

Best Practices for Followers of Jesus – Fasting
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ
On Date - Sunday, April 11, 2021

Introduction

When I have a little free time, (something that doesn't happen as often as I'd like), one thing I like to do is watch “Educational Programs” - Programs where you learn something. One of the topics I enjoy learning about is food. That includes things like food preparation and nutrition.

One type of show I sometimes watch involves competitions between chefs, shows like “Iron Chef”. In this show, master chefs are given special challenges. Usually, the challenge is a special ingredient. For example, let's say the ingredient for the day is squid. The chefs who are competing have an hour to build a whole meal around it. You can imagine a main course featuring squid. You can imagine a squid appetizer. Maybe you can imagine a squid salad. Now, a really creative chef can use the ingredient even to make a dessert. Imagine squid flavored ice cream.

One episode of this show stands out in my memory. It was a multi-episode competition. A group of chefs made a number of meals, and at every level someone got eliminated. One day, the special ingredient was rabbit. So, all the chefs prepared a main dish build around rabbit. After an hour, they all came back with their dishes.

In this show, there is a panel of judges. The judges sample each dish. In this episode, after sampling the dishes, they called out one of the chefs. Here's what they told him: “Your rabbit was well cooked. The ingredients you added to it were very good. However, you didn't **season** your rabbit. You didn't even add salt and pepper.”

The chef said, “Well, people in my restaurant complain about salt, so you never know how much to put in.” The judges replied, “You are a master chef, and you're hoping to work in the best restaurants. In the best restaurants, the chef chooses how much seasoning to put on a dish. Therefore, you're out.”

In these competitions, when one person is out, that means the other competitors get to advance to the next level. So, all the other chefs gave a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat off their brows. However, the judges really wanted to rub this in. So, they pointed out one of the competitors. They said, “We just want you to know something. You were next in line to be eliminated. Had the other chef properly salted his rabbit, he would be here instead of you. Remember that in the next challenge.”

Imagine that. One missed ingredient meant a competitor went home. One ingredient was so important, that the dish just wasn't the same without it.

In article, we're talking to people who want to be followers of Jesus. Is there an activity that's very important in the life of a Christian, but which is often missed? And without it, your spiritual life just isn't complete. If so, what is it? In this article, we're going to learn about an activity that is very important for the life of a Christian. It's an activity that's often missed. Let's read about it.

16 "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16-18)

The activity that we need to look at today is fasting. What are the best practices for followers of Jesus when they practice fasting?

Let's start off by asking, what is fasting? Here's what the folks at "Oxford languages" say:

SLIDE

Fast(2)

/fast/

Verb

Abstain from all or some kinds of food or drink...

Note: The reason there's a "2" next to the definition is that this is the second definition. The first is to move quickly.

Let's hear from the scholars at Britannica:

Fasting - Abstinence from food or drink or both for health, ritualistic, religious, or ethical purposes. The abstention may be complete or partial, lengthy, of short duration, or intermittent.

I'll give it a try:

Fasting is the act of voluntarily limiting or eliminating food and drinks from your diet for a limited period of time.

An important part of any definition for fasting involves the fact that it's voluntary. If outside forces prevent you from eating, then you're looking at starvation.

We're going to break our discussion today into two parts: First, what is clearly here in the text. It's very straightforward. Next, we'll look at things from other parts of Scripture and life that help us to further understand fasting.

Let's dig in.

I. The Text

And WHEN you fast... (Matthew 6:16, my emphasis)

This is important. As Jesus is giving instructions to his followers, he assumes that certain activities will take place. This was also true of giving and prayer: "So when you give... (Matthew 6:2)". "And when you pray (Matthew 6:5)" And now, "And when you fast..."

Giving, Praying, and Fasting are all things that followers of Jesus need to do. They're so important, Jesus simply assumes we'll do them.

A. The "DO IT" principle.

Let's call this the "DO IT" principle. Giving, Prayer, and Fasting. You simply have to DO IT.

In our opening illustration, we mentioned a chef who was eliminated because he prepared an otherwise good meal, but left out something important. Note: We were talking about people who want to be master chefs. For a master chef to fail at seasoning means you find another job. There are lots of amateurs who may leave out the seasoning in a meal. So, with fasting, I'm not suggesting that you lose your salvation if you fail to do it. However, if you understand our text for today, you'll find it's more important than people realize.

As it turns out, there are lots of things that are important for followers of Jesus. Reading Scripture is important. If you don't do it, you'll lead a second-rate spiritual life. Fellowship with other believers is important. If you don't do it, you're missing something important.

