

"Biblical Fasting, Part 2"
(Matthew 6: 16-18)

Introduction: Last week we began looking at fasting as an occasional act of worship. First we saw what fasting is, namely, that fasting is a special religious duty in which you give up food, either partly or in whole, usually for a day, to humble yourself before the Lord as a means of obtaining your request. Henry Scudder defined it in this way: "*A religious fast . . . is, the sanctifying a day to the Lord by a willing abstinence from meat and drink, from delights and worldly labours, that the whole man may be more thoroughly humbled before God, and more fervent in prayer*" (49), and a Brakel, defines it as, "*a special religious exercise in which the believer deprives himself for a day from all that invigorates the body, humbling himself in body and soul before God as a means to obtain what he desires*" (4:3). Secondly, we saw that the Bible requires that we fast as a duty by way of example and by way of command. Many of the saints in the Scriptures, and often the whole nation of Israel, observed fasts. Jesus, in Matthew 6, does not command a fast, but assumes, as with giving and prayer, that you will do it when the situation requires. Tonight, we will want to look at those situations which require fasting.

III. Thirdly, I Want You to See that There Are Certain Circumstances in Which You Ought to Fast.

- A. *Jesus Says Here, "AND WHENEVER YOU FAST." "BUT YOU, WHEN YOU FAST."*
 - 1. *Again, He does not spell out the "when" of the fast, assuming that they will know "when."*
 - 2. *But there are certain things we may learn from the Scriptures as to when a fast is necessary.*
- B. *There Are Times when Overindulgence Can Have Deadening Affects upon Your Spirit. And so a Fast May Be Necessary to Wean Yourself from Them and Their Effects.*
 - 1. *Remember, the more you drink in the things of the world, the less you will be inclined toward the things of God.*
 - 2. *Don't forget that the intimate union between your body and soul means that whatever affects your body will also to some degree affect your spiritual well-being.*
 - 3. *Henry Scudder writes, "Fasting is contrary to that fulness of bread, which makes both body and soul more disposed to vice, and, indisposed to religious duties, through drowsiness of head, heaviness of heart, dulness and deadness of spirit. Now these being removed, and the dominion of the flesh subdued by fasting, the body will be brought into subjection to the soul, and both body and soul to the will of God, more readily than otherwise they would be" (51).*
 - 4. *Believe it or not, too much indulgence in anything can hinder your walk with the Lord. Too much food can make you dull and heavy, both physically and spiritually. And when you become dull spiritually, you fall prey much more easily to the sin which indwells you, and consequently to temptation. If you constantly feed the lusts of the flesh, the flesh will grow stronger and the spirituality of your soul weaker.*
 - a. *Have you ever read the lives of the great men and women of God, whom the Lord used mightily in the past? Have you ever*

- wondered what made them so usable by God?
- b. It was that they sought godliness at all costs no matter what worldly comforts they had to give up. There is a large difference between the way George Whitefield lived for instance and the way that we live.
 - c. If these directions sound extreme to your ears, realize that they didn't to these saints. This was a common way of life for them. They gave all that they had to the Lord, and weaned themselves from the things of the world in order that they might better serve Christ. And they, for the most part, did serve Him better.
 - d. Now, of course, they were not without sin. They were keenly aware of their own corruption. But their faults were not the same as ours. Today, we have a difficult time finding any time or motivation to pray and read the Word. We have difficulty mustering up the courage to witness to our neighbors and friends. We have a hard time finding time for the things of the Lord. They did not seem to have any problem in these areas. Their problem was, having done all these things, they would cry, "WE ARE UNWORTHY SLAVES; WE HAVE DONE ONLY THAT WHICH WE OUGHT TO HAVE DONE" (Luke 17:10). It is not that they did these things without fail, but I suspect they took these things much more seriously than we do.
 - e. What made the difference in their lives? What gave them the hidden strength that motivated them to push forward for Christ? They were in love with the things of the Lord and not the things of the world. Their affections were set on the things above where Christ is, and it caused them to carefully discipline themselves so as to have the greatest amount of strength and time for Him, and not to be constantly weakened by indulging in the world's goods.
 - f. The funny thing is that we would all admit that these men and women were exceptionally godly. But if anyone tries to live that kind of life today, they are usually labeled a fanatic.
 - g. This, people of God, is the way that our brethren who loved the Lord lived. And if we find that what they did reflects what our Lord commands, then we ought to live with as much love and zeal for Him as well.
- B. Secondly, There Are Also Times When You Need to Counter the Effects of the Other Things in This World which Can Steal Your Devotion to God and Hinder Your Christian Service.
1. Again Scudder tells us, "A day of fasting is a great assistance to the soul, for the better performing of holy duties, such as meditation, reading, and hearing the word, prayer, examining, judging, and reforming a person's self; both because his spirits are better disposed, when he is fasting, to serious devotion; and the mind being so long taken wholly off from the thought, cares, and pleasures of this life, he may be more intent and earnest in seeking of God" (51).
 2. Scudder's point here is something we seldom think about, although I have already made allusion to it, and that is, that the more that you embrace the world, the more you will crowd out your affections for the things of the Lord.
 - a. Just notice how your spirituality declines when you spend more time in the world.

