



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS



Fasting: It's What's for Dinner

Tim Badal | March 16, 2014 | Matthew 6:16-18

The Upside-down Kingdom Series, Lessons Learned from the Sermon on the Mount, Part 22

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 6. For some time now, we've been in our series "Upside-down Kingdom" looking at how Jesus teaches us what it means to live differently through His Sermon on the Mount. He has told us that as His followers we need to live very differently from our friends, family and those in the world. He's been showing us systematically how upside-down thinking affects all aspects of our lives. It begins with our attitudes. As followers of Christ, our attitudes are going to be different. This means the way we think about ourselves, about our relationships with God and about our relationships with others. Christ wants us to be poor in spirit, to mourn over our sins, to be meek, to be pure in heart and to be peacemakers.

Jesus says a true follower of His doesn't stop with those attitudes; it's not just about thinking the right thoughts. These attitudes are going to lead to actions. We have looked at different actions such as how we treat others, how we engage in life with our husbands or wives and how we take oaths or swear by things. God has said we need to live very differently in these types of actions. They affect how we relate to the world around us.

More recently we have focused on the issue of affections: our relationships with God. We've looked at giving and praying and are about to look at fasting. When we look at these types of things, we tend to think, "Giving, praying and fasting all have to do with my relationship with God." Yes they do, but the master Teacher Jesus reminds us in our passage that there is more to it than that. Even as we relate with Him there are implications for other relationships as well. Let me explain.

When we give, we are not only giving back to God but the Bible says we are also giving to others. We honor God as we give our tithes and offerings to Him but we're also honoring others as we serve them through our generosity.

What about prayer? Prayer is a reminder that our Christian lives aren't just about serving others. It reminds us that our God is our Father in heaven Whose name is to be hallowed—honored as holy. We must remember the importance and priority of engaging in a personal relationship with our God.

How else does fasting affect our relationships? Not only does fasting involve our relationship with God but Jesus reminds us it is about how we relate to ourselves. Fasting has to do with my body. Fasting deals with the needs, desires, wants, hungers and appetites of my body. Jesus is saying if you want to have a right relationship with God and a right relationship with others then a vibrant, healthy and mature Christian is one who is able to keep his or her appetites and desires under control, not pursuing them for selfish gain but for the glory of God. As we show our affection to God, we must recognize that we also need to pay attention to how we relate with ourselves. With that in mind, let's look at this issue of fasting.

Fasting is an issue we don't hear about or preach about very often in the church. We don't hear of people doing it very often. For many of us this is a brand new ball game. That is why I love preaching verse-by-verse; it forces us as a congregation to address seemingly obscure passages or practices.

Let's address this issue and put ourselves under the teaching of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We're going to look at this passage under the heading "Fasting: It's What's for Dinner." Let's look at our text. Matthew 6:16-18 says:

¹⁶"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

How many of you want to be rewarded by God? Then you need to listen to the words of God.

Let's go to prayer, asking that the Spirit would open our hearts and that we might be rewarded because we choose to follow God and not self.

Father God, teach us by Your Spirit what it means to fast. This is a brand new paradigm or activity for some of us. Open our hearts to hear what Your Word has to say. For those of us who have heard this over and over again, reacquaint us with this discipline so that we may rejoice in You as the greatest of all good things. Lead us, guide us, direct us and sanctify us by Your truth. As we leave this place let us be more like You in our understanding and in the lives we live in the week to come. Direct my words so that they may be pleasing to You. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I want to show you this video clip to begin:

Beef stroganoff. Beef bourguignon. Irish beef stew. Beef brisket. Chateaubriand. Sauerbraten. Roast beef. Catalanian beef ragu. Mongolian beef. Chicken fried steak. Steak Diane. Grilled steaks balsamico. Hamburgers. Sizzling beef. Spicy braised beef. Barbeque beef ribs. Beef wellington. Peppered beef. Beef jerky. Beef with broccoli. Beef burritos. Beef fajitas. Beef tacos. Do you see where I'm going with this? Beef. It's what's for dinner.

Right away you might say, "Tim, that is absolutely the worst illustration for a message addressing the subject of fasting." But I want to give you a little background behind the slogan "Beef. It's what's for dinner."

