

Alan VanDeusen, Fasting
Reading: Matthew 6:1-18

March 20, 2016

This morning I want to talk about something that I'm probably way behind the curve on, in fact I know I am, and I don't know how many other people are or not because we don't know a lot about it. We don't talk about it very much. When we read through the reading we just had, the first 18 verses of Matthew the sixth chapter, we talked about three different things here that we should be doing. The first one is we should be giving. And when we give, it's told how we should give and that should be in secret. It shouldn't be something that we publicize. When we pray-- we're supposed to pray. We're supposed to do that also in secret, not to be seen of men. And when we fast, we're supposed to fast so that we prepare ourselves. Normally we don't go around making a big deal about it so that we don't appear to be righteous, right? We're doing it for the right reasons. I'm going to talk about the last of those three this morning and that is fasting.

Now there is a full disclosure here-- I picked this topic when we had a vacation here recently. We were on a cruise ship and I struck the topic fasting which is pretty ironic in itself if you've ever done that. I came home and the next three nights we're out talking about evangelism, then we had the adults' night out, and a basket dinner, so this was like food saturation week and I'm trying to go through all these examples of fasting. From a personal standpoint, the only time that I had fasted in the manner that is described here was when I was installed as an officer, and Rick had us do a fast as part of it to get our minds around what was going to happen. That's not a part of my life and that I practice, and when I read this, it kind of jumped out at me that I better get on board here. I think God is recommending this, so with that, we're going to go through some examples of fasting in the Old and the New Testaments and then talk a little about implementing this, but what I would like to get from this is for us to think about this some, and then maybe some information sharing because I'll bet some people here are good at it, have done it more and have gained a lot from it, and I just don't know. I think that on all three of these topics that we're not supposed to do in public to be seen of men that we're supposed to share with one another so that we can improve our lives and our practices. I'd like to see that happen. so I would like to hear from some people, and maybe we can open some discussions in this area.

The Old Testament, let's look at that first. We have an example on the Day of Atonement-- that was the command that was given for that day that fasting should occur. Leviticus 23:27: "The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves. . . [which means to fast or in the New King James it says "afflict your souls"] . . . and present an offering made to the Lord." So they're to fast and present an offering to the Lord. As a petition to God. We know David had a child who was very ill and II Samuel 12:16,17 reads: "David therefore pleaded with God for the child. David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. So the elders of his house arose and went to him to raise him up from the ground, but he would not. He did not eat food with them." Later, the child died, and at that point the purpose of his fast was no longer present. He got up and went on about his business.

I'm sure he was still sorrowful, but the fast was over. That concentrated effort which he was trying to influence that decision was done. So as we see on these fasts, there's a particular task that is trying to be accomplished.

Fasting is also for forgiveness. We have an example of when Daniel confessed the sins of Israel. In Daniel 9:3 reads: "So I turned to the Lord and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed, 'O Lord, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands. We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and your laws.'" So he went on a fast and prayed because of their sin. Another good example I see is in the book of Esther. In Esther when the Jews heard that Haman had gotten this command so that all the Jews would be killed and in Esther 4:3: "In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes." So there was a fear that overcame them there, an unknown, something that was about to happen and they didn't know what it was, so there was fasting and weeping. But in Esther 4:16 a plan came in place where Esther was going to go before the king, and then as a group again, they got together, and Esther said, "Go and gather all the Jews who are present in Susa, and fast for me. Neither eat or drink for three days and nights. My maids and I will fast, likewise, and so I will go to the king which is against the law and if I perish, I perish." Esther needed strength for an event that was really going to try her abilities. So we have these different purposes: forgiveness, faced with danger, a command before the Day of Atonement.

We do have an example here-- one more in the Old Testament I could throw in here as an example of fasting incorrectly. If we go to Isaiah 58:3 here, the people are saying: "Why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed? [Isaiah says] Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. [You're saying you're fasting on these days, but you're not doing anything correctly.] Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." So they were fasting incorrectly. Then he tells them how they should fast in the seventh verse. "Is it not to share your food with the hungry, and 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? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard." They are being chastised for fasting incorrectly and for the wrong motives.

