

10.30.05

Whenever You Fast

Matthew 6:16-18, 9:14-15

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*“And **whenever you fast**, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.*

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

*But **when you fast**, put oil on your head and wash your face,*

*So that your fasting **may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret;** and Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

We all know about dieting, which is eating less for physical purposes. We are familiar with hunger strikes, when people don't eat for political purposes. When Jesus talks about fasting he means abstaining from food, but usually not water, for spiritual purposes. Many of us have skipped a meal for one reason or another. There are people in our church who can remember missing a meal because their family had no food. I want you to know our church has the Caring Cupboard a food pantry so anyone who is here can get food if they need it. Others of us have missed a meal in order to lose weight or because we were too busy and didn't have enough time to eat. While our students often participate in a 30-hour fast once each year, fasting for spiritual purposes is not something the vast majority of us do on a regular basis. Why is that?

Perhaps just living in the United States where we are taught that if we don't eat three big meals a day with multiple snacks in between that we're hungry. The cultural message of our age is, *“Indulge yourself.”* Companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars to get you to drink their soda, eat at their restaurant, or to buy their food. It is difficult to listen to or watch any kind of media for long without seeing an ad for something to eat or drink. Some people even say when they're hungry, *“I'm starving,”* - far from it. We need to be a little more careful when we speak about hunger. Most of us have no idea what it feels like to be truly starving. In a world where approximately **50,000 –60,000 people a day, many of them children, die** of starvation and nutrition related diseases, many Americans biggest food related concern is obesity and all the related health concerns that come with it. Diet plans and products to help people lose weight represent a billion dollar industry. In 1 Corinthians 6:12 we hear these words, *“All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.”*

Eating is a necessary and very pleasurable part of life; it makes us feel good, and often involves significant social interaction. Eating together is tremendously helpful for families and fun for friends. Food structures our time more than virtually anything else in

life. We build our days around our meals. We look forward to eating and talk about it a lot. However, it is important that we not allow ourselves to be enslaved or dominated by anything, including something as basic to life as food.

The purpose of this sermon on fasting is not to make you feel guilty about going home and having lunch or going out to brunch to talk about the sermon on fasting nor is it to discourage you from eating something in the lobby in order to cut down on our food costs. I have preached on fasting before and I know it is not a subject that people say, “Gee, I really hope Doug will preach on fasting again soon, that is so interesting and such an important issue in my life!” During sermons on fasting folks’ eyes glaze over and they look like they’re trying to find the remote control so they can change the channel to something more interesting. However, Jesus felt fasting was important enough to practice and to speak about so we humbly need to consider why it may be of value for us.

Thus the purpose of this sermon is to help you learn about a spiritual practice you may not have engaged in as much as giving or prayer that you might consider to grow closer to God. In Matthew 6 Jesus addresses giving, prayer and fasting. We seem to have accepted Jesus’ words about the importance of charity and sharing with others who have less than we do, and his words about prayer and taking time alone with God, yet the church has neglected his words about fasting. Jesus doesn’t say “if” you give, pray, or fast. He says, “*Whenever you give (6:2), whenever you pray (6:5,7), whenever you fast (6:16).*” While these are not commands, Jesus assumes his followers will engage in these spiritual habits so he tells us the wrong way and then the right way to do each one of them and the reward that follows. The praise and esteem of other people is alluring, but it cannot compare to the reward of our “*Father who sees in secret*” (6:4,6,18). Yet in my personal life as well as in my experience with American Christians, it seems we give more than we pray and we pray more than we fast. Compared to the rest of the world, we live with so much material abundance perhaps it is easier to *give money* than it is to discipline ourselves to *take the time to pray* or to make *the sacrifice of giving up food* when we have so much to eat that is so easily accessible.

What the Bible says about Fasting

Fasting is not unique to Christianity; virtually every religious tradition includes it among their devotional practices. Fasting is a biblical practice engaged in by many people for a variety of reasons. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for 40 days while he was

receiving the law from God (Exodus 34:28). King Jehoshaphat called for a fast in all Israel when they were about to be attacked by the Moabites and Ammonites (2 Chronicles 20:3). Nehemiah (1:4) and Esther (4:15-16) also fasted and prayed at times of national crises. David humbled himself by fasting when he learned that Saul and Jonathan had been killed (2 Samuel 1:12) as well as when his own child was ill (2 Samuel 12:16-17; Psalm 69:10). Even the pagan people of Nineveh fasted in response to the preaching of the prophet Jonah and Darius, the king of Persia, fasted all night after he was forced to put Daniel in the lion's den.

In the New Testament, we learn about Anna who "worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" at the Temple (Luke 2:37). John the Baptist taught his disciples to fast (Mark 2:18). After his baptism by John and before the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus engaged in a 40 day fast in the desert. When he was tempted by Satan to turn stones into loaves of bread that he might eat, Jesus replied with a passage from Deuteronomy 8:3, "*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" We heard earlier in this service that the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus why his disciples didn't fast often like they and the Pharisees did. The Lord's reply was, "*The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast*" (Matthew 9:14-15). This may be the clearest verse indicating Jesus' expectation that after he was gone, his followers would engage in fasting as part of their discipleship. We learn of fasting by followers of Jesus after his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2-3, "*While they were **worshipping 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." Paul and Barnabas also spent time in prayer and fasting before they appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23).

While we can pray without fasting and we can fast without praying, combining these two activities can be very powerful and effective. **Fasting is a way of emptying our selves so we can be filled with the Spirit of Christ.** We spend time fasting not in order to lose weight, but to gain a deeper relationship with God. Fasting helps to take our focus off the things of the world and to place it on God. Fasting is a very biblical practice, one that Jesus and many of the great characters of the Bible engaged in, and it shouldn't be ignored or dismissed too quickly by us. There may be times of crisis

whether personal or national, times when an important decision needs to be made, or when we're seeking God's direction when fasting is an especially appropriate spiritual practice.