"Beef. It's what's for dinner," is a slogan many believe resurrected the beef market in America. In the early '90's, chicken had taken on the massive market share of meat consumption. Pork was struggling; beef was really struggling. The cattlemen's association wanted to do something that would make beef synonymous with dinnertime. They came up with this slogan which has become one of the most golden advertising campaigns ever used. Advertisers look at "Beef. It's what's for dinner" as the gold standard for advertising. Here's why. The goal of marketing is for 45-55% of people to have a connection with the product being advertised when they hear or see an advertisement. "Beef. It's what's for dinner" has a 90% saturation rate. So when you say, "What's for dinner?" 90% of people respond, "Beef." The beef industry wanted to see consumption go up so they had to connect "beef" with anytime someone thought about dinner. They got it down to a science. As a result beef had a resurgence in the American meat market.

So you might ask, "What does a rib eye have to do with fasting?" Fasting is God's advertising and marketing plan to remind us that whether we eat, drink or whatever we do it should always be done to the glory of God ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)). It reminds us when we see food not to think about the food before us but to think of the Giver of the gift. We should think of the One Who has so graciously and generously given to us. Fasting reminds us not to put our attention solely on what is before us but to always go to the God Who has given it.

So we should ask, "If that is what fasting is all about, then why have so few of us ever done it? Why have so few of us engaged in this discipline?" There are a few reasons. For many within the evangelical church, fasting is not a big deal because of ignorance. Many of you don't know what fasting is all about. Maybe you've heard about it but you really don't know anything about it. Because of that, we want you to turn to the Elder Distinctive provided for you concerning this issue. <http://www.villagebible.org/articles/fasting/>

An Elder Distinctive is something that helps explain a spiritual discipline, theology or something regarding ministry that we want to help you understand. This distinctive addresses the issue of fasting and discusses things like how you do it, when you're supposed to do it, what's involved in it and how to focus your attention on it. There are many things I won't address in this message because they are addressed in that distinctive. So take some time after this message to read that. <http://www.villagebible.org/articles/fasting/>

There are some other reasons why we don't fast. Many of us don't fast because it has fallen prey to being guilty by association. How apropos it is that we're addressing the issue of fasting during the season of Lent. I want to make it abundantly clear that the elders of this church have no issue with observing Lent. We throw no barbs at it. It's a wonderful opportunity for us to celebrate and prepare ourselves for Easter. If fasting can help us do that, it's a wonderful thing.

However, we recognize that Lent has been abused by many people. We hear many people say they are fasting from something for Lent but they have no relationship with God. They talk about this spiritual activity, yet they have no spiritual connection to the God Whom they say they are worshipping. Throughout these 40 days of Lent, we hear about some of the absurd things people are fasting from and they have no spiritual understanding of why they are doing it.

Another reason why fasting doesn't happen is because there are many believers who profess Christ but struggle with these issues of affections: giving, praying and fasting. They don't fast because they don't give and they don't pray. Why in the world would they do one if they don't do the other two? So many of us say we have this relationship with Christ but our affections never lead to any type of action.

Maybe you are thinking, "Tim, that's okay. Fasting is optional." As we look at Matthew 6, I'm here to contend that fasting is not optional just as giving and praying aren't optional for the believer. Twice Jesus says, "*When you fast...*" He's not suggesting it; He's expecting it. He expects the child of God to fast.

That begs the question, "If God requires it and Christ commands it, why aren't we doing it?" So whenever we come across food, drink or any other earthly thing, fasting should always remind us of our Father in heaven.

To do so we need to address four things:

The Definition of Fasting

The Dilemma of Fasting Today

The Distortion Surrounding Fasting

The Discipline We Should Engage In

1. The Definition of Fasting

The definition will be gleaned from understanding this principle or discipline from biblical times. We have to ask ourselves, "What does the Bible say about fasting?"

Maybe you think, "Fasting isn't talked about much in the Bible." We believe in the Lord's Supper—fasting is spoken about more often than communion. We believe in baptism—fasting comes up in the Bible more than baptism does. This discipline is discussed in the Bible so we need to address it.

We should look first to the Old Testament. We're not going to look at every single passage because the Bible is full of passages on fasting. That is one way the Elder Distinctive on this subject will help you. It cites every verse I'm alluding to in our message today.

In the Old Testament we see that this discipline of fasting came under the Law of Moses. The nation of Israel was commanded to fast once a year during the celebration of Yom Kippur. During that one feast a national time of fasting was required. We also know from Scripture that fasting was done in the Old Testament during times of national distress or emergency. The Israelite priests or judges—even some kings—would declare a national time of prayer and fasting.

Now fast-forward to the Gospels. Right away we see that fasting is still part of Jewish life. John the Baptist was part of the great revival in Israel, calling people to prepare for the Kingdom of God. We know that the Pharisees commended John the Baptist's disciples for being men who fasted often. On the other hand,

Jesus' disciples were pointed out as men who didn't fast and Jesus said, "They don't need to fast while I'm here; it's a time of celebration. But there will be a season when I am gone and they will fast."