Now let's go to the New Testament and as we come to New Testament times, we remember the Pharisees. They made a big deal about how righteous they were. They fasted twice a week, and they talked about the tax collector and the Pharisee says "Oh, I'm glad I'm not like him. I fast twice a week"--so that had become a showy thing. So let's look at some fasting examples in the New Testament. Of course Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days right after his baptism. The spirit led him into the wilderness

for this 40 day fast because he had a lot to prepare for. He was beginning his ministry. So Luke 4:1-2 says: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness being tempted for 40 days by the devil. In those days he ate nothing. Afterward, when it had ended, he was hungry." Then we had the Scripture that was read today that told us how we should fast in Matthew six and 16. I won't reread that but here it says, "when you fast." "When you fast." When you pray, when you give, when you fast-- there are all right together in one chapter. One example of fasting in the New Testament that I want to bring out that is a little bit different is about the man and his epileptic son. This is Matthew 17:15. By the way, if you've got a NIV Bible or a ESV Bible, turn to Matthew 17:21 if you don't know this little trick. But here's a story about the disciples who couldn't get rid of the demon out of this boy and then they finally came to Jesus and he says: "You faithless and perverse generation" and he scolded them for not having the faith to be able to do that. The disciples came to Jesus and said: "why can we not cast it out?" In the 20th verse Jesus said because of your unbelief "for surely I say to you, if you have the faith of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." So if you have an NIV or ESV version of the Bible you don't have a 21st verse. Did you ever notice it goes from verse 20 to 22? That's because when people translated this Bible, my understanding is from Rick's talk is it that they thought fasting was such an important part of their lives they added this verse that says, "however, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" but that is not in the original manuscript. So that holiness of fasting creeps into things, even some of our Bible translations.

Okay, let's look at this as a group now. These verses bring in this one Scripture quoted on the program. Acts 13:1 talks about the sending out of Paul and Barnabas. "In the church that was at Antioch, there were certain prophets and teachers [and they are listed] who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." This was a group work that the church was doing, sending these men out, and as a group they fasted and prayed and sent them out. Acts 14:21a similar situation when they were appointing elders: "They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

A couple of other quick ones here as we're kind of going through and getting a sample from the New Testament. I Corinthians 7:5 talks about coordinating this activity with your spouse. If you're going to participate in fasting, you know, someone that you eat with regularly every day is going to need to know this. They need to know that you're in a period of fasting. Fasting for repentance and change again just like in the Old Testament and the New Testament, Paul during his conversion process did not eat or drink after he was blinded for three days. And here's another one I think is particularly

interesting and that's Cornelius. Cornelius in Acts 10:30 was fasting and praying before his visit from Peter. So it says: " Cornelius said, 'Four days ago I was fasting until this hour. In the ninth hour I prayed in my house and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, Cornelius your prayer has been heard and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.'" Then the gospel was brought to the Gentiles. But what was Cornelius fasting and praying for? You know I don't really know. I would have to say he knew something was happening and didn't know just what it was. So sometimes we can fast and pray for something that we're not exactly sure what it is and be ready to listen and be responsive to the answer. I think that's what happened with Cornelius.

So let's look at then what we've got. In the Old Testament we can fast for an important event, petition for something specific, forgiveness, mourning fear or strength to do a new task that lays ahead of you that you know is daunting. In the New Testament we find similar things--an important event, repentance, drawing closer to God in general, and for guidance and knowledge. We're not sure sometimes what we want , but we're opening ourselves to God to do that. We went through those kind of quick as kind of an example of fasting for different purposes throughout the Bible.

What should we do next? Well, if we're going to practice fasting and I'm not telling you this as an expert. That's why I'm after ideas in some sharing from the brothers and sisters, but here's what we apparently need to go through stepwise.

