

“FASTING”  
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Martin Luther did it – so did John Calvin.  
 So did John Wesley and John Knox and Jonathan Edwards.  
 Moses did it, Elijah did it, David did it  
 Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul Peter – all did it.  
 Jesus Christ did it!

The King of England called everyone to do it.  
 The Chief Rabbi called on all Israel to do it on June 5, 1967.  
 John Wesley felt so strongly about ministers doing it that he wouldn't ordain them  
 if they didn't do it two days a week.

What is it, so widely practiced by people for so many centuries?

What is it, that some people of our own church practice with frequency?

It is called “fasting” (not eating).  
 Fasting is basically abstaining from eating  
 (and sometimes even from drinking) to some degree  
 (all or partial) for some period of time (hours or even days).

While that describes the physical action of fasting, it does not describe the intent of fasting—and it is the intent that distinguishes biblical fasting from some other things called fasts.

Do you remember what happened in Northern Ireland several years ago when in protest of British rule—several young men starved themselves to death? They were called “fasts” but that is different.

Do you remember from the life of Mahatma Gandhi how he “fasted” until the Moslems and Hindus agreed to stop fighting? I am not talking about that.

I have seen old women walking on their bare and bloodied knees across over a quarter mile of cobblestone to reach the shrine at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Mexico City. The same women having “fasted” for days prior to that—their hungry, bloodied march all in an attempt to earn favor with God so He would heal a sick child. I am not talking about that.

If the leaders of this church called for a day of Prayer and Fasting—would you know what to do with the fasting part and more importantly, would you know why you would be involved or why not?

It's obvious that I want to talk about fasting this morning—And yes, I will attempt to challenge you to practice fasting—but before I do that I want to remind you from last week's message why I want to talk about fasting.

It is very evident to me that God sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to live, die and rise from the dead not just to declare us forgiven for our sin against Him and each other but to change our lives here and now while we are still alive.

Paul said: I call on each one of you who trusts in Christ  
to offer your very bodies to live for God.  
I call on you to be transformed—live a whole new way.

But the big question is—how do we do that? How do we live as a Christian?

The Bible is filled with things I am to do or not to do.

¿Is it true that now I have asked Jesus to forgive me for my sin and now that I have asked Him to be head(master) of my life—that when temptation comes I'll refuse it and when opportunity for doing good comes I'll do it?

As I said last week:

My problem isn't largely knowing what to do, it is doing it!  
I find that in spite of knowing what not to do—temptation is so strong and my will and ability to resist so weak that I do the very thing I said I wouldn't.

and

I find that in spite of knowing what I ought to do—my selfishness with how I spend my time, my energy and my money is so strong and dominating that I keep putting off the very thing I said I would do!

Oh we have all tried New Year's resolutions, and tearful resolves to do better. We have all said we'd buckle down and try harder. But the temptation is strong or our selfishness is powerful—we can't seem to do what we ought!!

WHY??

Because we are still babes spiritually,

We are immature—not grown enough yet.

We are still weak spiritually.

We have not fed and exercised our spiritual muscles enough to be able to stand against the temptations and to overcome our selfishness enough to do what we ought to do—even when it's costly.

We fail so miserably, so often, because we're like a 12-year-old boy who dreams he can

play in the NFL just because he owns an Orange #7 jersey.

Well, if God has called me to live my life for Him and to be different in my attitudes and lifestyle, and yet I find that I can't—

How does that get changed?

How can I be any different in the future?

There have traditionally been three responses to that question.

The list of three, and the one most common in evangelical churches for the past 100 years, is probably the least of the three—for it doesn't really answer the question.

The first response to the Christian life is basically a belief that if we get “born again,” get forgiven for our sins and get our guarantee that we will go to heaven when we die, that is all that is really necessary.

Now while those who hold this view say that it is true that we ought to live like Christ while we are still on earth and alive—if we start talking about any actual obligation to obey or any effort to obey—or any obedience as essential to being a Christian, then we are getting dangerously close to “works-righteousness”

And we know that we are saved by grace not works—therefore works are nice but not essential.

