

The Practices of the Christian Life – 3 - Fasting

As we consider the practices of the Christian life, we want to make sure we do not malpractice any of those practices.

Fasting is one of those topics greatly misunderstood and I suppose we could say, greatly 'malpractised'. Most Christians either avoid the whole thing, or they fall into the asceticism we recently saw Paul condemn in Colossians. In many cases, people fast just because they hear that Christians do, not knowing or understanding the meaning.

The difficulty with the topic of fasting is that the Bible never stops to give us a clear-cut definition and prescription for its use. You'll find that the Bible treats fasting in a 'by-the-way' fashion. It almost never stops to describe fasting, to explain it, or even to prescribe it.

In fact, we never find a very clear command to fast anywhere in the Bible.

The closest we come is in the book of Leviticus, where God tells Israel that on the yearly Day of Atonement, believers are to 'afflict their souls'. This Hebrew phrase simply means, "to be humbled". This began to be taken to mean 'fasting', so that by the time of Paul, the Day of Atonement is called 'the Fast' in Acts 27:9.

We have many examples of people who fasted. David fasted when his child was to die. Ezra and his people fasted when they needed direction as to how to get back to Israel. Nehemiah fasted when he heard of the broken walls of Jerusalem. Israel fasted in response to Ezra's preaching. Daniel fasted as he sought the Lord. Nineveh fasted in response to Jonah's preaching. Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights. The church at Antioch fasted before sending out Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas fasted when they appointed elders in the churches and left them there.

With all these examples, it would be hard to believe that fasting is not supposed to be a part of every Christian's life. Indeed, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not say, **"If** you fast", He says, **"When** you fast". Just because something isn't commanded does not mean we are not supposed to do it. It is the one under the Law who is only concerned about keeping the list of compulsory commands. It is the slave of love who seeks to please the Lord, and thus will incorporate fasting into his life, like the other love-slaves we just mentioned.

The closest we come to understanding what fasting is about is in this passage. Here, false fasting comes into conflict with true fasting. The Pharisees and John's disciples fasted often. Jesus' disciples did not. So they ask Him, "Why do we fast, but your disciples do not?"

This conversation shows that the kind of fasting which Jesus required, and the kind of fasting which the Jews were practicing were two very different things. Between the time of Ezra and the time of Christ, all kinds of new fasts began to be instituted.

By the time of Christ, some Pharisees fasted twice every week. Fasting had lost its intended meaning. It had become nearly the opposite of what it was intended to do. Fasting emphasises humility and emptiness, but it became something where people, who were full of themselves, would take great pride in it. Remember the Pharisee who boasted, 'I give tithes of all I possess, I fast twice a week'.

Jesus' answer gives us the clearest picture of what fasting is about in all Scripture. He creates a word picture for those asking the question. It is the picture of one of the happiest events in human life - a wedding. The day of a wedding is a day of celebration. No more so than in the Jewish tradition, where the groom would be accompanied by cheering, happy friends, to fetch his bride, and the celebration would go on for days. It was a time of extended feasting. Fasting during a wedding was the very opposite of what you do on such an occasion.

He goes on to say in verse 21 that when the bridegroom is taken from them, then they will fast. This suggests the opposite. The celebration is over. In fact, the mourning and longing that fasting is associated with in the Old Testament takes over.

Who is the bridegroom in this picture? It is Christ.

Who are the friends of the bridegroom? His disciples – you and me, if we have trusted Him as Lord.

Here is what we can draw out from Jesus' words:

Firstly, the nature of fasting has more to do with mourning and grief than it does with joy. That much comes out in this passage. Fasting is not what you do at a wedding; it is what you do when bereaved.

Secondly, fasting has to do with longing, not with satisfaction. When you have the bridegroom, you don't fast, because you have him. When he is gone, you fast because you don't have him and you wish you did.

Let's make some applications.

When Christ was on the earth, it made no sense for the disciples to mourn and long. He was right there. John said that they saw and heard and handled the Word of Life. There was no place for mourning because the Joy of the whole earth was physically present. In the same way, it made no sense to long for Him if He was right there. They could walk up to Him and commune with Him at any time.

However, He died. He rose, and saw them briefly in the forty days that followed, and then He ascended. He was gone.

Now if that was the whole story, Christians would have to fast their whole lives because Jesus would now be gone forever. But Jesus made a promise that He would come to them in two ways. He said He would come personally to fetch them to be with Him in His Father's house.

But secondly, He also promised to come to them another way:

John 14:16-20 *And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever -- ¹⁷ "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ ¶ "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ "At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.*

Here's the point - Jesus is gone from us physically. I doubt if there will be any fasting in heaven, any more than there was fasting when Jesus was here. But between now and heaven, or His Second Coming, is the time for fasting.

