

## Fasting (Matt 6.16-18)

### I. REVIEW

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is inviting his disciples into a greater experience of the blessed life (whole, complete, fulfilled, satisfied). This is centered around the eight beatitudes (Matt 5.3-12), which are the most succinct portrait of the values of the kingdom of heaven. The presence and growth of these virtues are the mark of our discipleship (Matt 5.13-16) and the measure of true and lasting greatness (Matt 5.17-20).
- B. At the heart of the Sermon is the call for Jesus' disciples to *be perfect* as the Father in heaven is perfect. This is a call for wholehearted obedience to God in every area of our lives — thought, word, and deed.  
  
<sup>48</sup>You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5.48)
- C. In chapter 6, Jesus outlines several practices (means of grace) that are to be *actively pursued* as we seek to cultivate the beatitudes in our lives.
- D. Jesus is not concerned to do away with means of grace — rather he is concerned to reorient *how* we pursue them (before the eyes of God alone) and *why* we pursue them (for true, lasting reward).
- E. One of the dynamic realities of understanding these means outlined in Matthew 6 is to see that they are all invitations to pursue voluntary expressions of *weakness*. In each of these pursuits we give up something that we generally understand as strength (money, time, control, personal rights, food, etc.) in order to more regularly align ourselves with our true dependence.

### II. THE CALL TO FAST

- A. The fourth practice Jesus outlines in Matthew 6 as something we are to actively pursue in partnership with his grace is the discipline of fasting.
- B. In a similar manner to both the practice of acts of mercy (6.1-4) and prayer (6.5-13), Jesus is not attempting to remove the practice of fasting from the life of a believer. Rather, he is again attempting to highlight the propensity of our hearts to seek to find accolades in appearing spiritual while our hearts are far from the Lord in pursuing these practices.
- C. Jesus sees fasting as a *normative* part of the Christian experience. He does not say “if” we fast, but rather “when” we fast. However, many Christians see this as nothing more than an optional aspect of walking with Jesus (if they have even thought of it at all).
- D. Fasting is the intentional abstaining from food for a time frame in order to position our hearts more before God to receive his grace. Although there is value in abstaining from other things (social media, entertainment, etc.), the practice of fasting is specifically related to abstaining from food.
- E. This is a practice that God gives to his people *primarily* for the purpose of seeing internal change and transformation as our hearts are positioned more readily to receive from his grace in our weakness.
- F. There is a dynamic relationship between our physical hunger/appetites and our spiritual hunger. Just as God has placed within us a *painful grace* in our bodies to remind us of our need for sustenance and strength, he has put within us a similar *painful grace* in our souls that tells us of our greater need for something eternal.

<sup>1</sup>As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. <sup>2</sup>My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (Ps 42.1-2)

<sup>1</sup>O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water (Ps 63.1)

- G. Many times, we seek to use temporal gifts (food, money, entertainment) to dull the ache of our spiritual hunger. Many believers do not possess a deep hunger for God precisely because we have filled ourselves at the table of the world and have grown dull to such longing.
- H. In the practice of fasting, we more regularly empty out ourselves (denying our physical appetites, putting ourselves in a posture of weakness) in order to become more aware of our spiritual state of poverty and weakness before the Lord.

### III. BIBLICAL MODELS FOR FASTING

- A. To set our hearts to seek the Lord (cf. Dan 9.3)

<sup>3</sup>Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting an sackcloth and ashes (Dan 9.3)

- B. To accompany seasons of repentance and confession (Dan 9.20; Joel 2.12-17)

<sup>12</sup>"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup>and rend your hearts and not your garments... <sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; <sup>16</sup>gather the people. (Joel 2.12-13, 15)

- C. To plead with God to fulfill his promises (Dan 9—10)

<sup>21</sup>I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass... <sup>3</sup>I turned my face to the Lord... with fasting (Dan 9.2-3)

- D. To experience a greater release of God's power (Matt 17.21)

<sup>21</sup>But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting (Matt 17.21)

- E. To receive greater understanding of God's word and his purposes (Dan 9.22-23; 10.12-14)

<sup>12</sup>Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God (Dan 10.12)

### IV. JESUS GIVES A NEW MODEL FOR FASTING (MATT 9.14-17)

<sup>14</sup>Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup>And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Matt 9.14-15)

- A. In Matthew 9, the disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus to ask him a question related to fasting. John the Baptist had continued the practice of the religious leaders of the day (Pharisees) and taught his disciples to fast. However, it was clear to them that Jesus did not fast (Matt 11.19) and did not teach his disciples to fast.
- B. In Jesus' answer he outlines a *new paradigm* for fasting that will mark the people of God in the new covenant. This paradigm of fasting is driven by something different. We do not fast to motivate God to pay attention to us or to love us, but rather as an expression of our longing for him and to position our hearts to receive the affections that he already has for us.
- C. To fast with this paradigm does not 'move Gods heart', but rather it moves ours. It decreases our spiritual dullness and the places in our lives where we (either intentionally or unintentionally) cloud our capacities to experience his presence with good things.
- D. This type of fast is based on desire. It is about understanding God's immense desire for us and responding to that desire with a practice intended and designed to increase our experience of that desire.

- E. We can also note that Jesus' paradigm of fasting here is tinged with an element of *pain*. There is a lack, a mourning, a longing that is to mark fasting. God gives painful graces to us in order that we will not remain stagnant in spirit or complacent.
- F. The paradigm for fasting that Jesus presents introduces into the practice of fasting the idea of *longing*. The idea of longing demonstrates that we experience a current lack of something and desire to be fulfilled, satisfied, etc.
- G. Many believers struggle to pursue such graces of the Spirit because they do not possess a vision for the fullness of life in God.

