

Fasting to Set the Oppressed Free

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:16-18

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Matthew 6:16-18:

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

As we come to this text I want to acknowledge that in the history of our church we have never ever had a sermon on fasting. This is strange in view of the fact that in the history of the Church there has really only been a three year period where the disciples of Jesus Christ didn't fast, and that was during the time when Jesus Christ was with his disciples.

I want to be very clear that both fasting and feasting are important categories in the Bible. The whole Bible is a testimony of how, on that great day, a redeemed people are ushered into a great hall for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, where there will be a great feast. So then, during our time on earth between now and that great supper, the people of God are called to spread the Gospel through praying, through giving, through fasting and through opening their mouths about the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. In the previous chapter, we learn from the Lord's Prayer that our great calling in life is to say, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."¹

¹ Matthew 6:9-10

This whole section that starts in verse 1 has continues with the same theme that there is the design for the Church of Jesus Christ, that they would be a people who would cry out to God. That they wouldn't pray for man, they wouldn't give for man, they wouldn't fast for man, but that they would do all of these things only for one reason and that is to gather those to that Great Supper.

And so all of this is in preparation, all of this fasting is in preparation for a great feast. Fasting today is for feasting tomorrow. And so Jesus is documenting the tragedy that existed among the people of God in his day. He is speaking to his disciples on the mountain and he is teaching them the way in which they should go and he is pointing his finger at the Pharisees and saying, "Don't go that way."

When it comes to fasting, the Pharisees were fasting not for the reasons that fasting was created. That is where we are in context. Jesus is following that same pattern in this text that he has followed in all of the others on the other categories of religious life.

There is a kind of praying that is simply so that one is thought of as spiritual and has nothing to do with the Great Commission and that is the kind of praying that the Pharisees were doing. They were praying for themselves, not of the glory of God. They were giving for their own glory and not for the glory of God. Here we find them being accused of fasting, just going through the motions, just fasting, just doing it and being so religious and regular and regimented about it. They loved to pray. They loved to give and they loved to fast. Religion means nothing without the heart and Jesus is pounding that over and over and over again.

Now we have this terrible problem: we are so wrapped up in ourselves, we care so much about our reputations, we care so much about our own pocketbooks, our own everything that we don't have any energy or passion for fasting. With the Pharisees they were just going through the motions, but there was no passion of the glory of God. And so that is why Jesus says, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward in heaven."²

So, first of all, he says, "When you fast," in verse 16. Fasting is assumed. Jesus Christ is saying that fasting is a good practice. He is likening it to the normal activities of Christians. It should be as normal as giving, as normal as praying. And he puts fasting on the same plane. None of it is commanded here; it is just

² Matthew 6:1

assumed. Of course, he is talking about that practice of secret fasting. He is talking about secret giving and secret prayer, now secret fasting. These are things that are done out of the urgent churnings of the heart in love toward God. So he is not saying that fasting is optional. He is saying that fasting is just a normal part of everyday life. He himself fasted 40 days and 40 nights.

I mean, you contrast this with our modern Christian culture. Modern Christian culture pretty much seems to have forgotten fasting. Case in point, this church in 10 years has never heard a sermon on the subject of fasting. I don't know how much people fast, but it is hardly ever mentioned here in our church. How many of you have heard a sermon on this subject? How many of you have fasted in the last year? Most people would probably answer the question pretty much no, because fasting is something that seems to have sort of dropped off the radar screen of modern Christians.

In Matthew 9:15 we find one of the really critical texts to help us understand why it is that fasting is necessary and actually endorsed by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is one of the definitive passages to teach us about the New Testament doctrine of fasting.

The disciples of John the Baptist asked why the disciples of Jesus aren't fasting. And Jesus replies, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?"

So Jesus is saying, "I am the bridegroom and when the attendants of the bride groom are together you just don't fast. It is a time to feast." And then He makes an interesting statement that fasting is actually connected to mourning and while Jesus is with them they are not mourning. Then He speaks of a day when the disciples will fast. And he says, "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."³

So there is a three year period when the disciples of Jesus don't fast while the bride groom is with them, then they will feast again at the end of the age. Fasting is just assumed during that time between when Christ was on earth and the time He will return.

