

Fasting

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 March 2019

Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen.

Amen. So, our sermon series on the disciplines and the responsibilities of the Christian life continues this week with a sermon on the topic of fasting.

Now, I will begin this morning with a bit of a confession. When I think of the disciplines of the Christian life, fasting might be the one that I find the least appealing.

I find it a challenge, which is probably a surprise to absolutely no one. In fact, I happened to find myself snacking on potato chips during part of my prep time for this sermon.

And they were delicious, if you wondered. Does anyone else find fasting a challenge? We are 21st century Americans.

[1:34] We're all-you-can-eat-wing-night kind of people. Fasting is not something that comes easily to us. On Ash Wednesday, when I gave the invitation to the observance of a Holy Lent, I invited us to take on a whole bunch of things.

Fasting was one of them, along with repentance and self-denial. And these things are all connected. More on that in a minute. That call to fasting, though, is, again, something that we find difficult.

We not only find it hard because we really don't want to do it, but also because fasting probably isn't something that we think about all that often. It's tricky, too, because the New Testament never gives us a full how-to manual for fasting.

Jesus says that his disciples will fast, and he gives instructions not to show off when we fast, suggesting that we will fast.

But that's pretty much the extent of it. We're not given a long list of rules about fasting, or even a long list of pointers about fasting. So we might not even really know what fasting is or why we should do it.

[2:58] So I want to talk this morning about the place of fasting in the Christian life and why it matters. First, let's talk about what fasting is.

It is simply abstaining from food, either reducing the amount of food you're eating, or abstaining from food completely, which I have to say I typically would not recommend for an extended period of time.

We also have some biblical examples of people abstaining from drink, but that could be dangerous. I really don't want any of you to end up in the ER with dehydration and tell the doctor that your priest sent you there.

Certainly hasn't been the norm in historic Christian practice. Now, why would we fast? On one level, it seems like a weird thing, doesn't it? Probably seems especially weird if we don't fast regularly.

What is the connection between our faith in Jesus and setting aside a time to avoid chowing down on the Big Mac meal from McDonald's?

[4:04] What's the connection there? Well, before I go into why we fast and what fasting means, I want to talk a minute about what fasting does not mean, because we could undertake the practice of fasting for bad reasons.

What do I mean by that? Well, here are a few examples. We don't fast because there is something inherently valuable about the mere act of making ourselves miserable.

God is not some kind of tyrant who likes to see us torture ourselves. While the Bible is clear that the Christian life will include trials and difficulties, seeking out suffering for the sake of suffering is not what we're aiming for.

Also, we don't fast because we think that we can manipulate God through our fasting. As I said in a recent sermon, we do not manipulate God.

He is not our puppet. Fasting is not about going on hunger strike so that God can see that we're really serious and that he had better step in and give us what we want.

[5:12] It does not work that way. It is not some part of a magical formula to get God to do our bidding. Finally, fasting is not something that we do to earn God's favor.

We could fast until we starve to death and it would never be enough to make us right with God because only the blood of Jesus Christ can do that. There is only one way to have God's favor and that is through faith in Christ.

And if you have faith in Christ, you already have God's favor. If you don't have faith in Christ, fasting will not do anything but make you hungry. On a related front, we don't fast because we're afraid that if we don't fast, God is going to zap us.

So what is fasting about? Why do we do it? There are several reasons and I want us to take a look at some of them this morning. First thing I want to point out is that fasting with the right motivations is an expression of repentance.

We see an example of that in our reading from Joel chapter 2 for this morning. Where we read, Yet even now declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.

[6:36] And rend your heart and not your garments. So here we see fasting included with repentance, included with weeping, included with mourning.

When we fast, if we're doing it with the right motivations, we are mourning and grieving over our sin. That is not because we're trying to torture ourselves.

It's not because we're trying to win God's favor or go on a hunger strike. It is because, if we know Jesus, we will be grieved by our sin.

And fasting is an appropriate biblical expression of grief and sorrow over sin. Now something of an aside, I cannot help but wonder if in our culture, we think so little of fasting because we think so little of repentance.

I listen to so many popular preachers. I see so much of what is being published under the banner of Christian publishers. And I have to admit that in the contemporary scene, I see very little emphasis on repentance.

[7:52] I see a lot of stuff that makes people feel good. I see a lot of affirmation. But I see very little of the honest truth that without repentance, we will perish in our sins.

I see very little about the godly grief and conviction that comes with knowing that we have sinned against God. The kind of godly sorrow that leads to repentance.

Fasting, the discomfort and the inconvenience of the whole thing, reminds us that the proper response to sin is repentance. If it's an expression of repentance, of course it's going to be uncomfortable.

Repentance is uncomfortable, isn't it? So, fasting is an expression of repentance and of sorrow over sin.

What else can we say about our reasons for fasting? The next reason for fasting is somewhat related to the first. When we fast, it is a sign that we are humbly acknowledging our need before God.

[9:06] Think about the Joel reading that we read just a minute ago. In this passage, God is instructing his people to fast and to leave, to repent, to acknowledge that they need God's mercy.

When we fast, if we are doing it the right way, that is what we are doing. We are acknowledging that we need God's mercy and grace.

We are acknowledging that we depend on him for absolutely everything that we need. We are reminded that we are so frail that our bodies cannot withstand hunger.

And that as much as we think we need food, and we do, obviously, we need the mercy of the Lord even more. So fasting is a sign of dependence on the Lord, and it is an expression of grief and mourning over sin and an expression of repentance.

