

## THINK “FAST”!

You all broke something this morning. You may not know it but you did – you broke something. Some of us have night snack, while others don’t eat anything between supper and a certain meal the next morning. That time between eating in the evening and eating in the morning is actually considered a fast. Mind you, you are sleeping throughout most of it. When you wake up and eat your toast or bagel or cereal, you end the fast. This is why in the Old English tradition we call it “breakfast”; you are breaking your nighttime fast.

When Jesus taught the crowds on a hill, he addressed three fundamental aspects of religion. In Matthew 6 we read about giving, praying and fasting. These three practices are common to all the major religions of the world, including Christianity. People all over the world do them regularly. Except in North America for the most part. Not us. Some do, but the majority of us do not practice fasting.

Some may regard it as too religious, or too Catholic, thinking of Lent before Easter. We may consider it legalistic or an old relic of phony religion. I don’t know really. Why have we disregarded this practice? And if we renew the practice of fasting, what does it do for us?

Jesus taught about it. Apparently references in Scripture to fasting outnumber those of baptism. The Bible is full of accounts of when people fasted. So let’s take some time this morning to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn about fasting.

### 1. “When you fast...”

**a) The Assumption** – In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the people to be careful not to perform their good works for the poor to be admired by others. Then he talks about how prayer should not be a public display of our eloquence and piety to be seen by others. Fasting comes under this admonition as well.

In each of these three practices of religion, Jesus does not teach as if this is something new. The people listening to Jesus were already doing these things. What needed to change was the attitude of their hearts as they did them.

Jesus said, “**When you fast...**”, and assumed that they were already fasting. There was no command given that they should fast. Fasting was in no way linked to salvation. Jesus simply assumed that those who seek God will naturally and regularly fast.

Let’s stop for a moment and define what a fast is. When we fast, we choose for a set time to do without something that is hard to do without. Generally a fast involves going without food for a day, or three, seven or even 40 days (though this is extreme). You could go without TV or some other daily practice that is difficult to give up for a time. The idea is to remove anything that comes between you and God, so that it can be placed in its proper perspective. A fast is typically abstaining from food. When our stomachs grumble we look for food to settle the craving. Is it ruling our lives? Is it an idol? Fasting helps to bring something like food under control so it can be surrendered to God and put in its right place.

It is assumed, when Jesus teaches, that we will fast.

**b) Our appearance** – So Jesus taught, “**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**” (6:16).

Obviously some people were using fasting as a “holiness” barometer. In the midst of a fast these folks were walking around, maybe doubled over, with a pained expression. They hoped that someone would ask them what’s wrong. Then they could answer, “I’m fasting.” “Wow,” the person would respond, “you sure are holy. You must love God a lot.”

Jesus responds to this saying, “That’s it. That’s your reward for fasting. Everybody look how holy Eugene is.” Jesus goes on to teach that fasting is something no one else should notice. So for that

matter, the indictment that no one in North America fasts is either true or everyone here does it so well in secret that no one would suspect.

A fellow pastor came late to a breakfast meeting and refused food or coffee. Anyone would assume, he hoped, that he had had breakfast, remembered in a panic that there was a meeting, and arrived late. But I looked at him and smelled it on him. I knew he was fasting. Unfortunately my big mouth opened and I said, "Fasting, huh?"

No one should suspect you are fasting. It is between you and God.

**c) The Reward** – Jesus continued, "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious 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" (6:17-18).

John Piper noted, that as Jesus teaches it, fasting is an intensely Godward act. Do it toward God, who sees when others don't. Jesus is testing the reality of God in our lives. Do we really have a hunger for God himself, or a hunger for human admiration?

Jesus tests our hearts here in Matthew 6. He wants to know if God is our true treasure in life. To the people of that time fasting was an outward expression of an inward condition. To Jesus, fasting was an inward sign of an inward condition. How do we feel when nobody else knows what we are doing for God? Are we content when no one but God knows what we have done? All that matters in this moment of fasting is God, who He is, what He thinks, and what He will do. That is the reward.

2. For what purpose are you fasting?

We have looked at the mechanics of fasting, but what we really need to know is why we would want to fast. What purpose do we have in bringing this practice back into our religion. And by "religion" I want you to think of devotion to God, not the old "religion vs. relationship" debate. What place does fasting have in true religion? The Bible identifies several situations that it would be appropriate to practice fasting.

**a) Fasting and Repentance** – In the OT we see several examples of people fasting when they recognized their sins before the LORD.

The prophet Joel spoke to his people and called for a fast of repentance: "Even now,' declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:12-13).

And when the prophet Jonah went to Nineveh speaking the God's judgment on the people, it says the Ninevites believed God and declared a fast. Even the animals weren't allowed to eat.

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) said, "This, then, is the philosophy of fasting. It expresses repentance, and it uncovers the life to God. 'Come down, my pride; stand back my passions; for I am wicked, and I wait for God to bless me.'"

When you have recognized sin in your life, by all means confess it and turn away from it. That is all you have to do. Tell God you sinned. But if in your repentance you fast, somehow it speaks of a deeper sincerity. Perhaps through the discomfort of fasting and the resulting hunger, you will be helped to resolve not to do it again, to live differently.

**b) Fasting and Obedience** – Fasting is meaningless unless it is coupled with obedience. Isaiah recognized the hypocrisy of his people when they fasted one day and fought with each other the next. They pretended to humble themselves in fasting but were full of pride just the same.

