

Counterfeit Christianity - Fasting

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- [0 : 0 0] Will you turn with me this evening to the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 6. The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 6.
- And if you read verse 16. Matthew 6, verse 16. Moreover, when you fast, be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance.
- For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Assuredly, I say unto you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, that you appear not unto men to fast, but unto your Father which is in secret.
- And your Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly. So as we continue our study in the Sermon on the Mount, we come to, I suppose you could say it's one of the most neglected subjects in the Bible.
- The subject of fasting. And it's interesting that last time we were looking at one of the most well-known and well, or most memorized parts of scripture.
- [1 : 2 0] And we were looking at the Lord's Prayer. But in contrast to that, the topic of fasting is one which we either don't know much about, or we may just pass it over completely as something that's irrelevant to our 21st century lives.
- But of course that can't be true. We can't say that fasting is irrelevant and unimportant simply because Jesus picks up on the topic of fasting here in the Sermon on the Mount.
- And if Jesus thought it important, then it must be important. Because as we've said before, the Sermon on the Mount is a sermon which was delivered by Jesus to many of the multitudes who were following him.
- And his followers, which tonight are me and you, we are the followers of Jesus Christ. And the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to teach us, those who have entered the Kingdom of God through faith and repentance, it's to teach us how to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God.
- And that we live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven by emulating and mirroring our lives upon the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. And that's the theme and the thrust of this whole sermon that we've been looking at.
- [2 : 4 2] That it's teaching us and calling us to Christ-centered living for Christ-centered lives. And as we've seen over the past few weeks while looking at chapter 6 in Matthew's Gospel, we've seen that in verses 1 to 18, Jesus is challenging the scribes and the Pharisees on the problem of counterfeit Christianity.
- Counterfeit Christianity. And Jesus challenges their counterfeit Christianity in relation to giving in verses 1 to 4. And then he challenges them in relation to praying in verses 5 to 15.
- And then lastly with fasting in verses 16 to 18. And these three acts of giving, praying and fasting, they all come under the banner of doing righteousness.
- The righteous living. And Jesus was accusing the scribes and the Pharisees of being counterfeit. They were being hypocrites. And Jesus, he states that that's not the behaviour of someone who is a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

That's not what Christianity is about. And so when Jesus teaches us against the dangers of counterfeit Christianity, he stresses to us, don't be like the hypocrites.

[4 : 00] Don't be like the hypocrites and practice all your religious righteousness before others. And don't seek the glory of others. Don't desire the praise of people and the approval of other people.

Don't do your giving and your praying and your fasting so that others can see you and others can see how righteous and how religious you are in order to be praised.

Don't be like the hypocrite. And it's a strong indictment. Jesus is saying, don't be like the actor on the stage and practice your religious righteousness before the audience of the world.

Don't make your Christianity a performance. And Jesus stresses this to us in order that we can see that the reward of those who act like the hypocrite is the glory of men.

The reward of the hypocrite is the glory of men. They sought the glory of men. They received the glory of men. They didn't seek the glory of God. Therefore, the reward isn't the glory of God.

[5 : 01] And Jesus repeatedly says, assuredly, I say to you, they shall have their reward. And as Jesus highlights these acts of righteousness, of giving, praying and fasting, he repeatedly uses all these phrases.

And we've seen that time and time again throughout this section. But this evening we're coming to this third and final aspect of counterfeit Christianity. Which Jesus challenges the scribes and the pharisees with.

And that is the subject of fasting. And as we've said before, Jesus uses the structure of man's reward and God's remedy.

Man's reward and God's remedy. And so Jesus, first of all, he speaks about man's reward. That's the first thing you're seeing. Man's reward. And he says in verse 16, Moreover, when you fast, be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance.

For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. So that's man's reward.

[6 : 10] And looking at the topic of fasting, it's something we don't know very much about. And I have to confess that prior to preparing for this evening, I haven't given much thought to the subject of fasting.

I don't know if you give it thought either. And I also have to confess that I've never fasted. I've never fasted in the religious sense of the word for any period of time.