We say, "So John the Baptist fasted. What about Jesus?" In Matthew 4 Jesus was driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness where He endured 40 days and 40 nights without food. During His time of fasting He was bombarded with temptations by the devil.

Now fast-forward beyond the Gospels to the early church period. Jesus' followers—His disciples—continued the practice of fasting. We see it in Acts 13:3 in the church at Antioch. The church prayed and fasted in order to seek God's wisdom regarding sending Paul and Barnabas into missionary work. So we see fasting happening in the Gospels and in the early church.

In Jesus' day there had been a change to the rules of fasting. It used to be a yearly thing or something for special occasions. The people of God would fast as individuals or as a group of people. The Pharisees turned it into a mandated practice twice a week. In Luke 18:11-12 the Pharisee prays in the temple and says, "Thank You, Lord, that I'm not like these others for I tithe all my income and I fast twice a week." They used it as a way of separating "the men from the boys" spiritually. If you fasted twice a week then you were spiritually mature; if you didn't then you were spiritually naïve. So Jesus is articulating the importance of fasting but also pointing out it is not that kind of fasting.

As we see the overview of fasting in the Scriptures we might say that our definition will only involve food and drink. That is only true if we take Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 7 out of its biblical context. In this passage Paul says something that expands our understanding of fasting. He is addressing the Corinthian church about the marital relationship. He says, "Husbands, you don't own your body; your wife does. Wives, you don't own your body; your husband does. There is to be an ongoing intimate relationship between husbands and wives. It is good, it is right and it keeps sexual temptation from running amuck within the church. God has given this grace of intimacy so use it and be filled with joy as a result of it."

Then Paul goes on and expands fasting beyond just food and drink. In 1 Corinthians 7:5 he says, "*Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*"

So Paul says fasting can also involve intimacy. I want to be clear about this because I don't want there to be fights between couples later when one party says, "I'm fasting. Sorry Honey!" The fasting Paul is talking about has to be agreed upon by both parties.

When the two agree to fast from intimacy, they are saying, "Instead of pursuing intimacy with each other, together we are going to pursue intimacy with God. We are going to forgo the physical intimacy between us to pursue the spiritual intimacy as a couple with God." Maybe there's an issue, struggle or concern that a family has. It is altogether good and profitable for the husband and wife of that family to forgo intimacy in order to pursue the will of God through their fasting.

This type of fasting has nothing to do with food or drink. Notice also that it is to be done for a limited time. The word (*kairos*), translated as “limited time,” there means “very short.” It is to be a short time. There’s to be a set boundary for the time of fasting from physical intimacy.

Notice also that it isn’t just about saying no to the physical act; it is for the purpose of prayer. That means you can’t say, “I’m fasting from this because I want to show my husband or wife who’s boss,” or, “I want to use this time of fasting as a weapon.” Paul is telling us through the Holy Spirit that when you fast it is for the specific purpose of praying. Then when you have concluded that purpose, you are to bring back the intimacy before the devil is able to tempt you.

Maybe you are thinking, “Tim, why would you spend all that time on this aspect of fasting?” This passage shows us that fasting is not to be relegated to only food or drink.

The Definition

So with that in mind, here is my definition of fasting that I believe is true to the overall understanding of the text: **Fasting is the self-denial of earthly things for a measured period of time to heighten our desire for spiritual things.** Let’s break that down:

1. Fasting is self-denial. This means you are making a concerted decision to give up something. God has not required you to give it up. Rather you are saying, “I am willing to give up something that God says I have the freedom to participate in, be part of or have. I’m willing to give that up. I am making the decision to deny myself.”
2. Fasting is for earthly things. As a follower of Jesus Christ there is a big difference between fasting and abstaining. You do not fast from evil. The Apostle Paul says, “*Abstain from every form of evil*” (1 Thessalonians 5:22). So I can’t say, “Guess what I gave up for Lent? I gave up stealing.” No! That’s not what fasting is. We are to abstain from evil because God commands that. Fasting is very different. Fasting is denying a good that God has given us.
3. Fasting is for a measured period of time. A real fast is one where you make a commitment saying, “I’m going to begin on this day and end at a predetermined time in the future.” All of that is built into our Elder Distinctive on fasting.
4. Fasting is to heighten our desire for spiritual things. Fasting is supposed to elevate the spiritual over the physical realm. Fasting does something quite amazing: it reminds us that we are not just body but we are both body and spirit. It reminds us that we are not just material but we are also immaterial. So when we fast we are saying, “I recognize that I am not merely flesh and bone but I’m also spiritual. I’m willing to say no to the flesh for the sake of the spirit. I’m willing to deny myself the things of this earth to elevate heavenly things.”