We've just been reminded of giving. It's alarming how many people think you can live a complete life without ever giving to the church or others. But as we've been reminding people in our series, the greatest gift God can give to people is his image. He wants us to be like him. He is generous and giving. When we are generous, when we are giving, we can become like him. And when we become like him, we enjoy the benefits of being like him. We understand him. We relate to him. We enjoy him. If we're not generous and giving, we miss out.

And oh, we just spent weeks discussing prayer. Our Lord went out of his way to teach us how to pray. Prayer is important! If we do it, we meet with the Lord high Creator of the Universe. He is gracious and loving. He allows us to address him as “Our father”. If we don’t pray, we’re missing an unthinkable opportunity.

And here, our Lord tells us about fasting. Most people miss out on fasting. Somehow, it gets passed over when we talk about spiritual activities. But, understand something: Our Lord Jesus is putting fasting on the list of activities that his followers do. He’s placing it in the same list as giving and praying. By doing this, our Lord is saying that fasting is important. If we leave it out, perhaps we’re like the chef who ruins an otherwise good meal by forgetting to add the seasoning.

Giving, Praying, and yes, Fasting. Do it!

Before we find out more about fasting, lets look at one more principle that’s clear in this text.

B. The Privacy Principle.

In our series of “best practices for followers of Jesus”, we’ve already talked about the privacy principle. This principle must be very important to Jesus, because he’s discussed it two times in Matthew 6, and this is the third. In fact, it’s the over-arching principle of the first half of Matthew Chapter 6.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.
(Matthew 6:1)

There are somethings that are between you and God. So, Jesus teaches us, keep it that way. Some people insist on displaying their righteousness before others. We’re told that they get no reward in heaven.

We saw it with giving.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others.
(Matthew 6:2)

Jesus says there are problem people: Hypocrites. And he warns us, don’t be like them.

In fact, Jesus tells us to take steps to keep our giving secret.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. (Matthew 6:3)

Then, we saw this principle with prayer.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. (Matthew 6:5)

Again, hypocrites make a show of their prayer. And again, don't do that. And again, Jesus tells us to take steps to keep our prayers private.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6)

So, we have a privacy principle. Hypocrites show off before others. Don't do that.

Now, Jesus tells us to apply this principle with fasting.

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:16-18)

Fasting involves abstaining from food. That makes you hungry. That makes you tired. The hypocrite wants everyone to know. So, the hypocrite says, "Look at me, everyone – look how hard this is! Look how dedicated I am!" We're told that they "disfigure their faces". We don't know exactly what that means, but it means they're going out of their way to put on a show.

To those people, Jesus says what he said in each of the other situations where the privacy principle needs to be employed. "Truly I say to you, they have received their reward." And, just like in the other two case, Jesus tells us to take steps that our spiritual activities may be private.

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16)

So, instead of doing things that make you look even more tired and worn-out than you are, do things that make you look alert and healthy. Wash up. Put on good clothes. That way, no one needs to know that you're doing something that's a burden on your body.

So far, we've learned about three important practices for followers of Jesus: Giving, praying and fasting. The best practices for followers of Jesus start when we make a point of doing these things, along with other important practices. So, DO IT!

Next, we're told that when we do these things, we must apply the privacy principle. These spiritual activities are between us and God first and foremost. So, we should take steps to do them, when possible, in private.

A quick note: There are times when all of these things, and other spiritual activities, are done as a team with others. So, then, they can be public. We'll talk about those times shortly. But what's important here, if they're missing from your life, it's like the chef who tries to create a meal, but leaves out the seasoning.

So having learned these things from our current text, let's move on to part two of our discussion today.

II. Fasting in other parts of the Bible and in Life.

What do we learn about fasting from other parts of the Bible and from life? We learn lots of things, of course. But let's concentrate on these: Fasting can be scheduled, as a personal discipline, or it can be a response to events.

Let's look at the second type of fasting: Fasting as a response to events. Note: I spent some time discussing this type of fasting back when our church participated in an event called, "The Return" in September of 2020. I gave a message called, "God's Gifts in a time of Challenge". You can find that on our web site.

Another note: this is likely not what Jesus is referring to. I'll explain why. For now, we're going to cover these in order to give this topic proper treatment.

In this session, I'll just summarize the categories. We'll look at two classic examples.

Esther

The first involves Queen Esther. She was a Jewish woman lived during the time the Jewish people were deported to the nation of Babylon. Through a series of miraculous events, she married the King of Babylon. Apparently, the king didn't know that she was Jewish. She learned one day that an evil man had gotten permission to wipe out the entire Jewish population. So, she responded by calling a fast. Let's read about it.

