

**"Biblical Fasting, Part 4"**  
(Matthew 6: 16-18)

**Introduction:** In the evening sermons we have been looking at what the Bible teaches about fasting, and have seen, first, what it is: a day that we set aside to the Lord to humble ourselves before Him in spirit and body; secondly, that it is the duty of faithful Christians to fast when the situation requires it; thirdly, what the circumstances are in which we should fast: when there are things which threaten our's, or other's spiritual and physical well-being; and fourthly, what the benefits are from fasting: the furthering of the glory of God through increased spiritual and physical strength, as well as the speedy answer to very important prayers. This evening, we will want to see how to fast, and end with an exhortation to fast.

V. *Fifth, There Are Certain Things that You Need to Know in Order to Keep a Fast Which is Honoring to the Lord. "AND WHENEVER YOU FAST, DO NOT PUT ON A GLOOMY FACE AS THE HYPOCRITES DO, FOR THEY NEGLECT THEIR APPEARANCE IN ORDER TO BE SEEN FASTING BY MEN. TRULY I SAY TO YOU, THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD IN FULL. BUT YOU, WHEN YOU FAST, ANOINT YOUR HEAD, AND WASH YOUR FACE SO THAT YOU MAY NOT BE SEEN FASTING BY MEN, BUT BY YOUR FATHER WHO IS IN SECRET."*

A. *First, You Need to Determine Whether or Not Your Health Will Allow You to Fast.*

1. *There may be some of you, who for one reason or another, cannot fast. You have some physical problem which will become more complicated if you abstain from food for any length of time. Or maybe you are weakened from age, and you simply do not have the strength.*
2. *If there is any real doubt, then it would be wise to ask your doctor before you begin to fast. But please don't rob yourself of the blessings of fasting if you only think you can't do it. Find out for sure.*

B. *Second, You Should Determine How Often and How Long You Should Fast.*

1. *It is difficult to lay down definite rules concerning this, because we have already seen that it depends upon the circumstances of our lives, and the Scriptures are not definitive in this area. But that doesn't mean, on the other hand, that because it doesn't that fasting is unimportant.*
2. *Again, in his very helpful little book on Fasting, Samuel Miller writes, "And I begin this head by remarking, that the **frequency** with which every individual Christian ought to fast, and the **extent** to which he ought to carry his abstinence on each occasion, are questions concerning which no definite rule can be laid down. The word of God prescribes no precise law as to either of these points. The whole subject is left, as the subject of alms-giving is left, to every man's conscience in the sight of God. No one can open the Bible without perceiving that we are bound to give alms to those who need them; that 'we have the poor always with us, that whenever we will we may do them good.' But **how often**, and **how much** we are bound to give is nowhere said. Yet I have no doubt that in the great duty of fasting, as well as of alms-giving, where the heart is right with God, and where there is a sincere and humble desire to walk in that course which is*

adapted to promote our best interest, there will be no mistake with regard to the path of duty. [But you must not impose what may be right for you on someone else] That degree of abstinence which is salutary and not uncomfortable to one, would be deeply injurious as well as painful to another.

"The great END of the duty is to be regarded. God 'will have mercy and not sacrifice.' Fasting, like the Sabbath, was made for man, and not man for fasting. No one, therefore, ought to carry abstinence to such an extreme as to impair or endanger his bodily health -- of which there have been undoubtedly, some mournful examples, both in ancient and modern times. We have no more right to injure our bodies than we have to enfeeble our minds. Yet this, it must be acknowledged, is by no means the extreme to which the masses of professing Christians, at the present day, are inclined. On the contrary, it is manifest that the tendency in general is to **deficiency** rather than **excess** in this important duty. For [every] one who injures himself by excessive frequency or protraction of his seasons of abstinence, thousands, it is probable, either wholly neglect this self-denying duty, or perform it in a most superficial and inadequate manner" (15-16).

