It would be wrong to take this metaphor at its literal face value and to interpret it as if there were no metaphor involved. Since Christian behaviour is here seen as the contrary of that of the Pharisees, the description of the manner in which good works are to be practised is given in terms which will most clearly bring out this opposition. Now in all three texts the approach of the hypocrites is described as a particular type of action which results from a well defined attitude. So also the approach which must characterise the Christian is described as a particular type of action which must result from a well defined

²¹ Dupont. Op. cit. P. 52, n.i.

²² Georges. Art. cit.

attitude. This is a clearly expressed form of parallel and contrast. In each case it is the attitude, the motive, which is dominant, and which is either praised or condemned. This attitude is then seen in a concrete application in each case, and it could be said that the maintenance of the parallelism in the action as well as in the motivation leads to some absurdity—as for instance when we are told that our right hand must not know what our left hand is doing, a phrase which taken absolutely literally, has no meaning. But seen in its proper perspective, as a parallel to the action of the hypocrites, it becomes significant; just as their basic attitude, the desire for the praise of men, is seen in action, so also the basic Christian attitude, a desire to serve the Father, is seen in practice. So also the Christian attitude to prayer is seen in opposition to that of the hypocrites, and the opposition is further developed in the description of two different kinds of action. Here again the continuation of the opposition into two kinds of action does not fit very well. It is scarcely possible that the Christian is forbidden to pray anywhere but behind closed doors. It is the basic attitude of each group which is opposed; the continuation of the parallelism to describe the corresponding action, if we were to take it absolutely literally, would be in the one case meaningless and in the other unacceptable, as impossible to reconcile with the rest of the gospel tradition. Now in the third case, that of fasting, neither of these objections would apply. It is a priori possible that Christian fasting is meant to be done without external sign, or rather with an external action which conceals it from the eyes of men.

But when we take the text on fasting together with the other two texts it is clear that here also a particular kind of action, that of concealment, is not being recommended; it is a specifically Christian spirit which is recommended, and to preserve the form of parallel and contrast on two levels at once an action is described which in this case also is meant to be taken metaphorically.

We may here mention again the corresponding text of the *Didache*, 8, 1. Manson considers that we have here a clear case of how easily and quickly the teaching of the Sermon has become corrupted, insofar as it places the difference between the disciples' fasting and that of the hypocrites in a mere difference of time, instead of in a more fundamental opposition, namely between a fast which is seen, and meant to be seen externally, and one that has no external sign. This does not seem to us to be correct. In the first place the purpose of the text in Matthew is by no means the same as the purpose of the text in the *Didache*. Matthew is here above all concerned with the proper dispositions for fasting and other pious exercises. The *Didache* is a collection of practical instructions—its purpose is to give regulations for

practical action, rather than to inculcate the motives which must animate the Christian.

The contrast which Manson sees between works done externally and works done in secret is too simple a view. We have shown above that in the case of the examples of almsgiving and prayer the action of the Christian described in the second part of each text cannot be taken as a literal instruction that a Christian must only give alms in secret, or that he must only pray in secret. Such an interpretation would be irreconcilable not only with the rest of the New Testament, but with the teaching of Matthew himself in other places. These Christian actions have meaning insofar as they serve to emphasise what is important in each case—the motive which must be present. In the case of the text on fasting, the same holds true: taken in conjunction with the other two texts, it is clear that here also it is the motive of the works which is emphasised. But for Matthew there is no question of the external action being excluded as unworthy of the Christian. The emphasis is not placed on this aspect, for Matthew's purpose is to reassert the other side of the coin. This does not however mean that Matthew denies the aspect which he is not emphasising at the moment. It is clear therefore that the text of the *Didache* cannot be seen as a fall from the original pure state of the Matthean doctrine merely because it is concerned with a direction for practical external action. The external action is uppermost in the mind of the author of the *Didache*, and this is what he emphasises, but he would not deny the importance of the motive which must lie behind such action any more than Matthew would deny the place of the external action which he does not happen to emphasise at the moment.

It should be clear from what has been said that Matthew's view of fasting does not involve us in a contradiction of the view of fasting found in the Old Testament, the idea of man's humiliation of himself before God and man. There is however, a correction of perspective. What had begun as the humiliation of men before God and their fellow men could so easily end in the search for the praise of men, a "performance" and nothing else. This was in fact the situation which confronted Christ in his earthly ministry, and the early Church when it handed on, applied, and developed his teaching. The situation which faces Matthew is the final point of a process. Fasting is now commonly practised as a mere device to gain the approval of men. Matthew wishes to correct this false emphasis. He therefore attacks the concrete manifestations of this false emphasis, the external practice. Of course he will at first sight appear to attack all external manifestations of a state of fasting. But on closer examination it can be seen that the

principal object of the attack is not the practice itself, but the motive which lies behind it.

