

MATTHEW 6:16 – 18 WHEN YOU FAST...

I can recall being in elementary school, probably somewhere between first and third grade, one morning when the subject came up regarding the word, “breakfast” and what that word actually meant. Our young minds quickly kicked into gear, most of us breaking the compound word into its logical deconstruction of, “break” and “fast.” I remember the young lady sitting beside me reasoning that breakfast was the word used for the first meal of the day because we were normally hungry upon waking and “broke” for the kitchen in a very, “fast” manner. That seemed to be the consensus among us students. The obvious difficulty with this interpretation is that none of us knew the definition of “fast” as a noun. We only knew it as an adjective, meaning to be “characterized by quick motion.”

The biblical term comes from a Greek word meaning, **“to abstain from food.”**

Had we known this, defining the word would have been much easier. To eat breakfast means we cease our abstinence from food. I have never forgotten what that word meant.

Fasting is our topic today as we pick back up with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Please remember that Jesus is on a hillside, along the banks of the Sea of Galilee, speaking to a throng of people, most of which are now believers. Some of them will one day be Apostles, but most are followers, technically making them disciples.

Jesus, following on the heels of John the Baptist has shared the Gospel and multitudes have been saved at this point. Now, this message, (the Sermon on the Mount) is telling Jesus’ followers what is to be expected of them as they are now in the Kingdom of God. This is a new day and there is a new sheriff in town. The old ways are not the new ways. Gone are the days of being able to go through the motions of dead, dry religion. Jesus has come and there is new wine in new wine skins. God is now to be known and addressed as “our Father.” The follower of Jesus now has the same, if not better access to Him than even the High Priest; the only one allowed to go into the Holy of Holies. A relationship has now replaced religion. And praise God that is the same place in which we find ourselves today!

As believers we are to be ever-seeking a deeper relationship with God rather than more religion.

In order to aid us in this, Jesus has already spoken of prayer and giving. These are both exercises, spiritual ones I might add that help connect to God, discern His will and to aid in the growth of the church, God's collective body of believers here on earth. Now Jesus brings up a subject that was very familiar to the first century Jew, but one from which we Americans try to stay away. That is the subject of fasting.

Mt. 6:16-18

16 "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. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 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.

Once again, we see that fasting, just as with prayer and giving, is a GIVEN.

Jesus fully expects His followers to pray, give and to fast.

I know, we Americans want to roll our eyes at such a thing. You may be tempted to ask, "We have to pray, give our money and now you want us to not eat?" But that is what Jesus is saying here.

And you may ask, "I can understand praying and giving, but why are we to fast?"

Remember, Jesus is pouring new wine into new wineskins. Faith is now about a relationship with God more than ever before. An intimacy with God has been established through Jesus and now we who believe are temples housing the Holy Spirit. We worship in spirit and in truth. Let's look at fasting from a Biblical, historical point of view.

- Israel was a nation of many feast days. Some of those feasts lasted for weeks. Feasts, in a day and time when food, especially meat and other luxuries weren't as available as they are to us, were a time of real celebration. Think of your experiences as a child at Christmas and you get a good picture of what every feast was like to an Israelite. Imagine erecting a small tent or booth on top of or around your house as a child and having your entire family as well as the entire nation living in it for an extended period of time. As a child that would have been awesome! It amounted to a family camping trip! No school! NO work! Super groovy! There were many feasts in Israel but there was only one mandated fast and that was on the Day of Atonement. (Lev. 16:27-31)
- **Leviticus 16:31**

- **31 It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.**
- **Afflicting your souls was akin to fasting.**
- There are other times when we see people in the OT where people fasted voluntarily, for spiritual discipline or to draw closer to God for a time.
- During the Babylonian captivity, in the newly established synagogues, as a way of remembering better days in their homeland, the leaders began a tradition of fasting twice a week. This was continued on into Jesus' day. This is the context in which He is speaking.
- Our problem is that we have minimized the fast and maximized the feast!

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The Pharisees continued this two-day a week fasting tradition. And there was nothing wrong with it, but any good thing can be made into a bad thing if the proper motives aren't in play. They began to use it as a way to be seen as more pious and holy than others. They would not bathe, comb their hair and would stand around looking miserable in order to elicit questions as to what was wrong. This would allow them to state that they were fasting. This would usually result in people applauding them for their holiness and devotion to God.