Now why is it that we don't fast today? There are probably many reasons. Ignorance might be one of the reasons. Some have said that we don't fast today because we are over reacting to Roman Catholicism and we are making an over

³ Matthew 9:15

correction to the kind of fasting that we see in Roman Catholicism. It might indicate a lack of seriousness about Scripture. It might be that the Church is so focused on itself, that it doesn't have the capacity in the heart to labor and mourn and fast for other people.

It is a self focus. You know, Jesus talked about the Word of God being choked out by the pleasures of this life in Luke chapter 18. Our minds get clogged up and we are longing for all the wrong things and we have no capacity for broken heartedness for those around us. We don't fast because we don't care. We don't care about the lost enough. We don't care about the person whose life is falling apart. We don't care about our lost friend. Our hearts don't break because we just don't care. We can't care because our minds are so clogged up with all of our own pursuits. We are so excited about everything else but the lost or the divorced or the heartbroken or the son or the daughter who is destroying his life her life and so we don't fast. We might even do that as parents when we have something going on in our families. We, as parents, are so cold hearted that all we do is jabber about it and we don't cry out to God with a broken heart.

So there are many reasons that we might not fast. It is the pleasures of this life, the desires of other things come and steal the things that matter the most.

One of the critical passages of Scripture on fasting is in Isaiah 58 and we learn there that fasting is connected with brokenness and heartache and difficulty and it follows that if you don't understand those things then you cannot fast.

In Isaiah 58—go ahead and please turn there—in the first five verses of Isaiah 58 there is a testimony of how the people were fasting, but it wasn't a Lord's fast. It was a fast just like the Pharisees. See, what Jesus was talking about the Pharisees wasn't new at all. It was really very old. It was something the people of God always struggle with. When their hearts grow cold and they have no capacity for tears, no reason big enough that they can see as they scan the needs of the people around them that they ought to actually go without food to cry out for someone. That is what the Jews were doing. Isaiah is confronting this, and he is saying, "You are fasting, you are afflicting your souls. You are bowing your heads. You are spreading your sackcloth. That is not my kind of fast. Here is my kind of fast. Is this not the fast that I have chosen?" In verse 6: "To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?"

In this passage there are six reasons to fast. One, to loose the bonds of wickedness; two, to undo the heavy burdens; three, to let the oppressed go free; four, to share your bread with the hungry and to have them into your house; five, when you see the naked, to cover him; six, and not hide yourself from your own flesh, that means your own family. That means fasting for the people in your own family.

You are so concerned about your extended family, your siblings, your parents, your aunts and your uncles. Some of them maybe even hate you. Maybe you don't even talk to them anymore. But have you fasted for them? I mean, this is your own flesh. Often we are so cold-hearted even to our own flesh. We might fast for an unbeliever. But we would never vast for our family member who hates us. And so why don't we fast? But fasting here is just assumed.

Now fasting was being practiced according to at least the command of the Pharisees, once a year on the Day of Atonement. If you go to Leviticus 16 you will find this is the verse that the Jews used to claim that they should fast once a year. They were fasting once a year.

I am not confident this verse actually demands a once year, you know, rhythmic, regular fast, but the Pharisees were doing it once a year. The Pharisees were fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. The early Church turned around and said, "Well, we want to distance ourselves from that. We are going to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays." And so there were these regular fasts that we learn about in the Didache, which was a writing that explains life in the early church after the first century.

There were various kinds of fasts. There was a kind of conventional fasting you see in Matthew 4:2, where Jesus is fasting and he has no food, but he is still drinking water for 40 days. Then there is a partial fast, you know, abstaining from certain kinds of foods. That is what Daniel was doing. He wasn't eating the king's food. Or there was a complete fast like with Ezra and with Esther and in the book of Acts. And then there is secret fasting like we see in Matthew chapter 6. Then, there is the congregational fast like you see in Joel chapter 2 Acts chapter 13. And then there is a national fast that you see in 2 Chronicles 20 and Nehemiah 9 and Jonah 3. You find fasts that are called even by presidents. John Adams, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln all called for fasts in our country.

So when Jesus says, "When you fast..." he is acknowledging a category that most people just think that should be normal in the Church. So that is the first thing that we learn, that Jesus is just assuming fasting. And he says to his disciples, "When you fast..."

Then he gives the example of the Pharisees and explains it in verse 16. He issues a command: "Do not be like them."

