

Title: Religious Theater
Text: Matthew 6.16-18
Theme: Fasting
Series: Matthew #34
Prop Stmtnt: Fasting is a means to enjoying God.

Read Text: Matthew 6.16-18; (note 6.1-2) Acts 13.1-3

I have to say that it was rather interesting to be on vacation (which is usually associated with relaxation, eating and pleasure) and at the same time preparing to preach on fasting. One night, while Cathi and I were standing outside of a restaurant waiting to get in I observed the faces of the people who were waiting outside with us. Some were casual, but others were anxious. The door would swing open and the hostess would call a name. Whomever she called would smile and get this look of anticipation. Eyebrows would rise. Eyes would open more fully. Shoulders would rise. It was like a mini resurrection, which is not too far off the truth, since for many, eating is a religious experience.

Have you ever looked at the cookbook section of Barnes and Nobles bookstore? I went in to one the other day, and saw literally dozens of cookbooks that were on clearance. There was shelf upon shelf of others that were newly printed. We like to eat. We like to talk about eating. We like to plan our eating. We like to watch TV shows about restaurants, cooking and eating. But, I have to admit that I think that it really is an oxymoron to watch the food channel while on a treadmill. There is something about that scene that just does not seem quite right. So, with food being such a big deal to us, why am I talking about fasting? After all, New Testament Christians are never commanded to fast - right? Israelites were only commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement and Christ fulfilled that. And while there are other examples of people fasting in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are not commanded to. Besides, we are Protestants. Isn't fasting what Muslims pretend to do during Ramadan and what Roman Catholics sort of do during Lent? If you visit any of our ABF classes and Small Group Meetings, it is very evident that our idea of fasting is eating fast - right?

Fair enough. But, Jesus talks about fasting and he talks about it in a way that he assumes that his followers will fast. And yes, there are examples of the early church fasting. In fact, in Acts 13 we are given a rather fascinating picture of a slice of life of the early church in Antioch. Let me set the stage for you.

Antioch was the first city where the gospel of Christ was preached to Jews and Gentiles. Whoa! How did that happen? It happened as a consequence of the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem against the Christians. Some of the Christians were fleeing for their lives and they spread the gospel to the cities they moved to. One of those cities was Antioch. As a result, many Gentiles, along with Jews began to follow Christ and they followed Christ, together! This is huge! It is also extremely controversial, especially back in Jerusalem. So now, a shift begins to take place. The focus of the New Testament begins to move away from Jerusalem to the church in Antioch. Antioch is about to become the fountainhead for church-planting around the Roman Empire. Acts 13 gives us a slice of life in the church at Antioch. It is racially diverse (explain) and when they meet, they apparently meet for an extended period of time since they are

worshipping and fasting. I bring that up just to assure some of you that it really is okay if our Sunday service goes past noon. The Lord is fine with that. But notice that the church is fasting. What was the occasion? Luke does not tell us. It is possible that these believers were burdened for other cities and regions who had not yet heard about the gospel. But the point is, fasting appears to be part of the life of the early church, as natural as worshipping is.

I. **What is fasting?** (16a)

When Jesus talks about fasting, he is not talking about going without food for just any reason. In a sense, we go without food at night, which is why the first meal of the day is called breakfast, since we are breaking the fast. That is not what we are talking about. Fasting, as Jesus is referring to, is going without food for a spiritual purpose. That purpose may be for increased prayer time or Bible study, or Christian meditation.

You can see why for most people, this would be so helpful. Here is what I mean. I spent a week in India speaking at a Bible college. Early in the morning, before classes, a large group of students were hard at work, preparing food for lunch. Some of them worked all morning long, and as soon as we ate lunch, then an enormous effort began to prepare dinner. When I was in Haiti with Bob and Judy Kay, we would go to the market to get food for the day. Food preparation is an extremely time consuming task, especially in settings where there are no appliances or refrigeration. It is also likely that they practiced fasting as a habit. This may have been done as a way to include everyone for an extended period of time. So, if you fasted, you were setting aside a significant amount of time to focus upon God. Historically, fasting most often takes place in response to a crisis or a great need. The immediate need simply reveals our need for God. So, in fasting, we are saying, that we need God more than we need food. You may hear someone say, "I am going on a Facebook fast, or a TV fast." I know what they mean, but you do not have to have Facebook and TV to live. Those are not needs. Fasting is giving up a need because of a greater need.

So, we've established the fact that Jesus assumes that his followers will fast. We have also seen that the early church practiced this and we have clarified what fasting is. But, since eating is not only something that our bodies have to have in order to live, and since eating is not just functional, it can be extremely pleasurable; fasting seems, well, so intense, so disciplined, so...spiritual, right? And that is the problem.