And my ignorance, and maybe your ignorance if you were to confess it, my ignorance on this topic is not due to a lack of evidence presented to us in scripture.

Because there's ample amount of evidence on this subject presented to us both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. So fasting isn't just an Old Testament concept confined to the biblical era.

And I would say that the reason we have often overlooked the importance of this teaching, it is because of our ignorance. Which also makes me think how imbalanced we can be in our view of Christianity.

[7 : 23] And I'm speaking to myself. Because we can lay a huge emphasis upon other subjects. Such as the inerrancy of scripture, or forms of worship, or our view of baptism, our understanding of the Lord's Supper, our consideration of God as a primacy, or take on head coverings, or even Bible versions.

And I'm not trying to minimise these subjects, because they're important, they're all important, and they should be discussed and examined in light of scripture.

But what's interesting is that all of these topics, they are mentioned less than that of fasting. And their frequency in scripture is minimal in comparison to the frequency which fasting is mentioned.

And so we can't say that this subject is not important. Because it is important. It's repeatedly mentioned throughout the Bible. Therefore, it's important.

But not only that, it's important because Jesus thought that it was important enough to include it in his sermon. But why don't we ever talk about it?

[8 : 35] Why don't we ever raise this issue of fellowships? Why don't we ever discuss the importance of fasting? And I suppose the reason why we never mention the topic of fasting is because we don't do it.

Maybe I'm just speaking about myself. I don't know. We don't engage in this religious act of fasting often, if at all. But what is fasting?

What is fasting and why should we do it? Well, as we've seen with giving and with prayer, fasting is one of these three pious practices which were held in high esteem by the Jews.

We've said before that giving, prayer and fasting were considered to be these acts of righteousness. And because it was one of these three acts of righteousness, if you were to engage in fasting, you were considered by others to be someone who's noble and upright.

You were someone who should be held in high esteem and given this place of honour for your religious discipline. You should be labelled as someone who's godly, or holy, or devout in their faith, or righteous.

[9 : 52] Just because of your act of fasting, you were disciplining your body to go without food. You were withholding and abstaining from food.

You were overcoming hunger and the natural desire to eat. And it was an act of self-discipline. But the purpose of fasting was to be focused in prayer, as you probably know.

The purpose of fasting was to pray. Because when we look at the evidence of scripture, we can see that on many occasions, the Lord's people, they fasted whilst engaging in prayer.

And so fasting is often mentioned in connection with prayer. It's the act of going without food in order to spend time praying. And this was considered by the Jews as something that was noble and a difficult act.

Not only because prayer is difficult. It's, and we would say it's difficult whether we eat or not. Prayer is a struggle. But also because, it was difficult also because the Jews, like many Eastern cultures, they made a huge emphasis upon food and spending time eating together.

[11 : 09] Because when we read through the Gospels, how often do we find Jesus eating? And it's interesting, see, if you read through the Gospels, how many times would you find Jesus eating?

Because he's either eating with his disciples, or he's with Mary and Martha and Lazarus in the house of Bethany eating, or he's at the house of a Pharisee, and he's eating.

And we're always finding Jesus eating somewhere. And that was because hospitality was, and still is, a massive part of their culture.

And as it is with many Eastern cultures, there's this great emphasis upon eating meals together and sharing food. And I also remember when I was in Glasgow a few years ago with my sister, there was all these Africans in Glasgow City Free Church.

And they used to have a gathering once a month where all the Africans would come together and they'd sing all their African songs. And I went one Sunday afternoon, and they had their worship service.

[12 : 19] But after the worship service, huge amount of food where they all ate and they all discussed the service. And they all sat together. There was this huge emphasis upon eating meals and sharing food.

But the issue with eating lots of food and showing hospitality to others, as many of you will probably know, is that it takes up a lot of time.

Food preparation and preparing for guests arriving, it takes time. But the purpose of fasting was to abstain from enjoying feasting with other people by acting with self-discipline in order to give yourself time to prayer.

And inevitably in the Jewish culture, this would have been difficult because of the huge emphasis upon food. But the purpose of fasting was to focus upon prayer.