1. focus on something; know what you're fasting for. It's not just Tuesday, so we're supposed to fast. Prayer and concentration on the spiritual is a good thing any time every day, but fasting seems to be reserved for some particular significant event in our lives or weakness that we might have. So focus on something.
2. Then establish your guidelines--no food and only drink is the most common one that we see here. You know you would have to medically understand the effects that are acceptable for you. Then decide the timeframe for that. We wake up in the morning, have no food until that evening. I think that would be the more common way to do that until after dark that night. Pick your timeframe, maybe a three day fast. I know people that have done three day fasts.
3. Again talk about it with your spouse so they know what you're planning on doing. They may want to join you in that, but they need to support you in that effort that you're doing and not have a nice dinner waiting for you when you get home.
4. Then the other thing I believe because some of these were groups. If it's something that you think affects some more people than just you, then mentioned it to others--I think that can be done here with our brothers and sisters in the group without violating any of the problems that were mentioned in the sixth chapter of Matthew. I'm going to do this, you know, I would like for you to join me if you would like. It is a sacrifice on the part of people to do that so let somebody else know if you think that would be beneficial.
5. Then the actual fast, focus on what the fast is actually for. Humility was the thing that was done incorrectly. Make sure that you're humble and prayer, lots of prayer about your specific topic.

Now when I go through this and read all these examples I wonder why fasting gives you a boost more so than just going to God in prayer. I listed five things. The first thing I believe is it requires a purpose. It forces you to think about what you need to be fasting for-- what is important in your life that you need to be to go through this fasting process? Number two: I think is the key ingredient here. It separates your physical and your spiritual self. We go through this life and we're a chemical processing machine along with the spiritual eternal being all stuck in one place for now. So with fasting, you're basically starving one and putting extra food in the other one. The fasting process is to make you realize that you're two separate people, that your spiritual side and your physical side are different.

Number three: Sacrifice. You have to give up something, so you have to be sincere. You know as a parent when we're raising our children, sometimes our children need something or sometimes our children want something, and we want to give it to them, but we'd like for them to make some kind of a sacrifice. It's not maybe even close to equal what the worth is of the item they want (I'm not talking toys--it can maybe be something else) but we want them to make a gesture to show that they really are sincere about this thing. I think that's a similar thing. Our fasting is a drop in the bucket of our debt to God. But if we can't do that then I think this demonstrates that the sacrifice isn't there for us.

Number four: I think self-control is never bad for us to try to reign in our physical bodies and desires in lieu of advancing ourselves spiritually. So there's a self-control over our bodies that this would bring us stronger within ourselves.

Number five: However long the fast is there's a constant reminder from the time you get up to all during the day that I'm hungry. I have that feeling because there's something I should be concentrating on that reminds you--like the proverbial tie the string around your finger because it feels funny on your hand. Why is that there? you ask. Oh yeah this is for that. This hunger will be with you all day long as a constant reminder to bring you to your thoughts to the direction it needs to be. So fasting is something I'm interested in and want to get better at. Conversation with my brothers and sisters would be good and I think we could talk about it with each other more than we have. If we can get anything out of this --I don't think I've brought any revelations on examples or anything, but let's bring it up and discuss it. Fasting is more than suggestion for us in the Bible. It is an expectation. You can tell by the wording of these verses that we read. It's an expectation for how major an event and how often I don't know the answer to that question, but I think it is worth considering. And that's why I bring these thoughts to you this morning, but whether you choose to do more or not, I Corinthians 10:31 says: "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

If you're here this morning and you haven't accepted Jesus as your Savior, you don't have these tools available to you with the spirit working in you. And if you haven't done that, to God, when God looks at you, He sees sin and disobedience. It's a fact; God can see things that we can't see. He sees sin and He sees disobedience unless you're covered, been buried in baptism and you're covered by the blood of Jesus and the grace that God has to offer. You're not part of the family of God. We want that more than anything in the world for you, so if there's anything the group can do for you this morning, please come forward as we stand and sing . . .