So far we have seen that our text considers the practice of fasting as something of its nature necessarily external, yet which must not be allowed to degenerate into a mere search for the praise of men. To such an extent any Rabbi could have gone. Our consideration of the notion of justice or righteousness as found in Matthew has led us to expect that our text, which deals with a particular instance of this righteousness, will also contain an indication of a new spirit in which the practice must be carried out. In this we are not disappointed. Our text makes it very clear that the dominant emphasis in Christian fasting must be a reference to the Father.

In a recent study, F. Sparks has drawn attention to the special place which the Father holds in Matthew's gospel.²³ In material received from Mark, Matthew reproduces three explicit references which the former has to God the Father. "Furthermore, on four other occasions when Matthew is reproducing Mark he either alters the wording or makes deliberate additions with the result that "Father" appears in the Matthean version whereas it does not appear in the Marcan. In material that is found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, there are nine definite references to God as Father, all of which have been reproduced faithfully by Matthew. Besides, there are seven other places in this material where one evangelist has "Father" but the other one in the parallel has something else. In these cases we could in theory argue for or against the originality of either version but when we bear in mind that in each instance it is Matthew who has "Father" against Luke, and Matthew's special interest in the Father, it would be unprofitable to do so. It is therefore more probable on general grounds that Matthew has added rather than that Luke has omitted. Finally there are a further twenty references to the divine Fatherhood in material proper to Matthew's gospel. About these references all we can say is that since Matthew has interpolated additional references to God as Father into Mark and also into the material which he shared in common with Luke, it is likely that he has done likewise with his proper material." By way of conclusion Sparks notes that the total picture presented is the same throughout all the gospels, even that of John, and is in perfect harmony with the teaching of St. Paul and of the other New Testament writers. The picture is that of God in the first place as the father of Jesus, because Jesus is the Messianic Son, and in the second place the father of all those who follow Jesus, who have perceived and acknowledged his messianic status, and are in consequence members of the

²³ F. Sparks. 'The doctrine of the divine Fatherhood in the gospels'. (Lightfoot memorial volume. P. 261-2)

messianic or Christian community. Thus although Matthew shows a special interest in the Father he in no way distorts the picture that was there before him. What he has done, however, is to underline and emphasise the essential elements of that picture.

This emphasis on the place of God the Father in Matthew is clearly to be seen in our text. In 6, 1 where the principle is given, and in each illustration of the principle, the Father is mentioned. This is clearly not a matter of mere chance.

The Christian practice of fasting is thus placed in essential relationship with an attitude of dependence on God as Father, first of Christ, and through him of all Christians. What was in the Old Testament a means of catching God's attention, of making manifest before him the need of his people, has now been shown to have another aspect also, an aspect which does not exclude the Old Testament view, but perfects it. One has now all the more confidence in attracting God's attention in one's misery and sinfulness, because in spite of the wretchedness which is so common a feature of human life, we know that God is our Father.

This Christian emphasis is all the more evident when we take the particular kind of relationship to the Father which fasting is said to involve. It is to be performed in the confident expectation of a reward. But this reward is not of this world—it belongs to the time when the kingship of God will be brought to perfection. In this age the Christian must expect to find persecution and suffering—"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16, 24f).

According to Reicke²⁴ such mentions of reward as we have in the gospels conserve Jewish moralistic conceptions and are inconsistencies in the teaching of Jesus. Now when we bear in mind that the three good works with which we have been concerned were certainly greatly emphasised in Judaism: that they are in fact the typical good works of Judaism, we should not be surprised to find that Jesus' teaching with regard to the reward promised should have much in common with Jewish teaching, as has his teaching with regard to other aspects of these practices. Yet there are differences: The reward to be given is not clearly described, nor are we given any indication as to the proportion which is to obtain between man's actions and God's reward. Rather, just as Jesus' demands on his followers are greater than those of contemporary Judaism, so is the reward promised. In fact, far from introducing an element of calculated profit-seeking into the gospel, the manner in which reward is dealt with in the gospel makes it clear that

²⁴ B. Reicke. 'The New Testament conception of reward'. *Goguel Festschrift*.

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the element of reward is raised from the realm of rights and earnings.²⁵

We must bear in mind the general New Testament attitude to reward when we read our text. The reward which God gives is the kingdom, such a reward as can be given by God alone. This reward cannot be earned by man—before such a reward all men are poor servants, and all their service is unworthy. Man is never an equal partner of God, but always a slave without rights. God's reward is a present of His superabundance.

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²⁵ Preisker. *Theologisches Wörterbuch z. Neuen Testament.* IV P. 722.