

"Biblical Fasting, Part 3"  
(Matthew 6: 16-18)

Introduction: You will recall that in the evenings we have been looking at what the Bible has to say about the worship of God. We have *so far* seen the ordinary elements of worship, which are prayer with thanksgiving, praise, the reading, preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, the sacraments, the giving of tithes and offerings, and the benediction. We then began to look at the occasional elements, and saw that religious oaths and vows and fasting were also acts of worship. I have labored these occasional elements more than the others, because I fear that they have probably become *so* occasional as to be forgotten, and it is important for us that we understand what they are and how to use them for the glory of God and for our growth in grace.

The last time we met together, we were looking at the biblical teaching on fasting. Since it has been a couple of weeks, let me just do a little bit of review. First, we saw what fasting was. Henry Scudder defined 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 it. And thirdly, we saw what some of the circumstances are in which we ought to fast. When overindulgence in food makes you dull and listless, you need to fast to break free from its influence. When the things of the world begin to steal your affections for God, and takes away your relish for spiritual things, then you need to fast to have the fires of holy passion rekindled in your heart. When the sin that you most struggle with, your besetting sin, begins to gain some victory in your life, then you need to fast and seek the Lord to break its power. When the Lord disciplines you for some sin or neglect or for some other holy and just reason, then you need to respond in fasting and humiliation to seek that the Lord would lift His chastening hand from upon you and turn your heart back to holiness. Also when you are seeking to know the will of God for your life in important matters, whether it is what you should devote your life to in employment, or whom you would marry, you can more earnestly and effectively seek the Lord through fasting and prayer, rather than by prayer alone. Fasting is a very important means of grace which is largely forgotten or neglected in our day, but which can have monumental effects in the lives of those who are willing to seek the Lord in this way.

Having seen these elements of fasting, this evening, I want to turn to the benefits of fasting.

**IV. Fourth, There Are Certain Benefits, Both Physical and Spiritual, That You May Gain Through Fasting. "AND YOUR FATHER WHO SEES IN SECRET WILL REPAY YOU."**

**A. First, There Are Certain Physical Benefits that You Can Expect From Fasting.**

1. **Before we look at the benefits, we would do well to listen to some warnings given to us by Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian**

pastor in New York City for over twenty years, and the second instructor ever to teach at the then newly founded Princeton Seminary. He writes,

"And in reference to this point, it behooves us to be ever upon our guard against the dictates of a vain superstition. For, as the practice of fasting for religious purposes has probably been in the world ever since the fall of man -- and we have every reason to suppose was thus early received from the Author of our being -- so this practice began every early, like every other divine appointment, to be perverted and abused.

"The Heathen evidently considered it as highly meritorious, and as purchasing for them the favor of the deities whom they vainly worshipped. And some of the ancient heretics, supposing that there was, as they expressed it, a certain 'malignity in matter' -- and that the less they had to do, in any shape, with material objects, the better -- taught their followers to consider abstinence, as far as possible, from all aliment [food], and especially animal food, as in itself the highest merit in the sight of God, and as one of the most important and essential of all duties. Hence, they imagined that the more any one mortified, enfeebled, and emancipated his body (without destroying life), the nearer he approached to moral perfection.

"But not only did the early heretics fall into the grossest superstition on this subject, the great body of professing Christians, very soon after the apostles' days, began to pervert the practice of fasting to superstitious purposes. Christians, in fact, began very early to be corrupted to Gnostic dreams and Pagan habits. As early as the close of the second century, they seem to have commenced the practice of observing Wednesday and Friday of every week as days of fasting. Not long after, we find them observing one great annual fast to commemorate the death of the blessed Savior. This fast was kept, after its commencement, for different periods of time by different persons -- plainly showing, as indeed many of them confessed, that it had no divine appointment for its origin, but was a mere uncommanded invention of man. Some kept it for one day; but the more common practice was to keep it precisely **forty hours**, because they supposed it was just about forty hours from the time of our Lord's death until he rose from the dead. And hence it was called, in ancient calendars, the **quadragesimal fast**, or the **fast of forty**. This time, however, as early as the sixth century after Christ, was extended by human superstition to **forty days** instead of **forty hours**; and the reason assigned for this change was that the Savior himself fasted forty days and forty nights. Of this annual fast, as well as of all the Fridays in the year, the Romish Church has long been in the habit of making a most superstitious use. The more serious and devout among them make themselves, without any divine warrant, the perfect slaves of this observance, and consider eating meat in Lent, or on Friday, as a mortal sin.

"Still more servile, if possible, is the rigor of Mohammedan fasting. The votaries of that imposture consider periodical abstinence from food as forming a large part of the duty of an exemplary Mussulman [Muslim], and perhaps, next to the pilgrimage

to Mecca, as the most important part of the price of heaven. And, in conformity with this delusion, the whole of their month Ramadan, the ninth in their year, is a great fast, during which the law of their religion is that no one shall eat or drink, of suffer the least particle of aliment [food] to pass his lips, from the commencement to the termination of light on each day.