That's the purpose of it. But when Jesus addresses the issue of fasting here in the Sermon on the Mount, he emphasizes that fasting is not to be a hypocritical act.

[13 : 29] He says that we're not to be the act on the stage and present ourselves to the world as those who are starving. We're not to present ourselves so that people will think that we're so disciplined and so holy and so righteous in our walk with the Lord.

And Jesus says this because that's exactly what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing. They were hypocrites. They were acting. They were putting on the mask and so that others could see them and know that they were engaged in the religious act of fasting.

Where they would, as Jesus says, they would disfigure their faces and have this sad countenance and give this gaunt appearance in order to make it look like they hadn't eaten for days.

And they would make themselves look miserable and sombre and that they were in some way suffering because of their self-discipline and their dedication to the Lord. And what Jesus is drawing our attention to here is that the scribes and the Pharisees had this front, this appearance, this face, the face on.

But it was a face that was double-sided. They were two-faced because they were giving an appearance of righteousness and being this good and holy person.

[14 : 56] But in reality, says Jesus, they were far from it. They were far from it. Because what Jesus says here is interesting. He says, they disfigured their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting.

Jesus says, they appeared to be fasting. Which indicates that the scribes and the Pharisees not only said that they fasted often, but they also gave the appearance of fasting.

But some of them didn't fast at all. They just said they did so that others would think highly of them. But in fact, they were being counterfeit.

They were being false. They were being two-faced. And what Jesus is revealing is that not even they could keep up the demands that they set for themselves and the demands that they set for others.

And this should make us ask ourselves, do we ever try and set a benchmark for others to live up to? and a standard of Christianity that others must follow?

[16 : 07] Or do we set a standard for ourselves so that others will think highly of us and think that we're so godly and so righteous as Christians? But Jesus says, it does nothing.

It's worthless. It proves nothing. It's an empty act of self-righteousness and hypocrisy. And you know, that's what Jesus said to the disciples.

If you only go into chapter 9, Jesus was speaking to the disciples of John the Baptist. And on that occasion, when he's speaking to the disciples of John the Baptist, they came to Jesus asking, why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?

And then Jesus responds with a question, can the friends of the bridegroom born 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.

So Jesus says they will fast. But then in order to drive home the point, Jesus gave these two illustrations. Verse 16, he says, no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on a little garment for the patch pulls away from the garment and the tear is made worse.

[17 : 27] Nor did they put new wine into old wineskins or else the wineskins break and the wine is spilled and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins and both are preserved.

And the point that Jesus is making is that the arrival of Jesus Christ and the message of the kingdom of heaven is not this attempt to try and patch up a worn out Judaism.

It's to show that we are a broken people who need to be redeemed and restored and renewed. And that doing acts of righteousness and following the commands of religion will not save us.

They will not help us. They will do nothing for us. And this is what Jesus is getting at. He's getting at the hypocrisy of telling people how to live their lives and issuing commands and demands on them so that they can be a righteous person like them.

Where they were saying follow my example. But Jesus is saying no follow my example and my teaching. And this is what's so sad that the scribes and the Pharisees they issued the command that in order to be a righteous person fasting must take place twice a week.

[18 : 55] Twice a week. And for the scribes and the Pharisees fasting took place on a Monday and on a Thursday. But what's so striking is that no command was ever given.

God never issued a command to fast except one day of the year on the day of atonement. the only day of the year they were to afflict themselves by fasting.

But there's no command in scripture to fast twice a week. It was never mandatory or this compulsory act. So with the exception of the day of atonement fasting was in a sense optional.

Which is why Jesus condemned the actions of the Pharisees in that well known parable of the Pharisee and the publican. You remember that the well known parable that Luke talks about and he says that Jesus spoke the parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.

And then Jesus presented the two men the Pharisee and the publican the tax collector and the righteous man the righteous Pharisee he stood up on the stage before the audience and he said within himself God I thank you but I'm not like other men like the extortioners the unjust the adulterers or even this tax collector because I fast twice a week and I give tithes to all that I possess.

