

Prayer and Fasting

Dr. Byron S. Chesney, Highland Baptist Church, Wednesday evening, 08/15/2018

†Matthew 17:14-21

- 14 And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a *certain man*, kneeling down to him, and saying,
15 Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.
16 And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.
17 Then Jesus answered and said, *O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.*
18 And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.
19 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?
20 And Jesus said unto them, *Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*
21 *Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.*

As you know, this past Sunday I made a call for the Church to voluntarily pray and fast for our upcoming Revival services which will be held October 14-17th. Which is only 59 days away. The ask is that everyone fast and pray each Monday between now and then. We had our first Monday 2 days ago so there are 8 more Mondays left between now and our Revival.

After I had made the call for fasting, I realized as your pastor, I had never really preached much on fasting. I ask for your forgiveness for that. I have neglected a very important Bible doctrine.

So, after praying and seeking the Lord's will, tonight I am going to be talking about prayer and fasting. I think this may help some that are not sure how to go about Biblical fasting.

In our opening text we find the familiar story of a man that brought his demon possessed son to the disciples in order to be healed. They were not able to heal the boy. Of course, Jesus had no problem healing him and afterwards his disciples came up to him and asked him why they couldn't heal him?

I want you to notice 4 things that Jesus told them was the reason they could not heal the boy:

1. Verse 20 he told them because of their unbelief.
2. Verse 20 he essentially told them they lacked enough faith.
3. Verse 21 he told them it required prayer.
4. Verse 21 he told them it required fasting.

So, all 4 of those ingredients are needed. We tend to overlook what he said about "belief and faith" How many times have you prayed about something and the whole time you don't believe that prayer will be answered? Am I the only one? I've done it. A situation looks so bad or has gone on for so long and after praying so many times about it you come to the point where you are just praying out of routine but not really believing the prayer will be answered.

It is obvious in this story that the disciples didn't even believe they would be able to heal the boy. They had no confidence because they didn't have enough faith in the power of God to be able to do it.

You may wonder why the disciples should expect to have such powers? Well, this is what it says 7 chapters before this one: **Matthew 10:5-8** *These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: 6 But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. 8 Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.*

So, the disciples should have been able to heal this boy but they were being hindered by their unbelief, their lack of faith, and obviously their lack of prayer and fasting.

Fasting – I'm not sure when it happened, but somewhere over the past 2,000 years the doctrine of fasting has been neglected to a point to where it is almost non-existent. There is historical evidence that **the 1st Century Church fasted 2 times a week – on Wednesdays and Fridays**, they did this at least up until 315 AD.

What is fasting?

The word "**fast**" comes from a Greek word which means: "**to abstain from food.**" That is what fasting is – abstaining from food. When you go to sleep at night you fast for how ever many hours you are sleeping but when you wake up and eat Breakfast – which is **Break – Fast**, you are **breaking your fast** from the night before.

These days you may hear some preachers bringing messages on fasting but they usually end up diluting the meaning and make such statements as: "**Well, you know, fasting is abstaining from anything, not just food. It could be abstaining from Television or the Internet, or anything else that brings you pleasure.**" They might even use the example of Daniel after he was taken into Babylonian captivity how he refused to eat of the King's meat or drink the wine. They will state that Daniel was fasting from foods that would bring him pleasure. So, therefore we ourselves could fast from chocolate or soft drinks or juicy steaks, or **Heaven forbid FRIED CHICKEN! --**

While that sounds real Spiritual and all, and there's not anything wrong with doing that, that is not true Biblical fasting. **Biblical fasting is abstaining from food.**

We see the proper example of fasting in the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The Bible says: **Matthew 4:1-2** *Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.* - Notice it says that Jesus *was afterward an hungred*, but it did not say **he thirsted**. And, the devil did not tempt him with water, but with bread. Also, the Gospel of Luke just says **Luke 4:2b**... *And in those days he did eat nothing.* - So, most likely Jesus only abstained from food and not water.

You will also find examples of fasting of both food and water such as in **Ezra 10:6** *Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.*

The reason for Ezra's not eating or drinking was because he was mourning the sins of the people that had returned from Babylonian captivity because they were still sinning against the LORD and he was sick over it, so he abstained from food and water in that case, however, it does not specifically state he was fasting – it's possible he was just so sick over it that he couldn't eat or drink.