Jesus says, “You can’t serve God and money at the same time. You’re either going to love one or hate the other” (Luke 16:13). He says, “Don’t worry about what you eat or drink. Don’t worry about what you wear. Seek Me and My Kingdom first” (Matthew 6:25, 33). So fasting is agreeing with God that while the flesh is

important, if you neglect the spirit you'll have no relationship with Christ. It says, "The flesh is important but it is secondary to things of the spiritual realm."

Hunger

When we fast, we are acknowledging that we are people who have hungers, yearnings and appetites. Every pang of hunger and every desire we have reminds us that we are needy people. We have needs, wants and desires. Those aren't bad things. We're not to discount those things. God has created us that way. Jesus Christ—Who was perfect—had hungers, yearnings and appetites and He didn't sin in those. But He never allowed those things to be elevated over the will and Word of God.

We have desires for things. Maybe you're going shopping and say, "I have to have that clothing item," "I have to have that car," or "We have to get that house." Whatever our desires, these things are good. God gives every perfect gift. God has been so generous to us because all that we have in this world comes from Him.

When those desires come, we have to ask ourselves the all-important question, "Am I going to pursue these with God or apart from God?" When you purchase things apart from God and then look at them with God in mind, you're going to get buyer's remorse. When I look at the things I've bought apart from God I always have buyer's remorse because I inherently have embraced the idea that fulfilling that desire will somehow fill or take care of an area of emptiness in my life. I must recognize that God is the only One Who will fill and satisfy me and that this thing is just one way in which God satisfies. God graces me with the opportunity to have life, breath and to be able to take care of my family. When I recognize these things, then that desire stays where it needs to stay. It is a tool of God's to show His grace, power and authority. Fasting shows our hungers and desires.

Humility

When we fast we are recognizing that we are not the king. It's a reminder that we are under authority when we say, "I am not going to do this thing; I'm going to deny myself." Kings get everything they want. If a king desires something then he gets it.

Here's the problem with the American church: we are producing the king mentality instead of the servant mentality. American Christians come into a church and say, "What are you going to do for me? How is Village Bible Church going to serve me? Tim better be on his A-game. The worship team better bring it today. My Sunday school teacher better have it. Because if I'm not satisfied I'll go down to the church next door where they have what I want." Then we're not happy there so we go to the next church. We're in this perpetual state of asking, "What will the church do for me?" instead of asking, "How am I going to humble myself and honor my King?"

Honor

Fasting is a reminder that God is the only King. God is the only One Who is the Giver of all that is good. We must remember Job 1:21 says, "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.*" We have nothing. By His grace, God brings us all these wonderful things. With the discipline of fasting, God reminds

us never to allow those things to become greater than Him. It speaks of honor. It helps us say, “God, these things are good. This food is good, this drink is good, this television is good, this entertainment is good, this hobby is good—but You’re better. You’re greater. You’re more glorious and I’m willing to give up things that are near and dear to me so that I may give more time and attention to You.”

2. The Dilemma of Fasting Today

Now you may ask, “Well Tim, if that’s the case then why isn’t fasting the heartbeat of every believer?” Because there is a dilemma regarding fasting today. Many of us don’t live this way because we are unwilling to sacrifice some of the good God gives for something greater. We are unwilling to turn off the consumption to allow ourselves to delight in and devour God’s goodness.

Why is this? It is because the believer is hearing two conflicting messages.

The world says, “Supersize me for Your sake.”

Just look at what we see on billboards, in magazines, on televisions and hear on the radio. I’m in the food business. Do you know how much propaganda there is just to get people to eat food? That’s been going on for some time.

For instance, who can walk away from a steak grilling on some Kingsford charcoal? The smell is a beautiful thing. There’s something glorious about it. I’m convinced God loves meat cooking on the grill. When you get to heaven there are going to be grills lined up and the marriage supper of the Lamb is going to be glorious.

The world says this good thing is the supreme good. Think about advertisements. A fast food hamburger looks so glorious and wonderful in advertising that you think, “I have to have that! If I have a Big Mac with two patties and all the toppings, that’s going to take care of all my ills. I will be a glorious individual.” It’s advertised that way. They want you to think you are lacking and if you are lacking any good thing then your job is to go beyond filling that need to the point of gorging yourself. We live in a society that says, “Don’t just eat for the sake of keeping yourself alive. If you don’t leave the table completely full to the gills then you have wronged yourself. You have done yourself an injustice and disservice.”