[20 : 28] And the Pharisee he mentions everything to God everything to prove that he is righteous. He mentions giving he mentions praying and he mentions fasting.

And yet Jesus was saying he has his reward. He has his reward. He has the glory of man. That's what he wanted that's what he called. But we have to be clear on this issue.

Jesus wasn't condemning fasting. Not at all because he himself fasted. Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness prior to his temptation by the devil.

And so Jesus wasn't condemning fasting. He was condemning the hypocrisy of fasting as a means to gain the approval of others. And what Jesus is warning us about here is that whenever we fast we ought to take precautions.

We ought to be careful because fasting as well as giving and praying they give opportunity to those who want to make a show of their piety.

[21 : 35] But again in order to point us away from seeking man's reward Jesus presents to us God's remedy. Which brings us secondly to consider in verses 17 and 18 God's remedy God's remedy because he says when you but you when you fast anoint your head wash your face that you appear not unto men to fast but unto your father which is in secret and your father which sees in secret shall reward you openly.

As we've seen before on previous occasions when considering righteous acts of giving and free Jesus is very direct when he presents God's remedy he says but you when you fast because in the second section we are again confronted with the contrast between the follower of Jesus on the one hand and the hypocrite on the other and Jesus is not only personal and direct when he says but you when you fast Jesus is also clear these acts of righteousness although they're condemned because of the way the Pharisees the hypocrites exalted themselves before others Jesus says that they must be part of our lives fasting must be part of our Christianity and what Jesus says is you the follower of Jesus when you fast your

Christianity is to be in complete contrast to the hypocrite and so what Jesus is pointing out to us as he did with giving and praying is that fasting is something which ought to be part and parcel of who we are as Christians and as citizens of the kingdom of heaven because Jesus says when you fast fasting is not if you do it but when you do it it's when you do it which implies to us that along with giving and praying fasting ought to be part of our Christianity now many of the commentators which I read they sought to try and explain that Jesus wasn't as specific when it came to fasting and that it should be left up to the individual to decide whether to fast or not but what's clear is that Jesus uses the exact same words and he uses the same sentence structure as he did when talking about giving and praying so we can't say that Jesus wasn't specific because he is specific he says but you when you fast but what is left up to the discretion of the individual is the question of how often and how long how often are we to fast and how long are we to fast for of course the scribes and pharisees would say twice a week monday and thursday that's when you do it that's when you should do it that's how to be righteous but there's no command given in scripture therefore these are discretionary questions they're up to the individual just like the issue of giving and praying are up to the individual because with giving we may ask how much should we give and how often should we give and it's up to the individual and the same is true for prayer we can ask how often should we pray and how long should we pray for again it's up to the individual and so it's for fasting how long should we fast for how often should we fast for?

It's up to the individual. It's all at the discretion of the individual, says Jesus, who is living their life in the sight of their heavenly Father.

But when I say that this is all at the discretion of the individual, let's not think that Jesus is giving us license to do what we want and live as we please.

[26 : 01] That's not the case at all. Because each of these acts of righteousness, they're all disciplines. And they all require self-discipline.

And that's what Jesus is trying to teach us. Self-discipline. Giving requires the discipline of setting aside money instead of spending it on ourselves.

Praying requires the discipline of setting aside time to pray to our Father in heaven. Fasting requires the discipline of setting aside food in order to focus upon prayer.

That's what's not a free for all. It's about self-discipline for those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, fasting, it's not a command.

It's about self-discipline. Because as we said earlier, in the act of fasting, you're disciplining your body to go without food. But the purpose of it was to focus upon prayer.

[27 : 03] Because when we look at all the evidence in Scripture, many of the Lord's people fasted whilst engaging in prayer. But what's interesting, and I suppose a point to note, is that when the Lord's people fasted, that's, when you look at Scripture, you look at, well, what happens, at what point they were fasting.

Because as far as I could see when studying this, praying and fasting took place at specific times, or specific periods in the life of the Lord's people.

When they were encountering hardship, or seeking the Lord's guidance. And the examples are, King David, he prayed and fasted when his child was born to Bathsheba, and the child was sick, and you know the child died after a week.

