

“Walking with God through Fasting, Part 2”
(Matthew 6:16-18)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. Last week, we began to look at fasting as one aspect of our walking with God.
 - a. We saw what fasting is: a special religious duty where you give up food, either partly or in whole, usually for a day, to humble yourself before the Lord as a means of obtaining what you want (provided what you want is something you should have).
 - (i) 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).
 - (ii) 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).
 - b. We saw several examples of fasting, as well as instances where the Lord commanded His people to fast.
 - (i) We read of many saints in Scripture who fasted.
 - (ii) The Lord often commanded the whole nation of Israel to fast.
 - (iii) Jesus fasted for forty days and nights before He began His ministry. (We need to be careful not to use this as an example as far as length).
 - (iv) And in our text, though Jesus doesn’t command fasting, He assumes that we will when the situation requires it, the same as with prayer and giving.
2. What we’ve seen so far is enough to show us that fasting should be a part of our religious experience.
 - a. It’s not one of the easiest things to do, but it is one of the ways we are to walk with God.
 - b. We also need to recognize that it is our duty to fast when the situation requires it.

B. Preview.

1. This evening, let’s consider those situations that require fasting.
 - a. Jesus tells us *how* we are to fast in our text, “Whenever you fast do not put on a gloomy face, etc.”
 - b. But *when* are we to fast?
2. Let’s consider four circumstances:
 - a. We should fast when we become spiritually lethargic.
 - b. We should fast when we have become too influenced by the world.
 - c. We should fast when we are struggling with a besetting sin.

- d. And we should fast when we are being disciplined by the Lord.

II. Sermon.

A. First, we should fast when we become spiritually lethargic.

1. There are perhaps several reasons why we might become spiritual drowsy and weak.
 - a. By indulging our flesh.
 - b. By withdrawing from worship and the means of grace.
 - c. But it can also happen by taking in too much even of those things that aren't sinful.
2. When we become spiritually weak because we have indulged in too much pleasure, we need to fast.
 - a. 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).
 - b. The Puritans recognized that there is an intimate union between your body and soul: whatever affects your body will also to some degree affect your spiritual well-being.
 - (i) Too much food can make you heavy and dull, both physically and spiritually.
 - (ii) And when you become dull spiritually, you fall prey much more easily to temptation and consequently to your sins.
 - (iii) This is true not only of food, but of a variety of other things.
 - (iv) One of the reasons we're not willing to admit we've crossed the line is that we are addicted to those things.
 - c. One of the "secrets" of those saints the Lord used powerfully was they fasted, not only from food and drink, but from the things of this world that got in their way.
 - (i) They understood what the author to the Hebrews meant when he said, "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2).
 - (ii) They didn't just give up their sins, they gave up those things that had the potential to slow them down – the things that might not necessarily be sinful in and of themselves, but were very addicting: in other words, pleasure.
 - (iii) They sought godliness at all costs no matter what worldly comforts they had to give up. They weaned themselves from the things of the world that they might better serve Christ. And they did serve Him better.
 - (iv) They weren't perfect – they were more keenly aware of their own sins than we are of ours – but they were more zealous for Him.
 - (v) That which made the difference in their lives – that which gave them hidden strength – was their love for the Lord was greater than their love for the world.

- (vi) Their affections were set on the things above, where Christ is, and not on the things below; and so they disciplined themselves so as to have the greatest amount of energy and time for Him.
- (vii) This is the way that they lived; and if we would find their strength, we need to choose their path.
- (viii) Be careful how much pleasure you imbibe.

B. We should fast when we become too influenced by the world.

1. Consider how your spirituality declines the more time you spend in the world.
 - a. The more you are around worldly people, with their talk, thoughts and ideas.
 - b. The more you get your eyes off the Lord and onto the things and cares of this life.
2. When your spirituality declines, so does your faith and the sight you have of the things that can't be seen except by faith.
 - a. Heaven and hell become less real.
 - b. You don't strive as forcefully to enter into heaven.
 - c. The fact that you know many people who are going to end up in hell seems less important.
 - d. The more you embrace the world, the more the world crowds out your affections for the Lord, and the more you need to fast.
3. How can you know when you've gone too far in the things of the world?
 - a. When it crowds out your love for Christ, or even causes it to weaken.
 - b. Susannah Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, has 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).
4. When this has happened or begins to happen, you should fast.
 - a. 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; this will allow your affections for the things of the Lord to be rekindled, even if it's only for a day.
 - b. You will be cutting off the things that feed the flesh, and you will be feeding your soul on the means of grace.
 - c. This is also why the Lord's Day or the Christian Sabbath is so important to our spiritual well-being: it is essentially a day where we fast from the things of the world and focus on the things of Christ.
 - d. The only difference between the Sabbath and a fast is that we can eat on the Sabbath.
 - e. When your spirituality is declining because of the world's influence, you need to fast.

C. We should fast when we are struggling with a besetting sin.

1. A besetting sin is that sin that you wrestle with more than any other, that is the most difficult to overcome.
 - a. That sin may be different for every one of us, but we all have at least one.
 - b. For one of us, it might be vanity, for another, drunkenness, for another, greed.
2. Fasting can help break the power of that besetting sin.
 - a. 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.
 - b. "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.
 - c. "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.
 - d. "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.
 - e. "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.
 - f. "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 always[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).
 - g. By afflicting ourselves through a day of fasting, we will seek the Lord with greater zeal, and by His grace find His help.

D. Finally, we should fast when the Lord is disciplining us for some sin.

1. Since the Lord disciplines us for our sins, the only way to be relieved of His discipline is to humble ourselves and repent. Fasting is the means the Lord has given us to humble ourselves.
2. This is true on a personal level: When the Lord afflicted David by afflicting his child born of Bathsheba, he fasted and humbled himself before the Lord, hoping the Lord would hear and heal his son (2 Sam. 12:16-17).
3. But it's also true on a corporate level:
 - a. Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted when they were defeated at Ai (Josh. 7:6).

- b. Nehemiah humbled himself before the Lord and sought Him with fasting when he heard of the desolation of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:4).
- c. The Lord will afflict His people outwardly for their sins, so that they might afflict themselves inwardly and seek after Him.
- d. When the Lord brings trials, whether for us as individuals, or for us corporately as a church or as a nation, we need to seek to humble ourselves before the Lord with fasting.
- e. The Lord said to Solomon, "If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chr. 7:13-14).
- f. And He says through Isaiah, "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2).

E. Application (encouraging example).

- 1. Let me close with one example of a man who was convicted, who humbled himself with prayer and fasting, and who was converted and used mightily of the Lord for the rest of his days: George Whitefield.
- 2. He writes in his journal, "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).
- 3. 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).
- 4. 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).
- 5. There came 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 filled with God's Spirit. 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.

6. "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.
7. "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).
8. If you've read anything of Whitefield's life, he went on to be very powerfully used of the Lord. Fasting was one of the ways he was able to conquer his sins and draw strength from the Lord to do His work.
9. We should consider from what we've seen whether or not we should 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. Amen.