It is appropriate to say, "Do not be like this religious group." It is appropriate to say that. Jesus is saying that here. He says, "Do not be like the hypocrites." I would love to have seen the look on His face when He said this. "Their sad countenance, they disfigure their faces that they may appear to be fasting." He is speaking very clearly and is identifying how ridiculous they looked and how foolish it actually was.

And so the Christ is most concerned about one aspect of fasting and that is doing it before men. The Pharisees were disfiguring their faces, you know, people today put ashes on themselves in order to let the world know how spiritual they are when they are fasting; during Lent people do this. The Pharisees were fasting, like I said, twice a week. When the publican and the sinner were standing there in the square, the Pharisee said, "I fast twice a week."

Fasting was never to be done as a matter of a routine. You never see that in the Bible. You never see regular, routine fasts in Scripture, as far as I can tell. I haven't been able to find anywhere there was some regular, "We fast on Tuesdays and Thursdays." "We fast on Friday." There is nothing like that. There are many examples of fake fasting in Scripture as well. If you go to Zechariah chapter 7 there is really an amazing section where the people were fasting, and I mean they were fasting big time. But they did not have compassion and the prophet Zechariah comes to them to confront them about their formalism and their externalism and how they were doing these religious things, but their hearts were not broken.

And so in the fourth year of Darius, in Zechariah 7:1 and continuing, the people come and they ask the priests and they say, "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done so for many years?" In other words, "Should we just keep doing this?" The people want to know because they are being confronted by Zechariah the prophet.

And then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah in verse 4 saying, “Say to all the people of the land and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seven months during those 70 years, did you really fast for me—For me?’” That is exactly how he says it. “Did you fast? Did you really fast for me—For me?” That is what he says. That is the problem we always have.

He says, “When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?” He is saying the same thing Jesus is.

And then he says, “Should you not have obeyed the words which the LORD proclaimed through the former prophets...?”

He is speaking of the testimony of fasting through the prophets of God. When Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous and the south and the lowland were inhabited, then the Word of the Lord came to Zechariah and said, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Execute true justice. Show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.’”

Verse 11 is terrifying and striking because we read, “But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders...” They shrugged their shoulders because they had no compassion. Their hearts never broke for anyone. They just did their duty. They prayed their prayers. They did their fasting. They did their giving, but they had no broken heart.

And in verse 12 he says, “Yes, they made their hearts like flint...”

So when you bring out the subject of fasting you need to ask: “Why are you not fasting or why are you fasting? What are you doing when you are fasting?” You have to ask yourself whether any of this figures in to the equation of your own life.

A people whose shoulders shrug, a people whose hearts are like flint while the lost are perishing, while people are suffering greatly, a hard, cold-hearted people is what Jesus is talking about here. You are just fasting for men, just praying, you are going to church for men. You are doing your family worship for men, but your heart is not broken. Whatever religious activity that includes the shrugging of the shoulders is not true religion. They shrugged their shoulders.

Now there are many ways that people fast today. There is the Roman Catholic method: They fast on Fridays. It is the fake fast, actually. They have fish. Dan Horn was telling us in Bible study that he used to work at Long John Silvers. He said that the cars would be stacked up around the block at Lent for the Roman Catholic celebration.

There is Hindu fasting. The men never fast. The women do of their husbands once a year and they make a big deal out of it and they walk around and the women fast and their husbands say, "Yes, my wife is so nice. She is fasting for me." And then when the women break the fast they dress to the nines and they whoop it up for the evening.

You can be like the Mormons who fast once a month Saturday night to Sunday night. They fast as a church and then they bring a tithe together at the end of that time.

Even the pagans fast. They fast to get in touch with the earth, to cleanse their bodies. You know, the pagans, the wiccans, the UFO religion people. They all do this as well.

Islam has rigorous fasting requirements during the 40 days of Ramadan. They fast from all food and all drink, smoking, everything from dawn to sunset during Ramadan. They do it to discipline themselves, to show their love to God, to beat their bodies, to give themselves what they call a mature adaptability. They do it out of duty.

The Bible is very careful to warn us, too, about those who advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared by those who believe and know the truth, 1 Timothy 4:1-3.

Fasting is always a danger for us. Instead, it should be to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to break every yoke, to share your food with the hungry, to provide clothing and to not turn away from your own flesh and blood. That is why we should be fasting.