3. With regard to the length of the fast, we have examples of differing duration in the Scripture:.. Moses (Ex. 34:28), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), and our Lord Jesus (Matt. 4:2) all fasted for forty days and nights; Daniel, fasted twenty-one days (Dan. 10:2-3); the men of Jabesh-Gilead fasted for seven days after Saul was killed in battle (1 Chr. 10:12); and Esther and the Jews fasted for three days when threatened with destruction at the hand of Haman the Agagite (Est. 4:16). In the case of Moses, Elijah and Christ, the Lord miraculously preserved their lives, for no one can go without food and water for forty days and live. In the case of the other lengthy fasts of twenty-one and seven days, it was probably a partial fast. And in the case of the three, it was probably total, but it was also a very unusual circumstance.
  4. It is generally agreed that twenty-four hours ought to be the length of total abstinence, and anything longer than this should be a partial fast.
  5. By the way, if you do decide to fast for one day, the best, and perhaps the most biblical way of doing this, would be to begin in the evening after dinner, and then to fast to the next evening's dinner. This would be a twenty-four hour fast.
- C. Third, You Must Be Sincerely Willing in Your Heart to Fast.
1. Remember that there is no virtue in giving up food for any period of time. Here it is true as it is also with things sacrificed to idols. Paul writes, "BUT FOOD WILL NOT COMMEND US TO GOD; WE ARE NEITHER THE WORSE IF WE DO NOT EAT, NOR THE BETTER IF WE DO EAT" (1 Cor. 8:8).
  2. But what the Lord desires here is what He desires in whatever we do: namely, the condition of our hearts.
    - a. It does not please the Lord if there is no sincerity in what we offer to Him.
    - b. Again, Miller writes, "There is no piety in merely

abstaining from food aside from the spirit and purpose with which it is done. It is in this case as in the observance of the Sabbath. A man may shut himself up from all the world on that day; or he may spend the whole of it in the house of God; and yet, if his heart is all the time going after the world, he does not sanctify the Sabbath at all in the most important sense of the term. So it is with the case before us. . . . A holy God might, and doubtless would, still say to us, as He did in substance to His professing people of old, 'Is this such as fast as I have chosen? Have ye fasted to Me, even to Me, saith the Lord? This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me; their appointed fasts are an abomination unto me; I am weary to bear them'" (18).

- c. The Lord is looking to see whether in your heart you are truly fasting unto Him. He wants you to be sincere.

D. Fourth, You Must Not Eat or Drink During the Fast.

1. This is obviously what is meant by a fast: abstaining from food and drink.
  - a. This means eating no food, and drinking no water for a twenty-four hour period.
  - b. Now, if the situation in which you are fasting makes this impossible -- for instance, if it is very hot, and there are things that you must do on that day which will be too taxing for you -- then you should take as much water as is needed to keep you from hurting yourself.
2. You must not let the fact that you don't feel very good when you fast keep you from this important duty. This effect is one of the main reasons why you are fasting in the first place. Miller writes, "Nor let any one imagine that it is not his duty to fast because the abstinence of a single day, and even from a single meal, in some degree incommodes his feelings. This is no valid objection to the duty. In fact, as you have heard, one great design of the privation is to 'afflict the soul,' to humble us under a sense of our weakness and dependence, and to remind us, by a feeling of want, of the purpose for which we submit to the privation. If no such feeling were induced, an important purpose of the exercise would be defeated (16-17).

E. Fifth, You Must, as Much as Possible, Shut Out the World During Your Fast.

1. Remember, one of the main reasons for fasting is to break the power of the world and indwelling sin in your life. To indulge in these things while you are attempting to be freed from them would defeat the purpose of your fast.
2. You must therefore shut out the things of the world in order to focus on the things of heaven.
  - a. Don't read the newspaper when you fast.
  - b. Don't watch television or listen to the news report or basketball game on the radio.
  - c. Don't go out and play the world's games.
  - d. **Also**, if it is at all possible, you should fast on a day when you don't have to work.

