

Joel 2:12-13

Feb. 21, 2021

Matt. 6:2-8, 16-18

Lent 1 – Fasting

Even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity, Joel 2:12-13.

Fasting is mentioned over 70 times in the Bible. **Fasting: abstaining from food or drink in order to focus on prayer and seeking God's will. Fasting has been practiced by God's people throughout the ages. Both the Old Testament and New Testament tell how individuals, or groups of believers, fasted and prayed before making decisions. And today? To be honest, fasting as a spiritual discipline, doesn't seem to be all that popular among Christians these days ... at least not in my experience.**

Last week I did an internet search on "fasting." I found hundreds of websites dedicated to intermittent fasting for weight loss, physical health and fitness, the medical science behind fasting, and other non-spiritual fasts. Lo and behold at the bottom of page 1 there was this listing: "What Does Fasting Mean in the Bible?" I clicked on it and it brought me to biblestudytools.com. There was a short article on fasting as described in the Bible and this quote: "Scripture tells us that fasting will help us grow a more intimate relationship with Christ and will open our eyes to what He wants to teach us."

This week our Lenten experience will be fasting (which is always inked with prayer). Maybe you've never fasted for spiritual purposes. Maybe you've never really thought about it; thought about it, but just didn't want to do it; thought about it but didn't understand why to do it.

"The purpose of fasting is to loosen to some degree the ties which bind us to the world of material things and our surroundings as a whole, in order that we may concentrate all our spiritual powers upon the unseen and eternal things," Ole Halleby.

So, I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes, Daniel 9:3.

FASTING IS EXPECTED

In Matthew chapters 5-7 we can read Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Perhaps it is the most famous sermon Jesus gave – maybe the most famous sermon anyone has ever given. He covers several different topics that are important in the life of the Christ-follower. It's practical and powerful teaching. The Sermon on the Mount could be summed in this sentence: "How to live a life that is dedicated to and pleasing to God, free from hypocrisy, full of love and grace, full of wisdom and discernment."¹

Right in the middle of this sermon, Jesus addresses **three spiritual disciplines that every follower of Christ should be practicing:**

- **Giving** – Matthew 6:2-4
- **Praying** – Matthew 6:5-13
- **Fasting** - Matthew 6:16-18

The first two are fairly widely practiced by most Christians, but the third one ... Do you think a lot a Christians regularly fast? Nevertheless, just like with the disciplines of giving and praying, Jesus says of fasting, "When you fast ..." **Jesus doesn't say "If" you fast, but "when" you fast.** Fasting is an expectation for followers of Jesus. If you say, "I will fast when God lays it on my heart," you never will. You are too cold and indifferent to take the yoke upon you," Dwight L. Moody.

Even though it's not an exclusively Christian practice (Muslims are required to fast during Ramadan), it is certainly a practice that God has made available to His children. Fasting, like giving and praying, helps us move further down the path of maturity in our walk with Him. It is a normal practice for Christians. Jesus expected that His followers would do it.

John Wesley fasted mostly on Fridays, which was the Anglican norm. His journal shows that in August 1739 he advocated Friday fasting for Methodists, according to the Anglican rule. Wesley usually began a Friday fast at sundown on Thursday.

THE RIGHT WAY TO FAST

Jesus says, ...when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting, Matt. 6:16.

Fasting, by definition is normally forgoing food for a period of time in order to focus on the Lord in a more intentional and intense way. It's not about showing others how holy you are. Fasting means to set aside even fleshly needs to give yourself to prayer and meditation. It doesn't have to be limited to food. **You can fast from social media, television, or other things ... so long as it is replaced with more prayer.** "Fasting is abstaining from anything that hinders prayer," Andrew Bonar. An announcement in a church bulletin: National PRAYER & FASTING conference: "The cost for attending the Fasting and Prayer conference includes meals."

