

Fasting for Reward

Fasting Part 2

Matthew 6:16-18 1-16-11

This message ends with a section that teaches how to make your resistant, unwilling heart more willing to fast. It's the method Jesus used.

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Matthew 6:16 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.

Introduction

Review

We have been studying verse-by-verse through the Sermon on the Mount and we came last week to this section in chapter 6 on fasting. Just to dust off the cobwebs let me do a quick review of the basics from last week. First, what is a fast? Fasting is any effort to humble your soul by saying no to food and other creature comforts, such as a comfortable bed, a shower, pleasant drinks, skin lotion, or sometimes just not eating tasty food. When do you do it? There are two kinds of fasts: Fasting in times of great sorrow for the purpose of cooperating with what God is doing by sending that sorrow into your life. He sends the sorrow to humble you, and you feel a special need to cooperate with that by humbling yourself through fasting. That is not to say you always have to fast in times of sorrow. Jesus did not fast the night before the crucifixion. Some people asked last week about the tradition of having a meal after a funeral. That is not necessarily wrong, because there is no legalistic requirement that we

must fast every time we are sad - just like there is no legalistic requirement that you have to shout for joy every time you are happy. But when you sense a special need to humble yourself before God in a time of sorrow, fasting is appropriate. The other kind is fasting in times of especially earnest prayer and communion with God. When you have a particularly desperate need, fasting is a way of saying to God, "This is how much I want this thing I'm asking for. God, if You are more inclined to answer the prayers of the humble, then I will go to these extreme measures to humble my heart right now. That is how important this is to me." So we fast in times of sorrow and in times of deep, earnest prayer. And so the most appropriate time of all to fast is when we are repenting of sin, because that combines both types of fast in one.

God responds to fasting

And God responds to that. It is amazing to think of how many events that have changed the course of human history have come in response to fasting: Moses on Mt. Sinai, Hannah before the birth of Samuel, Daniel at the return of the Jews to Israel, Anna at the birth of Christ, Jesus at the outset of His public ministry, and the early church at the sending out of the Apostle Paul. And you can add to that the countless stories we hear of how God has done mighty things throughout church history in response to fasting. God even answered prayers of some very wicked people when they fasted. God is responsive to humble, broken, dependent hearts, and that is what fasting is for. I can give you my own testimony from last week. As I was studying this last week, and I saw how fitting it is to fast in times of repentance, I felt like I should fast. For some time now I have been concerned about how tepid and weak my repentance over sin is, and how little brokenness I tend to have over sin. So I fasted, asking God to humble my heart resulting in a more thorough repentance. I did a Daniel-type fast - eating food, but staying away from tasty food. And the first several days I got some benefit - it helped me keep my attention on God throughout the day, and I felt I was praying from a somewhat more humble posture - but for the most part it seemed like my prayer for greater brokenness went unanswered. But then after about five or six days, the answer finally came. I had a dream. I dreamed that I had stolen a car years ago, and then covered it up. But in the dream I got caught, and the crime was exposed. When I woke up I was terrified. The dream was so real that after I woke up I was actually laying in bed trying to remember if I really had stolen a car. By the time I was fully awake and realized it was all a dream, the feeling of guilt and terror were still there, and the Lord, in His grace, enabled me to attach those feelings to the sin that does exist in my life. I got up and spent some time in prayers of repentance, and it was one of the most profound times of repentance I have had in a long time. And ever since then I have had much greater closeness to Him in my daily worship. So fasting is an effective way to humble your soul, and when you humble yourself before God He is especially responsive to your prayers.