"Now, all this is weakly and criminally superstitious. For 'meat,' as the inspired apostle expressly tells us, 'commendeth us not to God; for neither, if we eat, are we better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.' And, therefore, in estimating the benefits of religious fasting, we ascribe to it no mystical charm, no sanctifying power. We have no idea that there is any merit in macerating and enfeebling the body; nor can we regard with any other sentiment than that of abhorrence, the doctrine that abstaining from particular kinds of food ever did or can make expiation for sin, or serve, in any form, as the price of our acceptance with God" (Fasting 9-11).

2. Putting aside then any superstitious ideas of how we may benefit from fasting, let us first look at the physical benefits of fasting and then the spiritual.
3. The spiritual aspects may at first seem to be of more value, and they are certainly the things that should be primary in our lives. But we must not discount the physical benefits.
  - a. You must not forget that you are both a body and a spirit. You are not just an immaterial soul.
  - b. And the Lord is interested in redeeming the whole man, not just part of it.
  - c. Even when your body shall be lowered into the grave, your soul, though it will immediately enter the presence of the Lord, if you are Christ's, is still united to your body. And one day that body will be raised.
  - d. But what affects your body now also affects your soul.
  - e. When you are sick, you usually don't feel very spiritual. When you are going through a great deal of pain, whether physical or emotional, it tends to dampen your spirituality. That is why when you try and minister to the sick and dying, often those who had the assurance of the Lord's presence, "feel" as though the Lord has deserted them. Of course it is at times like these, when you are going through trials yourselves, that it is good to have a sound assurance of your salvation, so that when your equilibrium is thrown off by sickness, you can recall the Lord's promises and His faithfulness in affirming His grace in your heart, to strengthen your faith.
  - f. But the point is that your spiritual sense of well-being and strength is in some measure tied to your physical sense of well-being. And so the physical benefits of fasting are important.
4. There are two physical benefits which you can expect from fasting.
  - a. First, fasting has the tendency to make the mind more clear and active.
    - (i) To be an obedient and faithful Christian, you must be a thinking Christian. Those who have excelled in the Christian life, whose hearts were impassioned for God,

were those who spent a great deal of time meditating on God's Word that they might know their duty and how to perform it.

- (ii) Even those of the world have known that fasting creates an alertness that you cannot have without it. Again, Samuel Miller writes, "The seeming exceptions to this law of our nature are so few, and of such a character, as rather to confirm than contradict it. He, therefore, who desires to attain the highest efforts and the best products of his intellectual faculties, must often abstain, either in whole or in part, from his usual amount of bodily aliment [food], even though that amount be habitually moderate. Fasting, then, is, beyond all controversy, one of the best preparatives for high intellectual effort. It imparts a degree of acuteness to the understanding, of vigor to the imagination, and of activity and promptness to the memory, which are not experienced in other circumstances. Hence, it is well known, that some of the Pagan philosophers, when about to meet their adversaries in public debate, were in the habit of entering on the conflict fasting, that their intellectual powers might be more awake, acute, and active" (13).
  - (iii) Of course, if they did so for reasons of pride to promote their own ungodly thoughts, shall we who are Christians not make the same sacrifices for something far more worthy. Miller continues, "Did they cheerfully submit to this privation for the purpose of preparing their minds for meeting with advantage a fellow worm? And shall Christians refuse to submit to the same privation, for preparing to wait upon God with alacrity, and with holy elevation of sentiment and affection? If any man be desirous of preparing his mind for the highest acts of devotion; for the most complete withdrawal, for a time from the world; for being lifted above the vanities and sensualities of life; for collecting and fastening his whole soul on God and heavenly things -- among other means of attaining his hallowed object -- let him not omit to accompany them with real fasting. He who neglects this precious auxiliary to devotion (for so it assuredly deserves to be called) has not well considered either the structure of his own frame or the spirit of the word of God" (13).
- b. The second physical benefit is that it promotes physical health.
- (i) It has been medically proven that if you give your body a rest from time to time from its work of digesting all that you eat during the day, that it will promote your health and prolong your life.
  - (ii) There are examples in history of those who ate very little and yet lived very long. One such case is that of Anthony, a hermit that lived at the time of the Council of Nicea, in 325 AD. He lived by himself in the deserts of Alexandria, Egypt, and ate nothing but bread, water, and salt, and fasting quite often. He lived to be well

over a hundred, and his mind was as sharp as a tack when he came out of his seclusion to face the Arians at the Council of Nicea.

