

## Secret Virtues: Fasting

*Matthew 6:16-18*

How much do you want God? Really, how hungry are you for a deeper experience of God and His work in your life? John Piper in his book, *A Hunger for God*, says this:

If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you" (23).

Today, we are talking about fasting. It's one of the spiritual practices that we can engage in that can awaken our hunger for God. It is one of the ways we can say to Him, "I want you. This much, O God, I want you."

For some of us as we come to this topic of biblical fasting it might be something that is totally new to us. We know about fasting before we have a medical test and that kind of thing, but what is biblical fasting? Here's how Richard Foster defines it. He says:

Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. . . .Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes" (*Celebration of Discipline*, 49).

Biblical fasting is not abstaining from food for political purposes (hunger strikes) and it isn't abstaining from food to lose weight and to get ready for a medical test. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes.

Now for others of us, fasting is not a new concept, it's just not something we like to pursue. We are talking about abstaining from FOOD after all! We are like Tony Jones, who says this in *The Sacred Way*, a book on spiritual disciplines:

I hate fasting. No, seriously, I *hate* it, and I avoid it at all costs. It is my least favorite of the disciplines in this book. In fact, I wish I didn't have to write about it. I wish it weren't so deeply rooted in the history of God's people. Then I could ignore it. But I can't ignore it. It's too prevalent, and honestly, too important (*The Sacred Way*, 159).

Fasting is important. And we can't ignore it either. Fasting indeed is "rooted in the history of God's" people. In the Old Testament there was one day on which fasting was commanded - that was on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31). But during the Exile there were other regular fasts that were instituted (Zech. 8:19). According to the Talmud they all marked disasters in Jewish history (*New Bible Dictionary*, 373).

Both the OT & NT describe personal or group fasts with a variety of purposes. At times fasting was a way for the nation of Israel or an individual to humble oneself before the Lord and to confess sin. For instance in Nehemiah 9:1 we see a corporate fast to confess sins:

*Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them. <sup>2</sup> And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.*

And in Daniel 9:2, Daniel engages in a private fast to seek God:

*In the first year of his reign I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. <sup>3</sup> So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. <sup>4</sup> And I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed . . .*

Fasting was part of how Daniel gave [his] *attention to the Lord God to seek Him*. He too confessed the sins of the nation through his time of fasting.

At times fasting was used to express grief (2 Sam. 1:12) and at other times it was used in times of seeking help from the Lord. We read in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4:

*<sup>3</sup> And Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD; and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. <sup>4</sup> So Judah gathered together to seek help from the LORD; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the LORD.*

At other times, fasting was used as a way to come before God with a request. For instance in Acts 14:23:

*And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

We also know from the Scriptures that the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). And there were other spiritually devout people who fasted regularly. For instance it is said of Anna the prophetess in Luke 2:37 that she "*never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.*"

And so fasting was part of the landscape of Jesus' day and He expects that his disciples will fast. But there is a right way to go about fasting and it all has to do with our motive in fasting.

Today as we look at Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus is still fleshing out the principle he stated in 6:1:

*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*

Jesus has been giving examples to illustrate this principle. He has talked about giving to the poor and He has talked about prayer and doing these things in secret for the reward of the Father. Fasting is the third example that Jesus offers to flesh out this principle.

And so let's look at what Jesus says. Verse 16:

*<sup>16</sup> "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.*

Like almsgiving and prayer, Jesus doesn't say, "If you fast" rather He says, *whenever you fast*. He simply assumes that his disciples will fast. But Jesus cares deeply about our motive in fasting. He makes it clear that fasting is not to be used as a means to promote oneself before men.

When you fast, Jesus says, *do not put on a gloomy face*. Don't look all sad and down like the hypocrites. Jesus says that the hypocrites actually *neglected their appearance in order to be seen* (for the purpose of being seen) *fasting by men*. To *neglect* literally means to render unrecognizable. The hypocrites would allow themselves to become disheveled. Very likely they would make their faces dirty by putting ashes on their face. All of this, Jesus says, was for the motive of being *seen fasting by men*. In other words, they were practicing their righteousness before men. And for those who do, Jesus says that *they have their reward in full*. Whatever applause that they get from men that is all the reward that they will get.

This is not how Jesus' disciples were to fast. Instead, Jesus says,

*<sup>17</sup> "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face <sup>18</sup> so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.*

The hypocrites do things to draw attention to them when they fast, *but you, when you fast* Jesus says, don't put on the gloomy face. Don't look or act grumpy and sad. Rather, *anoint your head, and wash your face*. What Jesus is talking about here is not extravagant care. Washing and anointing with oil were simply normal steps in hygiene in that day. It would be like saying in our day, take a shower and brush your teeth.

Do this, Jesus says, *so that you may not be seen fasting by men*, but rather you will be seen by *your Father who sees in secret* [and He] *will repay you*. That is the point of this

whole section in chapter 6 - not to draw attention to yourself, but to do your spiritual practices motivated by a heart for God. When done with this motive there is the promise that you will be seen by *your Father who is in secret, and [He] will repay you*. We don't know exactly what the reward is but I think in part it is this deeper experience of God.

And so, Jesus assumes that we will fast. And at the heart of what he is saying here he is saying that our motive for fasting should be **for the purpose of seeking and pleasing God**. Don't do it to please others. Don't do it to impress others. There is no value in doing it for those reasons. Do it to seek God.