Studies done on American consumption show that we are eating twice the amount of food today than we did twenty years ago. I know this to be true because I’m in the food business. Quick service restaurants—places like McDonald’s and even Chili’s or Applebee’s—say the only way customers are happy today is if they triple the amount of food a person is supposed to eat. Remember that the next time you eat at any of those restaurants.

Again, it is this king mentality. You’re the one in control. You’re the one who should have anything you desire. The world is telling you, “You should have everything on demand.” That goes beyond just food. Let’s talk about TV for a moment. Our culture binges on TV. During the last snowstorm Netflix said one particular show was seen by one in three households in the northeast area because they were at home.

They didn't have anything else to do. Listen to this. During that snowstorm, there was an opportunity to engage with family and friends or maybe do some cleaning, but the average Netflix household watched nine and a half hours of TV. Nine and a half hours! Is there something wrong with us? That's a whole day of work and then some spent not knowing what to do. So people gorged themselves on entertainment while the opportunity for spending time with family was wasted. Here's the thing: that was one show. One show broke all the records.

Jesus says, "Sacrifice for My sake."

Now here's the collision that is taking place. The world says, "Eat, eat, eat. Take in, take in, take in. Consume, consume, consume. You're the king. Have whatever you want." But Jesus says, "Sacrifice for My sake. Stop consuming. Stop making consumption your god." Are these things good? Yes, these things are okay. There's nothing sinful in these things. Granted, if you start watching sinful things then it becomes a sinful exercise. But for the most part these things we're partaking of are not sins. We don't fast from sin. God is warning us against taking created things and making them greater than the Creator. Romans 1:18-32 reminds us what happens when we elevate the created over the Creator. True joy and contentment are not found in the consumption of things but in devotion to the Savior. So fasting is giving up the good things that have an undue prominence in our lives.

Now this is where we start talking about absurdity. I'm going to hit close to home now. Someone might say, "I'm going to fast from coffee."

Maybe others will say, "That's silly. Why would you fast from coffee? There's nothing great about that. It's not that big of a deal."

Maybe you are asking, "Why should I fast from coffee? It's not a god. I've not elevated it to a place of prominence in my life." Here's where I'm going to push you. If you cannot get through your morning without three, four, six cups of coffee—or whatever it is—without tearing everybody's heads off at the office or in your home, then you have elevated coffee to being a god. You are saying, "If you don't serve the god you're going to feel the wrath."

So if that's how you're living you need to start fasting from coffee. If all you can think about is a particular food, drink or activity and you just go through your day mindlessly until you can reach it, there's a problem. No matter how good, noble or honorable that thing is you had better start fasting from it because you're allowing it to be god over the God of the universe.

It's easy to see this in the lives of our children. I have an eleven-year-old son and a big temptation for eleven-year-old kids is to have everything their friends have. All of Noah's friends have some level of technology in their hands. I'm not saying that is bad. There are some great things available. But I also know my son and I know he needs fewer things taking away his attention, not more things. He was really hoping to get a Kindle for Christmas, but Santa and the old man didn't come through. So Noah was a sad boy.

I'm an entrepreneur. I want to use this opportunity to create young, enterprising minds. So I said, "Well Noah, if you really want something that much then I want you to save for it." He has never saved a dime in his life; in his first eleven years he saved 23 cents. I'm not sure how he did it but he came to me with his wallet and said, "Dad, I think I have all the money I need to buy the Kindle."

I was floored. I said, "Are you kidding me? Where did this come from?" We could end the U.S. debt just by putting kids in government for a little while and saying, "If you get rid of this \$17 trillion of debt, we'll let you have a Kindle Fire." They would find a way to solve it.

So Noah came to me with his money and said, "Dad, you said I could have it if I got the money." I don't know how he got it, but I don't think he stole it. I don't want to accuse him of that. He worked hard to get it. So I said, "Before we get this thing, I want to start with something small." I had an old smart phone that I gave him. It doesn't have many bells and whistles but it can bring up some apps and play some music. He got it last week. Since then, living with him has been terrible!

I love my son. But as soon as that phone connected to his hand he stopped listening to mom and dad, became rebellious and became insubordinate. That phone went wherever he went.

I'm using Noah as an example. I'm not stupid enough to destroy my son in front of you; I'm trying to make a point. Do you think an eleven-year-old kid is bad? Think about his 37-year-old dad with his toys. My desires are just a little more mature, a little more refined. Do you know what I do if I don't get what I want? I yell, I scream and I become a jerk to deal with—and you're the same.

