

**FASTING – HOW RADICAL DOES JESUS WANT US TO BE?**  
**MATTHEW 6:16-18**

**INTRO.:**

1. **ILLUST.:** Having the right tool, and knowing when to use it, is critical to the success of any building project.
  - a. Let's say that I hired Mike to build an addition onto our house.
  - b. When he arrives, he brings his white trailer full of tools.
    - 1) He has an air compressor to which he can hook a nail gun which makes driving nails a snap.
    - 2) He has a table saw, a circular saw, a "saws all", a jigsaw, etc.
    - 3) He knows from experience which tool to pull out and how to use each.
  - c. On the other hand, I have got these two saws and this old ball-peen hammer.
    - 1) Imagine me trying to do the job on my own with just these rusty, dull saws and hammer.
    - 2) It might be possible, but I would waste a lot of time and effort.
    - 3) You would consider me foolish for attempting such a task.
  - d. But imagine how silly it would be if Mike, who possesses all the right tools, left them in his trailer and picked up my old rusty dull saws and hammer and went to work.
  - e. That would be ridiculous!
2. But sadly, the point is that this is exactly what the majority of Christians are doing when it comes to their living for God and especially their prayer life.
  - a. God has given each of us some powerful tools.
  - b. And when it comes to our prayer life He has given each of us a powerful tool to use in order to increase our effectiveness in prayer, our spiritual power, and our ability to know God's will.
  - c. But sadly, most of the time we "leave it in the truck" and try to muddle through life on our own using our own rusty saw.
3. What is this tool, you ask?
  - a. It is the subject of our text for today.
  - b. It is FASTING.
4. **ASK:** When you hear the word "*fasting*" what type of people comes to mind?
  - a. What do they look like?
  - b. Do they appear a bit strange?
  - c. Are they John the Baptist types, or legalists, or health nuts?
  - d. Does Jesus come to your mind when you think of fasting?
5. The fact is that Jesus both practiced and taught fasting.
  - a. And yet, fasting is the most feared and misunderstood of all the spiritual disciplines Jesus taught.
  - b. Many believe fasting turns us into something we do not want to become and causes things to happen that we do not want to happen.
    - 1) We fear that fasting will make us some hollow-eyed fanatic or odd "Jesus freak."
    - 2) We are afraid that it will make us suffer dreadfully and give us a generally negative experience.
    - 3) For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their heads or walking barefoot across a bed of hot coals.
6. I think, fasting is so misunderstood because of the famine of contemporary awareness regarding it.
  - a. How many people do you know who regularly practice fasting for religious purposes?
  - b. How many sermons/lessons have you heard on the subject, or how many books have you read?
  - c. And yet it is mentioned in Scripture more times than even something as important as baptism (about 77 times for fasting to 75 for baptism).

7. In our gluttonous, self-indulgent society, Christians may struggle with accepting what Jesus had to say regarding the practice of fasting.
  - a. In fact, I doubt that any of you have fasting on your top 10 things to do today, or even this year.
  - b. Few disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of our culture where you find a restaurant on nearly every corner.
  - c. Of course, there are some people who, for medical reasons, cannot fast.
  - d. But for most of us there is a danger in overlooking the benefits this spiritual discipline can give to us in our pursuit of a Christ-like life.
  
8. Thus, as we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls His disciples to a radically different way of living, once again He is going to challenge us to consider a whole new view on life.
  - a. Due to time constraints I will not be able to go into great detail on this subject, but I want to give you enough information that you will see the benefits of what Jesus is calling for here and dig deeper into a study of fasting on your own.
  - b. Also, I will not deal with the “how-to’s” as we have already covered that principle in our study of giving and prayer.