And since He is always with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, I am going to suggest that the time for fasting is when your **experience of Christ has become as if He were absent**. You are still saved, the Spirit of God still resides within you, but a conscious experience of His presence has withdrawn. You do not experience Him. There isn't a closeness in prayer. There isn't a personal touch to your devotions. There isn't a majesty to singing the hymns. There isn't a sense of his hand opening up opportunities to witness and disciple and love others. Things have simply become cold.

Christ is spoken about, sung about, but it is not the celebration of the friends of the bridegroom. It is not the joy of fellowship. It is just abstract religious ideas, some forms and some rituals, some religious habits, but the joy has gone.

That is the time to fast. When the bridegroom is gone – not just to heaven, for then we would always fast; not from your heart, because He will never leave you, nor forsake you, but from your spiritual sight - then we must fast. Put simply, when we are spiritually dry, it is time to fast. When we are spiritually low, empty, lacking in love and joy in our Lord, it is time to fast, because something has entered our walk with God that is hindering the Spirit's illumination of Christ to us.

What does fasting have to do with a close experience of Christ? Only for this reason: Fasting and

prayer are inseparable. Fasting without prayer is of no value. Biblical fasting is seeking God's face in prayer to the point of suspending eating until you find what it is you are seeking. In the main, what we are seeking is a return of the bridegroom's felt presence.

What I am assuming is that this close experience with Christ is what you long for. I am not, during this sermon, trying to prove to you that you should long for this, but speaking to those who do long for it.

You have experienced what Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of in his hymn: "We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread, And long to feast upon Thee still."

Assuming that to be true, I want to attempt to explain why fasting accomplishes this:

Fasting is a natural sign of grief. If you have experienced bereavement, or been near someone who has, you will know that eating is about the last thing someone wants to do when experiencing grief. Without even trying, the person turns away from food. Food has to do with joy and pleasure, and in that state of grief, eating seems contradictory.

Spiritually, when Christ is no longer felt as He ought to be, we should feel grief. The One most precious to us is not felt. If we miss our spouses and children and one another when separated, how great should the sense of loss be when Christ seems distant.

When we eat, we usually enjoy it. Eating has to do with pleasure and joy. It has to do with fellowship – we eat together, we get to know people over meals. Fasting says, "How can I go on eating, if Christ seems far from me? How can I feed my stomach, when my soul is lean? How can I carry on with the external pleasures of fellowship when I have nothing like that internally?"

In fact, if you are lean spiritually, and you go on pleasuring your body – there is a word for that in the Bible: 'carnal'. It is the sort of thing the unsaved, sensual person does, who only desires pleasures for the here and now.

Fasting helps because it represents and even encourages a kind of grief – my walk with Christ is not what it should be. Christ has not been real to me in the Word; my fruitfulness in witnessing is waning; my prayers seem to be going unanswered. Christ seems far.

Fasting magnifies our spiritual hunger

A person who does not stop to eat is usually consumed with something else. Whether it is a problem pressing upon them or a desire to complete a project at work – they are driven to neglect regular needs and activities so as to complete their goal. In other words, one desire overcomes another one. The desire to succeed or to solve a problem overcomes the desire to eat or even sleep.

When we fast, we are taking this into our walk with Christ. We deliberately abstain from food, because we are consumed with something else – namely, the absence of close fellowship with Christ.

The physical hunger you experience when fasting is a reminder of the spiritual hunger you have for Christ. In a way, fasting says, I want my soul fed again before I feed my belly. I do not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes out of the mouth of God. If my spirit is empty, then I will not fill my belly. I will not please my body over my soul. I want Christ more than food. I want that intimacy again. And I show how much I want it by suspending what I usually do. My spiritual hunger is greater than my physical hunger.

When you fast, more than anything you are praying for revival. The cry of your heart is 'Return, O Lord, how long' You are calling on the Lord to come back and allow your heart to again rejoice in Him.

Fasting focuses our attention on Christ.

Fasting is suspending the normal activities of our day to concentrate on revival. It is making the pursuit of Christ our focus. You do not ordinarily refuse food, you ordinarily eat. You only refuse to

eat when under some special circumstance.

So we fast when our spiritual life is at a low ebb and we do not want life to continue as normal. We want to focus on restoring the joy of our salvation, so we suspend what we would normally do, as far as possible. You can't always suspend everything – you have to go to school or work, you have to live in your family. But you can choose to suspend certain things so as to focus on seeking the Lord. Those things need not only be food. It can be: Sleep, marital relations, Internet, TV, books. This is how people who cannot fast physically due to diabetes or blood pressure or other health issues can still fast. You can fast from what you would normally do, so as to seek the Lord.

