

## *Some Rewards of Fasting*

### *A Season of Fasting and Prayer, September 1 - 30*

Text: Galatians 6:7-9; Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-17

Thesis: As with any spiritual discipline, the Lord rewards those who seek him through fasting (Galatians 6:7-9). The Lord uses the spiritual discipline of fasting to increase our capacities to know him, to reveal our dependence upon the Lord, and to help us grow spiritually.

Message:

Early followers of Jesus were referred to as those “*who belonged to the Way*” (Acts 9:2). There were habits and practices that shaped their identity and helped them to show up in their spheres of influence like Jesus. **There were spiritual disciplines and practices which the early church engaged in following Jesus-- where they listened to the Lord, served the Lord, and did it together with others.** And, there were the ways of Jesus which the early church embodied in terms of **virtues in action**: love, unity, sacrifice, mercy, compassion, etc.

You and I are part of a community shaped by the practices of Jesus. That is our identity. If we want to follow Jesus and do the works of Jesus, then we need to engage in the practices of Jesus that empowered him to connect with the Lord and to do the will of God in the earth with others.

Our journey with the Lord is shaped by the habits and practices we do with the help of the Lord. “Spiritual practices are the way we dwell in and cultivate the space around us— where we hear, listen to God, and do it with others” (Dr. Alan Roxburgh, ATCO Conference, 10/13/16).

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).*

Spiritual disciplines are ways of sowing to the Spirit. Whatever you sow, you will reap. When we sow to the Spirit, we will reap life from the Spirit.

With this understanding of spiritual disciplines, I want to talk about fasting.

As you know, we felt that the Lord called us to a season of fasting and prayer for September 1 - 30. We talked about the right way to fast from Isaiah 58. Then, the Lord led us to experience the true fast of Isaiah 58 in the midst of Hurricane Harvey Relief.

*“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your*

*healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail" (Isaiah 58:6-11).*

We have lived into Isaiah 58 in very practical ways over the past few weeks.

**Jesus teaches us that fasting is a normal spiritual practice for those who follow the way of the Lord, just like prayer, giving, worship, and other spiritual disciplines.**

*"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 received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 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 (Matthew 6:16-18).*

In the time of Jesus, fasting was a normal practice. However, Jesus taught a radically different view of fasting. According to rabbinic tradition, fasting was viewed as earning something from God. And, it was the primary act of demonstrating piety. Unfortunately, it was a false piety consisting of external observances to impress others.

**Jesus shows us a better way to understand fasting.**

1. Jesus taught that fasting was a normal spiritual practice for his followers.
2. Jesus taught that fasting was done unto the Lord in dependence, surrender, and desire to connect with the Lord.
3. Jesus taught that fasting is a spiritual discipline that the Lord rewards.
  - a. As with any spiritual discipline, the Lord rewards those who seek him through fasting (Hebrews 11:6).
  - b. The Lord uses the spiritual discipline of fasting to increase our capacities to know him, to reveal our dependence upon the Lord, and to help us grow spiritually.

The prevailing mood of fasting when Jesus appeared on the scene was one of mournful sadness, an obligatory necessity, and a self-imposed requirement to produce the discipline of self-denial. (Shared from PocketBible for Windows Store: <http://www.laridian.com>.)

**Jesus turns this view of fasting upside down.**

*Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 15 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from*

*them; then they will fast. 16 “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. 17 Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved” (Matthew 9:14-17).*

Jesus' words about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount constitute a radically different approach to voluntary fasting. In condemning the type of fasting that seeks favor with men by an ostentatious display of outward piety, Jesus taught instead a robust faith that sought genuineness of relation to God through a pure heart. Jesus does not condemn fasting as such, nor does he forbid it. He does, however, give it a new meaning. Fasting is service to God.

This new understanding of fasting is set within the context of the dawning of the time of salvation. The Bridegroom is here. It is a time of joy, not of sorrow. Consequently, the prevailing mood of fasting as mournful stress and pretended piety is inconsistent with the mood of the new age that has begun.

Jesus' teachings may be summarized: Fasting is transcended by the beginning of the eschatological times. The rule of the Messiah has broken the power of the evil age. Fasting would appear to be no longer consistent with the spirit of thanksgiving and joy that marks the framework of the new age, since the Christian life is not to be dominated by tragedy but by joy and happiness. Yet the kingdom is not fully realized. There is a place for fasting, properly understood. Fasting must be done within the context of the joyful thanksgiving of the new life in Christ. The context of fasting is prayer. It should conform to the same conditions as prayer: unostentatious quietness before God, arising out of gratitude, expressing thanksgiving, grounded in faith, as a means of spiritual growth. (Shared from PocketBible for Windows Store: <http://www.laridian.com>.)

**So, what does this call to fasting and prayer mean to you and me?**

1. As with any spiritual discipline, **the Lord rewards those who seek him through fasting** (Galatians 6:7-9). The Lord uses the spiritual discipline of fasting to increase our capacities to know him, to reveal our dependence upon the Lord, and to help us grow spiritually
2. **Spiritual disciplines simply facilitate our relationship with God.**
  - a. Spiritual disciplines help remove the illusion that God is absent.
  - b. Spiritual disciplines are not merit badges or trophies, nor are they tools to build something. They “earn” nothing from God, nor do they make him do anything.
  - c. Spiritual disciplines position us to receive from God, to participate in divine life.
  - d. Spiritual disciplines are an exercise of sowing to the Spirit.