### LESSON:

- I. The first thing we notice is that while fasting is not commanded for Christians, Christ does expect us to fast?
  - A. Two times in our text Jesus says, “*When you fast*” (vs. 16 & 17).
    1. He did not say, “*If*,” but “*When*.”
    2. We have already seen where Jesus said in vs. 2 – “*When you give*,” and in vs. 5 – “*When you pray*.”
      - a. The assumption is that if you are a follower of Jesus you will give and you will pray.
      - b. We have no problem with understanding and obeying what Jesus said here.
      - c. But when we come to vs. 16 we balk and it and say, “Isn’t that something for “religious fanatics?” Isn’t that a bit “legalistic? Wasn’t that for Christ’s disciples in the first century, but not for us in the 21<sup>st</sup>?”
    3. The point is that while Jesus did not command fasting, He does expect His disciples to practice fasting.
  
  - B. Perhaps part of our problem with what Jesus said here is in our definition of fasting.
    1. Just what do we mean when we refer to fasting?
    2. One of the best definitions I have seen is: “Fasting means to lay aside any pleasurable and/or vital activity for a period of time in order to intensely pursue God and know His mind with the intent of obeying His revealed will.”
      - a. Fasting is all about God, and not about me.
      - b. Fasting is focusing on God and excluding the things of this world that would distract us from that focus.
    3. Throughout Scripture, fasting is usually referred to as the abstaining of food for spiritual purposes.
      - a. It is not a hunger strike or a diet plan.
      - b. While these may have their place, their purpose is not holy or spiritual.
      - c. Fasting, if done the way Scripture describes, is a very spiritual practice to aid one’s spiritual life.
      - d. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual matters.
    4. While fasting is usually connected to food, Paul does carry it further to other areas of our life when he refers to abstaining from sexual relations with your spouse for the specific purpose of devoting some time to prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).
    5. Let me also note that the Bible teaches that fasts can last anywhere from a part of a day up to forty days.
      - a. The point is that it is not the length of the fast that gives it meaning.
      - b. It is the purpose of the fast that makes it a powerful tool for spiritual growth and development.

II. To understand why Jesus encouraged His disciples to fast we need to look at its purpose. – That is, what will fasting accomplish?

--The Bible gives many purposes for fasting, but I have condensed them down into several major categories.

--Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes.

--Notice that not one of the purposes is to earn God's favor.

--We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance.

A. 1<sup>st</sup>: To strengthen our prayers.

1. Most of the examples of fasting in the scriptures are connected with prayer.
2. There is something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications.
3. For example:
  - a. When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage.
    - 1) They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey.
    - 2) Ezra 8:23: “*So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.*”
  - b. Nehemiah “*fasted and prayed before the God of heaven*” (Neh. 1:4).
  - c. Daniel devoted himself to plead with God “*in prayer and petition, in fasting*” (9:3).
  - d. In a direct command through the prophet Joel, Israel was told, “*‘Even now,’ declares the Lord ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning’*” (Joel 2:12).
  - e. It was not until after “*they had fasted and prayed*” that the church in Antioch “*placed their hands*” on Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus and “*sent them off*” on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:3).
4. The point is that the most important aspect of this discipline is its influence on our prayers.
  - a. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding.
    - 1) If we ask God for something outside His will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider.
    - 2) Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying.
  - b. You will notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer.

B. 2<sup>nd</sup>: To seek God's guidance.

1. There is biblical precedent for using fasting to help us more clearly discern the will of God.
2. In Judges 20 the other eleven tribes of Israel prepared for war against the tribe of Benjamin.
  - a. In prayer they sought the Lord before going into battle against Benjamin.
  - b. But even though they outnumbered the Benjamites by fifteen to one, they lost the battle and forty thousand men were killed.
  - c. It was not until they prayed and fasted that the Lord told them: “Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands” (vs. 28).
3. According to Acts 14:23, before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches they founded, they first prayed with fasting to receive God's guidance.
4. While fasting does not ensure the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God, when it is rightly practiced, it does make us more receptive to His guidance.

