

Soul Food

“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, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” (Matt. 6:16-18)

I. DON'T CHEW WITH YOUR MOUTH OPEN!

Some things are better done in private. Don't you agree? I'm pretty sure at least one high schooler in Massachusetts thinks so. I remember I was sitting at my favorite study spot in Manchester-by-the-Sea overlooking the harbor. I had grabbed some take-out Chinese food for lunch and was buried in books in my car. Reaching for a bite in between sentences, I bit down on a tasty chunk of fat and gristle. There was no swallowing this morsel. It had to come out, but my open books and clipboard kept me from reaching my destination. So I leaned over as far as I could and expertly spewed the bite across the car onto the tray - just in time to see Emily Martin with a friend, out of her car, approaching my door! I have to admit that I never saw Emily's friend at youth group after that. I wish I could have that bite back!

I wasn't trying to be rude. I thought I was alone. I guess I should have listened to my mom and chewed with my mouth closed. Isn't it frustrating thinking and trying to do something right but doing it wrong? That describes my spiritual life a lot of the time. How about you? In my efforts to climb higher, I fall. In my desire to dive deeper I often choke. “Yeah, I'll read the Bible in a year.” Then three days (and one sin) later, “Yeah, I'm one, impressive Christian. Don't mess with me!” One week (and another sin) later, “I'm pathetic. I'm too far behind. I give up!” How can we take a step forward in our faiths without always taking two or three back?

We're not the first to face this dilemma, and we won't be the last. In fact, Jesus dealt with this very problem in the very

unusual context of fasting. Please turn with me to Matthew, chapter 6, verses 16-18.

II. "FASTING" DEFINED AND DEVELOPED

You know, I always tell the high schoolers to mark up their Bibles. See something you like? Underline it. Read something troubling? Write down why. See something confusing? Circle it and look it up. Since we're talking largely about fasting today, I think it would be smart to sort of circle it at the beginning and look it up.

What is “fasting?” The Greek seems to be a simple combination of the word “not” and the verb “to eat.” So more than anything else, it literally means an abstinence from food and occasionally water.

I'm sure quite a variety of ideas and images popped into your heads when we read the word. For some, “fasting” means Ghandi; for others it's dieting or a body cleanse; for a good many it means craving gum or coffee those 40 days of Lent, or long Friday nights waiting for Saturday communion. Some of us think nothing of it, while others reserve it for those elite, super-spiritual, “not-us” kind of people. Unfortunately, neither perspective is rooted in Scripture.

What does God's word have to say about it? Quite a bit actually. But more in the Old Testament than the New. In Leviticus 6:29-30 we learn that the people of Israel were actually commanded to fast at least once a year during their Feast of Atonement. As the nation annually made a sacrifice and confessed their sins, they would grieve over their offense to God. That was a common reason for fasting - great sadness or mourning. And such a fast would typically last from morning to evening.

When King David's son was ill or Esther pleaded for Israel, facing great danger or oppression, they would sometimes fast. Most of all, though, they fasted to prepare for serious

communion/conversation with God. And no matter the reason, fasting was almost always intimately connected with prayer. (Jer 14:11-12; Neh 1:4; Ezr 8:21)

Now in the New Testament, once Christ has come, we find over 20 references to “fasting.” But the majority of them are found almost exclusively in the Gospels, and these are largely critical in nature, including this morning’s text (“Don’t fast this way” or “Don’t fast at all, now.”).

III. ARE WE REALLY TO FAST - LITERALLY?

So what do we do with this information? Are we supposed to fast or not? Is it one of those Old Testament, ceremonial things like animal sacrifices that we no longer practice? I don’t want to use our time to focus on this one question, but it is essential to establish whether or not God does call us to fast.

Our first clue to the answer comes right here from Matthew 6. Suppose I were to say to you all, “If these beams come down we’ll be in trouble.” It’s obviously true, but I don’t see anyone running for the doors. Let’s suppose I changed the little word “if” to “when.” When these beams come down, we’ll be in trouble. Suddenly, the sentence is a little less funny. There’s an air of certainty and expectation communicated by that little word. And that word pops up twice in our passage. Look with me at Matthew 6, verses 16 and 17,

“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...”

It’s easy to miss, but it’s very important. It’s not if you fast, but when.

Remember, too, the greater context of this section on fasting. (It’s ok if you’re having trouble. I can’t always remember what I’ve *taught* on previous weeks!) Let me refresh your memories. In this chapter Jesus has been instructing his audience on giving and prayer, two non-negotiables of the Christian life. And Jesus’ language clearly connects fasting with them. Look at verse 2 and 5,

“When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full... And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”

Obviously, Jesus has grouped fasting together with prayer and giving, and we shouldn’t take that lightly.

Did anyone other than Christ say anything about it (not that Jesus isn’t enough!)? Yes, Paul mentions fasting just twice, but when he does it is about his personal experience. II Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27 reveal that he himself fasted. And so did members of the early church (Acts 13:3; 14:23).

I think it’s safe to say that the New Testament is more critical than condoning of fasting because its concern is more about how and why we fast than if we would do it at all. When your mom told you to chew with your mouth closed, you didn’t give up chewing altogether (unless you were a smart alec!). Despite the negative comment, you still knew chewing was good. You just didn’t know how to do it right.

IV. JESUS GIVES SOME GUIDELINES ON FASTING

A. How we shouldn’t fast

That should help to explain why our passage sounds more than a little negative. Jesus’ audience knew it was good to practice fasting, but they lacked sufficient guidelines as to how. We humans have a knack for turning something good and decent into something rotten and distasteful. It’s like candy: nothing’s inherently wrong with it, but try leaving a little one in a candy store for a day and what a picture of excess and abuse you’ll see!

