

Reading: Matthew 6:16-24

Theme: 'Soul Fattening Fasting'

We return to our studies in Matthew's Gospel this morning and we are still in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:1-18 we see how Jesus shows our Christian life can be divided into 3 sections - our doing good to others and He uses the example, illustration of giving to those in need; then there is the question of our personal relationship with God - so we have the illustration and teaching on prayer. Now in v16-18 Jesus turns to personal discipline in our own spiritual life using the illustration of fasting. In this section we have covered **ourselves in contact with others**, then **ourselves in contact with God** and will see **ourselves in contact with ourselves!**

Perhaps that idea is a strange one. We know we are to conduct ourselves rightly towards other people. It makes sense to conduct ourselves rightly before God and learn to please Him in all we do, but we may not grasp the need to conduct ourselves rightly concerning our own selves. We have the responsibility to live our personal and private lives in a consistent and disciplined manner. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying we are to live harsh, hard and punishing lifestyles. Yet there needs to be in place a self-discipline about our lives that does not need to draw attention to itself. It is part and parcel of taking up our cross, denying self and subduing our sinful nature.

We can also easily get out of condition spiritually, let alone physically! We need to constantly keep in shape and this involves self-discipline and self-denial. If you watched the Commonwealth games, you may have heard how people have been training even in the depths of winter, you realise that athletes need to be constantly self-disciplined and in training. Paul uses the illustration of an athlete in training and said he trained and

conditioned his body so it would not hinder his spiritual well-being (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

In the West we live in an age of ease, comfort, of the feelgood factor and the idea, the message of self-denial, self-discipline, of taking up our cross is not appreciated. As Christians we are to be people of self-discipline, be willing to deny our self even legitimate things **if** these things would hinder our spiritual life and our glorifying our Saviour. The need of self-discipline or self-denial may apply to many areas - the controlling of our thoughts or desires; avoiding certain activities, places, legitimate interests and even people. It could involve ourselves treating certain things as dangerous or wrong for ourselves as individuals and avoiding them e.g. alcohol if we had a drink problem, being careful with our money if we've had money problems. In such cases we have to discipline our own lives as we come to see it is necessary for us, but we are not to legislate to others for our own weaknesses.

The Lord Jesus illustrates the principle of self-discipline and denial using the example of fasting. Here we have principles concerning our own personal Christian life and personal righteousness. As we consider fasting, we are not to restrict the principles only to fasting, but to all areas of self-denial and self-discipline. I want us to note 3 things:

1. What Fasting Is.

Here, as in so many places in Scripture, fasting is primarily to go without food **for spiritual purposes** and done so in order to show our seriousness in a matter, being coupled with prayer and, at times, Bible study. It is not just going without food for a time. It has a spiritual purpose, end and exercise in mind. It shows what we desire of God is more important than our necessary food which we forego in order to seek God through prayer and His word. The

Puritans called it “*Soul fattening fasting*”. There are those who go without food even for days as part of a detoxification for their bodies - they are fasting but is not a scriptural fast which always has spiritual aims and purposes.

We are to remember that fasting is not the norm, nor to be done out of routine or habit. It is something that occurs now and again for a special and specific purpose. While self-discipline is to occur at all times, in all areas of everyday life and living in our Christian lives, fasting is a special time of self-denial and discipline within this ongoing pursuit of God. This is a word to my own heart and stomach - for we are to have moderation in the area eating as a part of our own self-discipline for health and part of our daily spiritual discipline.

Fasting is not to be limited only to food but can include abstinence from anything that is right and proper in and of itself, but which will be kept away from for some spiritual purpose. While it is not wrong to watch TV, we may set aside times to pray and seek God when we would usually rather be watching Match of the Day, or some baking program etc. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:5 say that in a marriage abstaining from making love was one such an area of “fasting” for a short time from something that is right and proper so a couple devote themselves to prayer, but not as a permanent state.

I hope we’ve seen that fasting is not partaking of legitimate, right and proper things - particularly food in most instances, for the purpose of spiritual exercises, especially prayer. Let’s move on and see:

2. When We Are to Fast.

On what occasions should fasting be considered as an option, as the right thing to consider and do? Most of the biblical information on fasting comes from OT. Only one fast is commanded in OT - on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16 & 22) and everybody in Israel did this, as this fast was to allow them to focus their attention and concentrate on the religious act being carried out, to express the sorrow and humiliation they should feel for their sin - which would go hand-in-hand with their heartfelt repentance. Later in OT we see people fasted and prayed during national and personal times of emergencies or threatened disasters e.g. David when his 1st son by Bathsheba was very ill. The people appointed fasts and mourning in remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem's walls and the city and they asked Zechariah to enquire of God if they should continue those fasts (Zechariah 7 & 8).

People fasted over ills, disasters - that had already occurred or were threatened, so defeat in battle, bereavement, sad tidings or ill-health were fasted over. Realise there is a natural basis for this also - as overwhelming grief may lead to loss of appetite. People also fasted over their sin and showed their humiliation, sorrow for sin and their repentance. Ezra and his company fasted, prayed and sought God's help as they faced a long and difficult journey back to Jerusalem, after they proclaimed God's ability to help and keep them, they did not want to dishonour God by asking for troops! Note the spiritual aim in this - to honour God and exalt Him. It is good to pray for safety on journeys, whether long or short - not necessary to fast. Fasting in OT allowed focus on important things in people's spiritual experience.