The wrong kind of fast

Just as wonderful things happen when you fast the right way, terrible things happen when you fast the wrong way. It is such a problem that there are at least seven different places in Scripture that warn of the dangers of fasting the wrong way: Isaiah 58, Jeremiah 14, Zechariah 7, Mark 2, Luke 18, 1 Timothy 4, and here in Matthew 6. It is so easy for an external action like fasting to turn into an empty religious ritual with no connection to the heart - or to even become the expression of sin in the heart, which is what Jesus warns against here. So the outline of this passage is very simple. Jesus has two points: Don't fast for human applause, fast for divine reward

Do not show off your humility

16 When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show¹ 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

Last week the question came up - how is it hypocrisy to fast and look like you are fasting? Isn't that just being honest? Hypocrisy is acting - when you pretend to be one thing and inside you are something else. But the Pharisees were acting like they were fasting on the outside, and they really were fasting - so where is the hypocrisy? And why do righteous people in the Old Testament put ashes on their head and do all kinds of things that make it obvious to everyone that they are fasting?

The answer to that is easy to understand if you understand the purpose of fasting. Remember the most basic function of fasting is to humble your soul. The hypocrites were going without food, but they were hardly doing it to humble themselves. Just the opposite - they were doing it to show off. They disfigured their faces so people would be impressed with how spiritual they were. Any time you are showing off how humble you are, you are not humble at all. Showing off is a function of pride, not humility. The reason they were hypocrites is because fasting is not just going without food - it is going without food *for the purpose of humbling your soul*. They were hypocrites not because they were pretending to fast; they were hypocrites because they were pretending to be humbling themselves when they really were not. Any time you are showing off your humility, your humility is an act. What could possibly be more hypocritical than showing off your humility?

The Pharisees fasted twice a week - every Monday and Thursday. Why Monday and Thursday? They said it was because those were the days Moses ascended and descended Mt. Sinai. Sounds pretty spiritual, but if you dig around a little in the historical context you find that Monday and Thursday were the market days - when everyone came into town. Everything they did was calculated for the maximum number of people to see and be impressed with them - even their acts of "humility." "Look at me, everyone! I am the prime example of how you should be because I have mastered humility." Putting your fasting on display to impress people is hypocritical because you are claiming to be humbling yourself when you are not humbling yourself.

Fasting must come from the heart

This is why Jesus was against ritualistic fasting. The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday as a ritual. Regardless of what was in their heart - happy, sad, repentant, unrepentant - the fast had nothing to do with the heart. And rituals that have nothing to do with the heart are worse than worthless. That is the perversion of religion that Jesus absolutely hated. He hated religion that did not touch the heart, which is what so much of Judaism had become in that time. Their system was a lot like the Roman Catholic system today, where there is a fast during Lent that is pure ritual. Tracy tells me that when she was growing up the MacDonald's would have fish fillet sandwiches for twenty-five cents every Friday during Lent because the Catholics were fasting so they could not eat meat, but they can still pig out on as many fish burgers as they wanted because fish is not technically considered meat. There are Catholic churches that actually put on a big Friday Fish Fry on Good Friday, so all the fasting Catholics come for all-you-can-eat fried fish. You see the same thing in Islam. During the whole month of Ramadan Muslims are supposed to fast, but the fast only applies to daylight hours. So as soon as the sun goes down they eat all they want. So much so that many Muslims gain weight during the "fast" of Ramadan - just like we gain weight over Christmas and Thanksgiving. A ritualistic fast, complete with loopholes that allow you to pig out all you want, is a joke. It has nothing to do with the heart, and is therefore worthless.

¹ The words translated **disfigure** and **show** are the positive and negative forms of the same word. To preserve the play on words we could translate it: "They make themselves unrecognizable in an effort to gain recognition."

If you are fasting because of something that is in your heart, then you are not going to gorge yourself on fish burgers and French fries or a big feast after dark. If you eat on a technicality, then the fast does not come from the heart and any effort to humble yourself that does not involve your heart is a joke.

Joel 2:13 Rend your heart and not your garments.

To “rend” means “to tear.” They were tearing their clothes as a show of repentance, but their hearts were still hard. Anything you do on the outside that does not match what is on the inside is hypocrisy, it is detestable to God, and it is worse than worthless.

Continuing in sin

This is why God refused to pay attention to the fasting of the Israelites in Isaiah’s time. Their fasting was disconnected from their heart. They would fast as an act of great devotion and humility, and then, while they were fasting, they would become irritable and unloving toward those around them.