We're all sinners in need of the gospel. We live with these things and we say we need them. With fasting, God is asking us, "Are those things greater than Me?" We have to ask ourselves that question. That's why fasting has to be a part of our lives because if we don't make a conscious decision to rid ourselves of these things from time to time then they will devour us. They will destroy us. In His love and grace, Jesus says, "I don't want these things to destroy you. They're there for your good."

3. The Distortion Surrounding Fasting

Now let's go to the text and notice what happened in Jesus' day. The people were fasting. We're not; they were. But they were still missing it.

Notice the distortion regarding fasting in Jesus' day. Jesus says in verse 16, *"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."* So what was fasting in Jesus' day? They had gotten part of it down. They were giving up good things but they were giving them up for nothing greater than image itself. They were being play actors or hypocrites. They used fasting like giving and praying before this to show something on the outside that was not happening on the inside.

Fasting Was Filled with Gloom, Not Gladness

So if fasting is something a person does on their own then how in the world did others know about it? Because they made their fasting something that was seen. They filled their fasting with gloom and not gladness. The practice of fasting in Jesus' day was to look as miserable as possible. The goal was to look gloomy and disfigure their faces. Those words "gloomy" (*skythrōpos*) and "disfigure" (*aphanizō*) are synonyms of one another that literally mean "to make yourself look as miserable as possible." They said, "Give yourself the worst possible countenance." Every action, word and wardrobe choice pointed to how stinking miserable they were. Then their fasting would be viewed as totally holy and pious.

Here's how that would look today: you would see me unshowered, unshaven and looking sullen. So you would ask, "Tim, why are you so sad?"

I would say, "Well, I just haven't eaten for so long. I'm so famished. I've lived without food." Or I would say, "I've lived without TV (or some other modern convenience). I just want to get close with God but it's hard. I know you're partaking of those things and I don't judge you for it but notice how sad I am. I'm sad for the Lord."

That's what fasting had become. It had become this idea that the more miserable you appeared the closer you were to God.

Fasting Was About Deprivation, Not Delight

Fasting is totally counterproductive if you are focusing on what you're living without during your fast. Maybe that is how you have fasted in the past. Miserable Christianity is of the devil. There's nothing miserable about Christianity but they had made fasting into that. Fasting had become about deprivation and not delight.

Let me give you an example: let's say I gave up coffee. Coffee is not an issue for me, but let's say I just can't live without it so I decide to fast from it. That's a great start. But if it's all I can think about every time I drive by a Dunkin' Donuts or a Starbucks, that's not right. If people ask, "Why are you cranky?" and I say, "I've given up coffee so people are really going to get it. I can't do this!" If that's what it's all about for you then don't fast! It isn't worth it!

True fasting should make us say, "I get the opportunity to give up coffee for Jesus. By giving up this coffee—or TV show, hobby or whatever it is—it's not about what I don't get. It's about what I do get in return. I get to walk and talk with my Savior. I get to embrace my Lord." Fasting is a delight.

Let me put it in food terms because that's what resonates with me. I am willing to forgo my peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich at lunch—I don't even have to cry about it—if I know Amanda's got a prime rib steak dinner waiting for me at home. Does that make sense?

So what do you talk about? Don't talk about how hungry you are; talk about what's coming in your future. If someone asks me, "Aren't you hungry?" I say, "Uh uh. I'm saving my appetite for that big prime rib that's waiting at home."

We fight over the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches in the Christian life and never get the opportunity to truly feast on the goodness of God. God is saying, "Give up that good thing for a little while for the greater good that you receive in return." Some of you are wondering why you're not experiencing the vibrant Christian life. It's because you're too busy living off the peanut butter and jelly. You're never getting to the rich foods of God.

After all of that, I want to make it clear that I'm an advocate for fasting. I've used fasting at different seasons in my life. In fact my longest period of fasting and the greatest fasting that has ever happened for me took place about 11 years ago when this church was considering me for this role. God brought me low. Fasting was a key part of that. I don't remember making the decision to fast per se but God moved me into a place where He wanted to bring humility into my life. It changed my life. So I am certainly an advocate for fasting.

Here's the thing: if you walk away saying, "Okay, there are 40 days of Lent. I'll fast between now and Easter and I'll have fulfilled this discipline." I want to move you past just a season of fasting to a lifestyle of fasting. This is what I mean: fasting is not only to be done for a measured period of time; it is to be a continual lifestyle. Right now you have a choice; you can choose God or your own desires.