It is not very sensible to fast from food and do everything else you normally would. Sometimes Christians skip some meals, but they go on amusing themselves with TV and Internet, they laugh at the same comedies, they read the comics. They don't pray much anymore or delve into the Word more. This misses the point. There is nothing spiritual about skipping meals. God is not glorified because your stomach is empty. Better to change as much as you can for the day or days you fast to truly focus on seeking the Lord while He may be found.

Because fasting produces an ongoing feeling of hunger, it helps us to have an ongoing prayer focus. The Bible tells us to 'pray without ceasing', to be 'continual in prayer', to 'abide in Christ', to 'meditate on His Word day and night'. Our ongoing sense of hunger and neediness helps us have a continual focus on Christ.

A fast is prayer intensified to the point of a consuming longing. It is the longing of grief, the longing of an obsession, the single-mindedness of an obsession. It excludes eating; pleasuring ourselves, carrying on with regular activities, rejoicing in the lesser gifts, because in fasting we are saying the greatest Gift is not as visible or sensible to us.

When we understand fasting like this, it protects us from asceticism. We do not fast just for the sake of fasting. We do not fast to punish the body for indulging. We do not fast to strengthen our willpower. We do not fast to tell others how often we fast or for how long.

We fast whenever the bridegroom seems to have been taken from us (and we will always find it is we who have turned from Him).

This also answers the question of how long we are supposed to fast. The answer is: as long as it takes. If it takes one meal to regain a sensed communion with Christ – that is when you break off fasting, and begin feasting – rejoicing in the return of the bridegroom. If it takes a whole day, or two, or a week or two weeks of self-examination, confession, repentance, crying out to Him for His manifestation to us – then that is how long we ought to fast.

It answers the question of what I am supposed to fast from. Answer: whatever seems natural when you are consumed by grief, longing and focus.

When we try and convert fasting into a ritual which we do for certain prescribed periods of time, we miss the power of it. Fasting is an intensifier of God-seeking prayer. Its sense of grief humbles and motivates us. Its hunger longs after God. Its gnawing nature focuses us.

But fasting aims to feast. You fast so as to be satisfied. You abstain from lesser pleasures because Christ seems absent. When he returns, you eat.

Perhaps you remember Christ sayin:

Revelation 3:20 *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."*

Here is an Old Testament illustration of why we fast and what it is we are doing:

I sleep, but my heart is awake; It is the voice of my beloved! He knocks, saying, "Open for me, my

sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; For my head is covered with dew, My locks with the drops of the night." {The bride, the church, thinks to herself;} I have taken off my robe; How can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them? My beloved put his hand By the latch of the door, And my heart yearned for him. I arose to open for my beloved, And my hands dripped with myrrh, My fingers with liquid myrrh, On the handles of the lock. I opened for my beloved, But my beloved had turned away and was gone.

[It is our sin, slothfulness that causes fellowship with Christ to wane]

My heart leaped up when he spoke. [The experience of fasting:] I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen who went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; The keepers of the walls Took my veil away from me.

(Son 5:2-7)

Chapter 3 shows us what happens when fasting succeeds:

By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him. "I will rise now," I said, "And go about the city; In the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love." I sought him, but I did not find him. The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, "Have you seen the one I love?" Scarcely had I passed by them, When I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go, Until I had brought him to the house of my mother, And into the chamber of her who conceived me.

(Son 3:1-4)

That leads us to the application. If fasting is what Christians do when the bridegroom seems to have withdrawn, I suggest that the only Christians who should not fast are those who never experience this. So, if you are a Christian who has experienced unbroken, continual fullness of joy, and an ever-brightening sense of illumination, then you are unique and fasting is not for you. But if your experience is one of times of Christ seeming far, fasting is a way of bringing things to a head. As the physical fast tends to purify your body, focused, hungry prayer will purify your soul. As you spend hours, or maybe days examining yourself, you are sure to identify attitudes, thoughts which have not been pleasing to Christ. It is not that fasting does the work. The Spirit does the work. Prayer and fasting gives Him the necessary time and undivided attention in order to do the work.

A message about fasting always has a hidden danger – to draw too much attention to fasting itself. Before long we are back to asceticism – willpower religion. My goal this morning has been to show you from the Word of God why fasting is a gift to restore spiritual joy and communion with Christ, when it has dried up. But let me end this way – if you walk out of here, and no fasting occurs in your life this week – it must be because you are in a revived, abounding fellowship with Christ. But perhaps there is some work to be done, to call on the Bridegroom to come and manifest Himself again, that we might rejoice with Him. The reason Jesus said 'when you fast' was because He knew such times were a part of every Christian's life, and therefore.

In fact, fasting reveals something far deeper – how much do you really want Christ? Enough to lose your physical appetites? Enough to interrupt your schedule? Enough to cause physical discomfort? So that's where we'll leave it today – how hungry are you for Christ?