As Piper said in the quote that we looked at before, there is an appetite for God within each one who is a believer in Jesus Christ. But unfortunately sometimes we have "nibbled so long at the table of the world" and we are stuffed with lesser things than God. Fasting is a way to make room for the Great. Fasting is a way to awaken the desire for God.

Do you sense a need in your life to awaken this desire for God? Do you hunger to know Him more? Do you long for a deeper experience of God and His work in your life? Do you long to have these lesser desires fade away and be replaced by a desire for God? Fasting is one of the spiritual practices that we can pursue that can help with this.

And so in the remainder of our time, I want to talk real practically about fasting. Unlike prayer, this might be an area that for some or maybe even many of us that is kind of foreign territory to us. We have little experience with it.

And so, first **why** might you want to fast? Well, as we saw from our quick survey of the Scriptures earlier there are all kinds of reasons. You might want to fast to confess and repent of sin in your life. Or you might want to fast to ask for God's help in a particular situation. Or you might be seeking guidance and wisdom for a decision. Or you might want to fast as a way to discipline your body. When we say no to food for a time, we learn that we do not have to gratify every desire of our body. When the hunger pangs come and you turn to prayer instead of the refrigerator, you learn to control the body. This tends to pour out into other areas of our lives. You learn that you can say no to lust or to laziness or to gossip. You learn that you can be in control; not your body. Fasting helps you, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:27 to discipline your body and make it your slave. And so there are lots of reasons you might pursue a fast. But the thing that summarizes all of these is that it is about seeking God.

How about **when**; when should you fast? Last week Steve mentioned that in using the Lord's Prayer as a prayer guide some might make it a daily practice while others use it occasionally. I would say that same thing for fasting. For some of you, you may decide that out of your desire for this deeper experience of God that you want to make fasting a regular part of your pursuit of God. For others of you, you may sense that occasionally you need to fast, but not regularly. That's fine.

For those who make it a regular practice there are all sorts of ways to do it. You might decide that you are going to fast once a week. There are a lot of ways to do this. Maybe you want to start by just missing one meal. Or maybe you want to miss a couple of meals. When I've done this, I will start my fast after dinner and then not eat again to the next evening at dinner. This would be a great approach if you are just getting started.

It is possible that God may lead you to do a longer fast - a full day where you miss all three meals or even a three day fast. In my experience, the longer fasts can be more beneficial in that I get by the hunger pangs (they do pass) and then move to a place of greater spiritual focus.

Now, finally, here are some thoughts on **how** to fast. First, prepare for your fast. Spiritually, be clear about why you are fasting. Go into it asking for God's help in the fast. And then physically there are some things that are helpful to do in preparation. For instance, if you drink a lot of coffee or tea, in other words, if you have a chemical dependency, you might want to wean yourself off of it a week or so before the fast otherwise you might feel so miserable with a headache that you find it hard to even pray.

Second, during the fast, make sure you drink a lot of water. You don't want to get dehydrated. Now, there are fasts where people go without food and water, but if you are just starting I would encourage you to consider just fasting from food.

Third, use the time that you would typically spend eating for prayer. When you look at the many examples of fasting in Scripture most of the time it is joined to prayer. And so as you fast, try to make it a time of increased prayer. Don't just think, "Hey, I'm going to use this time to get more work done." Remember, fasting is about seeking God, so make sure you devote time to prayer. As well, let the hunger pangs be used as a prompt to turn to God in prayer.

Now, let me share some thoughts on **who** should not fast. Obviously, there are some people for whom fasting would be unwise because of a medical condition like diabetes. For nursing or pregnant moms fasting might not be wise. If you have any questions about whether it is medically safe for you, you should talk to a doctor before you start a fast.

If you do have a medical condition that would prevent you from fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Remember, fasting is about seeking God and so there might be other things that you can give up for a time to seek God - TV, shopping, texting, video games, etc. There are all kinds of things that we can do without that can help us seek God.

There is so much more that could be said about the "how's" and "what's" of fasting that we just don't have time for today. I've given you two good resources on your outline that I would commend to you. Pipers whole book is about fasting. Foster's, on the other hand, is a book about spiritual disciplines, but he has a good chapter about fasting.

As we come to the end of our time, I thought I would share an excerpt out of Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline* in which Foster shares what one person wrote about their experience of fasting over a two year period. I think this might be a helpful picture of what we might experience:

1. I felt it a great accomplishment to go a whole day without food. Congratulated myself on the fact that I found it so easy . . .
2. Began to see that the above as hardly the goal of fasting. Was helped in this by beginning to feel hunger . . .
3. Began to relate the food fast to other areas of my life where I was more compulsive . . . I did not have to have a seat on the bus to be contented, or to be cool in the summer and warm when it was cold.
4. . . . Reflected more on Christ's suffering and the suffering of those who are hungry and have hungry babies . . . .
5. Six months after beginning the fast discipline, I began to see why a two-year period has been suggested. The experience changes along the way. Hunger on fast days became acute, and the temptation to eat stronger. For the first time I was using the day to find God's will for my life. Began to think about what it meant to *surrender* one's life.
6. I now know that prayer and fasting must be intricately bound together. There is no other way, and yet that way is not yet combined in me (58).

You get a sense of the spiritual work that was being done in that person's life as they fasted over time. You get a sense that it was a lot about the food at the start, but over time it became more about the spiritual work that God was doing in this person's life.

How much do you want God? Do you want him enough to try fasting? Do you want him enough to seek Him in this way? Let me encourage you to pray and see how God might lead you in this.

Let me close with the word of Piper:

There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you."

Amen.