Now this week I want to confess to you that I fasted more like a Pharisee than a disciple. I got my family up on Monday morning and I said, "This week we are going to be talking a lot about fasting and I will be reading different things." And I said, "I would like to fast today because I have all kinds of appointments for the rest of the week."

And then some of my other family members chose another day. I said, "Why don't you choose another day since this is not the best day for you." So I asked them to choose a day.

And so after I completed my day of fasting I looked back on the day and I recognized that I scarcely cried out to God at all. I did remember a couple of times to pray, but I have to tell you—My heart was not broken. I was not specifically laboring for oppression and brokenness that is all around me. I am like a blind man. I am like this Pharisee who stands and says, "Well, I fast twice a week." And so I come to the end of it and, honestly, it wasn't until I was driving home from work that it hit me. "Scott, you scarcely even prayed. Where was the broken heart? Where was it?"

I was fasting like a Pharisee. And so I came home to my family and I said, "I have led you astray. I have asked you to choose a fast day and it was wrong of me to just ask you to choose a fast day."

I have sinned against my family by misleading them about fasting. I told them that it would have been right if I had called them to find the brokenhearted and fast, to find the oppression and dedicate to that rather than just to choose a fast day.

So this week I fasted more like a Pharisee than a disciple.

But then Jesus explains how to properly fast in verses 17 and 18.

"But you..."

So he is drawing a contrast with those two words.

"When you fast..."

Again, assuming that you will fast.

"...anoint your head and wash your face," verse 18, "so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place."

So there are a number of things that are here. "Anoint your head and wash your face so that you don't appear to men to be fasting." In other words, take the whole appearance away from it and lubricate your head. You act like normal life.

You know, I don't think this is the sufficiency of Scripture for your hair, that you have to gel your hair, but you put oil on. I mean, you act like a normal person. You don't act like you are fasting at all.

But you Father who is in the secret place, sees in secret. So there is this time of secret fasting. This is not corporate or national fasting. This is secret fasting. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And you bring weighty matters before God which is consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Jesus here doesn't tell us everything about fasting. He identifies a particular sin and then just encourages them to fast in a certain way.

Now I want to give 20 reasons people fasted in Scripture. And I will go fairly quickly. I won't be able to really develop them, but I want to do this to give us a range of what kinds of fasting takes place in the Bible, because it can help us.

If you are thinking, "Well, I, you know, what kinds of problems should I be crying out for?" Well, there are 20 reasons in this list. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but it is a list that, I think, can help us to break some patterns of bad fasting and prayer. Fasting and prayer are always together. Whenever fasting is seen, prayer is always there together with it. So it is difficult to unburden them.

So, 20 reasons people fasting in Scripture.

1. For love and devotion to God, Luke 2:37. There was a woman whom I picture to be very much like my own mother. She was 84 years old and night and day she was in the temple. Her name wasn't Mary. Her name was Anna. And she did not depart from the temple at age 84, but served God with fasts and prayers night and day. She was a widow most of her life.
2. For repentance, Jonah 3:5. "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them."

This was a time of fasting for repentance. If there is a need for particular repentance, fasting is really appropriate. There is a sin that has gripped your life and you have struggled with it. It is appropriate to fast in repentance of that particular sin. We should be thinking about that. Is there anything that requires a greater broken heartedness than you have now about your own

sin. Often we trivialize our sins. We make less of them than what they really are. Sometimes we give them nice names. We might say, "Well, I am stressed out," when actually I am rejecting the sovereignty of God.

So repentance is second reason people fasted.

3. For threat of coming disaster, 2 Chronicles 20. The people of Moab and the people of Ammon were going to battle against Jehoshaphat and Jehoshaphat saw the danger and he called for a fast and there was a battle, but God slew the enemies of Jehoshaphat without him ever even partaking in the battle. That was, "fast in secret, he will reward you openly." That is an example of that. You see a similar fast in Joel 1:14
4. For obedience to the Word of God, Nehemiah 1:4. Nehemiah sat down and wept and mourned for many days and he was fasting and praying before the God of heaven because of the destruction of Jerusalem. It was left in ruins. The survivors were in distress and it was a time to fast for the people to be obedient to the Word of God.
5. To seek God's guidance. In Acts 14:23, we find that elders were appointed in ever church and they prayed with fasting and commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed for guidance. For the deployment of leaders. When guidance is needed to deploy people to particular works, fasting is often helpful and good.
6. To spare the life of a child, 2 Samuel 12:23. David sins with Bathsheba and David, of course, is rebuked for his sin and he fasts for his baby and yet his baby dies.
7. To seek protection of families and possessions. Ezra 8:21 says, "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions."
8. For compromised marriages, Ezra 9:5. The people of God had engaged in unlawful marriages. We read in Ezra nine, "At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God."