I want you to know that right now you are fasting. Your presence here says, "I've chosen worshipping God over doing something else. I have denied myself the other things I could be doing right now so I can be present with God's people, worshipping and hearing the Word of God taught to me and fellowshiping with His people."

Now, what things could we be missing? There is a ton of things! There is so much going on right now and you're sitting here listening to a bald man preach. You're missing a lot of stuff. When you make church a priority you are fasting. You are saying to the Lord, "I could be doing these other things—which are good—but I choose the better: being with God's people."

Let me give you an example: Noah loves baseball and his baseball team. He wants to be part of baseball and he wants to be good at it. All of this is good. We live in America—baseball is good! This last year during spring training, Noah and his entire team had the great opportunity to be coached in hitting and fielding by a professional baseball player for a season.

Noah was very excited and he said to us, "Hey Dad and Mom, I want to be a part of this thing."

We asked, "When are the practices?"

He said, "Sundays."

I said, "Son, we need to talk. Is baseball important to you?"

Noah said, "Yeah."

I asked, "Do you love it?"

He said, "I do."

Then I asked, "Is it more important than God?"

Do you remember the phone issue from earlier? Let me build up my son a little bit. He said, "No, Dad. Baseball is not more important than God."

I said, "We're going to church. Are you mad about that?"

Noah said, "Nope. I like going to church and if that means I'm not the best baseball player that's okay."

I could have had the opportunity to say, "One of my boys is going to be a major league baseball player." Right? Isn't that what we think? But do you know what? My son has chosen the right thing.

I want you to know that I gave him the option. Parents, I know there's a part where we tell our kids what to do but as my son is getting older, the last thing I want him to do is think, "I go to church because my parents make me." So I gave my son the option to take seven weeks off from church. I'm glad he chose the right thing. We talked through it and I gave him wisdom about what to do but ultimately I said, "Son, you have to make this decision. You have to figure it out." In the end, he chose church over friendships, over being the best player on the team and over learning from a professional baseball player. God bless him for that.

Just as my son had to make this choice, we have to as well. When your pastors and elders say, "Church attendance is important," it's not so we can pad our numbers or say, "Look at how full the pews are!" We're saying, "Don't choose good over the great."

Let me expand on this: when you give to the Lord, you are fasting. You're saying, "Lord, my money is not my money. It's Your money. You're the Giver of this money and these gifts." You recognize that you're just a manager and saying, "I'm not going to keep it all for myself. I'm going to give a portion back to You. I know I could spend it on many other things but You're more important. You're greater than the things I think are important to me so I'm willing to give a portion back to You, Lord. You've only required a portion of it to be given back to You and I'm going to delight in the portion You allow me to keep for myself. I delight in the opportunity to give."

How does this look with service? When we come to church, we are not to come with the king-mentality but with the servant-mentality. Serving is an opportunity to fast from our own enjoyment. There are people in the nursery fasting from the privilege of being in here in order to show a little baby that they are made in the image and likeness of God, that God loves them and so do we.

When we give, serve and show up to church we're fasting because we're sacrificing something good for something greater.

Maybe you are thinking, "Look at me! I give, I serve and I'm at church 100% of the time. Worship me!" God says, "You know what you're doing? You're doing the same thing the Pharisees did: putting on gloomy faces and disfiguring your faces." Maybe you are sitting there thinking, "Boy, we could have a new car if we

didn't have to give to the Lord," or, "Man, my house would look a lot better if I had Sunday mornings to work on it and Tim didn't pontificate for the length of time that he does."

If that's what it's all about for you then don't do it because it isn't accomplishing anything. The only thing it's accomplishing is giving you your reward on earth. We can applaud you and say, "Well done. Great job serving in the nursery! Good for you."

God says, "Do it in secret." Do it from a heart that says, "God, You're greater than I am. You're greater than all the good gifts You've given and I'm going to serve and honor You because I love You. I delight in You. It is a privilege."

Some of the most miserable people I know are Christians. How sad that is! And we wonder why nobody listens when we present the gospel. People are thinking, "I don't want to be happy like you're happy. If that's happiness then forget it! I'll live in my sin."

When we live a fasting lifestyle we delight in God. People will say, "Tell me about this. You're filled with joy and contentment. Why?" It's not about you; it's about others. It's about God.