What you are going to fast from? Sometimes fasting reveals to us what really controls us. How long are you going to fast? Will it be a total fast or partial fast? Will it be alone or with others? Accountability while fasting is good sometimes. It's OK to tell others you're fasting as long as it's not in a bragging way. **A fast is not a show of piety. A fast is not an attempt to coerce God – that would be a hunger strike. Fasting is action to submit to God's commands and hear Him.**

Whether one fasts completely for a day, or for several days consuming only water or juice, or semi-fasts with one main meal and two light snacks, the time should be devoted more to prayer than meal preparation. Jesus said that His followers WOULD fast. As always, check with your doctor if you have any health concerns.

THE RIGHT REASON TO FAST

There once was two lumberjacks – one older, one younger. The younger was proud of his physical prowess and ability to cut down trees very fast. He challenged the older lumberjack to a tree-cutting contest. The younger cut nonstop all day. The older one cut for an hour, then took a fifteen-minute break. That was his pattern all day. At end of day, the older lumberjack had cut down 1/3 more trees than the younger. The young man was flabbergasted asking "How can this be?" The older said, "Every time I sat down to rest, I sharpened my axe."

Many of us work hard to do right and to live right, but our axes are dull, and we wonder why our challenges aren't falling before us. We make resolutions but fail to follow through. We rededicate our lives to the Lord, but quickly fall right back into sin patterns. Fasting is one of the means that God uses to sharpen our axes.

"I am convinced that when God's people fast with a proper biblical motive — seeking God's face, not His hand — with a broken, repentant and contrite spirit, **God will hear from heaven. He will heal our lives, our churches, our communities, our nation and our world," **Bill Bright.****

Looking in the Bible we see that fasting occurred when there was a need for a **spiritual breakthrough** due to the burdens of life. These burdens could be an ongoing battle with a specific besetting sin and a need to repent. It could be a serious decision that needs to be made that will affect the direction of your life or your family's life. People fast and pray for a loved one who is ill, a friend or family member who has not yet come to faith in the Lord. Or maybe it's you who is not walking with the Lord. The reason to fast could be for a revival in our hearts, or in the Church. Our burden might well be the ongoing spiritual warfare we find ourselves in. **"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning..." Joel 2:12.**

Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights before He began His public ministry (Matthew 4:2). He was fasting and praying to clarify His role as God's chosen one and to engage in spiritual warfare with the evil one. Oh yes, we too are engaged in spiritual warfare: *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,* Ephesians 6:12.

But most of the time we are so comfortable in this world that we don't realize it. Even in the midst of our fasting Satan will try to steer us away from God.

Did you hear about the guy who started intermittent fasting? He says, "I've been doing all my eating within a window. Sad to say it's been the McDonald's drive thru window."

Our fasting, though, isn't to lose weight. And we don't fast to impress others. We don't fast to get all our prayers answered, for we can't manipulate God. Nevertheless, the Bible and Christian history show that **when prayer and fasting increase, there is an increase in Holy Spirit activity.** Christian fasting is for biblical, God-centered purposes. We are not seeking something from His hand. We are seeking His face in worship, commitment, and devotion. By fasting, the body learns to obey the soul; by praying the soul learns to command the body, William Secker.

***While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off, Acts 13:2-3.**

THE RIGHT TIME TO FAST

The right time to fast is any time you have a biblical, God-centered purpose that drives you to fast and pray. **Fasting is an intensifier of prayer.** The right time to fast is the time when your prayers need to be intensified. I believe for many of us, that time is right now.

Here's John Wesley: "Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer; support the tottering knees. Have you any days of fasting and prayer? Storm the throne of grace and persevere therein, and mercy will come down."

Fasting rightly used, is a powerful spiritual tool, which God expects us to keep private and not brag about. Fasting is a powerful mystery coupled with prayer, which turns us upon God, in whom we find blessings. Let's use this powerful tool and turn to God.

Above all, our fasting is a reminder of God's grace, not a way to earn approval. Fasting is humbling, teaching that a person does not live on bread alone, but by everything the LORD says.

"The greatest saint in the world is not he who prays most or fasts most; it is not he who gives alms, or is most eminent for temperance, chastity or justice. It is he who is most thankful to God," William Law.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/sermon-on-the-mount.html>