

“Walking with God through Fasting”
(Matthew 6:16-18)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. As we continue to examine what it means to walk with God, there are some things that should be becoming clearer.
 - a. When we read in Scripture that Enoch or Abraham walked with God, we are not to take this literally, as we would for Adam and Eve.
 - b. We should understand it as the kind of life they lived: a life of holiness.
 - (i) It's true that God is present with us at all times – He is omnipresent; the Spirit dwells in our hearts as well – so in a certain sense, we are walking *with* God.
 - (ii) But what the Scripture means by this is living according to His Word.
 - (iii) If you live that kind of life, God will be with you and you will be walking with Him.

2. Last week, we considered how to walk with God in the things we do to refresh ourselves.
 - a. First, with regard to eating and drinking.
 - (i) We should eat to refresh and strengthen ourselves first, but only for pleasure second.
 - (a) Don't eat things that will slow you down or make it impossible for you to do anything, but eat the things that will help you do what the Lord has called you to do. If there's something you really like, but eating it will cost your productivity, then don't eat it for God's glory.
 - (b) Make sure that you avoid the sin of gluttony, which we saw isn't so much a commandment against gaining weight as it is a command forbidding becoming addicted to food.
 - (c) Eat in moderation.
 - (ii) When we drink, we also need to exercise moderation.
 - (a) The Lord gave us wine to gladden our hearts (Ps. 104:15) – not grape juice, but fermented grape juice.
 - (b) But at the same time He warns us against becoming addicted to it – we are not to use wine or strong drink to escape facing reality or our responsibilities, or to make ourselves incapable of doing what He has called us to do.
 - (c) Our first responsibility is to walk faithfully with God.
 - b. With regard to recreations, we saw that we needed
 - (i) To spend time with God, because that is the ultimate recreation.
 - (ii) To do something different, rather than just do nothing; we don't want to waste time.

- (iii) To make sure our recreations don't offend God or others – that they're not sinful or destructive.
- (iv) To make sure they're safe – that they won't kill or maim us.
- (v) And to make sure that we seek God's glory in them and not our own.
- (vi) Our goal in both food and drink, and in our recreations, is to refresh or re-create ourselves so that we may better serve the Lord.
- (vii) If our refreshments drain us, disable us, or draw us away from the Lord, they are defeating their ultimate purpose.

B. Preview.

1. This evening, we're going to begin to look at the other side of the coin.
 - a. We've already considered how to walk with God in our work – which is the opposite of recreation.
 - b. This evening, let's consider how we are to walk with God in fasting – which is the opposite of eating and drinking.
 - (i) Fasting is something we often forget about because it's not something we do all the time. Our circumstances don't always call for fasting.
 - (ii) But sometimes they do, and we still don't fast, either because we don't understand that we need to, or because we just don't want to pay the price of going a day without food.
 - (iii) But it is something the Lord commands, something that was practiced by the saints, including Jesus Himself, something that brought about powerful answers to prayer, and for that reason, something we would do well to rediscover today.
2. Since this is a very important topic, and one we tend to be unfamiliar with, we'll spend a few Lord's Day evenings on this topic. We'll look at what fasting is; why we ought to fast; the circumstances in which we ought to fast; the benefits we can expect from it; and how we are to fast. Tonight, let's break ground by considering two things:
 - a. First, what fasting is.
 - b. And second, that it is our duty to fast when the situation calls for it.

II. Sermon.

A. First, let's consider what fasting is.

1. Let's begin with a couple of helpful definitions:
 - a. First from Henry Scudder in his book *The Christian's Daily Walk*, "A religious fast . . . is, the sanctifying a day to the Lord by a willing abstinence from meat and drink, from delights and worldly labors, that the whole man may be more thoroughly humbled before God, and more fervent in prayer" (49).
 - b. The second is from Wilhelmus A'Brakel, a Dutch Puritan pastor from the Dutch Second Reformation, in his work *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, "Fasting is 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).

2. As we can see from these definitions, there are two parts to a fast. Scudder writes, “The one, outward, the chastening of the body; the other, inward, the afflicting of the soul; under which are contained all those religious acts which concern the setting of the heart right towards God, and the seeking help of God for those things, for which the fast is intended” (50).
- a. Fasting is first of all the abstaining from all physical nourishment for a specific period of time.
 - (i) When Mordecai learned of Haman's plot against the Jews, he called upon Esther to intercede before her husband, the king. But before she did, Esther sent messengers to Mordecai asking that he rally the Jews to fast on her behalf, “Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way” (Esther 4:16).
 - (ii) She was referring here only to the outward part of the fast – to the not eating and drinking. This, by itself, is not enough.
 - (a) We might expect to receive physical benefits from this type of fasting, but not spiritual.
 - (b) A’Brakel writes, ”Fasting due to poverty, avarice, illness, for health reasons, or a being prevented from eating food due to business activities is not applicable here” (3).
 - b. But when the outward fasting is joined with the inward part – the humbling of your soul, and the seeking after God for some holy purpose – it can bring tremendous blessing: it can speed your prayers to God.
 - (i) We read in Ezra 8:23, “So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.”
 - (ii) Its name may come from the outward part – abstaining from food – but its power comes from the inward part – the humbling of your soul before God.
 - (iii) Again, A’Brakel writes, “Fasting primarily consists in a depriving one’s self of all that invigorates the body, being desirous to bring the body for that given day into a condition of withdrawal, distress, pliability, and weakness. . . . The second aspect of fasting is a humbling of ourselves according to body and soul. Soul and body are so intimately united that the ill disposition of the one begets the ill disposition of the other. When the body, due to the withdrawal of all refreshment, is rendered feeble, pliable, and is subdued, the soul will also be in such a disposition; and thus the natural disposition takes on a spiritual dimension. Fasting, in and of itself, is not a religious practice. It is only so when it is a seeking after God by way of fasting. He who has merely deprived himself of all refreshment has not partially observed a day of fasting, for fasting and a humbling of ourselves are not two separate duties. Fasting must be characterized by a humbling of ourselves, and the humbling of ourselves must be done by way of fasting. Fasting serves but one purpose: to facilitate the humbling of the soul; it has no significance beyond that.