- b. *The more you watch television, the more your morals begin to decline, and the more your thoughts and words change.*
 - c. *The more you listen to the world's music, play the world's games, and spend time in the world's recreations, the more you will adopt the non-Christian's life and world view. And when you do, it makes the biblical truths of a future heaven and hell seem less real. The fact that you know several people who are outside of Christ, who will end up in that furnace of fire, seems to become less important.*
 - d. *How can you know when you have gone too far into the world? Susannah Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, had a very penetrating observation where she writes to her son John, "Would you judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasures? of the innocence or malignity of actions? take this rule, -- whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself" (Ryle Christian Leaders 71).*
 - e. *As your love for the world and the things of the world grows, it crowds out your love for the things of the Lord. Even the things which are lawful for the Christian can be over indulged to the point where they quench your love for Christ.*
3. *When you fast, you not only cut off food for a day, but you also cut off all worldly recreations and employments in the world, which in some degree will allow your affections for the things of the Lord to be rekindled.*
- a. *Even the removal of these things for a day will greatly strengthen you in the things of the Lord.*
 - b. *On the one hand you will be cutting off that which feeds the flesh, and on the other hand you will be feeding your soul on the means of grace.*
 - c. *By this you can see, as well, how important the Christian Sabbath is to your spiritual well-being, for in essence, on that day you are fasting the things of the world, and centering your focus on the things of Christ. And when you do, it not only gives you the benefits of the use of God's means of grace, but it also to some degree further weans you from the things of the world, and enables you to walk more closely with Christ the rest of the week.*
- C. *Lastly, There May Be Times When Your Heart Is Weighted Down by Some Terrible Besetting Sin Which Has Overcome You, and You Need to Seek God's Help Through Fasting, Or the Lord May Bring Discipline Upon You for Some Sin for Which You Need to Fast.*
1. *A besetting sin is that one sin that you wrestle with more than any other which is the most difficult to overcome. That sin may be different for each one of you. For one person, it may be vanity, for another, it may be drunkenness, for another, it may be greed.*
 2. *Fasting can help break the power of that besetting sin. Again Scudder writes, "Fasting is an open profession of [your] guiltiness before God, and an expression of sorrow and humiliation; [it is] a real acknowledgement of man's unworthiness,*

even of the common [necessities] of this present life.'

"But it is not enough that the body be chastened, if the soul be not also afflicted, Isa. 58:5; because, it is [nothing] else but a mere bodily exercise, which profits little; nay, it is but [a] hypocritical fast, abhorred and condemned by God; frustrating [the main purpose] of the fast, which is, that the soul may be afflicted.

Afflicting the soul works repentance; another chief end, and companion of fasting; for godly sorrow causes repentance, never to be repented of, 2 Cor. 7:10.

When the soul is afflicted, and heavy laden with sin, then a man will readily and earnestly seek after God, even as the sick do the physician for health, and as a condemned man to the king for a pardon. In their affliction (saith God) they will seek me diligently, Hosea 5:15. If this be true of the outward, then much more of inward affliction.

The afflicted soul is a fit object of God's mercy; to him doth God look that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, Isa. 56:2, that trembles at his word; yea, the bowels of his fatherly compassion are troubled for him, Jer. 31:20, who is troubled and ashamed for his sin.

Moreover, upon a day of humiliation (if a man deal[s] sincerely) this affliction of his soul drives him quite out of himself to seek help of God in Christ; and makes him endeavour to bring his soul into such [a] good [state], that he may truly say he doth not regard iniquity in his heart, Psa. 66:18, and that his unfeigned purpose is, and endeavour shall be, to keep a good conscience toward God and man alway[s]. [From this] follows boldness, and assurance, through Christ Jesus, that God will be found [by] him, John 15:7, and that in God's own time, and in the best manner, he shall have all his holy desires fulfilled" (51-52).

3. Scudder points out in this passage that affliction, both from without and within, is a means to drive you to God.
4. Sometimes God is the One who brings the outward affliction in order to humble you, and to drive you to fasting.
 - a. Remember that Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted because the Lord had humbled them by allowing them to be defeated at Ai. They had become proud and did not seek the Lord before they went into battle, and they didn't realize that Achan had sinned by taking something that was under the ban (Joshua 7:6).
 - b. The Lord afflicted David through his child born of Bathsheba. This humbled him for his sin, and caused him to fast before the Lord (2 Sam. 12:16-17).
 - c. Nehemiah humbled himself before the Lord to fast when he heard of the desolation the Lord had brought on Jerusalem for their sins of idolatry (Neh. 1:4).
 - d. God brings outward affliction upon His people to cause them to be inwardly afflicted and humbled, so that they will seek Him. It is His divine discipline which is meant to produce within them greater godliness. And they would further humble themselves by fasting.
 - e. And if you or I will not humble ourselves for our sins, the Lord may bring this chastening upon us to afflict us, to bring about humility within us, so that we might seek Him. .