Isaiah 58:3 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet ... 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife ... You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

It is absurd to say, “I’m going to turn my back on food to humble my soul in repentance, but I’m not going to turn my back on the sin itself.” So the thing that makes fasting hypocritical is when the act does not match what is going on in your heart. That was Jesus’ point when they asked Him why His disciples did not fast. When John’s disciples said, “Why don’t Your disciples fast?” the answer was, “Because fasting would not match what is in their hearts. They have joy in their hearts right now, not sorrow. If they fasted in a time of celebration then their actions would not be matching what was in their hearts and they would be hypocrites.”

Does it ruin it if others know?

So what about people like David, who fast in a way that makes it obvious to those around them that they are fasting? Does it ruin it if people find out that you are fasting? If so, then Jesus gets no reward for His fast because we all know about that. Fasting is just like praying and giving - the issue is not whether people see it or know about it; the issue is your motives. Jesus said not to pray in public like the hypocrites, but to pray in private instead. But that does not mean Jesus was sinning when He prayed in public. It is fine to pray or give or fast in public where people can see; what is forbidden is doing that so that people will be impressed with you. And if you want to test your motives to find out if impressing people is part of your motive - try doing it in secret and see if it feels like a waste of time. (Any time you ever do something that no one knows about and it feels like a waste of time because no one appreciates it - you know you are working for human applause and not divine pleasure.) So not all fasting has to be top secret - just like not all prayer has to be secret. But some of it should be secret so you can test your own motives. So Jesus says when you fast, **wash your face and put oil on your head.** The oil was to keep the skin moist, so a better translation would be lotion, rather than oil. It was a normal part of personal grooming. If you did not put on lotion your skin would dry out and it would become very uncomfortable. And if you are going for a real pitiful, disheveled look so people will be impressed with how much you are humbling yourself, you would go without the lotions. So Jesus says, “Go ahead and wash up, put on lotion, do all your normal grooming so no one but God will know about your fasting.”

Now, what about Daniel and David, who both went without lotion during their fasts? Were they wrong to do that? No - no more than Jesus was wrong for allowing people to know about His forty-day fast. The point is not that there is something inherently sinful in putting on lotion. Going without lotion can be an excellent part of fasting if your goal is to humble your soul before God. But Jesus is speaking specifically about where there is a temptation to do it for show. And where that is an issue, the best thing is to find a way to fast that only God sees.

Fasting for reward

So the wrong way is fasting to impress people, now let's look at the right way.

Matthew 6:17 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.

Fasting toward God

Fasting is between you and God - just like prayer and giving. All forms of worship must be directed toward God. Any act of religion designed to impress people is self-glorification, which is the opposite of worshipping God. Religious acts designed to impress people is self-worship, and that is true whether you are talking about praying or giving or fasting or even eating and drinking. Did you know that eating that is not for God's sake is sin?

Zechariah 7:5 When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for my sake that you fasted?

The answer was no - they were not fasting for God's sake; their fasting was designed for their own glory. And the same was true of their feasting.

6 And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for your own sake?

They committed two sins - 1) fasting, and 2) feasting. They fasted for their own glory and not God's, and they feasted for their own sake and not God's glory. Everything we do in life is to be worship - including our eating and drinking.

1 Corinthians 10:31 whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

So our eating and fasting and praying and giving and everything else must be for God's glory, not our glory. So why aren't we told to eat in secret? Because eating is not something that normally causes people to be impressed with how spiritual you are. But fasting and prayer and giving can have that effect, and so for the sake of testing your heart you should sometimes do those things in private just to discover whether it feels like a waste of time when no one but God sees it. If there is any difference at all in your acts of worship when people are watching than when you are in private then you are better off to do them only in private until you can learn how to direct all your worship toward God rather than toward yourself. But if there is no difference in how you are in public or private, then it is fine for people to see your worship. In fact it is a wonderful encouragement to the saints.

