

Authentic Discipline Matthew 6:16-18

INTRODUCTION:

In Matthew 6, we've already looked at two spiritual disciplines: giving and praying. We come to a third: fasting.

"To be or not to be: that is the question." That is what Shakespeare wrote in the play, Hamlet. I'm not sure if that's the question or not. But I'll tell you what isn't: *"To eat or not to eat"*...that's **not** the question. The question is "why fast?"

In his book *Celebration of Discipline* (published in 1978), Richard Foster writes:

In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times. In fact, fasting has been in general disrepute both in and outside the church for many years. For example, in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years. More recently, a renewed interest in fasting has developed, but we have far to go to recover biblical balance.

Thirty years ago, when *Celebration of Discipline* was published, that was probably true. But in the last three decades, we've made up for lost time! Now there are scores of books about fasting. But I'm still not sure we have recovered the "biblical balance" on the subject.

My guess is that we have more people who give and who pray than we do who fast. And my guess is we understand giving and praying more than we do fasting. So we have some learning to do today.

Let's start with God's word and work our way out from that starting point. Please turn to Matthew 6:16-18 (that is on page 960 of the pew Bible in front of you, if you wish to use that.)

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Any time we study the Bible there are some questions we must answer.

1. First of all, we need to ask, "Who is speaking?" In this case, it is Jesus.

2. Then we ought to ask, "To whom is he speaking?" In this case, Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience.
3. Next we should ask, "When was he speaking?" And the answer is, he was speaking at the beginning of his public ministry.
4. Finally, we should ask if there were any special circumstances to which he was speaking. The context of this teaching reveals that Jesus was addressing the issue of the hypocrisy of doing religious things to impress other people instead of doing them to cultivate a closer relationship with God.

I. FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Given that Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience, we ought to try to understand the subject of fasting the way they would have when Jesus used the term.

Fasting was a regular part of Judaism. Just as fasting is a regular part of Islam. For the Jews, there were two types of fasts: required fasts and voluntary fasts.

The Jews were required to fast for the Day of Atonement. In fact, that was the only annual public fast required in the Law of Moses. On that day, as a sign of sorrow for sin and as evidence of repentance, everyone in the Jewish nation was to abstain from eating and also abstain from working for a full 24 hours (Leviticus 23:26-32).

In addition to the Day of Atonement, there were occasional required fasts during times of national crisis or for emergency purposes.

- The prophet, Joel, called for a national fast as part of his call for repentance after God sent a swarm of locusts on the land (Joel 2:15).
- King Jehoshaphat called the nation of Judah to fast after the country was invaded by the Moabites and the Ammonites (II Chronicles 20:1-4).
- Ezra had the exiles fast before they returned from captivity back to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23).

These and many other examples of required fasts can be found throughout the Old Testament.

In addition to required fasts, the Jews practiced voluntary fasts.

- It is hard to believe but Scripture says that Moses went forty days without food and water before receiving The Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 9:9).
- Daniel fasted for three days prior to seeing a vision of a man dressed in linen (Daniel 10:1-3).

- Very typically, the common people fasted on the second and fifth days of the week plus other special occasions.
- Plus, some people kept “partial fasts” for their entire lives. By that, I mean that they abstained from certain foods or drinks as a sign of their devotion to God. As an example those Jews that took a Nazirite vow did not eat anything unclean, did not drink strong alcoholic drinks and did not have their hair cut during their lifetimes.

So when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said, “*When you fast...*” the people would have known exactly what he was talking about. It was part of their religious practice.

II. FASTING IN THE TIME OF JESUS

In fact, so common was fasting in the time of Jesus that it had become a religious ritual. And for some people, fasting became a way of showing off. Some people would put ashes on their faces so they would look pale and unkempt. They wouldn’t bathe so they would look and smell bad. They wouldn’t change their clothes. And then, when people would ask them if they were alright, they’d say (with a really pitiful tone to their voices), “Oh, I’m alright...just a little weak, I suppose, because I’m fasting.” They wanted people to know they were fasting even though it was hard on them. On the one hand, they wanted people to feel sorry for them and yet, on the other hand, admire them for their devotion and their discipline because they were fasting even though it made them feel ill.