God spoke through Isaiah and said this, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:6-8).

Fasting prepares us for obedience. Remember it is a humbling experience and is supposed to put us in the right frame of mind.

When Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit he fasted for 40 days. Then the test came. Satan tempted him and assaulted him to give up his mission. But Jesus had resolved himself with prayer and fasting to remain strong in obedience to his Father. Fasting prepares us for obedience.

**c) Fasting and Mourning** – On a few occasions we read in Scripture that people fasted while grieving the death of a loved one. When King Saul died in battle, David and all of Israel called for a national time of mourning (1 Samuel 31:13).

It is not unusual for us to think of food as trivial when Mom or Dad or someone we were close to dies. Hunger is replaced with intense grief. And good, kind people from the church try to help out by bringing casseroles and lasagnas to alleviate the need to think of making a meal. This is so helpful. But maybe, just maybe, we could come alongside and fast as a response to this death. A day or two is all it would take to feel hunger again. Do we need strength to mourn? Or do we need weakness? Something to think about...

**d) Fasting and Prayer** – In the preceding points prayer was certainly an element in each one. Prayer takes center stage here with fasting as an accompanying expression of sincerity.

When praying for change it is appropriate to fast as we ask God to change course. As David's son lay dying he fasted and prayed and wept before the Lord to heal his son. For seven days he did this hoping God might hear this cry. David said, **"While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live'"** (2 Sam 12:22). The child died and he ended his fast. Though his experience did not produce the result he had hoped, David continued to love the LORD and respect the mind of God. Part of fasting is just that, not to change God but to change us.

When praying for healing we will also want to fast. A boy suffering from seizures was brought to Jesus after his disciples had failed to heal him. Jesus rebuked the demon in the boy and he was healed. The disciples were bewildered and wondered why they couldn't heal the boy. Jesus' answer is striking. He said, **"...this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting"** (Mt. 17:21). In your Bibles this verse is a footnote, but it should be taken seriously.

Fasting and praying for leaders is not uncommon either. Paul and Barnabas were planting churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch as they went along. In Acts 14 it says this, **"Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust"** (Acts 14:23).

In a few Sundays we will be installing new deacons. Would it not be appropriate to fast sometime that weekend in celebration of what God is doing here in our church?

In all these instances the one thing that fasting symbolizes is a sincerity before the Lord. It is not a spiritual hunger strike to get what we want, or some way of manipulating God. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying. That makes all the difference.

### 3. Feasting vs. Fasting

**a) Valley Fair every day** – While fasting has been somewhat lost in our present style of Christian living, it is probably all the more important that we find it again. Food is a big part of North American culture. I avalanched you with pictures of mouth watering food in the beginning, but that is what we come to expect when we watch TV. We are so fortunate to have a variety of food that common food is not good enough.

The problem is that with such abundance of choice and type of food we are feasting everyday. When given the choice of a peanut butter sandwich at home or chicken fingers at Happy Earl's, which would you pick? Feasting was reserved for celebrations in the old days, now it is a common occurrence.

Let's put this in a biblical perspective. In Mark 2:18-20 John the Baptist's disciples are fasting while Jesus' are not. Why not? John's disciples ask. Jesus' answer is revealing. He said that the guests of the bridegroom do not fast while he is with them. When he is gone, then they will fast.

To be physically with Jesus is a celebration. But he's not here right now and so we fast as a reminder that we long for his appearing again. Valley Fair is a good place to go and enjoy carnival rides, but you can't live there. So feasting every day, as we have become accustomed to doing, is not natural. Just as Valley Fair every day would grow mundane, feasting the way we do at our meal times is less special. Fasting makes feasting special again.

**b) Anticipating the Big Banquet** – This is especially true in relation to the return of the Lord Jesus. In Jesus' teaching we are told of the Big Banquet that will take place when he returns to claim his bride, the Church. If we are feasting now, are we cheating ourselves out of the celebration when Christ returns? Will we be ready for it?

Jesus' banquet will unlike anything we have yet experienced. We read in Revelation 19, **“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear...Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”** (Rev. 19:7-9).

I am not saying it is wrong to celebrate here in this life. We have occasions that are worthy of feasting. We feast at Easter to celebrate what Christ has done for us. We feast at Christmas to celebrate his first coming. There are times to feast. But there are times to fast as well.

**c) Suffering with those who suffer** – While we live here in the first life we are very conscious of the fact that the poor are with us all the time.

On the main door as you leave the church today is a poster announcing World Food Day, Oct. 16. It invites us to fast for change. It reads, “Join thousands of Christians across Canada in a day of fasting and reflecting on how we are all connected to the 850 million people who will go to bed hungry tonight.”

Fasting is a way to remember and identify with those who suffer all around us. Christ suffered for the hungry as well as for those who struggle with sin. If he suffered for them, one day of fasting wouldn't hurt us in identifying with him. Honestly, I am not sure how fasting one day will change the world, but I would do it for Jesus.

Peter said, **“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps”** (1 Peter 2:21).

Andrew Murray said that fasting helps us to express, deepen and confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves, to attain the Kingdom of God. And Jesus who himself fasted and sacrificed, values, accepts and rewards with spiritual power the person who is ready to give up everything for Him and His Kingdom.

I want to encourage you with these words. Jesus assumed we would fast and taught us accordingly. It will not increase your salvation, but it may increase your hunger for God. So if you can find the time, and you are physically able, think “fast” and spend quality time with your Lord Jesus.

AMEN