



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### GIVING GOD ROOM TO WORK THROUGH FASTING

~ Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18 ~

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#### INTRODUCTION

Just a few verses after Jesus gives us *The Lord's Prayer* are these verses:

<sup>16</sup>*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have their reward in full.*

<sup>17</sup>*But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,*

<sup>18</sup>*so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Throughout Scripture, fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes:

- It stands in contrast to the *hunger strike* (a form of social action).
- And it is not to be confused with *dieting* (done for health reasons).
- Nor is it to be used as a means of *saving money*.

It's a practice we haven't talked about much here. When's the last time you heard a sermon on fasting? A couple people asked what I was preaching on this morning, and when I told them, they said, "*Oh. . . Interesting*". It's not a very popular topic. I mean, who wants to dwell on "sacrifice" or "giving things up"?

Yet it's a very important discipline:

- It's all through Scripture (50-some references between the Old and New Testaments).
- It's connected with prayer over & over again.
- It can be a very useful tool for spiritual growth.
- It's one more way we can give God room to work.

Let's ask a few basic questions this morning. . . . .

## I. IS FASTING A COMMANDMENT?

NO! . . .with one exception. Fasting was mandatory for Jewish people once a year—on the Day of Atonement [Leviticus 23:32].

Nowhere else in Scripture do we find a Biblical law requiring regular fasting. Nor do we find a direct command to fast, not even by Jesus.

What we do find are examples of many Biblical personalities for whom fasting was important:

- Moses the lawgiver
- David the king
- Elijah the prophet
- Esther the queen
- Daniel the interpreter of dreams
- Anna the prophetess
- Paul the apostle
- Jesus Christ the Savior

Many great figures throughout church history have fasted and testified to its value:

- Martin Luther
- John Calvin
- John Knox
- John Wesley
- Jonathan Edwards
- David Brainerd
- Charles Finney

When Jesus gave instruction on fasting in the *Sermon on the Mount*, he said: “When you fast...” He didn’t say, “You *must* fast” (as a direct command). Nor did he go to the other extreme and say, “*If* you fast” (as though it was an “elective”). But he said, “*When* you fast”—suggesting that it was expected. Jesus assumed people serious about their spiritual commitments would fast.

So, it is taken for granted that fasting should be part of our normal devotional life in the church.

## II. WHY FAST?

There are many answers to that. Here are some. . . . .

### A. **To Worship –**

Anna in Luke 2:37 “worshipped night and day, fasting and praying”. As a result, she was unusually close to God. . .and God used her (even in her 80’s). The purpose of a spiritual fast is to remove worldly distractions in order to focus upon and worship God. If you undertake it as a “duty” and not “worship”, that will only make you edgy and irritable.

**B. To Hear From God (if you are seeking guidance & direction) –**

Moses in Exodus 34:28 “was with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights; he did not eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant—the 10 Commandments”.

Ananias in Acts 9 was guided of the Lord to go lay hands on Saul from Tarsus [later the Apostle Paul]. When he did, the scales fell off Saul’s eyes and the Holy Spirit fell on him.

It seems a church seeking God’s direction for its ministry and building needs would do well to give time to fasting & praying—to receive God’s guidance.

**C. To Repent and Turn Around –**

Israel in Isaiah 58 was all the time fasting, but God (through the prophet) severely censured them because they were not sharing their food with the hungry. Their outward show of piety was not matched by an inward show of compassion for the oppressed. To make matters worse, on the day of fasting they exploited their laborers by making them work harder while they took life easy. [“After all, I’m fasting, aren’t I?”] Isaiah flat out told them this was unacceptable, and that they needed to humble themselves, repent, and start “loosing the chains of injustice and untying the cords of the yoke” (v. 6). They needed to make a few changes.

If we want to have clean hands and a pure heart before the Lord, fasting is a great way to get to the bottom of what separates us from a holy God. . .because. . .