My parents came down to visit this week and when I shared that I was preaching about fasting, my mother told me a family story. She said when her oldest sister was born one of her legs was longer than the other. The doctor said she would never walk normally. For the first year of my aunt's life my grandmother would massage her legs and exercise them and my grandfather, who was a Presbyterian pastor, fasted and prayed for Nancy one day a week. When it came time for her to learn how to walk both of her legs were the same length and she was fine. Today she walks as normally as is possible for members of my family.

Some times fasting can help us to face difficult moments or situations with the Lord's help, rather than hiding from them. As much, if not more than most spiritual practices, **fasting often reveals what is inside us.** When we fast we may find that our disposition is not good, that we are grouchy, short-tempered or irritable. At times we can use food to comfort or console ourselves, to make us feel better, to take our mind off facing something that is painful or difficult. After all there are few situations in life that can't at least be momentarily eased by a really good dessert. **When our stomachs are empty it may reveal what our spirit is full of that day.**

A deeper purpose of fasting is revealed in a passage about eating. In John 4:31-34 Jesus and his followers are in the region of Samaria and the disciples went into town to get food. Meanwhile Jesus has an enriching conversation with a woman of Samaria. The disciples return to Jesus and say, "*Rabbi, eat something.*" Jesus says to them, "***I have food to eat that you do not know about.***" The disciples said to one another, "*Surely no one has brought him something to eat?*"

Jesus replies, "***My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.***"

When we fast we are feasting on God's presence, God's word, and doing God's will.

Fasting reminds us of our utter dependence on God for our life and for our most basic needs. Remember, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" Fasting renews in us a spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude – you taste and appreciate food more when you don't have it for a little while. Jesus wants our righteousness to go deeper than the scribes and Pharisees, and that means building habits into our lives that allow us to be continually drawn into the presence of God. **Spiritual change often comes not so much from**

inspiration or information as much as from a decision to change our habits.

Habits make us or unmake us. We have to decide we are going to act. A past issue of Men's Health magazine listed several of the more creative excuses doctors and physical therapists heard from patients explaining why they didn't exercise. Some of the best: *"An earthquake drained my pool. My wife would be angry with me if I lost weight. I can't because of the volcanic ash."* Or my favorite, *"The TV at the gym is always on something I don't want to watch."* Our motivation for engaging in fasting or any spiritual discipline is not one of guilt, it is not to impress others or because by doing them we think we are holy, **but because they enable us to focus and feast on God's presence and God's word and the doing of God's will.** Jesus says our Father in heaven who sees in secret will reward us. He never says HOW God will reward us, that is unique to each of us, and God's purpose in our life, but Jesus says that God will.

Practically speaking, what should you do if you wish to try fasting? First don't try to be Moses or Jesus by starting with a 40 day fast. Not eating from now until the second week of December would be very difficult. Second, there are some people like women who are pregnant or nursing, those with serious illnesses, such as diabetes or heart disease who should not fast. If you have any questions about whether you may fast, check with your doctor. However, if we cannot fast from food, that doesn't mean we can't fast from other things. Remember what Paul said about not being enslaved by anything. Some of us may need to fast from television, the Internet, or email even more than we need to fast from food.

When you fast, take a shower, dress nicely, and try to keep it to yourself. Drink lots of water, most people don't drink enough any way and often mistake our body's need for water for hunger pangs. When you feel hungry one of the best things you can do is drink a glass of water first. When you're ready to fast from one meal a day begin by skipping lunch or breakfast and spend the time you would have spent preparing and eating your meal by reading the Bible, praying or journaling. I think you will find this a rewarding experience. Try this for a number of weeks.

Then some time try skipping breakfast and lunch. Don't eat a big meal the night before you fast because your stomach will expand and you'll be hungrier. I don't mean to be rude or hurtful, but most of us, myself included, have plenty of energy already stored in our bodies to carry us for a while. Over time we can expand our fast to a full day or more. When you break-fast (ever wonder where the word "breakfast" comes from?), don't eat a large, rich, or greasy meal. Break a fast with fruits, vegetables, nuts,

and fruit juice or water and with much thankfulness and rejoicing to God. We are fasting for a spiritual purpose so take the time you usually spend eating in Bible reading, prayer or acts of service. Don't use the time just to get more work done.

Fasting has many Benefits.

Fasting enables us to focus on and draw near to God in times when we need God's direction and leading or during a personal struggle or national crisis. Given everything that has happened in the last year perhaps we all should be consider fasting one meal a week and praying for our nation.

Fasting helps us to be the master and not the slave of our habits.

Our stomach is often like a person has been spoiled and a spoiled person needs discipline not indulgence. Fasting increases our self-discipline and helps us feel more in gain some control over our appetites.

Fasting also teaches an old fashioned virtue called sacrifice; it helps us gain the ability to do without things. The number of things we have come to call essential has grown incredibly. As we control and limit what is "essential" in our lives our freedom increases.

Rather than being a rejection of a pleasure God has given us for our health and good, **fasting enables us to better appreciate the blessing of daily bread and food and eating.**

Fasting also helps us grow in compassion and caring for if we go to bed hungry once in a while it makes us aware of the reality millions of people live with because they have no food to fast from.

Over the last three weeks we have said that in Matthew 6:1-18 **Jesus addresses our motivation for doing anything related to our spiritual life.** Jesus warns us we can give, pray, or fast **to draw the attention of other people to our selves,** or we can give, pray, and fast **to give God our attention.**

The more attention we give to God the fuller and more satisfying and enriching our life will be.