In NT fasting is noted at the appointment of missionaries (Acts 13:2-3); elders (Acts 14:23); Jesus fasted and prayed, probably to aid His concentration for and on the work ahead He was deliberately involved in. It is interesting that Jesus here says to His

disciples and to all Christians “**When** you fast...” He assumes that Christians will at some time fast, using this means of extra self-denial and discipline. Jesus never taught fasting directly, but it is an important part of our Christian heritage that has been neglected through ignorance and ease by many.

The NT has a number of approving references to fasting, showing its rightness and value, but we will not look at these references now. Church history speaks of those who fasted and prayed to seek God - His will, guidance and blessing. If we are serious with God, desiring more of Him and His blessing, then is it really that hard to discipline and deny ourselves in any area of our lives? Sadly this, like all other right means of seeking God, can be misused, be misapplied and become mechanical and so we need to see:

3. Wrong and Right Ways to Fast.

We are never to fast for the sake of saying we fasted! Please listen and listen well, for I am NOT saying that we must fast; neither am I saying that if we haven't or do not fast, we are a lesser Christian or unspiritual. Fasting, like all self-discipline in the Christian life, is a matter between ourselves God and it is for special seasons of seeking God. We should never fast in a routine or mechanical way. The Pharisees did this. Over the years they added regular fasts and by the time of Jesus they routinely fasted twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays) - hence the boast of the Pharisee in the temple included this! It became mechanical routine. They fasted for the sake of fasting as it was expected. It also appeared they fasted for the honour of being known as such a person who fasted yet did so in a hypocritical manner.

The Lord Jesus warns of such a show of fasting in this passage - some disfigured themselves, looking all mournful and lowly; looking so sad and humble. So, when people saw them, they hoped

people would be impressed by their fasting and humility! They had their reward in full - admiration from people and yet not from God and therefore had no true blessing.

We are not to view fasting as that which will make us a superior Christian, having the attitude that because we fast often we must be better than the run-of-the-mill Christians around us! Such a fasting will be done in a wrong manner, with no self-humiliation but could lead to pride. In such a case it is better not to have fasted then to end up a proud spiritual bigot or Pharisee.

We are to realise fasting does not guarantee immediate results either and so do not expect such. Just because we fast and pray, we are not guaranteed the results we want. In fasting and seeking God, we may find we, our attitudes and expectations are changed - it may teach us patience and love in the situation we are in. Results are not mechanical nor immediate as prayer and fasting is not some type of a celestial vending machine or shortcut to get success. Nor are we to fast because we imagine it is a way to greater blessings. Fasting is to seek God, His will, to show we are serious about this matter or other concerns and not to “win” or “earn” or “merit” blessings.

We must also be careful not to confuse the physical benefits of fasting for a longer period with the spiritual. I have read of Christians who had longer periods of fasting and they speak of the mental clarity they had, especially after the 5th day and they urge fasting for these benefits. Yet if you read of detoxification diets, or in New Age literature, you will find that this is their experience also and it would appear to be primarily a physical thing. I have also read of Korean Christians, on the extreme, almost mystical edge of Christianity, who speak of their 2 or 3 weeks of fasting and the visions they regularly experienced! I tell you, 2 or 3 weeks

without food and we too would have visions! Realise in fasting we must take into consideration our physical, mental and spiritual states. A godly friend of ours tried fasting, but his body metabolism was such that he could not. As a young man I thought I could eat, but my father said my friend made me look like an anorexic! It wasn't that he was greedy but he just needed that food for his body's metabolism and he was as thin as a beanpole! Those are some warnings of wrong ways to fast.

Thankfully Jesus goes on to speak of the right way. Fasting is a means to an end - to have undisturbed and undistracted times alone with God to seek Him. It is not to be done unless you feel the Lord's leading and it usually occurs in special circumstances or trials. If we feel there is some particular need in our life for an entire concentration on a major step of guidance etc. then the whole of our being should wait upon God, to seek His help, leading and to worship Him. That then is the time to fast and this is the way to approach the subject.

We are not to imagine fasting will make up for our lack of regular self-discipline. Fasting is to occur in the framework of our ongoing self-denial and discipline in our everyday Christian lives. When we fast, we are not to appear different. Some imagine Jesus' words in v17 mean they act and behave as if they are high on some medication or wonderful experience and go around as constantly grinning and jovial people. Not at all, for the custom of the day was to put oil on one's head and wash one's face as a regular course of events. What Jesus means is that we are to be natural, be ourselves, we are not to draw attention to ourselves in either morbid mourning or silly glibness!

In other words, we are to forget about self, self-image, self-reputation and be ourselves. We are to be natural in spiritual things

and spiritual in natural things at all times. We are to be real - our true selves and personalities and not to be hid under some hypocritical mask of conformity to a perceived norm. Salvation gives us the freedom to be ourselves in Christ. When we fast, if we are denying ourselves any legitimate thing in our seeking God, then we are not to draw attention to it and we are to carry on our lives in a natural way and our Father in heaven will see and reward us.

In closing, I want to underline that whether we fast not, it does not make us a Christian. Remember Jesus was speaking to those who were His people, who were His followers. He was speaking of how their lives were to show this - giving to the needy in a right way, praying aright and fasting aright. We are to realise no amount of charity, praying or fasting will ever make us right with God. There is only one way to be right with God and at peace with Him and that is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Out from the new life and relationship we then have, should flow our doing good. We are not to get this the wrong way around and think that by doing good we will be right with God. 1st and foremost we need to trust the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and then live out, show out the new eternal life He gives to us. Pray God would help us to understand His word and apply it correctly to our lives and situations.