

Text: Matthew 6:16-18

Title: Fasting

Truth: Religious activity is to be done with a view toward God, not man.

Date/Location: Sunday May 30, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

Remember that the Sermon on the Mount is the explanation of what life looks like when a person is repentant (Matt. 4:17, 3:2). Such people do deeds in agreement with repentance (3:8).

I. Basics of our Lord's Teaching on Fasting

- A. As with **deeds of mercy** (6:1-4) and **prayer** (6:5-6), **fasting** is to be done discreetly. This means that it is unobtrusive or private, without calling attention to oneself.
- B. Fasting the "hypocrite way" shows that the motivation behind the fasting is to please people, not to please God. In fact, the deeper motivation is to please the one person who is doing the fasting, because he or she is seeking the attention of others, and this makes them feel happy. This is where religion becomes a "tool" to magnify oneself rather than God.
- C. Fasting privately—the Christian way—shows that your devotion is toward the One who can see everything. He will reward you accordingly.
- D. Practically, this means that when you fast, you should take a shower, comb your hair, get dressed, shave/wash your face, put on makeup, put in your contacts, and whatever you normally do to not look haggard and depressed. Put a real smile on your face, not a sad countenance. Yes, often we can choose how to make our faces look. Train yourself to look "normal" that way. Do not make a subtle or not-so-subtle difference in appearance so people will notice and ask you what is going on.
- E. Naturally some questions arise. *Should* you fast? *Must* you fast? And even before we answer those questions, we must answer this question: *what* is fasting?

II. What is Fasting?

- A. Fasting is associated with mourning, distress, prayer, and bad things, not happy things (Jonah 3:5). It indicates that there are distressing problems in life that may take your appetite away. That is when fasting is a sign of grief or distress. Alternatively, it is used as an activity of devotion to God, as when there are things you wish to pray about in a focused manner.
- B. What fasting is *not*. Fasting is not done because of an involuntary lack of food. That is called *starvation* or *malnutrition*. Fasting is not, “I think I will give up chocolate for lent.” Or, “I am going to fast from video games for a while.”
- C. Fasting has to do with a *choice* not to eat food. Food is one of the essential things we need for life in the short term (in addition to water and, if inclement weather, shelter). In the absence of food, we can focus time and energy on devotion and prayer to God instead of food preparation or other things of this life. If we choose not even to *eat*, that means we are setting aside everything, even one of the most important things, in order to give our attention to the things of God.

III. Must I Fast? Should I Fast?

- A. Fasting is assumed because this life has problems. The Lord says, “whenever you fast,” not “if you fast.”
- B. Must I Fast?
 - 1. Most references to fasting are in the Old Testament; there are some in the gospels. All uses of the word *fast* in the New King James Version after Acts are to “hold fast.” There are only three uses of the word in Acts (13:2-3, 14:23). These have to do with the solemn responsibility of appointing missionaries and pastors to their service. Certainly, this important church action (ordination, commissioning) calls for the utmost devotion to God. But there is no explicit instruction in the New Testament on fasting—how often, how long, etc. “Fasting twice a week” is an old Pharisaical practice (Luke 18:12), but that was man-made.

Therefore, fasting is not required in the church age. This lines up nicely with the grace principle of living that under which we operate. We are not ruled by Law, but by grace and love. The commands of the New Testament *are* commands, but they are for new-natured people and serve as guides for what the new nature in us wants to do anyway.

2. Fasting was entirely inappropriate when Christ was with the disciples, like fasting at a wedding is inappropriate. But when He was taken from them by the Jews, Romans, cross and tomb, it was appropriate for them to fast at that time for sorrow (Matt 9:14-17).
3. After the resurrection, the disciples were full of joy (John 16:22) and fasting did not fit the general religious atmosphere at that time. We exist in that same time of joy because we know our Lord has conquered sin and death. We know He is alive, at the right hand of God, awaiting His enemies to be made His footstool. How can we *not* be happy about that? We ought to have a pleasant, happy demeanor because the Lord has redeemed us, He is alive, we are His children, He is sanctifying us, He has forgiven and is forgiving us, etc.

C. Should I Fast?

1. Short fasts are fine for most people and may even offer health benefits. However, because we need to eat fairly frequently, we are not Gila monsters. They can go months without food because they store fat in their tails. When one eats, it can eat 1/3 of its bodyweight in one sitting. That is very unlike us!
2. If you have health issues related to hyper- or hypo-glycemia or other things I do not know anything about, you should be very cautious. You may have to forgo fasting altogether. A doctor's opinion should be sought in such cases. You know yourself, so act wisely.
3. It depends on your private desire, and your estimation of the need for a focused time of confession or intercession or praise of God.