Reward

So what is the reward? Jesus promises here that if we fast before God in private He will reward us. I am not going to spend a lot of time on the subject of having reward as your motivation because we studied that in detail back in verses 1-6 when we talked about praying and giving for divine reward.

All I will say now is if you were taught that doing things in order to get reward from God is a substandard motive you have been taught wrong. It is the highest motive there is, and throughout this entire chapter it is what Jesus is teaching us to do. Everything we do we should do for reward from God.

And fasting is no different. If you fast with the right motives, God will reward you and that should be all the reason anyone needs to fast. I said last week that fasting is never commanded in the New Testament, but for Jesus to offer to reward us for fasting is essentially the same thing as commanding it. When God commands something, all He is doing is showing us that that thing is the right thing to do, and obligating us to do it. And offering divine reward accomplishes the exact same thing. Offering a reward for fasting shows us that it is the right thing to do and it obligates us to do it. "How does offering a reward obligate me to do it? If I see a sign that offers a reward for finding someone's lost cat that does not mean I am morally bound to have to go find that cat." That is true, but reward from God is different because we are morally bound to trust God. You see, if some person says, "I will make it worth your while if you do this thing I want you to do," you may or may not be motivated depending on how much faith you have in their ability to make it worth your while. Whatever the reward is may not be worth the trouble. But when God promises to make it worth your while, and that does not motivate you to do it, that just shows that you do not really trust Him to make it worth your while. We are not obligated to trust in the richness and generosity of the cat owner, but we are morally obligated to trust in the richness and generosity of God. Therefore it is a sin not to be motivated by God's promises of reward, because it shows a lack of faith.

So faith obligates us to do anything God promises to reward. And so does love. A few weeks ago Tracy misplaced her slippers and she told me one day she would give me \$5 if I could find her slippers. (We joke around a lot in our house. The \$5 was not a great enough reward to motivate me to look for anything.) I spend half my life looking for things I have misplaced and so looking for things is not something I enjoy doing at all. So it would take a lot more than \$5 to make that worth my while. However, as soon as she said that I was motivated to help her find them not because of faith - not because I trusted her ability to reward me handsomely, but because of love. By offering that reward what she was saying was, "I really, really want to find my slippers." Offering a reward is an expression of a desire. People offer rewards for things they really want done. And if you love the person then your heart will be moved simply by the fact that they want it so much (assuming it is not an evil desire). My faith in her reward was very small, but my love for her drove me to look for the slippers. And I found them, by the way. And it really was fun to present those slippers to her because she had been searching for them for a couple months.

If God offers a reward for fasting that means He desires that we fast, and the mere fact that He desires it obligates us morally to do it, because He only has good desires. Again, if someone you love desires something evil that does not obligate you to do it. But everything God desires is morally good, which means we *ought* to do those things, which means we are morally obligated. He does not have to formally command it. All God has to do for us to be morally obligated is to let us know that He desires it, because He is so good that His wish really is our command.

So when God offers a reward for something, both faith and love require that we do that thing - faith because we trust in His ability to make it worth our while, and love because we desire whatever He desires. So, must we fast? Yes. The promise of reward makes it a moral obligation.

The reward

Undisclosed heavenly reward

So what is the reward? I don't know - Jesus leaves that undisclosed. I think Jesus wants us to think primarily in terms of the reward we get in heaven - not on earth. When He first brought up the idea of reward in this sermon He specified that it was reward in heaven.

Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven

And the very next thing He says after this He tells us to fast for reward is...

Matthew 6:19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... 20 store up for yourselves treasures in heaven

So Jesus purposely keeps the reward secret. He does not show it to us. He wants us to trust Him. He wants us to be motivated not by seeing the reward, but by our faith in His goodness and generosity. So He does not give us even the slightest clue what that reward is.

Immediate rewards of fasting

And since He goes on to talk about storing up reward, we get the feeling that the main focus is future. This is reward that we will receive not in this life, but on Judgment Day. However, as we saw last week, in addition to that glorious future reward, there is a reward for fasting that we do receive in this life. It is a reward that is of supreme value. It is a treasure that is so priceless, it is worth any sacrifice to get it. The reward we get in this life for fasting is ... humility.

