

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a smattering of quotes. Tommy Smothers - "Red meat is not bad for you. Now blue-green meat, that's bad for you." Erma Bombeck - "I've been on a constant diet for the last two decades. I've lost a total of 789 pounds. By all accounts, I should be hanging on a charm bracelet." Buddy Hackett - "As a child, my family's menu consisted of two choices: take it or leave it." Barb Johnson - "A balanced diet is a cookie in each hand." George Rosenbaum - "A bagel is a doughnut with the sin removed." Those people talked about one of the things we value the most – eating food. But today, I'm going to talk about not eating it.

Fasting

When I say "not eating it," I don't mean dieting. I mean fasting. To fast means to abstain in a significant way from eating food and perhaps drinking water for a specified period of time – for spiritual purposes. I know a man who fasts every Friday to grow in Jesus. The only thing he consumes that day is water. That illustrates what it means to fast. We abstain in a significant way from eating food and perhaps drinking water for a specified period of time – for spiritual purposes.

That's what Mark 2:18 is about. John the Baptist's disciples and the Pharisees were perplexed that Jesus' disciples didn't fast. So they asked Him why they didn't. He explained with an analogy in verse 19. Groomsmen are with the groom at the reception following his wedding. It's obviously an occasion of celebration and joy, which makes fasting an utterly inappropriate thing to do. Feasting is consistent with the nature of that setting that the groomsmen are in. Fasting is not.

Well, it was just like that for His disciples, Jesus said. His physical presence with them was an occasion of celebration and joy, which made fasting an utterly inappropriate thing to do. Feasting was consistent with the nature of that setting the disciples were in. Fasting was not.

But, Jesus observed in verse 20, the time would come when He'd no longer be physically present with them. Fasting would then be consistent with the setting they were in. So that's what they'd do, fast. His expectation was clear. After He ascended to heaven, all of His followers would regularly fast. That's what He expected and they did it.

We see that in Acts 13:1-3. Verse 1 mentions prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. Verse 2 then records that "**they were ministering to the Lord and fasting.**" While they were doing that, the Holy Spirit directed them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for ministry. According to verse 3, they responded by fasting some more and praying. It's clear that fasting was a normal part of their ministry and life.

But it wasn't just 1st century Christians. Here are just three of countless examples of what I mean. In the 2nd century, a church manual called the *Didache* prescribes that Christians should fast two days a week – Wednesday and Friday. In the 16th century, Martin Luther declared about Matthew 6, "**It was not Christ's intention to reject or despise fasting . . . it was His intention to restore proper fasting.**" And finally, in the 18th century, John Wesley urged early Methodists to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. He believed so strongly that they should in fact that he refused to ordain anyone as a Methodist minister who didn't.

The bottom line is this. The Bible doesn't command us to fast, as it commands us to pray or study Scripture for instance. But a large body of evidence, both Biblical and extra-Biblical, makes clear that we should.

Awakens Us to God and His Kingdom at Hand

But why should we? What is the value of fasting? A phrase I used when I defined it, "**for spiritual purposes,**" tells us. It achieves three vital spiritual purposes, each of which I want to explain.

First, it awakens us to God and His kingdom at hand.

Several years ago, I preached a Thanksgiving sermon from Nehemiah 8:10, which says, "**Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet.**" It is the normal course of things for God's people that we eat and drink. That's

because of what eating and drinking does. It gives us strength and joy. It nourishes us physically and psychologically.

With that in mind, listen to a curious statement Jesus made in John 4:32. He told His disciples, "**I have food to eat that you do not know about.**" He then explained what that food was in verse 34, "**My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me.**" The context, verse 31, shows that He wasn't speaking metaphorically. He was stating this profound truth instead. There are spiritual sources that can give us the same physical and psychological nourishment that food does.

Fasting connects us to those spiritual sources. When we eat, we feast on food. When we fast, we feast on God. A Christian who regularly fasts explained to me that he has as much energy and strength when he's fasting as when he's eating. That's my testimony as well. Fasting has never once diminished me bodily. That's because God sustains us when we fast. He gives us the same strength and joy that food gives us.

That is a supernatural experience that confirms two things: our utter dependence on God and His kingdom at hand to meet our needs and their faithfulness in doing so. Practiced regularly, fasting buttresses our trust in Him and His kingdom as the sources of our life. It awakens us to Him and His kingdom as the defining realities of our existence.

Equips Us to Suffer Happily and Easily

Fasting achieves a second vital spiritual purpose. It equips us to suffer happily and easily.

If there's one thing we all know, it's that we're going to suffer in this life. No matter what else happens to us, painful things will: the loss of a job, abandonment by a spouse, the mental illness of a child, injury, disease, failure, slander, the death of a loved one, and much more.