Since fasting facilitates this, however, the act as such is nevertheless required. It is an essential aspect of a day of fasting – however, only in union with, and thus inseparable from, the humbling of ourselves. They do not function in a dual sense, but in unison” (5-6).

- (iv) Fasting, then, is the abstaining from physical nourishment for a time, to humble our souls, so that we might earnestly seek the Lord for a specific mercy.

B. Second, let’s consider that fasting is a biblical duty when the situation calls for it.

1. In the Sermon on the Mount, everything that He discusses is a duty, not just a suggestion.
 - a. When He pronounces a blessing on particular characteristics that should be ours in the Beatitudes, He is at the same time reminding us what we should be cultivating in our lives (5:1-16).
 - b. When He corrects the teachings of the Pharisees regarding the Ten Commandments (5:17-48), He does so to show us what it means that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48).
 - c. And when He deals with fasting, He does so in a section that deals with particular religious duties where we might be tempted to put on a show for others, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (6:1).
 - (i) Each of the things He discusses here – giving to the poor, praying, and fasting – are acts of worship, and so our duty, although some of them we may do more often than others.
 - (ii) He doesn’t command that they be done, but assumes that they will be, “When you give to the poor (v. 2) . . . when you pray (v. 5) . . . when you fast (v. 17).
 - (iii) He doesn’t command it here because He’s dealing with correcting their abuse – He isn’t dealing with them from the standpoint of duty as much as from the manner in which they should be done.
2. But to see more clearly that fasting is a duty, let’s consider two further arguments.
 - a. The first is the several examples we have of fasting in Scripture.
 - (i) When Israel was defeated at Ai, Joshua and the elders of Israel held a solemn fast.
 - (a) “Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads” (Joshua 7:6)
 - (b) Here we see fasting coupled with humiliation. We assume that they fasted since they were on their faces until the evening. They were humbled by the fact the Lord had allowed them to be defeated before their enemies.

- (ii) David fasted before the Lord, when his child was ill because of his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, fasted before the Lord.
 - (a) We read in 2 Samuel 12:16-17, “David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them.”
 - (b) Again we see his brokenness and humility as he sought the Lord for the life of his child.
 - (iii) Nehemiah, when he was in Babylon and heard of the desolations of Jerusalem, sought the Lord through fasting. He writes, “Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (1:4).
 - (iv) Even wicked Ahab fasted when he heard the judgments God intended to bring on him.
 - (a) We read in 1 Kings 21:27-29, “And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the Word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days.’”
 - (b) If God would answer the prayers of a wicked Ahab when he fasted, how much more those of His own children?
 - (v) Jesus fasted for forty days before His public ministry (Matt. 4:1-2); Anna the prophetess served the Lord night and day in his temple with “fastings and prayers” (Luke 2:27); the apostles fasted and prayed when they ordained elders in the churches (Acts 14:23).
 - (vi) Samuel Miller writes, “In short, we scarcely find in all the scriptural record, either in the Old or New Testament, a single example of an extraordinary season of humiliation and prayer which is not accompanied by the abstinence of which we speak” (Fasting, 7).
 - (vii) If the Lord shows us that this is His will by way of example, that’s enough.
- b. But we have more. We also have examples of the Lord calling His people to fast.
- (i) He said to the people of Judah, through the prophet Joel, “Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord” (1:14).
 - (ii) Jesus says that when He is gone, His disciples will fast, “Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The attendants

of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:14-15).

(iii) In our text, the Lord assumes that His disciples will fast, “And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face . . . but you, when you fast” (vv. 16-17).

(a) It’s a command not unlike the Great Commission, where Jesus literally says, “Having gone, therefore, make disciples” (Matt. 28:19).

(b) His command is not “to go”, but to “make disciples.” He assumes that they will go.

- c. The reason there are no more specific commands to fast may be because the frequency of fasting is determined by the hand of God in His sovereign providence, as He brings about the different situations where we ought to fast. *Fasting is always commanded and observed in response to some situation that requires it.*
- d. We’ve see what fasting is and the Scriptural warrant for it. Next week, we’ll continue to look at this important duty. But until then, let’s begin to consider whether there are things we should be seeking the Lord for through prayer and fasting.