We saw last week that the purpose of fasting is to humble the soul. And what is there in all the world that is more valuable than humility? Humility is the key to so many wonderful things. Humility is what moves God to answer your prayers. Humility gives you special access to His grace.

James 4:6 God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Psalm 18:27 You save the humble

Psalm 25:9 He guides the humble

Psalm 147:6 The Lord sustains the humble

Psalm 149:4 he crowns the humble with salvation.

Isaiah 29:19 the humble will rejoice in the Lord

Psalms 146:8 the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Humility enables you to love people and to consider others more important than yourself. Humility is the solution to the deadly disease of pride, which is at the core of all sin. All our worst problems are tied in one way or another to pride, and humility is the only remedy. Therefore humility is the key to all virtues. Humility is priceless to anyone who longs to be like Christ. So even if there were no eternal reward in heaven for fasting, it would be worth doing just to get the immediate reward of humility. (Which once again goes to show that if you fast in a way that feeds your pride you destroy the whole point and it is not even true fasting.)

Conclusion: How to make yourself willing to fast

At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned that there is no legalistic requirement to fast every time you are sad, nor do you have to fast every time you repent of a sin or every time you seek God in prayer. So how do you know when to fast?

Fasting is a response to impulses from the heart

That question is kind of like the question, “How do you know when you should cheer or clap your hands?” How do you know when you should frown or bow your head down or collapse on the ground? How do you know when you should jump up and down for joy? All those things are physical expressions of something on the inside, and fasting is the same way. It sounds from Scripture like fasting is a response to impulses in the heart. There are times in which the Lord will move your heart in the direction of fasting in certain contexts of great sorrow or special need or deep repentance. And you might be thinking, “I have never felt an impulse like that.” I think, in a wealthy culture like ours there tends to be a lot less fasting because what happens is we allow our stomachs to become king. So when our heart whispers, “maybe you should fast” we do not hear it because our stomach is shouting, “Don’t you DARE!” We have two problems - our hearts are too quiet and our stomachs are too loud. We are not sensitive to the impulse to fast because King Stomach has become like a spoiled 2-year-old. In fact, we put up with behavior from our stomachs that we would never tolerate in our kids. We are standing in the checkout line, suddenly King Stomach catches a glimpse of something it wants, and if you try to say no it will pitch a fit.

“Get me that Snickers bar NOW!!!!”

“Ok, ok, ok - just stop yelling,” and we obey King Stomach. When stomach is king, fasting is out of the question. Any godly impulses of the heart in the direction of self-denial will be so drowned out by the shouts of King Stomach that we cannot even hear them.

That is a very dangerous place to be spiritually. The moment we bow to the appetites of the body, Satan can lead us by the nose pretty much anywhere he pleases. All he has to do is make it taste good. Letting your stomach become king is deadly to your spiritual life because King Stomach quickly becomes God Stomach.

Philippians 3:19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach and ... Their mind is on earthly things.

If your god is your stomach – If your life is ruled by your appetites, then your mind will be on earthly things and you will be utterly insensitive to spiritual impulses and your destiny will be destruction.

Romans 16:18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.

You cannot do both. That is why Paul told Titus to rebuke the gluttons in Crete sharply (Tit.1:12). And regarding himself he said:

1 Corinthians 9:27 I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be rejected.²

² The reason he gave for beating his body and making it his slave was not just so he would get a little extra victory at the margin, or pile up ten percent more rewards in heaven, or just be a little bit better example - he said **No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be rejected.** That word rejected is *adokimos*, and it is a very strong word. The NIV translates that disqualified for the prize, but that is an extremely weak translation. And you do not have to take my word for that - judge for yourself. The word appears eight times in Scripture, and it always refers to someone who is rejected as worthless. **2 Timothy 3:8 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth--men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.** That word translated rejected is *adokimos*. **Hebrews 6:8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless (*adokimos*) and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.** **Romans 1:27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with.** **28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind.** That word translated depraved is *adokimos*. In 2 Corinthians Paul uses that word to describe people who fail the test of salvation. **2 Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test? (lit - unless, of course, you are *adokimos*)²** **Titus 1:16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit (*adokimos*) for doing anything good.** That is the word Paul used to describe his own fate if he failed to beat his body and make it his slave. **1 Corinthians 9:27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be *adokimos*.**

It is a very, very dangerous thing to become enslaved to the appetites of your body.

