



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Discipline of Fasting

St. Matthew 6:16-18

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October 26, 2008 – Reformation Day

Today I want to jump ahead twelve verses in Matthew Six, to look at the sixteenth through eighteenth verses. Next week we'll back up and look at the verses in between, where Jesus tells us about the discipline of prayer and gives us what we know as the "Lord's Prayer" as an example to follow. Since I want to look at what Jesus has to say about prayer in depth, we're going to skip over it this week. You see, in these first eighteen verses of Chapter Six Jesus describes the outward religion of his followers – the outward acts of piety. And he does this in a very Jewish way. For the Jews there were three main outward acts that showed their faith: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. We looked at almsgiving last week and this week I want to look at what Jesus tells us about fasting. In each case, Jesus contrast the Biblical understanding of these outward acts with what had become the norm in his day. The Jews had come to see them as things you did in order to show other people how religious you were. The Pharisees made a show of giving to the poor and of making their contributions at the Temple. Jesus gives the example of the Pharisee going to the Temple and praying loudly before everyone there and giving thanks that he was not like the poor, scum, tax collector kneeling humbly in the back. And here he tells us that in the same way, our fasting is to be done before God, not as a spiritual show to be put on before men.

Now, I think that we all understand the concepts of giving and of prayer – even if we don't do those things as often as we should. But fasting is something foreign to our culture, and for that reason it's foreign to a lot of us in the Church. And yet Jesus, in these verses *assumes* that his disciples will fast. Look at his instructions in verses 16-18:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they

have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Most modern Christians live as if these verses don't exist. As Evangelicals we tend to focus on inward religion or religion of the heart, but we have a hard time with an external and bodily practice like fasting. If we think of fasting at all, we might think of it as an Old Testament thing; as something that the Jews did on the Day of Atonement, but a thing that Jesus did away with. After all, it was John the Baptist's disciples who came to Jesus asking why his disciples didn't fast like they did. Jesus told them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast" (Mark 2:18).

But the fact is that Jesus himself went into the wilderness at the start of his ministry and fasted for forty days and nights. When he answered the people who criticised his disciples for not fasting, he did *also* tell them, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day" (Mark 2:20). Again, Jesus tells us here in Matthew Six *how* to fast on the *assumption* that we would. And in both Acts and the Epistles we see the apostles fasting. So we can't just say that fasting is an Old Testament thing, a Roman Catholic thing, or even an Anglo-Catholic thing.

So let's look at the Old Testament first to see what it says about fasting. As I just said, the first instance of fasting is what God commanded the Jews to do each year on the Day of Atonement. God connected it with mourning for sin and repentance of it. On that one day each year the Jews were to mourn their sins and look for the reconciliation that God had provided through the sacrifices. So it's no surprise that "fasting" and "humbling oneself before God" were seen as pretty much the same thing. When a Jewish man or woman wanted to show their penitence for past sin, they would weep and fast. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian exile, they had forgotten the commands God had given their ancestors. They often lived in gross sin, but didn't realise it because of their ignorance for God's Law. So when the Book of the Law was read to them and they became aware

of their sin, Nehemiah called the people to a national day of repentance. He called them to put on sackcloth and to fast while they gathered to confess their sins. The book of Jonah tells us that when the people of Ninevah responded to Jonah's preaching and repented, they did so by proclaiming a city-wide fast and by putting on sackcloth. When Daniel sought after God, he first made a confession of his sins and the sins of his people, prayerfully, having put on sackcloth and ashes and after he had fasted. And think of Saul of Tarsus. When he came to Christ he was moved to penitence for his persecution of Christians and didn't eat or drink anything for three days.

Even today, when we as God's people are convicted of our sins and moved by the Spirit to repentance, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing for us to mourn, weep, and fast. Honestly, I think we could be better served with a national day of repentance and fasting than by a national day of prayer. Back in the middle of the Sixteenth Century, just after the Reformation in England, the leading bishops of the Church of England wrote two books of homilies or sermons to be read in the churches. A lot of the clergy were poorly educated and didn't know how to preach, but there was also a need to teach the people the Bible – something that had been lacking for centuries. One of those homilies has to do with fasting and it suggests that fasting is one way we can apply to ourselves Jesus' statement, "when the bridegroom is taken away from them, *then* they will fast in that day." The homily makes the point that Christ the bridegroom is "with us" and that we are enjoying the marriage feast when we are rejoicing in him and the salvation he gives. But it says, the bridegroom is "taken away from us" and the feast is put on hold when we are oppressed by defeat, affliction, and adversity. "Then is it a fit time," says the homily, "for that man to humble himself to Almighty God by fasting, and to mourn and bewail his sins with a sorrowful heart." Do you ever feel far from God? That's a good time to examine your life in light of God's commandments and spend some time fasting, praying, and mourning your sin, asking for forgiveness and a measure of grace.