Next, fasting is also training for us. Through fasting, we learn something about self-denial.

[10:22] We learn not to cave to the impulse to stuff our faces with Cheetos just because we want to. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with eating Cheetos.

We learn not to cave to that impulse so that when we are tempted to sin, we have some practice and self-control. Look at what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air.

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified. Now there is a lot to unpack in these few short verses.

[11:27] I could probably preach a whole sermon series on this passage. But I want us to notice what Paul says. He disciplines his body. There are a lot of opinions about what Paul means here.

I do not think that he is talking about whipping ourselves until we bleed. I do not think he has in mind something like the monks in Monty Python and the Holy Grail who walk around chanting and hitting themselves in the face.

Someone got that reference. Good. You know, I remember as a young and enthusiastic seminarian, I told my wife that I wanted to start sleeping on the floor at night as a practice of self-denial.

She rightly told me that I was being ridiculous. I do not think that sort of thing is what Paul had in mind. But he clearly does mean that by God's grace, he trains in self-control and in self-denial so that he is not at the mercy of his impulses.

He realizes that if we have the attitude that we can be Christians and still live in any way that we want without self-denial and without self-control, it is an indication that our faith in Jesus is not genuine.

[12:49] I am not at all saying that if we don't fast, and it's not entirely clear that Paul is talking specifically about fasting in this passage, not saying that if we don't fast that our faith in Jesus isn't genuine.

What I am saying is that if we know Jesus, we will want to exercise self-control because we will want to avoid falling into patterns of behavior that are dishonoring to him.

Fasting can be a helpful tool in our toolkit when it comes to the project of training to discipline our bodies and to keep them under control. Training in self-control and self-denial, Paul is saying, is part of the life of the disciple of Jesus.

We need to realize the same thing, and fasting can be a very helpful training tool. You might be thinking right about now, okay, I'm convinced fasting is a good idea.

How do I do it? Well, it's a good thing you ask. Before I transition into this portion of my sermon, I do want to be really clear. What I am about to say to you is not law.

[14:05] It is not a commandment from God. It's not a sin. If you don't follow the pattern, I'm going to suggest. Jesus had something to say about religious leaders who burden people with rules that are not found in Scripture, so I'm not going to do that.

What I am saying is that fasting is a gift from God to help us grow as disciples of Jesus, and I have some suggestions for how we might do that. Lent provides a good opportunity for fasting.

It's intended to be a season of fasting. Now, if you have fasted before, I'm going to assume that you already know what you're doing.

If you have not fasted before, here is what I would recommend. Start slow. Also, if you have a medical condition that would cause fasting to be detrimental to your health, don't fast.

If you're elderly and fasting would be detrimental to your health, don't fast. It does not make you any less a disciple of Jesus. Now, by tradition, which as Anglicans we think is helpful because we don't always feel that we need to reinvent the wheel, Wednesdays and Fridays, especially during Lent, are observed as fast days.

[15:21] You might try cutting down on some of your food intake on one or both of those days. If that's going well, you might consider cutting out all food during the day on Good Friday.

That is just a suggestion, but if you've never fasted before, I would encourage you to try it, and I would encourage you to start slow. Now, as I close, I want to point out that one of the reasons that fasting is so valuable to us is that it points beyond itself to essential gospel truths and realities of the Christian life.

It points to repentance and sorrow over sin. We might not all fast. Some of us might be unable to fast, but all of us need to be convicted of our sin and driven to repentance because there is no such thing as salvation without repentance.

Fasting also points beyond itself to the necessity of self-denial. What did Jesus say in the gospel passage we read for this morning?

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. He goes on to say, Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

[16 : 47] Let's not be deceived, brothers and sisters. Christian discipleship requires self-renunciation and self-denial. It requires taking up our cross and following Jesus.

It requires acknowledging that Jesus is in charge of our lives and we are not. We cannot have Jesus as just one small part of our lives.

We either have him as Lord and ruler of our lives or we do not have him at all. So, my last point for this morning, fasting points beyond itself to the absolute necessity of humble reliance on God.

I mean, of course, we should remember to rely on God. Salvation itself, of course, is something that God gives us, not something that we earn. That's true of every good gift we receive from God. even the most recent breath that we have taken. And this is also true even when we're talking about the demands of discipleship.

[17 : 58] We aren't disciples so that if we perform well enough, we can be saved. We are disciples because we have been saved by grace alone through the death and resurrection of God's only Son, Jesus Christ.

Humble reliance on God's mercy which fasting is an expression of and which fasting points to is the point I want to leave us with this morning because it is so important.

Do you know God's mercy in Jesus? Have you repented of your sins and put your trust in Christ as Savior? The call goes out to all of us today to turn from our sins and put our trust in Christ.

This morning, those of us who already know Jesus might be realizing, especially after we've heard those hard words from Jesus, that we have fallen short in the call to self-control and self-denial, the calling to take up our crosses as disciples of Jesus.

And if that is so, we need to take the opportunity provided to confess our sins, what we have done and failed to do, and to receive the assurance that we have in the cross of Christ, the assurance of forgiveness.

[19 : 23] So fasting is a useful tool. I recommend that we use it. I want to close with a reminder that one of the most useful things about it is that it points to essential truths.

The necessity of repentance, reliance on God's mercy alone and Christ alone, and the call to be disciples of Jesus who deny ourselves, take up our crosses, renounce all that we have, and follow Him.

By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, may we do just that to the glory of His holy name. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.