So if that is you, how do you break free from that? How do you make your soul willing to fast? When food is too important to you, you will never fast because whenever the idea crosses your mind (if it ever does) it will be shot down. "Not today. Not this week. I've got this meal coming up, this special event, this thing in the refrigerator; I need my strength this week, now's not a good time." So how do you break your dependence on constant feeding enough to make your soul willing to fast?

1) Teach your soul not to seek life from bread

The best place I know of in Scripture to go for the answer to that is Matthew 4 where Jesus fasted. Satan's first temptation was to try to get Jesus to break the fast based on the idea that suffering was incompatible with being the Son of God. Jesus resisted that temptation. And the way He resisted it was by calling to mind a principle from the book of Deuteronomy that enabled Him not to be overly dependent on food.³ And if that principle helped Jesus to continue His fast, we could use that same principle to help us become willing to begin a fast in the first place. Here it is:

Matthew 4:4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

When God said that man does not live by bread alone He did not just mean "live" in the sense of having a pulse. There is more to living than just having a pulse. The concept of life in Scripture is much fuller than that. It includes all the various aspects of life - strength and health and joy and fullness and satisfaction of soul. And you cannot get those things from food. They might come *through* food and other gifts from God, but only when we are obeying God's Word. Disobey His Word and not all the food in the world can give you a full, rich, contented, satisfied life. Most of us use food and other pleasures to try to "self-medicate" the cravings of the soul (to borrow a psychobabble term). And that is exposed when we fast. What are you going to do with all the unhappiness inside when you cannot turn to the refrigerator? What are you going to do with the dissatisfactions of relationships, boredom, sorrow, depression, emptiness - what will you do with all that when you do not have supper to look forward to? Do you really believe that life (fullness, satisfaction, joy, contentment, delight) - do you really believe that those things do not come from food, but from God alone? The more you believe that, the more willing you will be to give up those things that are not the source of life.

Food cannot satisfy the soul. On those days when you just want something, so you go into the kitchen and open the refrigerator and stare at hundreds of dollars worth of food and think, *There's nothing to eat in this house*, close the refrigerator door and tell your soul, "Hey - what you're hungry for right now isn't food." Those times when you cannot figure out what you want - you try something salty, "Naw" - you try something sweet, "No, that's doesn't hit the spot," - you rack your brain, "What would taste good right now???" - when it is food that you need it is not hard at all to think of something that would be satisfying. When you cannot immediately think of what kind of food would satisfy it is because what you are craving is not food. Leave the pantry and hit the prayer closet. That is what you are craving. Maybe you only need to fast for a few hours - until your soul finally understands that life comes from feasting on God's Word, not food.

Or maybe what your soul is craving is not the prayer closet, but the will of God in some ministry. I told you last week that Jesus only fasted once that we know of, but this week I thought of another time in His life when He probably fasted. In John 4, when Jesus was ministering to the woman at the well. He was at that well because he was tired and thirsty after a long journey on foot, the Disciples

Allowing your stomach to become the boss in your life is extremely dangerous. It is not a small matter. There is no limit to the disaster that can result from becoming enslaved to your appetites.

³ See the Appendix for an explanation of this principle.

had gone into town to get food, and when they come back Jesus, evidently, was not interested in eating.

John 4:31 his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" ³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."