The result is that those who hold this view don't give serious attention to obedience or how to achieve it.

Typically, those who hold to this definition of salvation as: Forgiveness and assurance of heaven do have a personal code of conduct that they adhere to—and as long as they stay fairly close to it they don't feel too much guilt.

They don't honestly expect to see any change in their lives, they just believe the right thing—and when they die that will be all they need—After all, we're saved by grace not works. Right?! Right—but definition of saved is inadequate.

The second response to how does my life change now that I'm a Christian is at least attempting to answer the question.

This response, which is more common in the Evangelical Church in the last 30 years (although its roots are much older), is that we need a second experience, or a third or fourth experience, to enable us to live the life God called us to live. Not enough that we've been born again—we must have a subsequent experience with the Holy Spirit—to be able to obey!

This response, taught by Finney, Moody, R. A. Torrey, the Pentecostals, non-Pentecostal Bill Bright, and some of the Charismatics, is that by prayer and faith you need to open

yourself up to God to do an additional work of grace in your life to enable you to obey as you ought.

It has variously been called:

The baptism of the Holy Spirit  
 The filling of the Holy Spirit  
 A second work of grace  
 “Spiritual breathing”

And though those phrases are not synonymous, in regard to living the Christian life, they speak to the same basic method:

“Let go and let God”

What you need to do is get out of the way and let Jesus live the Christian life through you—

I think such advice has proven largely unsuccessful. Most don't understand it and those who think they do spend their time trying to figure out how to let go.

The third response, to the question of “how does my life become any different in the future?” “How do I live the Christian life?” is extremely pragmatic and very biblical.

Paul said it (among many times) in I Timothy 4:7

“Exercise yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

How do we see our lives changed?

How do we ever get so we can obey?

How do we ever get so we can resist temptation?

We look at the Billy Grahams and the Chuck Swindolls of this world and say (to mix my analogies) ‘I can put on the #7 jersey but how do I ever play like John Elway?’

The Bible says we grow in grace.

Last week I took you to I John 5:3 and Matthew 11 to show you how Jesus said it—

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”

For my yoke is easy and my burden light by comparison to the other lords and yokes.

How do we live the Christian life? Jesus said, “Watch Him—learn from Him—do what He does.”

Jesus followed very basic disciplines—I believe the very same ones Paul has in mind when he writes for us to “discipline ourselves for the purpose of godly living.”

Learn and practice the basics and you will be strengthened—You will grow in grace and your ability to withstand temptations will increase and your discipline to do what is right in spite of the cost will grow.

And we will by God's grace, progressively be more like Christ and more able to live as He asks us to live.

One of those basics, one of those disciplines, practiced by Jesus and for 2000 years before Him and the 2000 years since is

### **FASTING**

Today when the very idea of fasting is introduced it is perceived as ludicrous by most Christians.

For two reasons most Christians dismiss it:

1. We reject it psychologically.

While we may see some who starve themselves as gutsy and well-intentioned and sometimes even heroic – by and large we see them as ignorant or pointless.

After all, our whole culture is based on getting all you can get – not depriving yourself! Gratifying every desire is the essence of success and happiness.

We love Japanese cars because of what they do for us.  
We love McDonalds because they know we deserve a break...  
and the shrimp is available as all we can eat!

Any suggestion that we are to deny ourselves is a contradiction of everything we see on television, study for and work for.

Our whole life is geared from infancy to get it and Jesus comes along and talks about fasting. Ludicrous!!

There's another reason why Christians dismiss it:

2. We reject it on religious grounds.

For many years it was because Catholics talked about it (though they hadn't practiced it for years) that Protestants had to be against it.

But it was more than that—

Like the lady in Mexico City walking on her bare knees on cobblestone hoping to secure a blessing from God—so fasting has been perceived as a rather bizarre self-inflicted pain that will somehow earn favor with God—

And we rightly reject that!!

The Christian life is not earned and we don't get God's attention by inflicting pain on ourselves. We aren't holier if we starve to death.

But just because the discipline of fasting has been abused and just because it flies in the face of our consumer society, dare we dismiss it?