9. Fasting to express sorrow. 1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:11-12; 1 Samuel 20:34. Saul is killed by the Philistines and David and his men fast. They mourn and they weep for Saul and his son Jonathan.
10. To overcome temptation. This is what Jesus does in His battling with the devil in Matthew chapter 4. You see yourself in a time of temptation, perhaps ahead, it is appropriate to fast to prepare for it.
11. Mourning for sin. In Psalm 35:13 David says, "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; and my prayer would return to my own heart.

He is fasting because of his sins.

12. To strengthen in prayer. Perhaps this is why prayer and fasting are often mentioned. Fasting strengthens prayer. It focuses it. It intensifies it. So it is a good thing. It is a help for prayer.

Ezra 8:23: "For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him.' So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

13. Before an important meeting. Esther fasted for three days before she went before the king to intercede for her people.
14. In time of distress and rejection and persecution. In Psalm 69:10 David says, "When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, that became my reproach."

David is crying out to God for deliverance from his enemies. He is crying out because he has a passion for God's glory which is why he says in Psalm 109:24, "My knees are weak through fasting and my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness." "My knees are weak through fasting..."

15. Before an important journey, Ezra 8:21. As the exiles were getting ready to leave Babylon they fasted and Ezra led them.
16. For the forgiveness of the people, Daniel 9. Daniel fasted and prayed for the forgiveness of the people with supplications and fasting and sackcloth

and ashes, and he says in Daniel 9:5,6, “We have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name...”

Daniel is praying for forgiveness for the people, but he is including himself. He is always saying, “We, we, we...” He is crying out for his sins and the sins of the nation. Usually you can find the sins of a nation in your own life somehow.

It is often so unrighteous to try to castigate a nation when, in reality, many of the seeds of those same sins are in your own heart. And you live them out every day.

17. For extreme situations, Mark 9:29. “...This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”

There are certain situations that just require an enormous amount of energy and crying out and outpouring and grief and strickenness and labor, extending into the night and letting your knees become weak. There is that kind—there are situations like that. Maybe there are situations like that in our church and we are just so blind to them, because we just think so much of ourselves and our own problems that the extreme situations just don't seem that extreme to us.

18. To mourn the death of a significant person, 1 Chronicles 10:12.

19. For the dominion work of husbands and wives. Fasting is appropriate of the dominion work of husbands and wives. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:5 says, “Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer...”

So it is appropriate for husbands and wives to set aside one of the most wonderful things God has given them so that they would cry out to God and that you would not have husbands and wives who are so obsessed with their physical needs in life that they wouldn't be willing to set that aside for a time for some other sorrow or difficulty.

It is a gift of God that we are required to use and when husbands and wives deprive one another it is sinful. At the same time there is a time

when husbands and wives, as they are taking dominion before the Lord, fast and pray for their own flesh, for their families, for their churches, for their nations, for the lost that are around them. But husbands' and wives hearts are so hard and they don't care, so they won't fast. Are you a husband and wife like that?

20. We should fast because the bride groom has been taken away. The bride groom is taken away and he is preparing a bride, sanctifying her and washing her with the water of the Word. And there is so much need of sanctification. There is so much sin in the church. There is so much darkness in the world. And because of that, the sons of the kingdom are to fast and to cry out to God during this season, not on Mondays and Fridays, but to cry out to break oppression whenever they see it.

The bridegroom has been taken away. He is preparing a bride to come and be ushered into this great hall of the marriage supper or the Lamb and he has created fasting for that feasting later on so that there would be more from every tongue and tribe and nation, so that the debilitating sins of our brothers and sisters, the power of them would be broken because we prayed for one another, because we cared enough to make our needs meek. But we don't care. That is why we don't fast, because we fast like the Pharisees.