- f. And as I have said on other occasions, when the Lord does afflict you, you need to examine your life to see what the Lord is trying to teach you. Remember, the Lord afflicts you in His faithfulness in order that you might share in His holiness. And, as the author to the Hebrews reminds us, "BUT IF YOU ARE WITHOUT DISCIPLINE, OF WHICH ALL HAVE BECOME PARTAUERS, THEN YOU ARE ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN AND NOT SONS" (Heb. 12:8).
- 5. But if we are keenly aware of our sins, especially our besetting sin, and afflict ourselves outwardly through fasting, we can humble ourselves before God and gain His help to break our sin without bringing upon ourselves His divine chastening.
 - a. By fasting we afflict our outer man, which afflicts our inward man and humbles us.
 - b. In this condition, we are more likely to seek after the Lord. And when we humble ourselves to seek Him, the Bible tells us that the Lord is more likely to answer our prayers. Isaiah the prophet tells us, "BUT TO THIS ONE WILL I LOOK, TO HIM WHO IS HUMBLE AND CONTRITE OF SPIRIT, AND WHO TREMBLES AT MY WORD" (66:2b).
 - c. I would like to end this sermon by reading to you the personal account of one of the most godly men who ever lived by anyone's standard, that of George Whitefield. From several examples from His journal, it is apparent that fasting was a regular part of his early Christian experience, and so was the outward and inward affliction of the Lord, as the Lord prepared him to be a fit vessel to carry His message of salvation.
 - d. He writes, "Being now near the seventeenth year of my age, I was resolved to prepare myself for the holy Sacrament, which I received on Christmas Day. I began now to be more and more watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions. I kept the following Lent, fasting Wednesday and Friday thirty-six hours together. My evenings, when I had done waiting upon my mother, were generally spent in acts of devotion, reading Drelincourt on Death, and other practical books, and I constantly went to public worship twice a day" (43-44).
 - e. Again, "For a twelve month, I went on in a round of duties, receiving the Sacrament monthly, fasting frequently, attending constantly on public worship, and praying more than twice a day in private. One of my brothers used to tell me, he feared this would not hold long, and that I should forget all when I came to Oxford" (44).
 - f. After he met the Wesleys, he really began to get serious about serving Christ. He said, "I now began, like them, to live by rule, and to pick up the very fragments of my time, that not a moment of it might be lost. Whether I ate or drank, or whatsoever I did, I endeavoured to do all to the glory of God. Like them, having no weekly sacrament, although the Rubric required it, at our own college, I received every Sunday at Christ Church. I joined with them in keeping the stations by fasting Wednesdays and Fridays and left no means unused, which I thought would lead me nearer to Jesus Christ" (47).
 - g. There was also a time of extreme darkness in his life where he felt as though his body had been given over to the Devil as

Job's had (52). This lasted several months, and then ended with a period of sickness which lasted seven weeks, after which time, he was gloriously delivered and used of God. He writes, "Soon after this, the holy season of Lent came on, which our friends kept very strictly, eating no flesh during the six weeks, except on Saturdays also, and ate nothing on the other days, except on Sunday, but sage-tea without sugar, and coarse bread. I constantly walked out in the cold mornings till part of one of my hands was quite black. This, with my continued abstinence, and inward conflicts, at length so emaciated my body, that, at Passion-week, finding that I could scarcely creep upstairs, I was obliged to inform my kind tutor of my condition, who immediately sent for a physician to me.

"This caused no small triumph amongst the collegians, who began to cry out, 'What is his fasting come to now?' But I rejoiced in this reproach, knowing that, though I had been imprudent, and lost much of my flesh, yet, I had nevertheless increased in the Spirit.

*"This fit of sickness continued upon me for seven weeks, and a glorious visitation it was. The blessed Spirit was all this time purifying my soul. All my former gross and notorious, and even my heart sins also, were now set home upon me, of which I wrote down some remembrance immediately, and confessed them before God morning and evening. Though weak, I often spent two hours in my evening retirements, and prayed over my Greek Testament and Bishop Hall's most excellent **Contemplations**, every hour that my health would permit. About the end of the seven weeks, after having undergone innumerable buffetings of Satan, and many months inexpressible trials by night and day under the spirit of bondage, God was pleased at length to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold on His dear Son by a living faith, and, by giving me the spirit of adoption, to seal me, as I humbly hope, even to the day of everlasting redemption. But oh! with what joy -- joy unspeakable -- even joy that was full of, and big with glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul! Surely it was the day of my espousals, -- a day to be had in everlasting remembrance. At first my joys were like a spring tide, and, as it were, overflowed the banks. Go where I would, I could not avoid singing of psalms aloud; afterward it became more settled -- and, blessed be God, saving a few casual intervals, has abode and increased in my soul ever since" (57-58).*

- h. *It appears that in the other examples before this one, that Whitefield didn't even consider himself yet converted. And yet, even before his conversion, his zeal for good works far outstrips any of ours.*

- 6. *People of God, consider from what has been said whether or not the situations exist in your life for which you ought to fast. Going without food is never comfortable, but when it is combined with spiritual humiliation and prayer, it is a formidable force in moving God to transform you and your situations into that which*

brings glory to Him. May the Lord guide and direct you into His will in this matter. Amen.