4. The Discipline We Should Engage In

I'm going to give you four reasons why we should engage in the discipline of fasting:

Fasting Protects Us from Becoming Slaves

Some of us are in bondage right now to our technology, entertainment, hobbies, our children's activities, our own activities, food and drink—it could be anything. The list goes on and on; we're in bondage to all kinds of things. We take that which God has given for good and turn them into gods.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul says:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

The idea here is that we recognize all these good things God gives us can become gods in our lives. Fasting says, "I'm going to protect myself from becoming a slave."

There is a TV show that I absolutely love. There is nothing wrong with it. It is a good, wholesome show—it's not Duck Dynasty—and I love it. But I have had to turn it off because it takes me away from the greater. It drives me nuts because I find myself inundated with it—thinking about the story line and things like that. God says, "Fasting is a way to rid yourself of something that enslaves you."

Fasting Places Greater Appreciation on What We Have

Two adages apply well to the matter of fasting:

- “You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” Do you want to appreciate things? Fast from them.
- “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Fasting will allow you to appreciate these things more because you give them up; you sacrifice for them and then you are able to see the goodness in them.

We have become so numb to the good things because we have them all the time. So in these moments when we don’t fast we are keeping ourselves from appreciating the gifts God has given us. We make these things gods instead of our Father Who is in heaven.

Fasting Provides Unhindered Seasons of Prayer

Fasting throughout the New Testament was always used in connection with prayer. We see prayer and fasting together. But what does fasting do for our prayers? I know some of you have some real prayer requests out there and you’re saying, “Wait a minute. This is new to me. I can fast and it can help my prayers?” Yes, it can.

Here’s how. When I was in high school I was part of the FFA—Future Farmers of America. Every year I got two weeks off school to help on the farm to help with planting and harvesting. One thing I learned about the planting machine the farmers use is that they do not just drop the seed on the ground. The machine has a two-disc system. The machine creates a bed for the seed to fall into and then two discs bring the dirt back over the seed. Why does it do this? If you get the seed into the ground then it has a greater chance of growing.

Prayer is like planting seeds. Fasting cultivates the ground and closes it back up so that your prayer requests can be firmly planted in the ground. It does not guarantee—just like in farming—that your prayer request will be answered the way you want. It just makes sure nothing else hinders it from what it’s called to do: that is, grow through the hand of God’s benevolence and love. So when we fast about our prayer request, we’re not guaranteeing something but rather guarding our prayer request so it is unhindered from the things of this world.

Fasting Positions Us for God’s Reward

Verse 18 tells us that if we fast correctly we’ll not receive the applause of men but our Father Who sees in secret will reward us. When we make God number one, fasting enables us to receive His reward. What’s the reward? We want to know what’s in that reward box, don’t we? What’s in the box may not be very inspiring to you. If that is the case then you need to check your spiritual temperature. What is the reward for fasting? It is intimacy with the Almighty. If that is attractive to you then God’s going to knock your socks off. God’s going to show you His love and affection. God is going to minister to you in ways you’ve never seen before.

So what is God calling you to give up? Though it may not be bad there is truth in the old adage that we can have too much of a good thing. Is it food? Is it drink? Is it entertainment? Is it a hobby? Is it reading? Is it a certain relationship? Are you willing to give that up? Don't do it to be gloomy but to be glad. Don't do it because it will be deprivation but because it will be a delight. Are you willing to give God the opportunity to commune with you so that you may enjoy Him today more than you did yesterday? That is what fasting is all about. It brings us closer to God. When we obey His ways and words about fasting, it produces in and through us a harvest of righteousness and blessing.

Let's pray.

Father God, we've invested some time here today on a topic that we haven't spent much time on before, either as a church or as individuals. I'm thankful for this passage and how it has reminded us of this discipline. What a glorious reminder that You do give us all these good things. But they're not the end all or the ultimate goal. Next time we'll be talking about money. Money is good and helpful but just like all good things, money can become our god when we serve it instead of You. We will hate You and love the other. We don't want to be double-minded. We don't want to worship other things. We want to worship You. We want to glory in You. We want to live for You alone. Give us the power to say no to things that take over our lives no matter how good they may be.

So Lord, speak to Your congregation. We don't all struggle with the same things. We don't make gods out of the same good things so speak uniquely to each one of Your children. Remind us of the good that fasting brings in our lives. What a grace You've given us to keep us from neglecting You! Make us mindful of every decision we make and every action we take. Let us be mindful of You as our supreme goal and focus. Let us live according to that by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Send us forth into a world that says it's all about us and let us redefine that by saying, "It is all for You." Whether we eat or drink, let us do all things to the glory of God Who is in heaven. It is by that name that we pray and give all thanks. In Christ's name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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