He prayed and fasted. Nehemiah, he engaged in prayer and fasting when he was informed of the devastation of Jerusalem. Daniel, he prayed and fasted when he brought the people of Israel before the Lord, and he repented and confessed their sins.

And Jesus, he prayed and fasted before he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. It was through prayer and fasting that the Lord revealed to the early church that Paul and Barnabas were to be commissioned and sent to work for the Lord.

[28 : 37] And it was after praying and fasting that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church in which they ministered. And what we see from the evidence of Scripture is that the Lord's people, they engaged in prayer and fasting.

And they sought the Lord, whether they were enduring personal hardship or entering into new spheres of ministry or they were pleading with the Lord in repentance, national repentance.

And in each of these specific cases, the Lord's people were bringing one particular issue before the Lord. It was the focused topic in prayer.

And it was a topic which they were burdened with and desperately seeking the Lord for help and guidance. And this indicates to me that these are the occasions in which we ought to be fasting and praying.

Not on a regular basis in order to keep up appearances. But when we enter into trial or temptation, we should seek the help of the Lord.

[29 : 51] Or when we are prayerfully seeking the Lord's blessing and the Lord's guidance with regard to specific areas of our life. When we are burdened and it's at our discretion to engage in prayer and fasting.

But looking at the example of the early church, a question which I thought about in my head, which we could ask is, should we be engaged in prayer and fasting when calling a minister or electing new elders?

That's the example in the New Testament. Paul and Barnabas were being commissioned. Paul and Barnabas were setting apart elders. Just a question.

Something to think about. It's in Acts 13 and 14. Should we be engaged in prayer and fasting when electing or calling a minister or electing new elders?

But with all this said, I know it's, I suppose, a difficult topic. With all this said, J.C. Ryle, he wisely indicated that the emphasis which Jesus is making about this topic, he said, one thing must never be forgotten.

[31 : 10] Those who fast should do so quietly, secretly and without ostentation. Let them not appear to men to fast.

Let them not fast to men but to God. And that's what Jesus is saying here. When we fast, anoint our head, wash our face, that we don't appear to be fasting.

Which means, when we fast, we're to go about our normal daily routine and not to make a show of it. We are not to adopt these spiritual acts of self-discipline for a selfish desire and for the praise of others.

It's to be done in secret. It's to be done quietly. It's to be done humbly. And these acts of righteousness, of giving, praying and fasting, they're to be part impartial of our Christian life.

But no one else needs to know about them. We don't need to make a display of them in order to please our Heavenly Father. It's the private devotions of giving, praying and fasting that our Heavenly Father desires to see.

[32 : 21] And that's what Jesus has repeatedly emphasized in verses 1 to 18. The Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

But just in conclusion, I suppose, we've witnessed from the teaching of Jesus when looking at these acts of righteousness, giving, praying and fasting, we've seen that, what we've seen is that Jesus is teaching against formalism and religion.

He's highlighting for us the danger that our Christianity can become ritualistic and ceremonial without even realizing. Where we view God and our relationship to God, it's something that we do.

And it's something that is done by Christians. In which it becomes more of an outward form before the eyes of others instead of this inward relationship which is growing and developing.

And that's the challenge which Jesus is issuing to us here in these verses about counterfeit Christianity. He's asking us, what is your Christianity like?

[33 : 34] What is your Christianity like? Is it a religion with rituals and formalism? Or is it a relationship with dedication and love for the Lord?

And of course, our Christianity, it needs to be a relationship which grows and develops as we are taught by the Lord and as we love the Lord more and more.

Which is also why Jesus repeatedly mentions the watchful eye of our Heavenly Father. Because we are His children. We are in a relationship with Him as the children of God.

He is our Father. We are His children. And as children, we have a responsibility to our Heavenly Father to love Him and to serve Him with a humble heart.

But the danger which we need to take care of is that our Christianity becomes more of an outward form before the eyes of others instead of this inward relationship that is growing and developing.

[34 : 37] Because that's the danger which Isaiah was addressing in Isaiah 58. which we read earlier. We're not going to go into the detail of it tonight. But the problem which the Israelites had in that passage was that they thought that the Lord would be pleased with all their outward formalism.

