

“Walking with God through Fasting, Part 3”  
(Matthew 6:16-18)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation. We’ve looked the past two Lord’s Day evenings at fasting.

1. We’ve seen what it is:

- a. Henry Scudder defines 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).
- b. And Wilhelms 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).

2. We’ve seen that it is part of our responsibility as believers, when the situation requires it.

- a. There were times when the Lord required the whole nation to fast.
- b. There are certainly several examples of individual saints fasting.
- c. And Jesus, in Matthew 6, assumes that there will be times we will fast, just as there are times when we will pray and give to the poor, when the situation requires it.

3. And we’ve seen the circumstances that require it.

- a. When you overindulge in the things of the world and need to break free from its influences.
- b. When the world begins to steal your affections for the Lord and take away your desire for spiritual things.
- c. When you need to have your passion for the Lord rekindled in your heart.
- d. When the sin you’re most liable to begins to gain some victory in your heart and life.
- e. When the Lord disciplines you for a particular sin, whether that sin be the committing of something forbidden, or the neglect of some duty.
- f. When you are faced with an important decision – such as direction in life, whether or not to take a particular job, whether or not to marry a particular person.
- g. Or when your family, the particular fellowship of which you’re a member, or the city, state or country of which you are a citizen is in some great danger or need.
- h. When things like these come into your life and you need to seek the Lord for His mercy, you can more earnestly and effectively seek Him through fasting and prayer, than by prayer alone.

## B. Preview.

1. Since the church has largely forgotten the blessings fasting can bring individually and corporately, we need to be reminded again so that we'll be encouraged to fast.
2. So tonight, we're going to look at the benefits of fasting.
  - a. First, we'll consider that there are certain things we'll need to avoid in fasting if we are to receive any benefits.
  - b. Second, we'll consider what physical benefits we can expect from fasting.
  - c. And third, we'll consider the more important spiritual benefits we will receive if we fast as the Lord tells us: "Your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

## II. Sermon.

- A. First, let's consider that we must avoid any superstition or any idea that we somehow obligate God to answer our prayers by our fasting.
  1. Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian pastor in New York City for over twenty years and the second instructor to teach at Princeton Seminary, in his small book on fasting, writes,
    - a. "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.
    - b. "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 anyone mortified, enfeebled, and emancipated his body (without destroying life), the nearer he approached to moral perfection.
    - c. "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.

- d. "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, or suffer the least particle of aliment [food] to pass his lips, from the commencement to the termination of light on each day.
  - e. "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. We need to put away any idea that we are doing anything meritorious, or that our fasting in any way purchases God's favor or obligates Him to answer our prayers.
- B. Let's consider second, the benefits we should expect, beginning with the physical benefits. (The spiritual benefits are the most important, but there are certain physical blessings that we shouldn't overlook). There are at least two:
1. First, fasting can make our minds clearer and more active.
    - a. Certainly, there are advantages to clearer and more powerful thinking in the Christian life.
    - b. The better we understand the Word of God and can apply it to our lives, the more sanctified we will be, and the more sanctified, the more useful to the Lord.
    - c. The better we can explain the Gospel to others, the more of a blessing we will be to them.
    - d. Fasting can help us in this area:

- (i) 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 . . . 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 . . . 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).
- (ii) If they were willing to do this to promote their goals, how much more should we to promote the Gospel. 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).

2. The second physical benefit is that it can promote health.

- a. Physical strength can be just as important in our service to God as mental.
- b. It has been proven medically that if you give your body a rest from time to time from its work of digestion, it will promote your health and prolong your life.
- c. There are also examples in history of those who ate very little and who lived long and useful lives.
  - (i) One such case is that of Anthony, a hermit living at the time of the Council of Nicaea, in 325 AD, in the deserts of Alexandria, Egypt.
  - (ii) He ate nothing but bread, water, and a little salt, and often fasted.
  - (iii) Not only was his mind clearly alert when he defended the doctrine of the Trinity against the Arians at the Council of Nicaea, he lived to be well over a hundred years old.
  - (iv) A clear mind and a long life can both be helpful in our service to the Lord.

C. Finally, let’s consider the spiritual benefits of fasting, which are three:

- 1. The first is it helps to humble our souls and keep them humble before the Lord.

- a. As we've seen, when we weaken ourselves physically through fasting, it has the effect of humbling us spiritually, because of the connection between soul and body. Ezra wrote, "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God" (8:21).
  - b. When we are seeking the Lord in prayer, humility is very important, because, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5).
  - c. And so Peter exhorts us, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (v. 6).
  - d. When you are humble, you are far better prepared to receive grace from the hand of God, as He is also far more prepared to give it.
2. Second, it helps to subdue the sin that we 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.
  - 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. The more you indulge physical desire, the more you feed your flesh, but the more you deny those desires, the more you subdue your sin.
  - d. The grace you receive in humbling yourself and seeking the Lord in fasting is also very helpful in this regard.
3. The final spiritual benefit is that of answered prayer.
- a. When Israel was oppressed by the Philistines, Samuel gathered all Israel to Mizpah to humble themselves before the Lord by fasting and confessing their sins. When the Philistines gathered 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).
  - b. When the Moabites, Ammonites and the Meunites came to fight against Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah, and the Lord caused the invading armies to destroy each other (2 Chron. 20:1-22).
  - c. When Ezra was about to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem to restore the Temple worship, he and those with him 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. 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).
- e. But don’t forget, we must seek Him humbly, we must seek Him repentantly, we must seek Him for the things that are according to His will, and we must seek these things for His glory, if we are to be heard. Scudder writes, “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).
- f. Next week, we’ll consider how to fast. Amen.