Please look with me at Matthew 4:1-2 (*read*)

Some say that it was because Jesus was weakened from fasting that He was more susceptible or vulnerable to Satan. I think I can build a case from how fasting is described throughout the rest of Scripture, that Jesus in fact fasted so he would be prepared, strong enough, to meet Satan and resist his temptation.

If that's true, see how it fits with growing in grace – disciplines that equip us, prepare us.

I want to come back to that idea later, but for now look with me at

|              |                    |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Matthew 6:2  | When you give alms |
| Matthew 6:5  | When you pray      |
| Matthew 6:16 | Whenever you fast  |

Did Jesus expect that His followers would give help to others? Pray? Fast??

Look with me at Matthew 9:14-15 (*read*)

Did Jesus expect that after He was physically gone that His followers would fast?

For you dispensationalists who have been taught that the gospels and early Acts don't apply to the church age in the same ways as later Acts and the Epistles do—

|                 |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| look with me at | Acts 13:2-3 |
|                 | Acts 14:23  |

While fasting is nowhere commanded in the New Testament, it is assumed—assumed that God's people would follow the example of our Lord and all those before Him.

Well, if I accept that Jesus and many others from Moses to the present practiced fasting, and that Jesus expected His followers to practice it—I still ask why? What's the point of it?

There are some examples of fasting for the wrong reason (e.g., Pharisees in meeting who fasted to be lauded for their piety.) But in every good example of fasting in the Bible it is connected with prayer!

Over 20 examples and calls for God's people to fast and pray.

As I went through the Scripture, example by example, I found that though prayer is called for in every circumstance of life – even to pray at all times –

Fasting was called for in unusual situations.

Fasting was done in the context of a crisis to be met or a decision to be made.

Look with me at II Chronicles 20:2, 3-6, 12-13

What's the point of fasting: Well clearly it is not just to get hungry. It was for the purpose of focusing one's whole attention on God.

Puritan Matthew Barker writing in 1674 said,

“A religious fast is the devotion of the whole (person) to a solemn extraordinary attendance upon God in a particular time set apart for that (purpose).”

Whether it was Jehoshaphat in II Chronicles,  
or Esther as she was about to plead for her people,  
or Daniel as he sought the Lord's answer to the future of his people,  
or the citizens of Ninevah as they anticipated God's judgment  
or David as he feared the death of his child—

the issue was so serious and their hearts so burdened that they took extraordinary measures to get alone with God—and focus all their attention on Him.

But why fast—won't prayer alone do that?

We are whole people – spirit and body

We may intention to pray but unless we can get our bodies to cooperate, our prayers are greatly hindered.

To grow in our ability to pray we must learn how to control our bodies and minds.

Our minds flit from one idea to another

Our bodies grow restless

We must learn how to discipline our minds and bodies—make them act as we want them to—and not just let them do whatever they want. Fasting is just one form of abstinence that we may properly use to increasingly bring our bodies under control.

My experience, limited as it is, is that in my first attempts at fasting with prayer, I thought more about food than God.

But I am assured that with practice that changes.

Because we are body as well as spirit, the Bible stresses that prayer is not just a mental exercise—our whole body is called on to get involved—

So we speak our prayers,  
we bow our heads

bend our knees  
lift our hands  
lay prostrate on the ground.

All to bring our whole self into the experience of meeting with God – waiting upon Him, seeking His answer to our need.

Likewise fasting is a way to bring our whole self into the experience of meeting with God.

Next week I'm going to finish this message, talking about the method of fasting and the traps that people fall into with fasting.

But let me finish today by reminding you that Jesus has called us to a different way of life than we have lived before. And to live that life—He calls us to take His yoke upon us and learn from Him.

One aspect of that yoke is, I believe, fasting and prayer— the kind of self-controlled attention to God that allows us to pray as we need to pray.

Do we want to grow in grace? Then I believe fasting is a part of that growth process—it is a discipline or exercise unto godliness.

Are you facing a big decision this week? Is there a crisis in which you are involved?

Will we fast and pray as our Lord did?