But Scripture doesn't just link fasting with mourning; it also links fasting with prayer. In the Bible we see many of the great saints humbling themselves before God as

a way of showing how they depended on him for future mercies. It's not that fasting while praying was what happened all the time, but we do see the example of people who, when the need was great – when they were seeking God's direction or his blessing – set aside worldly distractions so that they could pray more fervently. Moses fasted on Mt. Sinai after the covenant was renewed and when God had taken Israel to be his people.

Jehosaphat saw the armies of Moab and Ammon advancing toward him and “set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” (2 Chronicles 20:3). Before Queen Esther took her life into her hands by approaching the king uninvited, she asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews and to hold a fast on her behalf. Ezra proclaimed a fast before leading the Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem, “that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey” (Ezra 8:21). Again, Jesus fasted at the beginning of his public ministry, and the Apostles themselves followed his example. Before Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey, the church at Antioch prayed and fasted. They knew that before we set out to do big things for God, we need seek his guidance and blessing.

Finally, the third reason we find for fasting in Scripture has to do with self-discipline and self-control. I didn't really understand this aspect of fasting until I was talking with another priest about the subject of natural family planning. I had always thought about it from a pro-life standpoint and from the position of our being willing to submit to God's sovereignty. But my friend looked at it from the standpoint of self-control. And that really struck me, because self-control isn't a fruit of the Spirit that we as modern Christians are very good at. Our culture doesn't value it except maybe in the grossest sense, and we've acclimatised ourselves to our culture. Fasting, whether it's from food, from marital relations, from TV – you get the idea – teaches us self-control. You see, self-control is meaningless unless it includes the control of our bodies, and that kind of control is impossible without self-discipline. St. Paul describes it in terms of an athlete. To compete in the games the athlete has to be fit – that's why he trains. Not only does he have to control his diet, get enough sleep and exercise, but, Paul says, every

athlete exercises self-control in all things” (1 Corinthians 9:25). As Christians we're in a spiritual race and so we need to do the spiritual equivalent of the physical training an athlete engages in. In that same passage St. Paul even goes so far as to talk about pummelling or buffeting his body – beating it into submission until it's black and blue – and subduing it – leading it around as if it were a slave.

Now his point wasn't to be masochistic. It wasn't a false asceticism like wearing a hair shirt or sleeping in the cold with no blankets. And it wasn't a Pharisaical attempt to win the admiration and approval of men. St. Paul rejects all those sorts of things. God made our bodies. We have no reason to punish them, but we do have the *duty* of disciplining them – bringing our bodies and our wills to the point of obedience. Fasting is one way of building self-control. And this aspect of fasting also makes the point that we're not just talking about eating and drinking. There are other things we do that we can take a fast from.

So, back to Jesus' teaching on fasting. He assumes that we will fast. His point, just as it was with giving and with praying, is that when we fast we should be different from the hypocrites who do it only to draw attention to themselves. When they fasted they made a point of really looking like they were fasting. They deliberately looked miserable. They didn't go through their normal daily routines, like taking a bath and putting on clean clothes. Just to make themselves look *really* miserable, they'd rub ashes in their hair and on their faces. They thought that going around miserable, dirty, stinking, and covered in ashes was what made them holy – and so they made show of their “holiness” for everyone to see. The sad fact is that lots of people admired them for it – but that was all the reward they got. Remember what we read about giving last week? If you give to win the approval of men, you'll get it – but you'll receive no reward from God. The same principle applies here.

In contrast, Jesus says, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.” Take a bath, comb your hair, wash your face, iron your clothes. He's not saying you have to go around pretending you're *not* fasting, being slap-happy with everybody. But he is saying, don't make a

show of your fasting. Fast, but otherwise go about your day like you would any other day. The point isn't to be seen by men, but to be seen by our Father in heaven, who will reward us. *The point of fasting isn't to advertise ourselves; it's to discipline ourselves.* It's not to get a reputation with others for holiness; it's to be humble before God. If we manage to discipline ourselves and be humble before God, that's reward enough.

In each of these three cases where Jesus talks about the externals of our religion (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting) he's contrasting the legalistic and Pharisaical way of doing things with the biblical way of doing them. The Pharisees did all these things ostentatiously and to be rewarded by men. But Jesus tells us, Christian piety is secret and is motivated by humility and is rewarded by God.

