

## ***Fasting – Applied***

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

For some of you, this past Ash Wednesday brought a spiritual discipline into your life that has been rarely practiced. Oh, most of you are used to hearing about, and may even practice the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and Bible Study. But our focus this year incorporates the exercise of fasting to accompany those other disciplines. And that, I dare say, was probably a new experience for some of you.

That's why I spent the time I did last Sunday introducing the topic, and sharing a couple of my own personal experiences as a novice in the area of fasting. I also mentioned some resources: Dr. Loggin's thoughts in *The New Journey*, Bill Bright's section in the book, and the little text I received in Bible School, *God's Chosen Fast*. I also handed out an insert that included several examples from Scripture that described the applications and benefits of fasting. My goal today is to focus briefly on several of those passages as we move forward in this Lenten exercise of prayer and fasting.

To begin, I need to repeat what I said last week that the purpose for fasting is not the earning of spiritual brownie points, nor to motivate (*arm-twist*) God into action. Neither of these should be our motivation. We need to remember that to fast is to humble ourselves, or give up something dear to us, so that God can more deeply fill our lives with more of Himself. That which we are denying is to be replaced with something of eternal value.

But with that being said, there is a place for this oft-overlooked discipline. After all, there is a reason it's mentioned so often in Scripture in connection with a host of personal and national struggles. Apparently, there is an element of self and personal pride that must be addressed when other issues or concerns are tackled. And the first on the list is the realization that our relationship with God is not "all about us."

**Isaiah 58:1-4** "Cry loudly, do not hold back; Raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression And to the house of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup> "Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, They delight in the nearness of God. <sup>3</sup> "Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?" Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. <sup>4</sup> "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

Self-centered worship was a problem in Ezekiel's day, Isaiah's, and Paul's. In this passage from Isaiah 58 we see God's frustration in the people's fasting and doing other religious actions for all the wrong reasons. They figured that if they did the things that "made God happy," then He would surely "make them happy" in return. God

was a spiritual vending machine. Simply satisfy God with some trinket, and He will provide the necessary response.

Oh, the people sought the Lord. They asked Him for just decisions. They "delight in the nearness of God." But their motivations were all backwards. They fasted, humbling themselves, and struggled through their forms of worship expecting God to jump. But God was neither humored, nor fooled.

All you have to do is look around our society today and see the same attitudes. All around us you'll hear discussions and personal opinions about worship music, sermons, settings, print or projection, pews or chairs, length, etc. And almost all of the chatter centers on human perspectives and desires. "We're doing all the right things to make God happy, right? Don't we deserve His favor and intervention?" The focus is not on God, but on us.

Very little of the dialogue asks the question, "*What does God want in our worship or devotional walks? What will bring Him honor and glory, regardless of what it may cost me?*" Some of the paths chosen by people may even have godly and holy elements. But even these, done for the wrong reasons, bring God no pleasure.

You see, it isn't about the forms as much as it is about the heart of the worshipper. One form can be pleasing to God when the heart and life of the believer is right. However, that very same form can be repulsive to God when the heart of the believer is self-serving and self-righteous. Worship and personal devotion is about the humble (*self-sacrificing*) heart of an obedient believer lived out in daily service with kindness, and generosity.

**Isaiah 58:5-7** "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord? <sup>6</sup> "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

As commentator Matthew Henry explains,

"A fast is a day to afflict the soul; if it does not express true sorrow for sin, and does not promote the putting away of sin, it is not a fast. These professors had shown sorrow on stated or occasioned fasts. But they indulged pride, covetousness, and malignant passions. To be liberal (generous) and merciful is more acceptable to God than mere fasting, which, without them, is vain and hypocritical... Good works will bring the blessing of God, provided they are done from love to God and man, and wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit."

It is a humble heart applied to the life and worship of a child of God that will bring honor to the Father and blessing to the believer, and unity to the Body.

**Isaiah 58:8-12** "Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the Lord will be

your rear guard. 9"Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, 10And if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like mid-day. 11"And the Lord will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail..."

But lest you think that I have just make a case against fasting, I must clarify; I have simply shown the need to do any religious discipline from a right motivation. I have not abdicated the function of all spiritual disciplines, only challenged us to seriously consider the why's of doing them. For the Bible clearly shows the need to fast:

### **When you're far from God**

1 Kings 21:27-29 It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. 28 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29 "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son's days."

### **When you are under conviction of sin**

1 Samuel 7:5-6 Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the Lord for you." 6 They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.

### **When you are overcome with grief**

2 Samuel 1:11-12 Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. 12 They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

Nehemiah 1:3-4 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." 4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

### **When you are facing trials or persecution**

Esther 4:16 "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."

### **When you need direction from God**

Judges 20:26 Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

### **When you are in prayer**

Daniel 9:3 So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes.

Luke 2:36-37 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.

### **When you are facing temptation**

Luke 4:1-2 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. (see also Matt. 4:1ff)

### **When you worship and meditate on God**

Matthew 6:16-18 "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Fasting is not a discipline from antiquity, to be observed academically and studied from a distance. It is to be dusted off and practiced routinely, as a matter of regular spiritual exercise. Not as a source of legalistic pride or divine coercion, but as a statement of dependence and humility before a sovereign and almighty God.