Doing the Father's will - carrying out some specific task that God wanted Him to carry out, was so satisfying and delightful to the soul of Jesus that it gave Him more energy, more fullness, more strength, more satisfaction than food. Following God's Word and doing His will is so satisfying that it will make you willing to forgo food.

2) Use physical hunger and thirst to teach your soul about spiritual hunger and thirst

So the first principle: teach your heart not to seek life from bread. The second principle is from David, who is such a great teacher when it comes to this issue of hunger and thirst for God.

Psalm 63:1 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you

He thirsted so desperately that it drove Him to seek God with all His heart, and the result was...

5 My soul is satisfied as with the richest of foods

How did David do that? How did he manage to build up such an extreme desire for God - such an extreme hunger and thirst for God that he was finally desperate enough to seek God with all his heart and have an experience of God's presence that completely satisfied his soul? The answer is in the context. Go back to the beginning of the psalm and take a look at the context.

1 A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

David was running for his life in one of the most desolate, barren places in the world. He calls it a **dry and weary land where there is no water**. The physical dryness and weariness of his body made the thirst of his soul all the more acute and pronounced. David used the dryness and desolation of his circumstances to increase the thirst of his soul for God. He did not say, "I'm in a dry and weary land where there is no water, and so I long for food and drink." He said, "I'm in a dry and weary land and that makes me thirsty for an experience of God's presence." David did that with the hard circumstances that were thrust upon him; Jesus placed Himself in a context like that on purpose to accomplish the same purpose.

Remind yourself constantly that you cannot get life from food. Use hardships and sorrows in life to increase your hunger for God. And fast to cooperate with what God is doing in that process, until your hunger for God finally drives you to seek Him with all your being, and your soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods.

Benediction: Isaiah 55:2-3 Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. 3 Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.

Appendix: The test in the desert

The reason Jesus fasted in Matthew 4 was because he was reenacting the time of Israel's testing in the wilderness after the Exodus. If you compare the account of Israel in the desert and Jesus in the desert the parallels are obvious.

<p>Deuteronomy 8:2 the LORD your God <u>led you all the way in the desert</u></p> <p>these <u>forty years to humble you and to test you ...</u></p> <p>3 He humbled you causing you <u>to hunger</u></p> <p>and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that <u>man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD</u></p>	<p>Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was <u>led by the Spirit into the desert</u></p> <p><u>to be tested by the devil.</u> ² After <u>fasting forty days and forty nights,</u></p> <p><u>he was hungry.</u></p> <p>³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: '<u>Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.</u>'"</p>
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If you do not know the history then that passage from Deuteronomy can be kind of confusing. It says God fed them manna to teach them that man does not live by bread alone. How does providing manna teach the people that man does not live by bread alone? If you keep them alive by dropping bread from heaven, doesn't that make it seem like man *does* live by bread? Let's go back to Exodus 16 and see the specifics of this time of testing.

Exodus 16:4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.

So God told them, "Each day gather enough for that day, and no more. Do not gather any extra for tomorrow - only for today. And by the way, this is a test to see if you will obey Me." So what did they do? They gathered extra for the next day, and the next morning the manna was a full of worms and it stunk. When they obeyed the Word of the Lord they had all the food they could eat (even if they did not gather very much). When they disobeyed they got worms and a smelly house; when they obeyed they got full, satisfied stomachs.

So you can see how that really would teach them that life does not come from bread; it does not even come from manna - it comes from obeying the words of God. If you disregard God's words then bread becomes worthless to you. It will not sustain your life - it will just give you worms.

Summary

Fasting, like all forms of worship (including eating), must be between you and God, never for self-glory but always for His. And it must never become empty ritual (disconnected from the heart). Fast for reward from God (the offer of reward functions like a command because of faith in God's goodness and love for God, desiring what He desires). Become sensitive to the impulses of the heart toward fasting (overcome enslavement to food by teaching your soul that life does not come from food and by using physical hunger to increase spiritual hunger).

Q&A Questions

- 1) How long should a fast last?
- 2) Isn't gratitude a better motive than reward?
- 3) Why did Jesus say some demons only come out by prayer and fasting?