## V. THE REWARDS OF THE FATHER

- A. As with the earlier practices, Jesus contrasts two *rewards* that we can run after through the choices of our lives. We can either run after receiving our rewards in the eyes of men (affirmation, reverence, acceptance, etc.) or receiving our rewards in the eyes of God the Father.
- B. The experience of *rewards* related to fasting will rarely be experienced as one-for-one. Rather, we will experience more of God's grace and his life over time as we set our hearts to pursue this grace.
- C. The ways we experience the Father's rewards:
  1. **Internal:** the primary experience of rewards in this life is experienced internally. We experience more of God's manifest presence, his life, his love, and his power. We long for our *living condition* to more adequately reflect and align with the *eternal position* we have in Christ Jesus.
  2. **External:** although not primary, there are measures of external blessing that we will experience in our circumstances (family, relationships, financial, etc.) as we pursue obedience and devotion to the Lord in secret places. These are not the *primary* focus of our lives but are to be received with thanksgiving and humility when given.
  3. **Eternal:** there are also eternal aspects of our reward before God. Those who build upon the foundation of Christ with gold, silver, and precious metal will experience delight in the Lord for all eternity. Some will experience loss and regret at the judgment seat because they have built with faulty materials.
- D. There are many rewards related to fasting in this life
  1. Our **capacities are increased** to experience and encounter God's presence in our lives. One of the beautiful realities tied to fasting is that in emptying ourselves of strength (and our tendencies to dull ourselves through indulgence and self-gratification) is that our capacities to experience God's life are increased. Over time, as we walk in the grace of fasting, our hearts are enlarged to experience more of God's presence, life, and power (Eph 3.14-21).
  2. Our **desires are changed** from worldly things to spiritual things. One of the greatest gifts of practicing fasting is that God uses this means to change our desires. Over time, our love for his word, prayer, obedience, and the things of his Spirit will increase.
  3. Our **understanding is increased** in God's word (spirit of revelation). As seen in the book of Daniel, there is a specific correlation between the practice of fasting and the release of revelation. Over time, God gives more revelation (living understanding) as we walk before him in a posture of weakness and dependence.
  4. Our **souls are more in tune with the promptings of the Spirit** (leading, discernment, conviction, etc.). As we abstain from food, our souls are emptied out of the small indulgences that cloud our spiritual senses and our hearts.

5. Our ***identity is more firmly rooted*** in knowing God's affections for us. As we practice fasting from a posture of longing, God utilizes this grace as a means to further root us in our identity before him.
6. Our ***appetites are reordered*** in accordance with God's desires. In the practice of fasting we use our will to deny our appetites and indulgences. As we do this in partnership with God's grace, he releases to us a greater longing for spiritual things *above* earthly things. Fasting is a practice that helps us rightly order our use of earthly goods — not as idols or gods to fulfill us ultimately, but as gifts that are to be enjoyed with contentment and thanksgiving.
7. Our ***bodies, minds, and souls experience more of our dependence***. Fasting makes us weak in our bodies, our minds, and our abilities. If we practice this regularly, we will be brought face to face in our own physical limitations with the reality that we are poor in spirit. Jesus calls this ***blessed*** (Matt 5.3, 6).

## VI. PRACTICING FASTING

- A. Fasting is a *normative* practice in the life of a disciple of Jesus. Although there are situations in which fasting food is not possible (certain chronic physical conditions, children, pregnant women, etc.), it is clear that Jesus expected that fasting would be a regular part of his disciples' lives.
- B. Fasting is always voluntary. It is never *required* to belong within a spiritual family. However, it is always a step that we are invited to participate in to give up things in order to position ourselves before God to receive more from him.
- C. It is important to simply begin somewhere. Do not let your fear of fasting keep you from jumping in even in a small way. There are many creative ways to start fasting (fast a meal, fast solid foods, fasting sugar and meat).
- D. When practicing fasting it is important to plan for when and how you will fast. Set regular times/days that you will set to walk in in a rhythm of fasting. If it is not something you plan to do, you will likely never do it. Many saints throughout history practiced regular weekly fasting (1-2 days).
- E. When we fast, we need to be aware of practicing our fasting with a wrong spirit. Jesus outlines that we can be tempted to use our fasting as a means to garner favor and to boast in our religious accomplishments. We can also fast to attempt to earn God's approval or his favor. We must consistently be on guard against practicing spiritual disciplines with a wrong spirit.
- F. However, if we discern that we are fasting in a wrong spirit, the answer is not to stop the practice! Rather, we repent for the wrong spirit and we continue to practice the discipline with a heart set to receive and experience God's grace.
- G. Find a few friends to jump in with you in a regular rhythm of fasting. Do this with your community group or your discipleship group. To not call attention to yourself does not mean that literally no one can ever know that you are fasting, but that you don't promote yourself and your dedication to God through it. Practicing the spiritual disciplines with others is a dynamic way to help us in following through and more regularly walking out what we desire.
- H. Understand that it will be difficult. Fasting rarely *feels* good, and we rarely see the *rewards* from the hand of the Father in the midst of a fast. Many people stop fasting because they did not want to be insincere when it felt difficult in the midst of the practice or because they didn't experience something dramatic in it.
- I. When you break your fast run into the arms of God and delight in your free acceptance before him and set yourself to do it again the next time you have scheduled. Don't disqualify yourself from God's grace because you were weak and broke your fast. You are not accepted before God on the basis of your fasting, but on the basis of Christ's righteousness freely given to you by faith.