"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16)"

So, this fast is a response to an event. Something terrible is about to happen - The entire Jewish nation is about to be wiped out. The people who are doing this are powerful – powerful beyond the strength of Esther or the Jewish people. So, she calls for a complete fast – abstaining from food and water.

To make a long story short – it works. God miraculously moves the heart of the king so that he protects the Jewish nation.

Another note: This is an example of fasting where the privacy principle need not be involved. As we said, sometimes fasting is a team effort of many people. The Bible records times when people fasted and prayed. We're told they wore sackcloth and threw ashes on themselves. So again, this is not specifically what Jesus is referring to in our main passage.

Daniel

Another classic example is Daniel. He is best known for his time in the lion's den. But he was also a man who knew about fasting and prayer. At one point, he became deeply grieved about something. Let's read what he did.

At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; (Daniel 10:2)

So, Daniel is confronted by something that makes him grieve. He didn't feel led to completely abstain from food and drinks. Instead, he felt led to greatly limit what he consumed. Some people call this a "No meats or sweets" fast.

And again, this worked. God sent an angel to reply to Daniel. Here's what the angel said:

"Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. (Daniel 10:12)"

So, here are two times when people in the Bible fasted. They fasted in response to an event. These examples have some things in common.

- The event is overwhelming.
 - There was nothing that humanly could be done.
 - People needed God's help.
- The events cause grief and mourning.
 - Sometimes when people grieve it limits their desire for food.
- The fasts are associated with prayer.
- The people who participate believe that fasting enhances their prayer.

So, that's one kind of fast: Fasting in response to an event. The second type of fasting is scheduled fasting as a personal discipline. I think this is what Jesus is specifically referring to in our passage. Let's learn about it.

Scheduled Fasting as a Personal Discipline.

In order to understand this type of fasting, we need to discuss what it does. First, it can enhance our prayers. This is one of the reasons that I wanted to include the previous category about fasting in response to events. The participants in these events clearly believed that fasting enhanced their prayer.

Notice I use word “can”. Just like the other things we’ve been learning about in our series, fasting is not magic - It does not guarantee results.

This is especially true when we have sin in our lives. One type of sin is hypocrisy. We’ve spent some time looking at people who want to parade their spirituality in front of others. Those people should not expect results.

The prophet Isaiah talked about another kind of sin. Let’s read about that:

‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please...”
(Isaiah 58:3)

Isaiah sees a group of people praying and fasting. They think this is supposed to guarantee that they’re get whatever they want. But Isaiah also sees selfish and sinful people who refuse to face their sins. The rest of the chapter is a devastating list of people who are selfish and greedy.

So, fasting can enhance your prayer, but only if your heart is in the right place.

Here’s another benefit of fasting: Fasting can set us on the path to a disciplined life. It helps us to say “no” to our feelings.

Fasting produces feelings. You will certainly feel hungry. You may feel tired. You may feel a lot of other things. But you know something? Fasting doesn’t kill you. Most people can cut back on food - certainly for defined periods of time. So, your feelings and reality don’t always match.

How long can you last without food? The world record for a fast is very long. Ready for this? In 1965, a man named Angus Barbieri got tired of being overweight. He lived in Scotland. At 27 years old, he weighed 456 pounds. He decided to simply stop eating. He drank only liquids like water, tea, and coffee. On the advice of doctors, he added vitamins and electrolytes. He did this for 385 days. When he was done, he weighed 180 pounds. And, he was able to keep the weight off.

Standard note: Don’t do this. Every article I’ve seen on this man repeats, “Don’t do this.”

Here's the point: Most people don't die when they stop eating for a short while.

And again, the standard caveat: Talk with your doctor. Your health may be troubled with a fast. But for many, not only is fasting not unhealthy, it's downright healthy! My job as a pastor isn't to outline all the health benefits of fasting, which appear to be many. You can go to the Internet to learn about that. My job is to tell you about the spiritual benefits. These are: Fasting can enhance your prayer. It can be part of an overall disciplined life. Sometimes, our feelings say one thing and our head says something else. In those cases, fasting can give us the discipline to say "no" to our feelings.

For these reasons, many believers schedule it into their devotional life. How often can be decided by each individual.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today, we've learned about an important practice: Fasting. Sadly, this practice is often misunderstood or forgotten. But, if we follow the "Best practices" of our Lord, fasting can be an important tool for our spiritual journey.

First, we need to DO IT.

- Just like we need to give, pray, and other important things.

In order to do it correctly, we need to have our hearts in the right place.

- We need to apply the privacy principle.
- We need to find ways to avoid parading our spirituality in front of others.

We need to understand that fasting can be an important tool that enhances our prayers. If we learn this best practice, we can become effective followers of Jesus Christ.

May God bless us as we seek to grow as his followers.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org
Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com