II. **Why you should NOT fast.** (16b)

Fasting is not natural; therefore it is very impressive to others. But, here is where Jesus once again warns us. Fasting, like giving and like praying is not to be done to impress others.

A. to impress others

The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. It very likely meant that they did not eat from sun-up to sun-down. If you do not eat from sun-up to sun-down, you will certainly feel hungry, but it will not kill you. In fact, unless you told someone, they would most likely not even know. So, how do we know that the Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays? Because, they made

sure everyone knew. They would do everything they could to appear gaunt in order to leverage their fast for maximum impression. But fasting is not for others. Fasting is not to be done so you can gain respect and influence over others because of your perceived dedication and sacrifice. But, that is how it was done. And it works. Discipline is impressive, and if your goal is to impress others, then spiritual discipline is a two for one because giving money, praying before others, and fasting is a great opportunity to impress others and gain their respect.

Let me give you an example. Peter Greer was on a humanitarian mission in the Congo. He was part of a relief agency that was attempting to aid some of the 400,000 people displaced by the civil war. The agency that he served was simply one of many along with the work of the United Nations. Peter said that somewhere along the line, the people who were supposed to be helping seemed to forget that they were there to serve the people and not themselves. Peter writes, "Consider the blankets. Even though we were in central Africa, the rainy season and elevation caused the weather to be surprisingly cold. A lot of kids wore nothing but ripped t-shirts. And we had blankets to give - generously funded by churches in the U.S. and purchased locally. But we were unable to give them away." Why? Because, "supposedly an American news crew would be following the story"Each (organization leader) wanted the spotlight so the leaders began debating who would get to hand out the blankets while being filmed. This went on for two days. The camera crew never showed up. Eventually, Peter and others got to hand out the blankets. But, even as he did, Peter said, "Here I was, on the front lines, personally handing out blankets and helping families that had lost almost everything. Noble cause. Noble mission. Noble actions of a twenty-five-year-old relief worker. A photographer snapped pictures, and I smiled wide for the camera as I did "God's work." And the thought running through my head was not about the people receiving the blankets. I thought how I can't wait until the people back home see these photos of me."

The sad reality for many is this: Religion at its core is done for the approval of others. That may be the type of Christianity that you were raised with. It may be the type of Christianity that you follow. It may be all that you know. But Christianity like that is not authentic and Jesus condemns it. We will see this battle between Christ and the Pharisees develop and intensify in the book of Matthew. These men were settled for the respect of people instead of the approval of God. In fact, the respect of others was their god and Jesus exposed it. Religion for them was a theater were they could perform for the approval of others and this approval gave them power and influence. It will also damn your soul. Fasting, like giving, and praying, or any spiritual discipline is not to be done in order to impress others. Neither is it to be done to impress yourself.

B. to impress yourself

Fasting is a discipline and can be a good discipline. This is what makes it so dangerous. Fasting can be done as a part of program for self-improvement. For example, you may be intrigued by the concept of fasting and you wonder if you could really do this. So, you decide to start skipping a meal once or twice a week just to see if you can do it and you do. You prove to yourself that you are capable of disciplining yourself. In fact, you sort of like the fact that you feel a little more in charge of your life. Not only that, but you read some articles where people speak about the health benefits of fasting, so you incorporate this into your routine and you feel some of the

benefits that come with it, including saving some time. When Jesus talks about fasting, he is not talking about a self-improvement program. Neither is fasting to be done to punish yourself.

C. to punish yourself

A young man in our church was struggling with some areas of personal purity. So, he made a commitment that every time he gave into temptation he would give \$100 to a needy family. His sacrifice in giving was not motivated by a desire to actually help people as much as it was an attempt to punish himself. He wanted the pain of losing money to help him be motivated to keep some personal promises. Now, I appreciate his zeal. I really do. But, while there are consequences that we incur because of our sin, God never calls us to punish ourselves.

Many of you grew up with the ritual of lent. Does the Bible command us to give up something for the 40 days before Easter? No! Is it wrong to do that? No. But, for many, lent is the time you give things up in order to punish yourself for your sins. So, if you have really sinned, then you need to give up more than dessert once a week and meat on Fridays. You need to eat broccoli for breakfast or something like that. But, you get the picture. Fasting can be seen as an attempt to punish yourself in an attempt to help pay for your sins.

That was how Martin Luther understood it when he was training to be a priest. He deprived himself of food, of sleep, of blankets at night in the winter, and of about every comfort he could think of in order to punish himself for his sins. I have seen the same sort of thing with people who cut themselves. For many it is an attempt to inflict pain and punishment because they feel like a failure or they feel so ashamed and worthless. But, is that how Christ displayed God for us?