- e. Try to set the whole day entirely aside to seek the Lord and His strength.
- F. Sixth, You Must Humble Yourself Before the Lord for Your Sin.
1. There is much that could be said on this subject. Again, one of the main reasons for fasting is to humble yourself so that you will cast yourselves upon the Lord in thankfulness that He has delivered you from the condemnation of sin, but also to seek Him for the grace to break the power of sin.
  2. In order to humble yourself in this way, and to see more clearly your need of Christ and His mercy, it is good to meditate on the Ten Commandments which reveal the sins of your heart like a mirror reveals the character of your face.
    - a. I don't have the time to list all of the possible requirements in the commandments for you to examine yourself. But the questions you should ask yourself when you fast should be like these which you can find in Henry Scudder's book, **The Christian's Daily Walk**:
    - b. With regard to the first commandment, "Do I know and acknowledge the only true God to be such an one as he has revealed himself in his word and works? . . . Do I believe his word, in all things related, commanded, promised, and threatened therein? and that his holy and wise Providence is in all things? Have I and his word in continual remembrance? Do I esteem and exalt God in my heart above all, so that it humbly adores him at the very mention and thought of him; judging myself to be nothing in mine own eyes, yea, esteeming all creatures to be nothing in comparison of him" (58)?
    - c. With regard to the second commandment: "Have I worshipped God in spirit and truth, in all the kinds and parts of his worship, public and private, ordinary or extraordinary; as, by hearing, reading, and meditating of his word; by praying, praising, and giving thanks to him; by a right use of his sacraments, baptism, and the Lord's supper; and by religious fasting, religious feasting, and making of vows, according as I have had special occasion? And have I done what has been in my power for the maintaining and promoting of God's true worship; and have I, according to my place, executed aright, or submitted unto the government and discipline of the church of God" (60-61)?
    - d. With regard to the third commandment: "Have I glorified God, by answering my holy profession, with an holy and unblameable conversation; by performing all holy duties with due preparation, knowledge and devotion, also by thinking and speaking of the names and holy things of God with holy reverence; and in particular by fearing an oath" (61)?
    - e. With regard to the fourth commandment: "Have I upon the six days remembered the Lord's day, that I might despatch all my worldly business, and prepare my heart, that when it came I might keep an holy Sabbath to the Lord, according to the commandment" (62)? And so on.
    - f. And besides the question as to whether we have kept His holy commandments, there is also the question of how we have been conducting ourselves in the work of the Gospel, whether we have been faithful to live as good witnesses in the sight

of others and whether we have been faithful to tell others of their danger and how they might escape the coming wrath of God.

- g. It is good to reflect on our sins that we might better humble ourselves before God, so that we might receive His mercy.

G. Seventh, Having Discovered What Those Sins Are That You Wrestle With, You Must Be Genuinely Willing to Turn from Your Sin.

1. Having had your heart searched by the Law and the Gospel, you must be willing to repent of your sins. For if you regard iniquity in your heart, the Lord will not hear your prayers (Ps. 66:18).
2. But if in your heart you humbly repent and forsake your sins, then the Lord will hear and answer you.

H. Eighth, You Must Not Fast to Be Seen of Men.

1. This is what Jesus warns us of in our passage.
2. If the object of your fasting is to show how holy you are to men, then you will have your reward in full when they see you and applaud you for your piety.
3. But Jesus says that your fasting must be in secret. You must not appear to others to be fasting. Rather you should wash your face and put on clean clothes, so that only your heavenly Father can see your fasting, and He who sees in secret, will reward you openly.

I. Ninth, You Must Be Prepared to Spend Much Time in Prayer.

1. This also goes without saying. You are setting aside the things of the world in order to seek the Lord, and if you do not pray, and seek Him, then all of your exercise is for nothing.
2. After all, you are not fasting for no reason, but for the specific purpose which prompted you to fast in the first place.
3. When you fast, therefore, make sure that you have the time to lay out all of your requests before God.