Our discipleship to Jesus of course extends to those sufferings of ours. The devoted 15th century monk, Thomas a Kempis, said it well: "**Whoever knows best how to suffer will keep the greatest peace. That man is conqueror of himself, and the lord of the world, the**

friend of Christ, and heir of heaven.” He was right. Disciples of Jesus know what the best way to suffer is. It's happily and easily. That's how Jesus wants and teaches us to suffer, happily and easily.

The four year-old daughter of a friend of mine died suddenly of a brain tumor. He spoke at her memorial service and tearfully but joyfully expressed how grateful he was to God for the life she had lived and was now living. After the service was over, several people explained away his joy by saying he was in a state of denial. They couldn't grasp someone suffering happily and easily but that's what Jesus calls us to do.

None of us can do that naturally of course. We can only do it supernaturally, as the Holy Spirit empowers us to. Which is where fasting comes in. It gives the Him something to work with in that regard. Remember what I said. When we fast, we feast on God. Dallas Willard identifies the outcome of that: **“Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God. And that will help them endure deprivations of all kinds, even to the point of coping with them easily and cheerfully.”** He's right. Those are the dynamics. Fasting imparts a strong sense of God and kingdom with us. That sense in turn makes us feel secure come what may, which equips us to suffer happily and easily.

Disciplines Our Desires

There's a third vital spiritual purpose that fasting achieves. It disciplines our desires, by which I mean our wants.

And “boy” do they need disciplined. I told you once what happened on the street behind Smokey Bones Restaurant in Boardman. I was going a little above the 15 mph speed limit when a woman in a BMW passed me and honked at me and gave me the bad finger as she did. Analyze that. She wanted me to go 10 mph faster than I was going for .2 of a mile, which would have saved her five seconds at the most. I saw her park.

That's a microcosm of our current cultural climate. In that climate, people getting what they want, no matter how trivial, is everything.

Which is why they're so greatly disturbed, like that woman was, when they don't get it. Nothing is more insulting, in most people's thinking, than not getting what they want.

Which is where fasting comes in. It disciplines our desires. It does so because the craving for food is one of our strongest desires. We recognize just how strong it is in an idiom we use. We say that our stomachs are "growling" and that's an accurately descriptive word. Hunger can be intense, which is why food has the pervasive place in our lives that it does. The very idea of missing one meal, let alone three or six, is unthinkable to most Americans today.

But that's precisely what makes fasting so effective in disciplining our desires. Since food has the strong grip on us that it does, the effects of fasting permeate the entirety of our person and life. It retrains us away from always having to get what we want. It teaches us to be calm, serene, and strong – not angry, frustrated, or concerned – when we don't. Listen to one man's testimony in that regard: "**I came back from the fast with a clearer sense of purpose and a renewed sense of power. The anger which I unleashed at my wife and children was less frequent and the materialism that was squeezing the life out of my spirituality had loosened its grip.**" What fasting did for that man, it does for us. It disciplines our desires so that we, not they, control our life.

How to Fast

Now that we know why we should fast, let's examine how. If we're medically able to, there are three basic kinds of fasts we can practice.

One is a normal fast. In this kind, we abstain from eating or drinking anything, except water. Luke 4:2 seems to indicate that's what Jesus did during His 40 days of temptation in the wilderness.

Another kind is an absolute fast. In this kind, we abstain from eating or drinking anything, including water. That's what Paul did in Acts 9:9. He "**neither ate nor drank for three days.**" Active human

beings can't normally live without water for more than three days, which is why total fasts like Paul's usually shouldn't go beyond that.

There's a third kind of fast, a partial fast. In this kind, we restrict what we eat. So, I choose not to eat spinach or broccoli for a month or the rest of my life. Not really! We substantially restrict what we eat, normally limiting what we consume to liquids only. I read about a Christian who partially fasts one day every week. During that day, she consumes only fruit juices and broths.

Now, as with all spiritual disciplines, we should follow a progression in our fasting. Start out with a partial fast, covering two consecutive meals, once a week for several weeks. After that, try a normal fast, covering two consecutive meals once a week for several weeks. Then move to longer normal fasts covering three, six, or even nine meals, as the Holy Spirit leads you.

Our objective in this is to eventually fast systematically. It's to make fasting a consistent and normal part of our life. In my view, it's something we should do once a week, at least. One Christian, for instance, alternates every other week between a normal and partial fast, covering three consecutive meals each week. He also practices longer or other fasts when the Holy Spirit leads him to. We must fast systematically. That means consistently enough that the Holy Spirit is able to achieve those three purposes I discussed.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with a poem about fasting written by Edna St. Vincent Millay: "**I drank at every vine. The last was like the first. I came upon no wine so wonderful as thirst. ** I gnawed at every root. I ate of every plant. I came upon no fruit so wonderful as want. ** Feed the grape and the bean to the vintner and the monger; I would lie down lean with my thirst and my hunger.**" Eating and feasting on food. Fasting and feasting on God. May we, like Millay, value the second as much as we do the first.