C. 3<sup>rd</sup>: To express grief.

1. Grief over the death of a loved one.
  - a. Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting are connected with an expression of grief.
  - b. In Judges 20:26, the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord not only to seek His guidance, but also to express their grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle.
  - c. When King Saul was killed by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh Gilead “*fasted seven days*” after his burial (1 Sam. 31:13).
    - 1) When David and his men heard the news, they took hold of their clothes and tore them.
    - 2) They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and the house of Israel (2 Sam. 1:11–12).

2. Grief over our own sins
    - a. Although it is not a spiritual self-flagellation, biblical confession does involve at least some degree of grief for the sin we have committed.
    - b. And inasmuch as fasting can be an expression of grief, it can serve as a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession.
  3. Grief for the sins of others (Either those you know personally, or society in general).
 

--When a jealous King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David, Jonathan did not eat for a day, "*because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David*" (1 Sam. 20:34).
- D. 4<sup>th</sup>: To seek Divine deliverance or protection.
1. One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek deliverance from one's enemies or from some bad circumstance.
    - a. After being notified that a vast army was coming against him, King Jehoshaphat was afraid and proclaimed a fast for all Judah (2 Chron. 20:3-4).
    - b. We have already read of the fast Ezra called for when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem.
      - 1) There we noticed that they fasted in order to strengthen their prayers.
      - 2) But notice from the larger context of Ezra 8:21-23 that they prayed with fasting for God's protection: "*I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.*"
    - c. The best-known cooperative fast in Scripture is the one in Esther 4:16.
      - 1) Queen Esther called for all Jews to fast as a part of her appeal to God for protection from the king's wrath.
      - 2) She planned to enter the court of King Xerxes uninvited to appeal to him for the protection of the Jews from mass extermination.
  2. The fact is that the Bible teaches that fasting should be one of our first defenses against "persecution" because of our faith that comes from family, schoolmates, neighbors, or coworkers.
- E. 5<sup>th</sup>: To express repentance and a return to God.
1. It is one thing to pray, "Lord I'm sorry for what I've done."
    - a. It is something else to deprive yourself of food and plead with God for him to have mercy upon you for the sins you have committed against him.
    - b. Just as repentance involves a change of mind resulting in a change of action, so also fasting can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.
  2. Examples:
    - a. The Israelites expressed repentance through fasting in 1 Sam. 7:6 when "*They drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the Lord.'*"
    - b. In Joel 2:12, the Lord specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: "*'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'*"
  3. Richard Foster wrote: "More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, "I humbled myself with fasting" (Ps. 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear – if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ." – p. 48.
  4. Also notice that while fasting can express repentance, it is done in vain without repentance.
    - a. As with all spiritual disciplines, fasting can be little more than a "dead work" if we have persistently hardened our hearts to deal with a specific sin in our lives.
    - b. We must never try to immerse ourselves in a spiritual discipline as an attempt to drown out God's voice about forsaking a sin.