- And Jesus' response to this was that they had already received their reward. If the applause of men/ women is what you want then you can have it now. But, this applause is short-lived and carries no eternal weight or benefits.
- There is a real and proper place for fasting, but it isn't to be something we use in order to gain the praises of men.
- Fast but do it right. What Jesus was criticizing was not the act of fasting but the way in which people, (hypocrites/ actors) were going about it.
- Jesus fasted. 40 days temptation in the wilderness.

But then He and His disciples were accused of not fasting enough.

- **Mt. 9:14-17**
- **14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”**
- **15 And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. 17 Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”**

- Jesus and His disciples fasted, but not often enough for the followers of John or the Pharisees.
- Jesus said that His followers didn't fast that often at that point because He, the bridegroom was with them. After His ascension they would need to fast more often.
- So what is the purpose of fasting?
- 1. It isn't a hunger strike! We aren't trying to twist God's arm in order that He answers some specific prayer in a certain way.
- Fasting is a spiritual discipline in which we express earnestness and seriousness before God.
- We are made up of body soul and spirit. We tend to get the cart before the horse and pay more attention to our spiritual bodies than we do our spiritual well being.

1 Timothy 4:8

8 For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't take care of ourselves physically, but that we should have our priorities in the right order.

Imagine if we "exercised spiritually as much as we do physically! **A church should be a spiritual gym! This is why we have "Face Time!"** Unfortunately, people visit the gym for a time and then find it easier to go home and watch TV.

A fast is a way of saying just as Jesus did that, "Man shall not live by bread alone." It is a time in which we choose to draw all our nourishment from the mana of God, His Word.

It is a time in which we tell our physical appetites, our fleshly man that he does not have control over us. **It is a time in which we starve the flesh to feed the spirit.**

We are spiritual beings living in a spiritual world in which is being fought a spiritual war! So much of our troubles come from the spiritual front and we try to fight them in a worldly, secular way! So many of the things that are brought to me to fix are spiritual battles in which people have chosen not to fight on spiritual grounds. It is equivalent to taking a knife to a gunfight.

Until we, as American Christians begin to see the supernatural world as it is, we will continue to fail in the fight. We have bought into the secular ideas of the Enlightenment and so-called science that everything can be handled in a secular way and that just is not true. We take issue with a Christianity that is "too supernatural!" When I talk about fallen angels and demonic powers, some people look at me like as if I'm crazy! But these powers and these battles are all through the Bible. Now, to be balanced, we aren't to try to find a demon under every rock, but we

must acknowledge that we are in the middle of a spiritual war. If we, as the followers of Jesus Christ – the ones enlisted in the war, won't acknowledge our enemy or the weapons at our disposal, then there is no hope for us and there is no need to pray, as Jesus told us, for God's kingdom to come!

An example of taking a knife to a gunfight...

- **Mt.17:14-21**
- **14 And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, 15 "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him."**
- **17 Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour.**
- **19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"**
- **20 So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. 21 However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."**

A lack of calories does not necessarily constitute super powers from on high, but it is a spiritual discipline that aids us in drawing closer to God. And this keeps us on the same page as God is as far as His will for us is concerned. And that translates into a greater faith and less anxiety. It makes us into a more powerful weapon that can be used for God and His kingdom.

Fasting, just as prayer and giving, is a matter of priority.

Matthew 6:33

33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

When we do this, God has promised to reward us openly. How He rewards us is up to Him, but I would be satisfied with a greater peace and a healthier prayer life.

James 4:8

8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

We are to be single-minded, focused on the will of God and His kingdom, not our own. Fasting helps to bring us closer to this goal. Don't let your flesh dictate the terms of your life to you.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

- Don't just think of the physical advantages of fasting.
- It will be difficult at first, but everything is that is worth doing. For those of you that work out, it wasn't easy at first.
- Consider dietary concerns: blood sugar, caffeine intake.
- Don't do an extended fast in isolation.
- Don't be prideful.
- Seek to know God more intimately.
- We must live for our God and Savior, not our bellies.
- Starve the flesh, feed the spirit.