

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/15/95 PM
Matthew 6:16-18 "Fasting in an Age of Feasting"

Intro: What do the individuals in the following list have in common?

David, Ahab, Nehemiah, Daniel, Joel, the Ninevites, Anna, John the Baptist, John the Baptist's disciples, the Pharisees, the Church at Antioch, Paul, Barnabas, and Jesus.

All of the above are individuals who "fasted." Fasting is not a very popular topic in Christian circles in our day. As someone has said (Frank Vitt), "In a land where baseball, apple pie, and the hot dog are tradition, and where our landscapes are dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches, and where an assortment of pizza temples are waiting for our orders so their swift chariots can deliver, and where chocolate is fast becoming part of our balanced diet, fasting seems out of place."

Yet it shouldn't be. Not if we are serious about what the Bible says, and certainly not if we mean business about obeying Jesus' teaching. As we'll see in a moment, Jesus taught His followers to fast. Tonight, we are beginning a topical, four-week series entitled, "Fasting in an Age of Feasting." I am praying God will use this study in a great way to make us more like Christ, Who in fact, fasted.

What is fasting? Donald Whitney offers this definition (Spiritual Disciplines For the Christian Life, 152). "A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is Christian, for fasting by a nonChristian obtains no eternal value because the Discipline's motives and purposes are not God-centered. It is voluntary in that fasting is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes."

Whitney continues and suggests there is a broader view of fasting that is often overlooked (152). "This is the approach Richard Foster takes when he defines fasting as 'the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.' So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc., in order to become more absorbed in a time of spiritual activity."

As we begin our series, let's devote our attention to one of the key texts on fasting in the Bible, Matthew 6:16-18. Frankly, Matthew 6 is confidential material. What Jesus has to say to us in Matthew 6 is for disciples only. In fact, if there's one critical truth that stands out to me from the Sermon on the Mount, it's this--Jesus was not interested in obtaining "decisions," but in making "disciples." In this three chapter sermon He let people know clearly that discipleship involves the unreserved commitment of a life to Christ.

That commitment involves some responsibilities which are unpopular with the world. Jesus addressed three of these in the first part of Matthew 6.

In v 1, Jesus warned, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen by them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father, who is in heaven." In the best Greek manuscripts, the word "alms" is the same word used earlier in Mt 5:20, "righteousness." There Jesus told His disciples that their "righteousness" needed to exceed that of the Pharisees. The NIV is right in translating "alms" as "acts of righteousness" in Mt 6:1. The idea is that we ought not try to impress people with our acts of piety.

What does that mean practically? Jesus applies the principle given in v 1 to three specific acts of righteousness in vv 2-18. These three are good deeds that may be done with wrong motives.

1. Giving to the poor--Alms (2-4)
2. Prayer (5-15)
3. Fasting (16-18)

These three areas cover the bases when it comes to Christian living: Alms--what I do with others. Prayer--what I do with God. Fasting--what I do with myself. Our concern at this time is what Jesus said about fasting.

Proposition: In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus speaks candidly about two issues related to fasting.

I. Jesus warns us concerning the Abuse of fasting (16).

Two warnings...

- A. Don't be hypocritical.
- B. Don't use fasting to impress people.

II. Jesus teaches us concerning the Proper Use of fasting (17-18).

Two Guidelines...

- A. Follow certain precautions (17).
 1. Anoint your head.
 2. Wash your face.
- B. Focus on God.
 1. Fasting is spiritual (not merely moderation in eating).
 2. Fasting is secret (not to advertise ourselves).
 3. Fasting is an act of submission (we admit our dependence upon Him).

I. Jesus warns us concerning the Abuse of fasting (16).

Let's read vv 16-18, "Moreover, when you fast..." Again, what is fasting? It's the abstention from food for a period of time (for instance, "breakfast" is breaking the eight hour fast of the nighttime). But it's more than not eating. When a person fasts, he or she abstains from food for the sake of a special purpose, such as prayer, meditation, or seeking God for a particular reason.

Fasting is good, but fasting can be abused. How? Jesus gives us two warnings in v 16.

A. Don't be hypocritical.

V 16 "Be not as the hypocrites." Who is a hypocrite? In Mt 5:20, Jesus revealed that the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites. Why? Because they kept the letter of the law, but missed the spirit of the law. They were impressive on the outside, but on the inside their hearts were rotten. Such was the case when they fasted.