In reaction to that type of public display, Jesus said, “When you fast, don’t do it to show off. Make your fasting a private matter between you and God.”

Jesus’ own apostles did not practice fasting. In Matthew 9:14, Matthew records an incident when the disciples of John came to Jesus and asked, “Why is it that we fast and your disciples do not?” Jesus replied that it was like at a wedding. The guests don’t mourn and fast while the bridegroom is with them. It would be just as inappropriate for Jesus’ disciples to fast while he was with them.

We do know that Jesus fasted at the beginning of his ministry. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted for forty days. But we have no record of any other time that Jesus fasted. That is not to say that he didn’t but we have no record of any other time that he fasted.

III. FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

So, just a quick review: fasting was common in the Jewish community of the Old Testament and among the Jews during the time of Jesus. But

neither Jesus nor his disciples regularly practiced fasting while Jesus was with them. So what was the practice of Jesus' followers after he left them?

The earliest history we have of the earliest churches is what we can read in the book of Acts. Fasting is mentioned three times in the book of Acts.

- The first two times fasting is mentioned in the early church are in Acts 13:2 and 3 where the church in Antioch worshiped and fasted before they laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off to mission work.
- While Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary tour, they started churches and, before leaving them, with prayer and fasting, appointed elders in those churches (Acts 14:23).

So, in the first history of the first churches, the only record of fasting was as a part of the selection of leader-servants and even at that, fasting is not mentioned every time leader-servants are chosen, just in these two places.

Now, in this regard, it is worth noting that at that time in Paul's ministry, he was typically preaching in the synagogues of the communities he visited. As an example, Acts 13:1-5 reads:

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

My point is, that in the life of the early church, fasting took place for special occasions and special purposes (such as the selection of leaders) and that it occurred among Jews who had become Christians. Such Jewish Christians still went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, too. For them, fasting was simply part of their culture. They fasted, not because they were disciples of Jesus, but because they were Jews.

Do you remember that passage in Matthew 9:14-17 that I mentioned earlier? That's the one where Jesus talked about fasting in the presence of the bridegroom. That is also the place where Jesus talked about putting new wine in old wineskins. The implication seems to be that fasting is part of the old covenant and is like an old wineskin. The new wine of the Gospel doesn't fit with an old wineskin like that.

Furthermore, fasting is never mentioned in any of the epistles: those letters that Paul, John, Peter and others wrote to churches during the time of the New Testament.

So what I conclude is that there were some Jewish elements of the early church that continued to fast prior to major occasions and major decisions. But fasting does not appear to have been universally practiced in the New Testament church.

Certainly, after the close of the New Testament era, among some people at different times and in different locations, fasting became very popular.

IV. FASTING TODAY

So what about it? Should Christians practice fasting today?

That depends. There are many benefits that can come from fasting; benefits to our bodies, our emotions and our attitudes. Fasting can often improve physical health. It can help people develop self-discipline. It can certainly teach us a sense of appreciation for God's gifts to us.

But fasting does not appear to be a command to the church nor a sacrament of the church. A sacrament is a rite or a ritual, instituted by Christ, which is a means by which we receive grace and that imparts supernatural power or supernatural results.

I can find ample evidence of natural benefits to fasting but, whether inside the Bible or outside of the Bible, I cannot find anything that leads me to believe that God uses fasting in any supernatural way.

CONCLUSION:

I know this is a pretty unusual sermon. It is almost more of a lesson or a lecture. But I said at the beginning that I believe we have some learning to do where fasting is concerned.

Also, as I said at the beginning, "To eat or not to eat?" That's not the question. The question is, "If you fast, why do you do it?"

If you choose to fast, are you doing it as an empty and meaningless ritual? Are you doing it as a public display of your piety so that others will notice and be impressed with your holiness? Or are you doing it for reasons that are both meaningful and personal? With fasting, as with everything else we do for the Lord, motive matters.

The greatest thing is not how long you can go without food. The greatest thing is getting to know, love and serve the Lord. If fasting is a tool that

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helps you to know, love and serve the Lord, then by all means fast. But keep it between you and the Lord.

INVITATION: #644 – *“The Greatest Thing”*