We have to distinguish fasting from health or for penance. Fasting is never done for physical purposes. You can make a case that it is good for your body, but it is totally irrelevant. Scripture is blind to the health factor. While your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, there is something greater than your body. We take such good care of our bodies and such poor care of those who are suffering.

Who can call for fasts? In Scripture authorities can call for fasts. Fathers can call for fasts. Husbands and wives can call for fasts. Individuals can call for fasts. I have just summarized a couple of dozen passages of Scripture.

In 1697 there was a time of fasting and repentance after the Salem witch trials. Several years after the witch trials, the General Court of Massachusetts called for a fast. Judge Samuel Sewell who had been in charge of many of the hangings wrote a confession and he confessed his sin. And so in 1710 the Massachusetts authorities gave compensation to the families and to the other people who were accused. The Salem witch trials happened because a pastor allowed sin to be cultivated in his children and his children and the guests in his house were

accusing people wrongly and many, many were killed. That is what happened with the Salem witch trials.

When that time of fasting happened in 1697, revival broke out. Many, many historians, many Church historians mark the beginning of the Great Awakening to that fasting, because a man, a judge, repented of his sins and it relieved many to repent of their sins as well. And often what holds back revival is that we are holding on to our sins. We don't care about the wickedness out there or in ourselves. And so the awakening is held back because we just don't care. But it begins with how much we care about our own sinfulness.

We could speak of many fasts in history. But I want to move to some application. I want to return to this question that I have been working through this entire time together. Why don't we fast?

The symptoms are that we are not experiencing fervor. The symptom might be that we are content. We are experiencing a contentedness, a sinful contentedness. Of course, there is a godly contentedness and there is a sinful contentedness. Insensitivity to the sufferings of others, a loss of love for country or countrymen or a lack of care of the emergencies that are in our nation.

We are connected to the sufferings in this world, and we have obligations to them, and our God is not our belly.

Paul in Romans 15:30 said, "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me..." Paul is begging the Romans to strive in prayers for him so that he can preach the Gospel, so that he can go to the place that he is intending to go, because he is thinking about that feast. Paul has that feast on his mind. He is making tents, living in houses that aren't his because he has a greater feast in mind. He is gathering the people of God in Rome to fast so that there would be a fast to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to break every yoke, to share food with the hungry, to provide the poor with shelter, to clothe the naked and to not turn away from flesh and blood.

So those are the symptoms: insensitivity, contentment, things like that. Those are just symptoms. Whenever you find a symptom there is always something underneath, right? If you have a fever something is going on. You have to go find out what is going on. If you are angry, the anger is not the problem. There is

something else underneath, something is driving the anger. So it is like that with these symptoms here, these symptoms of contentment and lack of care, these maladies of our souls. They exist for a reason. There is something there. How do we find these symptoms?

There is always a sin at the bottom of a symptom like this. So the answer is not, "I am going to start fasting again." Don't anyone do that. Don't anyone make a commitment for fast in this room. Please do not do that. Do not say, "Well, family, it is the first Monday of the month. We are going to fast." Please do not say that, because you haven't gotten to the root of why we don't fast. So, why? Why don't we care?

I am going to quote John Piper on the answer to this question. It is from the book called "Hungry for God."

What dulls our appetite for the kingdom of heaven? Ultimately the lack of fasting is a lack of appetite for the kingdom of heaven. It is a lack of love for that great feast. It is being so absorbed in the world. What dulls our appetite of the kingdom of heaven? It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, that endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the x-rated video, but the Primetime drivel of triviality that we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of an oxen and a wife, Luke 14:18-20.

The greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies, but His gifts, and the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of the earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself the idolatry is scarcely recognizable and almost incurable. (Piper, 1997)

But it is curable. It is curable. Its only cure is repentance. We come here to recognize that the purpose of fasting is really for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, for the gathering at that great day, at that great feast. And in between now and then, that we would be the kind of people as we have been instructed for three weeks now, that we would be the kind of people who are urgently crying out to God, bringing heaven down and saying, "...Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." To loose the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the

oppressed free and break every yoke. To break every yoke. That is the purpose that we have been given in this world to break the yoke of the world and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus who said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."⁴

Let's pray.

Now, Oh Lord, we all have stood before this text and we know who we are and I pray that you would help us with our affections so that our hearts would burn again and break again for that great feast on that great day. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 11:29