I think it might be easier to understand the difference between these two attitudes if we look at where each one comes from and what it leads to. You see, religion that is showy and hypocritical is ultimately destructive. Giving, praying, and fasting are all authentic activities in their own right. To give is to serve others. To pray is to seek God. To fast is to discipline ourselves. But if we're hypocritical when we do these things it destroys their integrity by turning them, whether giving, praying, or fasting, into opportunities for *self-display* – for blowing our own horns to the world.

So where does this hypocritical attitude come from? Jesus says over and over again in these verses that the hypocrite does his good works “before men in order to be seen and praised by men.” But hypocrites aren't really obsessed with men – they're really obsessed with themselves. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “Ultimately our only reason for pleasing men around us is that we may please ourselves.” So the solution should be obvious. *What we need to do is to become so conscious of God, that we cease to be conscious of ourselves.* This is where Jesus puts our focus.

Look at it this way: total secrecy isn't possible for any of us. Whatever we do, say, or even think, even if there's no one else around to watch, is still seen and known by God. And it's not that God is up there as some kind of celestial killjoy

or policeman just waiting to catch us. He's a loving heavenly Father, who desires to bless us and looks for every chance he can to do so. So the question to each of us is, which matters to you more? Are you interested in men seeing your good works or God seeing them? The hypocrite goes through the motions of religion so that he can be seen by men. It's interesting that the Greek word that St. Matthew uses here is the same word from which we get our word "theatre." The hypocrite puts on a show – a performance. Their religion is a public spectacle. But, you see, the real Christian knows that he is being watched too, but in his case he knows his audience is God.

And here's the thing: we can bluff a human audience. We can fake out men and women and make them think we're holier than we really are. Even when we don't try, people will often see you or me engaged in some outward act of piety and comment on how much more spiritual we are than they – while all the time we're cringing with the knowledge that we're not as holy as they think we are! We can fool people into thinking that our giving, our praying, and our fasting are real, when in fact we're acting – putting on a show. But God sees our hearts. That's why if we do things to be seen by men, we degrade that thing, but if we do it to be seen by God we make it something noble, and through that noble thing God will work in our lives.

Let me close with an illustration. I think most of you are familiar with David Wilkerson. He wrote *The Cross and the Switchblade*. He writes about how he was pastoring a growing and healthy church. On the outside everything about his ministry looked really good, but on the inside, he says, he was restless; something was missing. Then one night while he was watching the "late show" it occurred to him that it might do him some good if instead of watching TV, he spent that time in prayer – he might fast from television and see what would happen.

Well, he immediately thought of a bunch of excuses. He was tired at night and needed to relax. It was good for him to be able to connect with what people were seeing and talking about. But he wasn't entirely convinced by his excuses. So he prayed, "Jesus, I need some help in deciding this thing, so here's what I'm

asking you. I'm going to put an ad for that [television] set in the paper. If you're behind this idea, let a buyer appear right away. Let him appear within an hour...within half an hour...after the paper gets on the street."

His wife was not very impressed with the idea when he told her about it the next morning, but he went ahead and put the ad in the paper anyway. It was a funny scene the next day after the paper hit the streets. Wilkerson sat on the couch with the TV set on one side, his wife and kids on the other, and the clock and telephone in front of him. After twenty-five minutes, just as he was saying, "Well, Gwen, it looks like you're right. I guess I won't have to..." the telephone rang.

"Do you have a TV set for sale?" a man asked.
"That's right. An RCA in good condition. Nineteen inch screen, two years old."
"How much do you want for it?"
"One hundred dollars, Wilkerson said quickly.
"I'll take it," came the reply. Have it ready in fifteen minutes. I'll bring the money."

Well, that was the beginning. Out of the times of prayer that followed, David Wilkerson was directed by God to the plight of the teenage gang members in New York City. Out of his efforts to help them came a work that God continues to bless, not only in New York, but all over.

Now I don't know how exactly this will apply to you in your life. As the story makes clear, fasting doesn't always have to mean not eating. We all need to work on self-control in different ways and with different things. But whatever your daily habits or routines are, there are certainly things that you could set aside, even if only for a little while, so that you can spend more time with God. You don't have to tell anyone about it. But that's okay, because you have the promise of the Lord Jesus that our Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we know that for many of us these words about fasting are something we've never give much thought to and never really put into practice, but we pray that your Spirit would be at work in our hearts and minds to show us ways in which fasting will

bring us closer to you and to your blessings and promises. Give us the grace and humility to submit to your lordship. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.