The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and prided themselves in this fact. Every Monday and Thursday. Guess what else happened on Monday and Thursday? These were the market days. There were big crowds and lots of people.

Do you know what some hypocritical Pharisees did? They took deliberate steps to let the crowds know they were fasting. Like what? V 16 gives us a clue. They put on a

"sad countenance," and they "disfigured" their faces (lit. means "make invisible"; the word is translated "corrupt" in vv 19-20). That is, they took steps to make themselves unrecognizable, either by covering their heads, or by smearing their heads with ashes and dirt.

And why did they do this? V 16 tells us, "That they may appear unto men to fast." They WANTED to draw attention to themselves. They were hypocrites. Their motive for fasting was to impress people with their spirituality. Someone has observed, "They made themselves unsightly to make a sight of themselves!" There's a second, related warning...

B. Don't use fasting to impress people.

The Pharisees did. Do you know what? When it came to impressing people, the Pharisees succeeded. They did receive the attention and applause of men. But in so doing, they forfeited God's blessing.

By the way, what kinds of things do we do to prove to others we are "spiritual?" When we brag about our Bible reading, our church attendance, or when we place a big Bible on our coffee-table to impress people, we are no different than the Pharisees.

So fasting can be abused. It was in Jesus' day as in ours. But that's no reason fasting should not be used by us. Not if we're serious about being disciples of Christ. Jesus said, "WHEN you fast," in v 16, and, "WHEN you fast," in v 17. Now that we're aware that fasting can be abused, let's move to the second issue.

II. Jesus teaches us concerning the Proper Use of fasting (17-18).

Jesus assumed His followers would fast. He Himself fasted (Mt 4), and here He teaches His disciples how to fast properly. Notice two guidelines. When we fast, we must...

A. Follow certain precautions (17).

When the Pharisees fasted, they disfigured their faces to call attention to themselves. Jesus instructs us to take steps to do just the opposite. He mentions two precautions.

1. *Anoint your head.*
2. *Wash your face.*

Washing and anointing were normal steps of hygiene and body care in Jesus' day. He's not telling us to go overboard when we fast (not, "Put on a suit and splash your face with Old Spice!"). Again, that would merely draw attention to ourselves, which was the same problem the Pharisees had. To paraphrase Jesus' instructions, "When you fast, look normal."

Where should our focus be when we fast?

B. Focus on God.

V 18 "That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father."

Why is fasting so foreign to many Christians? Allow me to suggest three basic reasons. First, we have a deficient view of God. We fail to grasp how dependent we are on God, and how much we need Him. Second, we have an inflated view of ourselves.

When we fast, we are admitting, "I need You Lord. I can live without food, but I can't live without You." And third, we have a distorted view of the gospel. Our American culture bombards us with the health and wealth gospel. We hear, "Believe in God, and you'll make more money, have a bigger house, enjoy a better business, and certainly, you'll never be sick." But when we fast, we are saying, "I will not be controlled by my five senses. I will be controlled by God. My life will not revolve around my senses. My life will focus on God."

Fasting helps us do that. Why? Three things are true of fasting.

1. Fasting is spiritual (not merely moderation in eating).

Biblical fasting is not the same thing as moderation in eating (although that may be good). Nor is it simply skipping meals for health reasons. No, biblical fasting is motivated by spiritual concerns--to please the Father who is in secret.

2. Fasting is secret (not to advertise ourselves).

We are not to fast to advertise ourselves, but to discipline ourselves. Our Father is in "secret," and fasting is to be done solely with Him in mind.

3. Fasting is an act of submission (we admit our dependence upon Him).

When we fast, we are demonstrating our humility and dependence upon God. Our God loves "secret" actions which take place in "secret" places which are taken to express devotion to Him. He is impressed by the unimpressive.

Dieterick Bonhoeffer said, "How is it possible to live the life of faith when we grow weary of prayer, when we lose our taste for the reading of the Bible, and when sleep, food, and sensuality deprive us of the joy of communion with God?" Fasting is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Fasting helps us to remember how much we need God. And fasting opens the door for God's blessing on our lives. V 18 "And thy Father, who seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

May God lead us as a church as we explore what may be a new area for many of us. I challenge you to make a personal study of what the Bible teaches about "Fasting" as together we uncover the riches of God's truth.

Next Week: Isaiah 58 "Proper Attitudes in Fasting"