In which they had convinced themselves that their religious practices would please the Lord and persuade the Lord to listen to them. But just as it was with or is with the scribes and the Pharisees here the Lord reminded the people of Israel that their focus upon their outward acts completely failed to appreciate what the Lord actually required.

The Lord requires genuine acts of righteousness which doesn't focus upon the outward acts but total inner dedication with love and loyalty to the Lord.

the Israelites thought that their fasting and their weeping would please the Lord but it didn't simply because it wasn't genuine.

And in that passage we read the Lord told his people what their relationship to him should look like. He said is this not the fast that I have chosen to loose the bonds of wickedness to undo the heavy burdens to let the oppressed go free that you break every yoke is it not to share your bread with the hungry and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out when you see the naked that you cover him and not hide yourself from your own flesh then your land shall break forth like the morning your healing shall spring forth speedily your righteousness shall go before you the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard then you shall call and the Lord will answer you shall cry and he will say hear anon if you take away the yoke from your midst the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness and what the Lord is emphasizing there in Isaiah 58 is exactly the same as what Jesus is teaching here our Christianity must go beyond formal formalism outward formalism it must infiltrate into every area of our lives my friend our Christianity is not about ticking boxes and being seen to be this particular kind of person and saying the right thing and doing the right acts our Christianity is not to be counterfeit it's to be genuine it's to be lived out and it's to affect every area of our lives in which it infiltrates everything how we think how we act how we speak what we do where we go and it's to be part of our whole life it's to infiltrate our witness in our homes our families our workplaces our community and in our congregation it has to affect everything it's not just a Sunday religion or a Wednesday religion it's a daily relationship with our Heavenly Father and that's the challenge which Jesus is setting before us in these verses what is our

[38 : 10] Christianity like is it counterfeit or is it genuine is there honesty or is there hypocrisy is it a religion of rituals and formalism or is it a relationship with dedication and love for the Lord and thinking about it is it any wonder that those when they heard the teaching of Jesus they confessed this is a hard sin who can hear it and there's no doubt this is challenging I find it challenging because we're being called to Christ centred living for Christ centred lives and God will and Jesus will teach us more as we continue our study in this great sermon so let us unite our hearts in prayer in this time O Lord our gracious God that we would truly have the prayer of the Psalms for he said teach me thy way and in thy truth

O Lord and walk will I unite my heart that I thy name may fear continually and now he went on to say O Lord my God with all my heart to thee I will give praise and I the glory will ascribe unto thy name always because thy mercy toward me in greatness doth excel and thou delivered hast my soul out from the lowest hell it is a marvel Lord that we are thy own children but O Lord as thy children that thou wouldst teach us teach us to be like thy son teach us to be Christlike teach us O Lord to humble ourselves before thee and to hear thy voice bless us Lord we pray remember us in our own situations our own homes and our own families all the things that we go through in life help us to bring them before thee in prayer to confess all before thee for thou art our Father who sees in secret and rewards us openly undertake for us and we pray thee take us to our homes in safety and do us good for Jesus' sake

Amen I shall conclude my singing in Psalm 69 Psalm 69 in the Scottish Psalter it's on page 306 Psalm 69 from verse 10 down to the verse marked 13 my tears and fasts they afflict my soul or turn them to my shame and sackcloth I did wear to them a proverb I became the men that in the gate do sit against me evil spake they also that vile drunkards wear of me their song did make but in an acceptable time my prayer Lord is to thee in truth of thy salvation Lord and mercy great heath me and these are prophetic words of Jesus

Psalm 69 is all about the sufferings of Christ so I suppose when you sing it it's Jesus that is speaking so anyway these verses psalm 69 from verse 10 to 13 to God's praise my tears are fast up in my soul where turn into my shame when sackcloth I did wear to them a proverb I became the men that did the king to sit against me wherever there swear of me their song is made.

Called in an absent of the time, my prayer is to thee.

[43 : 15] In the world salvation Lord and mercy take near me.

Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.