

“To Fast or Not to Fast”

Liturgical Date: Ash Wednesday

Primary Texts: St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, also references Joel 2:12-19

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for this Ash Wednesday is the Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 6. As we have now entered the Lenten season, fasting is an aspect of this season of penitent reflection on our sin and the suffering and death of our Savior. There is, however, a good bit of misunderstanding concerning fasting causing some to avoid the practice. The sermon title “To Fast or Not to Fast” points to answering these questions and confusions.

Many people fast, or as it is often put today “give something up” for Lent. Perhaps you have begun a fast of some type today. Yesterday was “Shrove Tuesday” or as it also know in connection to *Mardi Gras*-Fat Tuesday. The idea is that there is extra celebrating and indulgence on that day because the party ends the next day as Lent begins. And Lenten fasting is most often associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholics have mandated fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as well as not eating meat, other than fish, on Fridays during Lent. And in the Orthodox Church, fasting is even more intense and complicated as there are days of avoiding eggs, dairy, meat, and wine, which makes “fish on Friday” look like an all you can eat buffet!

But is this something that we Lutherans should be participating in? Should we just leave all this to the Catholics and Orthodox and carry on with our regular eating and life habits during Lent? What does the Bible say about fasting?

We see fasting in both the Old and New Testament, a total of almost 100 times. It would take a good bit of time to list and go through every example of fasting in the Bible, but some examples would be helpful here. We certainly see that fasting was an important aspect of Israel's religious life. Times of distress, repentance, and seeking God's will were often accompanied by fasting. We heard about fasting in our Old Testament Lesson from Joel 2. The Lord declared in verse 12, "*return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning*" Verse 15 said, "*Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly*". In the books of Samuel we read of the Israelites fasting at times of threat and mourning. Moses fasted upon Mt. Sinai for 40 days as he received the Law of God. Daniel fasted in Babylon from the food that was provided in order to remain obedient to the Lord. The Jews in exile fasted in Esther when they learned a diabolical plot to destroy them. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Isaiah spoke of fasting. The king of Nineveh declared a fast of repentance after Jonah warned of the coming judgment of God.

What of the New Testament? We know that Jesus fasted. In fact we will hear this coming Sunday about His 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. The early church prayed and fasted as Barnabas and Saul were sent out to do mission work; Acts 13:3, "*And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*" And of course we hear Jesus' teaching on fasting during the Sermon on the Mount in our Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 6.

Some have come away from this passage with a negative view of fasting. It speaks of "hypocrites" who go to great lengths to appear holy by making a public spectacle of their fasting. But the text does not forbid, nor even speak ill of fasting itself. Three specific spiritual disciples are brought

forth in our Gospel text for this evening: giving alms, prayer, and fasting. Jesus is calling out abuses related to these practices. Just as we would not say that we should stop giving to the poor or praying because some have done this for prideful show, we would not say we should not fast because some have fasted wrongly. Note that in verse 16 Jesus does not say “if ye fast”, but “*when ye fast*”. In verse 17 He does not say “if thou fasteth” but “*when thou fasteth*”. Jesus is not forbidding or discouraging fasting in any way, but is teaching the proper way to do it. It is clear from both the Old and New Testaments that fasting is a right, good, and beneficial practice for the faithful.

So as alms giving, praying, and fasting are good things for the Christian to do, why would we *not* do them? There are clear parallels with all three of these areas that Jesus teaches on in our Gospel text. Jesus tells us to avoid making a show of these things in order to gain the approval of other people or to try to set ourselves up as better and more spiritual than others. As our Lord says about alms, “*let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.*” For each of these three things Jesus uses the word “secret”. The main idea He is communicating about this is that we do not do these things to impress other people, but to draw closer to God and serve others. Even if no one knows about a large donation you made to a charity, how many hours you spent in prayer, or what you are fasting from God knows and will reward accordingly. Jesus closes the section of our reading for this evening with some words about where true treasure is found: it is not found in seeking the glory and things of the world, but is stored in heaven where it can never pass away: “*For where your treasure is, there will your heart also be.*”

Now I do want to make one additional note about this aspect of what Jesus speaks about in “secret”. Obviously Jesus does not mean to set up a legalistic rule that we can never talk about our fasting with anyone. If so then we could never share prayer requests or pray with anyone else either. There may be times when we need to let people that we are fasting and what we are fasting from. As a practical matter, if you are fasting from meat you may want to let your wife know so that she doesn’t spend a lot of time and money making you a steak dinner! Also, if you are fasting from sweets and are eating a meal with other people they may ask you why you are not eating dessert. It would be appropriate to tell them in a humble way that you are fasting at this time. It may even lead to an opportunity to witness. Again, the main point that Jesus is making here is against self-righteous and self-serving fasting. We don’t want to make a big deal about it by joining a meal and grabbing our stomach and saying, “I am really hungry and wish I could eat all this food you all are eating, but I am very holy person and have embarked on a fast.”

Furthermore, we don’t want to be legalistic in our fasts. You don’t want to be so intense in your fasting that you render yourself unable to complete necessary tasks or damage your health. For Lenten fasting also remember that Sundays are not part of the 40 days of Lent. So it is acceptable to take a break from your fast on Sundays if you desire to. For example, I usually fast from desserts and sweet snacks during Lent. I fast on Sundays too, but balance it out with partaking if I attend a birthday party or similar function where there is cake, etc. as this removes opportunities to have to appear to be boasting about my fast.

If you embark on a Lenten fast, or another time of the year for that matter, do prayerfully consider what you want to fast from. It can take many

forms: not eating or drinking a certain thing, giving up a certain meal, or not eating at all on specific days. It also does not even have to be a giving up of food. You could choose to fast from a certain activity that you enjoy. I know of some people who give up social media, TV, or particular leisure activity to spend more time in Bible reading or prayer. The point is that whatever you decide to fast from it should be something that you will miss, which is why mandated fasts of the same thing for everyone can be counter productive. For example fasting from broccoli and mushrooms would not be much of a sacrifice for me, but may be a hardship for others.

There have certainly been abuses related to fasting in the history of the church, and they continue today. But as with many things, the Lutheran Reformation did not seek to eliminate fasting because as we have seen it is right and biblical practice, but rather to clean up the abuses related to fasting. Martin Luther preached in a sermon in 1524,

Of fasting I say this: It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God's Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.

In the section of the Small Catechism on the Sacrament of the Altar, he wrote: Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.'

So fasting is not to be looked on as something that we do that that would in anyway earn our salvation. It is not something that the Church should require in terms of specific fasts at specific times. The manner and frequency of fasting is left for each individual Christian to prayerfully pursue before God.

So if we are not required to fast, why would we choose to do it? What are the spiritual benefits to this practice? A number of years ago, our Synodical Magazine, *The Lutheran Witness* published an article with 12 reasons to fast. As we come to the close of the sermon I want to share part of that article with you. If you would like a full copy of the article, there are some available on your way out.

Read portions of article.

Perhaps you have already decided upon a Lenten fast and have begun it today. If not, perhaps after hearing this sermon this evening, you would wish to prayerfully consider embarking on one. Again, I make no demands of you to fast nor as to what you should fast from. But we have seen that fasting is a Biblical concept, one practiced by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If we stick to what the Bible teaches us about fasting, it is a God-honoring and beneficial thing. And during this Lenten season, whether you fast or not, spend additional time prayerfully reflecting upon the severity of your sin and the goodness of God in winning forgiveness for that sin through the cross of Christ. Any sacrifices of comfort that we make cannot approach the ultimate sacrifice of God on our behalf. They should only point us to Him as we confess with the prophet Joel, *“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*

Amen.