3. **Key issue:** *We have bought into the illusion that we can be like Jesus without practicing his spirituality.*
  - a. **Corollary:** Practicing spiritual disciplines is not optional; it is necessary.
  - b. **Question:** Why do people stop practicing spiritual disciplines? We stop practicing disciplines because:
    - i. We think nothing is happening.
    - ii. We give in to laziness and indolence.
    - iii. We get out of balance and forget that we have a part, and God has a part.
    - iv. We get side-tracked, distracted, and hurried.
    - v. We are pressed into the world's mold of busyness, worry, etc.
    - vi. We fall into ruts, forgetting that spiritual disciplines are about relationship. When that happens, we need new ways to pray, commune, and fellowship. Variety is necessary. Understanding soul-tending and spiritual temperaments are important.
    - vii. We fail to stay in step with God, who changes the way he relates to us.
    - viii. We get discouraged by dry times, and forget that God has purposes in the desert.
    - ix. We get mad at God or disappointed at God. Point: we don't spend time with people we are mad at.
      - (1) Corollary: When we think God is mad at us, we won't want to spend time with him in spiritual disciplines.
    - x. We fall into the ditch of doing the disciplines out of duty and will-power. Devotion and passion are necessary for true fellowship.
4. **Spiritual disciplines must be practiced relationally, consistently, and intensely** (with sufficient intensity) if real change is to occur.
5. **Spiritual disciplines are practices that change the inner self and its relationship with the Holy Spirit.**
6. **Most people live the Christian life by *trying*; we must learn to live it by *training*.** *"Keep yourself in training for a godly life" (1 Timothy 4:7 TEV).*
  - a. We need to do more than what Jesus would do.
  - b. Rather, we need to be practiced, to be trained, so that Christ's spirituality flows through us.
7. **Spiritual disciplines make us responsible (response-able).**
8. **Caution:** Never turn the disciplines into works or heavy yokes.
9. **Fasting creates a hunger for God by creating space for God to fill.**
  - a. Fasting acknowledges that I have needs. But, it says: "More than I need food (or whatever), I need you, O Lord."
  - b. Fasting is a way to say "no" to something lesser so that we can say "yes" to something better.

- c. Remember this: “Every time we give Him space— through time, through hunger, through undistracted attention— He fills the capacity. Let's make room for God” (Tweet by Dana Candler @danacandler).
- d. In his wilderness temptation, the enemy told Jesus to break his fast by turning stones into bread. *Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).*
- i. We are actually filled and satisfied when we do the will of God.
  - ii. *Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” 33 Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?” 34 “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest?’ I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36 Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37 Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. 38 I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor” (John 4:31-38).*
10. **Fasting and prayer go together.**
- a. The temptation when fasting is to fill your time with busyness or more lists of things to do.
  - b. It is important to carve out time to stand, serve, minister, and burn before the Lord (2 Chronicles 29:11).
  - c. It is important to make time to spend with the Lord and to pray.
  - d. Turn your hunger pangs into prayer.
11. **Here are some rewards of fasting:**
- a. **Self-control**
    - i. When you say “yes” to fasting, you discover that there is a self to control. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). But, our flesh wants what it wants when it wants it.
    - ii. We don’t like to admit it, but we need to learn to say “no” to our cravings and desires in order to create room and capacity for saying “yes” to the Lord.
    - iii. For instance, what do many people think when they hear a call to fasting? Often we think, “How can opt out?”
    - iv. Here is a better way of responding: “What does the Lord want me to do and how can I participate?” “How can I opt in?”
  - b. **Spiritual growth**
    - i. Fasting is a way to sow to the Spirit and to grow spiritually.

- c. **Dependence on the Holy Spirit**
  - i. When practiced in a relational way, fasting reminds us that we are totally dependent upon the Lord.
  - ii. Fasting will show us what really drives us: self, food, attention, control (doing what we want when we want to do it), etc.
  
- d. **Breakthroughs**
  - i. We are called to be overcomers. There are things to overcome in our lives and in this world (1 John 5:3-5).
  - ii. With God helping us, we gain strength and grace to overcome issues and limitations in our lives that restrict our enjoyment and experience of the abundant life which Jesus offers to us.
  
- e. **New levels of intimacy**
  - i. When we create time and space for relationship with the Lord, we will grow in intimacy with the Lord.
  - ii. Fasting and prayer are ways that help us create space for relationship with the Lord, for listening to the Lord, and for attuning our hearts and lives to the Lord.

## Application

1. **The Lord rewards those who seek him through fasting (Galatians 6:7-9) or any spiritual discipline.**
  - a. The Lord uses the spiritual discipline of fasting to increase our capacities to know him, to reveal our dependence upon the Lord, and to help us grow spiritually.
  - b. *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).*
  
2. **Learning to practice spiritual disciplines is like learning to master anything: it times practice, time, energy, and skills.**
  
3. **If you have waned in your energy and enthusiasm regarding fasting and prayer, I want to challenge you to get back on the bike.**
  - a. I want to invite you to try on fasting if you haven't been doing so. (Please see the sermon notes on *A Season of Fasting and Prayer*.)
  - b. Learning a new practice takes practice, time, energy, and skills.