Look with me at John 14.18-23. Do you see the relationship that Christ is describing that we are designed to have with God? The love of the Father for us is truly indescribable because it is inexhaustible. Now, if you are an earthly father, and your child cuts himself, or starves himself because he or she thinks that by doing that, you will love him or her more or you will forgive him or her more, your heart would be so grieved because your child would not really know and trust your love.

Now there is some truth in all of this. Sin is serious and sin must be punished, but you cannot pay for it. Your fasting, your giving, your cutting, your promises are never good enough. But Jesus is. He fasted for you. He gave what you could not give. He was cut and nailed for you. And he died, as your punishment, because your sacrifice is tainted and does not count. Fasting can be a wonderful spiritual discipline and I am going to encourage you to incorporate it into your life, but not to punish yourself and certainly not to manipulate God.

D. to manipulate God

Our personal default setting is the glory of ourselves. We naturally think in terms of how we can advance our agenda in life. We therefore, tend to view God as the ultimate source of power that we want to tap into in order to get the life that we want. If we can somehow get God to cause good things to happen to us and to protect us from anything bad, then life, as far as we are

concerned will be great. God, is our genie. God is our magic. God is our good luck charm. This is so dangerous, but this is so prevalent. Think about it. We really do not love God. We love what God can do for us. We love ourselves. Some have said that the reason why Jesus talks about fasting after he does praying is because fasting is what speeds your prayers to heaven. When you fast, your prayers become a higher priority than others. If you fast and you pray, then your prayers get bumped up to first class.

I have been asked by a journal to write a review on Joel Osteen's latest book, Break Out. I am finding that this is a very difficult task. It is not because the book is difficult to read. In fact, the book is written, I would guess at a 4th grade reading level. Every chapter basically follows the same predictable formula and every new point is the same old point. It is like cotton candy that will completely rot your soul. What is so difficult is because his view of God is so warped. His starting point is flawed. So, while he tells nice stories and gives uplifting pep talks, they are poisonous because God is reduced to a means to my end. Again, this is what is so difficult. We are born with sinful natures that seek our own glory and desire to be worshiped. We therefore, naturally assume that it is God's job to cooperate with my plan to be rich, powerful, respected, healthy, comfortable and successful.

III. Why you should fast. (18a)

A. **to depend on God**

Jesus is teaching an entirely different way of living. Religion is not a means to manipulate God to get what you want. Religion is not a means to impress other people so that you have their respect and be a person of influence. True religion is a life that is lived before God in such a way that you are relating to him as He wants. He wants you to know that you are loved by him and that you are dependent upon him. You need his strength more than your own. You need his wisdom more than your plans. You need his direction more than your ideas. That is why fasting is not a command. It is not a duty to perform. It is a means to be more intentional in your dependence upon God.

When you choose not to eat, so that you can take that time and focus upon God through some Bible study, prayer, or meditation, you are giving up what you need for something even greater. This is why we tend to fast when we are in the middle of a crisis. The crisis has simply revealed that we need God and we are admitting it by fasting. When you fast you are reminding yourself that your relationship with God is more important than food. If you do not have food, eventually your body will die. But, are you as desperate for God and desirous for God as you are for food? If we really knew how much God loves us and if we really grasped his grace for us and his plans for us, then, seriously, we would be so jacked up to gather together as his people on Sunday. As much as we look forward to eating, we would look forward to enjoying God so much more. As John Piper has said, "God is most glorified in us, when we are most dependent on him." Let me add another angle to that. "God is most enjoyed by us, when we most dependent on him." Our need of God drives our enjoyment of God because God does not hide himself from us. In fact, he is the One who initiates the relationship. So, not only is fasting an opportunity to be more intentional in your dependence on God, it is also an opportunity to enjoy God.

B. to enjoy God

Have you ever done something that was so important that you wanted to do it instead of eating? That is the idea of fasting. Our time with God is so treasured that we choose to take the time that we would otherwise spend eating, and spend it with God.

IV. How you should fast. (17)

A. naturally

Jesus said that if you fast, do not do anything to draw attention to yourself. Wash your face, comb your hair, (oil your curls) and appear as you normally do. Do not try to draw attention to the fact that you fast. It is not about how others perceive you anyway.

B. privately

And you should fast privately. In other words, it is up to you. Once a week? Once a month? Twice a week? That's between you and God.

Conclusions:

What threatens my enjoyment of God?

What am I in danger of loving more than God?

What do I think that I have to have in order to be happy?

What owns me? (beer, exercise, cigarettes, healthy food)

How often would it be helpful for me to fast to cultivate my sense of dependence on and enjoyment of God?