Outside the church, people turned fasting into a magical power or protection from superstitious fears. Even inside the church fasting became mandatory - more like paying down the national debt than giving a gift in love. Pharisees themselves had to fast twice a week and absolutely everyone knew it. So this humble act of dependence on God was transformed into an

unpleasant burden for most, and a tainted badge of honor for others.

These are the misguided attitudes that Jesus admonishes in our text. It says people were putting on “gloomy faces” (NASB) or “disfiguring their faces.” (NIV) Why? Attention! People had begun to fast to grow their egos, their fame, not their faith. Can you relate? I can. It is so hard to do something good without saying anything about it - like letting someone have the last piece of bacon; like cleaning the house; or coming home from work on time; keeping a secret; or buying some flowers. The list is endless. And the sad fact is that it's impossible to do something good without feeling, at least in part, that we deserve praise or attention or compensation. But it has gotten out of hand when we begin doing good things specifically for the rewards.

Then doesn't it seem out of place that such selfish behavior is rewarded? Yet that's what our text says (v.16), **“Truly I say to you they have their reward in full.”** But don't you get the impression that their reward is more like the gift from a genie in a magic lamp? Ask for world peace and everyone disappears. Ask to be filthy rich and you get millions of dollars in drug money. Vanity's rewards are fleeting and empty.

When we end up boasting about our fast we put ourselves in God's place, hoarding for ourselves the glory and trust due him. And quickly the hunger we once felt for God is smothered in selfishness.

B. How we should fast

So we have a strong warning about fasting, basically, “Keep your mouth closed!” (Again, that's not the same as a command to avoid it altogether). Now having told us in v.16 what shouldn't happen when fasting, Jesus goes on in vv. 17-18 to reveal what should,

“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; and our Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

And it is all summed up with the little phrase “in secret.”

By definition a secret is private. It is not common knowledge, and really shouldn't be. Like a little boy walking up to a stranger saying, “I've got poo poos,” some information just isn't for general consumption. For example, nearly three years ago - almost to the week - Kristin told me a secret. Her brother and sister-in-law had just had their first baby and her parents were flying her out from Massachusetts to see the new arrival. But as great as that was, that wasn't the secret. What Kristin shared with me, and me alone, was that WE were expecting a new arrival ourselves! Of course that kind of information doesn't stay secret; however, we knew this needed to be kept private for a while, because we didn't want to draw the attention away from its proper place - cousin Joshua's birthday.

That's why we should fast “in secret.” It helps everyone, especially ourselves, keep the focus on God instead of us. If people oil (or “anoint”) their heads and wash their faces normally (v.17), then don't stop for a fast. Keep it private.

Secrets are personal, too. It's information shared by someone close to us, someone trustworthy. A unique bond is established by two people sharing a confidence. That's probably why Jesus began referring to God as “Father” during this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. It wasn't a coincidence. We can and should share the most intimate thoughts and feelings with our Father. And he'll keep that secret, because we have a personal relationship with him.

So secrets are private. Secrets are personal. And finally secrets are serious. Ok, maybe not the kind of secret a grade schooler wants everyone to know (“I like Suzie.” “Who are you going to ask to the dance?”). Those aren't really secrets. But when private and personal information are on the line, it is very important. Jesus' description of “the Father, who is in secret,” was foreign to Greeks. Unlike their gods who were all too public and plain, our Father was hidden. He was mysterious and transcendent, to be revered and obeyed. Fasting for such a Father was not to be taken lightly.

But can we take this “secrecy” thing too far? Sure. Our legalistic minds will over-react, “Am I nullifying any good I've done by talking about it? Is God going to dock me brownie points for admitting I've fasted?” That's foolish. But that's how our mind works. How could anyone ever teach on it, including Jesus, if that were the case. The fact of the matter is that if we waited for completely pure and holy motives before doing something, we

could never do anything! I can't take out the garbage without fleeting thoughts of being a great husband, or being owed some similar favor. Fortunately, most of the time I'm not really doing that chore specifically in order to get praise or compensation.

Well, does this sound like Mission Impossible to you? Sneaking around in dark clothes? Not speaking unless spoken to? Skipping those snacks? It's not! Build up to it. Skip a lunch once with your regular group of friends. Maybe do it on a day off. Let the hunger remind you to pray. Jot down your thoughts and feelings as you go. Just don't fast "with your mouth open" - that's fasting for yourself. Instead, fast in secret, because the Lord looks at the heart. Quite honestly, I think that's what our "reward" is in verse 18 - a deeper, more intimate relationship with the God of the universe. He doesn't have to repay us. In fact, we couldn't earn such a gift if we tried. But God just loves it when we acknowledge and enjoy our dependence upon him.

VI. DON'T FAST WITH YOUR MOUTH OPEN!

A few weeks ago I had the unusual pleasure of video-taping our kids doing a skit called "The Human Blender." My pleasure only came from the fact that I didn't have to be in the skit! Everything but the kitchen sink was poured into a student's mouth only to be chewed up, spit out, and theoretically sprayed on the audience (it was only pretend!). It was great for a skit, but trust me, you're glad I didn't bring the video in. No one wants to see that. Chewing with your mouth open is rude, and it's no different with fasting!

Parading our righteousness around offends everyone, especially God. So don't fast with your mouth open! If you have accepted God's call and challenge to grow and mature through fasting or giving or prayer or anything like that - GREAT! Praise God! But be very careful. You might have to consider practicing the discipline of silence along with it. It's hard to grow a big faith without growing a big head. Just remember this basic instruction - don't fast with your mouth open - and I'm confident that your hunger for him will be satisfied.

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