VI. Lastly, Be Exhorted to Fast. It Is a Spiritual Blessing as well as a Spiritual Duty.

- A. A Brakel writes this from a Seventeenth century perspective, but how much more do we need to hear this today, "It is sad -- a sign of great decay in the church -- that so little work is made of fasting, both in public as well as secretly. Therefore all who wish to lead a life of tender godliness and desire to see the good of Zion ought to stir themselves up to exercise this duty, for: (1) Has not God commanded this? "YET EVEN NOW," DECLARES THE LORD, 'RETURN TO ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH FASTING, WEeping, AND MOURNING; AND REND YOUR HEART AND NOT YOUR GARMENTS.' NOW RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD, FOR HE IS GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE, SLOW TO ANGER, ABUNDING IN LOVINGKINDNESS, AND RELENTING OF EVIL" (Joel 2:12); (2) Have not the church and the saints of all ages practiced this and left us an example to be followed? Observe this in Judges 20:26, 2 Chronicles 20:3, and Nehemiah 1:4 and Psalm 35:13. This was not only a duty and practice in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament (cf. Mat. 6:16-18; 9:15; Mark 9:29; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:3; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5). Therefore, as obedient children of God and followers of the saints, fast frequently. This was the practice of the original Christian church and of believers at the outset of the Reformation -- and even

- long thereafter. Do not allow this practice to die out" (9).
- B. I would like to close with this last exhortation from Samuel Miller, which I would call you to pay close attention to. He writes, "Finally, from the foregoing view of the subject, the reflection is obvious, **that WE have no less reason for fasting and humiliation than our fathers of former ages.** Let us not imagine that there was some special character either in the men or the events of ancient times which rendered the exercise in question more needful to **them** than to **us**. By no means; human nature is the same, religion is the same, and the causes of Christian mourning are the same now as they were when Joshua, David, Nehemiah, and Paul fasted and laid in the dust before the mercy-seat. What though the number of the hopefully pious be greater in our day than in theirs [sic]? What though the God of all grace has gladdened the hearts of his people in many places by 'pouring out his Spirit' and 'reviving his work?' How many millions of our fellow men around us still remain in hardened rebellion! How many churches in our land, notwithstanding all the precious revivals with which it has pleased God to favor us, are to this hour as cold, as desolate, and almost lifeless (in a spiritual sense), as the tombs which surround their places of worship! How many personal, domestic, ecclesiastical and national sins press heavily upon us as a people and cry aloud for the judgments of a righteous God! Think of the abounding atheism and various forms of infidelity, the pride, the degrading intemperance, the profanations of the Sabbath, the fraud, the gross impiety, the neglect and contempt of the gospel, and all the numberless forms of enormous moral corruption, which even in the most favored parts of our country prevail in a deplorable degree, and in the less favored hold a melancholy and undisturbed reign; think of these abounding sins -- and think also in how small a degree multitudes even of the professing people of God seem to be awake to the great responsibilities and duties of their high vocation -- and then say whether we have not reason for special humiliation and prayer?

"My beloved hearers, if we see no cause on account of these things for weeping and mourning and fasting before the Lord, it is because we have never had our eyes opened to see the evil of sin; never yet taken our stand among those who bear Jehovah's 'mark upon their foreheads,' and who 'sigh and mourn for all the abominations that are done' in the land. Professing Christians!, whatever name you bear, unless you are really found in these ranks of the faithful, how can you expect, when the angel of Jehovah's judgment passes by (as pass by he assuredly will), that your habitations will be spared -- or that, amid the surrounding darkness, there will be 'light in your dwellings'" (Miller 26-27)?

- C. People of God, doesn't the state of our country, the state of our churches, and our own personal state demand that we fast. There are many needs all around us and within us that should drive us to the Lord in fasting. Whether then it is in private, or whether there is a fast called for by the officers of the church, be ready to exercise this important means of calling down the blessing of God upon His people. May the Lord give us all eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to His church. Amen.