**D. God Will Use Fasting to Reveal the Things That Control Us**

We tend to cover up what is inside us with food and other pleasures. But if there’s anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, or fear within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger, for example, is due to our hunger. But go deeper, and you may discover a “spirit of anger” within you. Once you are in touch with that, you can rejoice in the knowledge that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and that He used to heal the sick is available to you.

**E. To Keep Our Balance in Life –**

How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. It starts out small until we are enslaved by them. “Indulgence” becomes “self-indulgence” which easily turns into “over-indulgence”.

➤ Paul in I Corinthians 6:12 – “Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything.”

➤ Then in I Corinthians 9:27 – “I beat (discipline) my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (i.e.: lose the privilege of telling others about Christ).

Self-denial is good discipline. We’ll never get anywhere without it. Want to get good grades? Win an athletic contest? Build a business? Well, there’s no easy way to accomplish these goals. . .likewise, there’s no easy way to spiritual maturity. Just as you build your body physically, so you build your spiritual body through Prayer & Fasting.

**F. For Health & Healing –**

David in Psalm 35:13 writes: “When they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.” I believe that God wants to see just how serious we are about what we are seeking Him for—whether it’s healing or some other special petition.

I am not suggesting we beg God. But just how much do we want what we're petitioning? Are we serious enough to do without food. . .or something else that's important to us (if it's not practical for you to give up food)? We do that for a college education or a new house. Why not for a spiritual purpose?


Nor am I suggesting we try to control God with the intensity of our prayer & fasting. This verse goes on to say: "*When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning*". God doesn't answer every prayer the way (or in the time) we think He ought.

Fasting is merely saying "*I'm serious!*" re. repentance, guidance, requests, etc.

### III. HOW TO HAVE A SPIRITUAL FAST?

Let's look to our text in Matthew 6 (which, by the way, is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount). . .

**v. 16a:** "*Do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.*"

The Pharisees voluntarily fasted twice a week to impress people with their "holiness". They went around looking as somber, sad and sullen as they could. They disfigured themselves—which probably meant they sprinkled ashes on their heads. [In today's terms, it would be like turning over an ash tray full of ashes on your head. Yuk!] 

Some people want others' attention no matter how they get it!

**v. 16b:** "*I tell you the truth, they have their reward in full.*"

What is that reward? They get noticed! That's about as far as it goes.

If you choose to fast (either for the Capital Campaign or on a regular basis), I hope you'll make it a point to reflect the *joy of the Lord*. After all, you're worshipping a God who sacrificed His all for you!

**v. 17f:** "*But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious that you are fasting.*"

Oil was like a lotion. There was nothing sacred or sacramental about the oil. All this is is normal daily personal hygiene. When you fast, go about your normal daily routine. Don't make a big deal about it. Weave it into the fabric of your everyday life.

**v. 18a:** "*It should not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen.*"

Jesus commended acts of self-sacrifice that were done quietly and sincerely. He wanted people to engage in spiritual disciplines for the "right" reasons. It is so easy for the human heart to operate with mixed motives.

Fasting is to be done in "secret" (quietly, unobtrusively) because it needs to be seen only by God.

**v. 18b:** "*And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you!*"

What is the reward of the one who fasts according to these directives? The rewards will always be in keeping with God's character. Things like:

- Closeness to God
- Divine guidance. . .a sense of direction and purpose

- A clean heart and a steadfast spirit (Ps. 51:10). . .unmixed with the little attitudes, motives and intentions that keep us from being Christ-like
- Loosening of those things that have a hold on us
- Balance
- Deliverance
- Answers to Prayer

## CONCLUSION

Fasting gives us time to pray. . .teaches us self-discipline. . .reminds us that we can live with a lot less. . .and helps us “*seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*”. It gives God room to work.

I hope you will join the Campaign Prayer Team in the next two weeks:

- By setting aside some specific times to FAST & PRAY.
  - By continuing to read the 40-Day Devotional Guide .
  - By consulting the back two pages which contain all sorts of practical teaching & tips on fasting.
- By joining us for the ***Prayer Vigil*** preceding the *First-Fruits Offering* the first week-end in June.