4. Although you know the Lord and that He is resurrected and that your ultimate destination is heaven, there are times in this life of great peril or difficulty. Any time is OK for fasting, but these hard times are very appropriate for fasting. If you are fasting, then also be praying while doing so. Fasting by itself is not a “thing,” nor do we encounter it in the Bible. In Acts, three times fasting is associated with prayer and serving God, never apart from them. And note that the paragraph on fasting *is* right next door to the one on prayer!
- D. My personal experience is not worth much, and I do not even want to share it, but as a pastor and example, I think I can touch on it without violating what the Lord is saying here. My personal metabolism is not a good match for fasting, or at least I have not trained myself that way. In the past, I have infrequently made time away from meals to express devotion to God. I remember one time particularly in the spring around Good Friday some years back when I enjoyed nice fellowship with the Lord holding back on food while remembering how the Lord died for us. In recent years I have not done fasting.
- E. Preparing for this message has caused me to think about it more. But since there is no instruction on the matter in the New Testament epistles, nor a command to fast, I do not believe regular fasting necessary for one’s spiritual life and sanctification. However, I am quick to add that we all need to think about how our private spiritual life is doing, and tune it up, perhaps with some fasting that will help us focus on prayer.
- F. I am not in favor of making other people fast while you fast. For example, if mom or dad wants to fast, it is only by mutual consent that the other spouse and children would do so as well. Mom cannot just go on strike and let everyone else be on their own for food! To do that would be setting aside love for others even as you claim to be religious in your fasting ritual.
- G. Like this message has caused me to think, perhaps it has caused you to think as well. Do you have a problem with gluttony? Are you wasting food by eating too much at each sitting? Do you live to eat? Do you even *think* about giving up something of value so you

can show piety, worship, devotion, or extra prayer to God—not to mention giving up on food? Are you praying regularly and fervently without the aid of fasting?

IV. The Reward

- A. God rewards conduct that matches His character. Correspondingly, He punishes conduct that does not match His character.
- B. The text—the very words of Jesus—promise us that God the Father who sees your private devotional life will reward you as only He can in the future. We can count on this. Some of us who seem to be outwardly very religious will not receive much reward. Others who now seem to be quiet and outwardly uninvolved in the Christian life will be rewarded richly for the charitable deeds, prayers, and fasting that they do.

V. Further Information on Fasting

- A. Exodus 24:18 and 34:28 record that Moses was without food and water for 40 days. This appears to be due to miraculous sustenance from God. Jesus did a similar fast before His temptation (Matthew 4:2). With water, 40 days without food seems well within the realm of the possible. Without water, it seems highly unlikely without some special circumstance like a miracle.
- B. Acts 27:9 speaks of “the Fast” which was part of the Jewish calendar. This refers to the Day of Atonement, which was in September/October. After this point, “winter sailing” was a dangerous business. The point for our study of fasting is that the Fast was a Jewish practice. It was not carried over into the church in any part of the New Testament because we have a completed atonement.
- C. Old Testament examples of fasting include:
 - national calamity, Judges 20:26, Neh. 1:4, Esther 4:3
 - to commemorate a national calamity averted, Esther 9:31
 - national sin, 1 Samuel 7:6, Ezra 9:5, Neh. 9:1, Dan. 9:3

mourning over a leader who died, 1 Samuel 31:13, 2 Samuel 1:12,
1 Chron. 10:12

the severe illness of a child, 2 Samuel 12:16, 21-22

pronouncement of judgment on sin, 1 Kings 21:27

seeking God's protection from danger, Ezra 8:23

the false fasting of hypocrites, Isaiah 58:3, Zech. 7:5

to intercede in prayer for others who were sick, Psalm 35:13

being troubled by a bad decision that endangered someone, Dan.
6:18

as an expression of repentance, Joel 2:12

as an expression of devotion to God, Cornelius fasted, Acts 10:30.
Although this is not Old Testament per se, Cornelius existed on
Old Testament ground.

D. Other passages: Psalm 69:10, 109:24, Jer. 36:6.

E. Zechariah 7:1-12 records a question about fasting which exposed
the people as disobedient religionists.

F. In some manuscripts, the word "fasting" is included at Matthew
17:21, Mark 9:29 and 1 Cor. 7:5.¹ In these cases, fasting is an
activity that is considered to be done in parallel with prayer.
"Fasting and prayer" together create the meaning of "intense
prayer."

Conclusion

Fasting is optional for the Christian. It is to be done privately for the
kinds of reasons that are discussed in the notes above. If it can be
of help to focus you on prayer, repentance, and intercession, then
do please make use of it. Regardless, be a person of serious prayer!

MAP

¹ The word "fasting" is not in the majority text manuscripts, which make its inclusion in
the text a bit more suspect.