B. But as I Said, Besides the Physical Benefits, There Are Also the Important Spiritual Benefits.

1. There are basically three spiritual benefits. The first is that it helps to humble your soul before God.
  - a. Remember this was one of the important aspects of fasting that we have already looked at in our definition. Fasting is a means of humbling ourselves. Ezra wrote, "THEN I PROCLAIMED A FAST THERE AT THE RIVER OF AHAVA, THAT WE MIGHT HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE OUR GOD" (8:21).
  - b. Humility is important, for "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5).
  - c. Therefore, the apostle Peter exhorts us, "HUMBLE YOURSELVES, THEREFORE, UNDER THE MIGHTY HAND OF GOD, THAT HE MAY EXALT YOU AT THE PROPER TIME" (v. 6).
  - d. If you humble yourself and seek the Lord, He will grant you grace and answer the petitions that you bring to Him, it seems, with greater speed and power.
2. Secondly, it helps to subdue your body of sin, your indwelling corruption, that you constantly wrestle with.
  - a. Again, Samuel Miller writes, "The tendency of the flesh, in our fallen nature, to gain the mastery over our better part is that great standing evidence of our depravity which the word of God everywhere recognizes, and which all history and daily observation, with melancholy uniformity, establish. This unhallowed dominion is first broken when the 'reign of grace' commences in the heart. But still the carnal principle, 'the flesh' as the Scriptures calls it, has too much influence even in the most pious; and to mortify and subdue it is the great object of the spiritual warfare, from its commencement to the last moment of the conflict" (12).
  - b. "Now, one of the most obvious means of effecting this purpose is to deny the appetite for food. This tends emphatically to 'keep under the body,' to restrain animal desire, to counteract sensuality, and to promote a holy superiority to all those 'fleshly lusts which war against the soul.' Accordingly, it may be asserted, that in all ages, those Christians who have been most distinguished for 'mortifying the deeds of the body,' bringing it 'into subjection,' and 'setting their affections upon things above' have been no less remarkable for the frequency and seriousness of their seasons of religious fasting" (12).
  - c. Fasting will help you break the power of indwelling sin. And as an added benefit, Henry Scudder remarks, "Fasting will put the soul into such [a] good frame, into such [a] habit of spiritual-mindedness, that (as when against some special entertainment, a day has been spent in searching every corner in a house, to wash and cleanse it) it will be kept clean with common sweeping a long time after" (Christian's Daily Walk 83).
3. Thirdly, not only will the Lord answer your prayers and give you further grace to break the power of sin in your life, a last

spiritual benefit from fasting can come from what you do with the money that you might save from not eating.

- a. It was not unusual throughout the history of the church, that Christians would fast one day per week and then give the money, or the food that they saved, to the poor.
- b. Some gave up one meal a week in order to give that portion of their food to the needy.
- c. There is not only the physical blessing to the person in need, but there is also the storing up of your treasures in heaven, for the Lord, on the day of His judgment, will graciously reward the good works of His saints.

C. Lastly, There Is Great Encouragement from the Scriptures that These Blessings Will Be Ours if We Seek the Lord with Sincerity in Our Fasting.

1. Henry Scudder writes, "It was never read or heard of, that a fast was kept in truth, according to the former directions from the word, but it either obtained the particular blessing for which it was kept, or at least a better, to him that fasted" (83).
  - a. When the sons of Israel went up to fight against Benjamin for their murder of the Levite's concubine, they fasted and inquired of the Lord, and He answered them (Judges 20:26-35).
  - b. When Israel was oppressed by the Philistines, Samuel gathered all Israel to Mizpah, and they fasted and confessed their sins on that day. And when the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight against them, "THE LORD THUNDERED WITH A GREAT THUNDER ON THAT DAY AGAINST THE PHILISTINES AND CONFUSED THEM, SO THAT THEY WERE ROUTED BEFORE ISRAEL" (1 Sam. 7:6-10).
  - c. When Ezra was to travel to Jerusalem from Babylon to restore the Temple worship, he and the people humbled themselves and sought the Lord through fasting that He might grant them safety on their journey. Ezra writes, "SO WE FASTED AND SOUGHT OUR GOD CONCERNING THIS MATTER, AND HE LISTENED TO OUR ENTREATY" (8:23).
  - d. And when the Moabites, Ammonites and the Meunites came to make war against Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah, and the Lord caused the invading armies to destroy each other (2 Chron. 20:3-22).
  - e. The testimony of Scripture encourages us that if we fast in truth and sincerity of heart, the Lord will hear, and answer our petitions.
2. But you must have a right heart when you fast if you expect to receive anything from the Lord.
  - a. Scudder continues, "I do acknowledge that some have fasted, and God has not regarded it, Isa. 58:3; yea, he tells some before-hand, that if they fast, he will not hear their cry, Jer. 14:12. But these were such who fasted not to God, Zech. 7:5-12; they only sought themselves; they would not hearken to his word; there was no putting away of sin, or loosing the bands of wickedness, &c, Isa. 58:6; no mortification of sin, no renewing their covenant with God.

Now, unless we do join the inward with the outward, we may fast, but the Lord sees it not, Isa. 58:3-5; we may afflict ourselves, but he takes no notice; we may cry and howl, but cannot make our voice to be heard on high. But when God sees the works of them that fast, that turn from their evil way, Jonah 3:10; yea, that they strive to turn and seek him with all their heart, then he will turn to them; his bowels of compassion does yearn towards them; and I will have mercy on them, saith the Lord, Jer. **31:18-20 (83-84)**.

- b. There are many precious benefits that the Lord has for you, if you will seek Him out of a good and pure heart. Be encouraged then to do so, to fast relying solely on Christ to cleanse your hearts by faith, and to renew your soul in grace, that you might receive your requests and be strengthened to serve the Lord more fully and faithfully in His kingdom. Amen.