- F. 6<sup>th</sup>: To humble oneself before God.
1. James 4:10 says: *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.”*
    - a. There are many ways we can demonstrate our humility before God, but choosing to go without food for the sake of spiritual things is one of the more practical ways.
    - b. Fasting reminds us that we can get by without most things in our lives for a time, but we cannot get by without God.
    - c. One of the main purposes of fasting is to draw us closer to God.
  2. When practiced with the right motives, fasting is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him.
  3. King Ahab, one of the most wicked men in Jewish history, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting:
    - a. 1 Kings 21:27–29: *“When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.”*
    - b. As a result, God resolved to delay His judgment.
  4. One of Israel's godliest men - King David - humbled himself before the Lord in the same way: Psa. 35:13: *“I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.”*
  5. Remember that fasting itself is not humility before God, but it should be an expression of humility.
  6. There was no humility in the Pharisee of Luke 18:12 when he bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week.
- G. 7<sup>th</sup>: To express concern for the work of God.
1. Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a specific area.
  2. We might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat.
    - a. This was the purpose for Nehemiah's fast when he heard that despite the return of many Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, the city still had no wall to defend it.
    - b. After his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something tangible and public to strengthen this work of God.
  3. Or we may feel compelled to fast and pray before we start a specific work for the Lord, as with the case of Paul and Barnabas being sent out on their first missionary journey.
- H. 8<sup>th</sup>: To overcome temptation and dedicate ourselves to God.
1. Perhaps the greatest example of this is Jesus' 40 day fast prior to His temptation in Matt. 4:1–11.
    - a. In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast He was prepared to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane.
    - b. It was also during that fast that He privately dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter.
  2. The principle we can learn from Jesus' example is this: Fasting is a way to prepare us to overcome temptations and renew our dedication to God.
    - a. There are times when we struggle with temptation, or we anticipate grappling with it, and we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it.
      - 1) Perhaps we will be traveling (or our spouse will be traveling) and temptations for mental and sensual unfaithfulness abound.
      - 2) At the start of school or a new job or ministry there may be new temptations, or it may seem appropriate to dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord.
    - b. Often we face decisions that place unusual temptations before us.
      - 1) Do we take a new job that will mean much more money but much less time with the family or to work for the Lord?
      - 2) Do we accept the promotion and transfer that would end a significant ministry in our local church?
    - c. In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required.
    - d. Fasting to overcome temptation and renew our dedication to God is a Christ-like response.

- I. 9<sup>th</sup>: To express love and worship to God.
1. By now you may have concluded that fasting is only associated with dire circumstances, but the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.
  2. Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in God.
    - a. Fasting honors God and is a means of worshipping Him as such.
    - b. In Luke 2 there is an unforgettable woman whose entire 84 years are flashed before us in three verses.
      - 1) Her name is Anna.
      - 2) The summary of her life is found in Luke 2:37: “*She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.*”
      - 3) Although Anna’s story is significant primarily in the context of Mary and Joseph presenting the newborn Jesus at the Temple, how she lived from day to day is what concerns us here.
      - 4) Anna was married for only seven years before being widowed.
      - 5) Assuming she married as a young lady, this godly woman devoted at least half a century, night and day, to a worship of God characterized by “fasting and praying.”
  3. The writings of the church fathers tell us that many of the early Christians fasted each week in preparation for the Lord’s Supper.
    - a. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God, their fast was also intended to help them focus on adoring the One who is represented in the Supper.
    - b. Their fast was to clear their minds of the things of this world so that they could concentrate on God and worshipping Him.

CONC.:

1. Let me close by reminding you that fasting is a privilege, not an obligation.
  - a. It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience His grace in a special way.
  - b. And in vs. 18 of our text Jesus promised us that God will bless any individual who comes to Him in this way.
2. Also remember that before you fast you must have a God-centered purpose.
  - a. What is it you hope to achieve by your fast?
  - b. How do you see your fast drawing you closer to God, or leading you into greater service in His kingdom?
3. I think that the reason we do not what to talk about this subject is that there is something about saying, “I’m not going to eat today,” that causes anxiety in many Christians.
  - a. Most believers would rather do anything, even if it means an offering of money, rather than give up food for a day.
  - b. But this is silly when we really put it in perspective.
    - 1) Sometimes while shopping, working, or playing, we willingly miss meals.
    - 2) Whenever we believe another activity is more important, we will go without food fearlessly and without complaint.
  - c. Thus we need to learn that there are times when it can be much more rewarding to feast on God than on food (Matt. 4:4).
    - a) It may be:
      - (1) When the Dr’s diagnosis is bad news.
      - (2) When our nation is at a crisis point like at election time or because of calamity.
      - (3) When our family is facing a crisis.
    - b) These are times for fasting and praying.
    - c) These are times to go beyond our normal routines of prayer, and determine that we need to have God’s intervention in our lives much more than we need food.
4. Jesus realized that fasting adds a unique dimension to our spiritual lives and helps us to grow in Christ-likeness in ways that are unavailable through any other means, and that is why He said, “*When you fast.*”
5. But fasting is useless unless we are in a right relationship with God – Are you?