We do find a specific mention of fasting from Ezra earlier in that Book in **Ezra 8:21-23** Then I **proclaimed a fast** there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. 22 For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God *is* upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath *is* against all them that forsake him. 23 **So we fasted and besought our God** for this: and he was intreated of us.

That is a great Biblical example of fasting and why they were fasting. They were fasting because they were seeking help and protection from the LORD.

Wrong reasons to Fast: There are also examples for the WRONG way to fast. We see that in the parable that Jesus gave in the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 18:9-14 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. 12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. 13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as *his* eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

The Pharisee boasted of fasting "**twice in the week.**" Now, fasting was not a commandment, it was just Jewish tradition. They fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, which were synagogue days. They were not under obligation to fast, however, we see in the case of the Pharisee that he did it as part of his religious routine. And, that's all it was, a religious routine. It made him feel holier and mightier than common folks, even more so than this low-down dirty Publican.

The Pharisee's fasting was not pleasing to God because they only did it to boast about their religiosity, they wanted to be seen by men for their piety.

Jesus himself warns against this kind of fasting over in the Gospel of **Matthew 6:16-18:** **Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.**

When Jesus says that those hypocrites "**have their reward,**" he is either referring to the reward of men, the applause of men, the attention of men, or he is referring to their reward of punishment from God for their phony religious act.

Are we commanded to fast? The question that everyone wants to know is, are we, as Christians, commanded to fast? **The short answer is NO.** There is not a commandment in the Word of God for Christians to fast.

There has only been one commandment from the Law of God for fasting and it was given to the Jews in the Levitical Law concerning the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 16:29-31 And *this* shall be a statute for ever unto you: *that* in the seventh month, on the tenth *day* of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, *whether it be* one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: 30 For on that day shall *the priest* make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, *that ye* may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. 31 It *shall be* a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever.

Here the word "**fast**" is not used but that phrase "**afflict your souls,**" is indicating fasting. Of course, Christians are not bound by the Levitical Law and the Jews no longer are either for that matter.

There were also 4 other fasts added much later to the Jews calendar upon the return of the Captives from Babylon. We find that mentioned in **Zechariah 8:19** Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth *month*, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace.

But, having said that, it is obvious from reading God's Word that **He assumes that we will be fasting.** Look at those verses again that we read while ago in **Matthew 6:16-18:** **Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.**

Jesus said "**when ye fast,**" and "**when thou fastest**" not "**if ye fast.**" It's just a given that Christians fast.

What is our motivation for fasting? Fasting is not a way of gaining favor from God or trying to make him change his mind about something, fasting is for the individual. Our motivation for fasting is to bring us closer to God. I don't want you to fast because I asked you to. You should not fast out of obligation. You fast because you have a sincere desire to fast. Fasting is more of a Spiritual act than a physical act.

When we fast, we find that we become more vulnerable, we are denying ourselves of something that brings us comfort and pleasure and replacing it with **our passion for the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Therefore, every time your stomach growls instead of thinking "oh I'm starving to death, this is excruciating, this is dumb, this isn't going to work," **our thoughts should go immediately to our passion, the Lord Jesus.** Our mind should not be on the next time we get to eat but it should be on the reason we are praying and fasting.

- We fast because we are hungry for God's Word.
- We fast because we long for God's presence in our lives and in our Church.
- We fast because we are looking for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- We fast because we long for Jesus more than we long for food.

These 9 Monday's of prayer and fasting are centered upon seeking revival for our Church. Real revival, not something worked up or contrived. We are NOT praying that the LORD fills the Church up or that we have a huge attendance. We are praying that the LORD truly sends revival in our individual hearts so that we can glorify Him.

Fasting should always be accompanied by prayer and obedience. It's more than just abstaining from food. You must be living a life of obedience when fasting otherwise what good is it doing?

The practice of fasting has always been something that **Churches do when seeking God's direction**. A great example of this is in the Book of Acts when the Church at Antioch was seeking for the Lord's direction on sending missionaries out: **Acts 13:1-3** Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord, **and fasted**, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. 3 And **when they had fasted and prayed**, and laid *their hands on them*, they sent *them away*.

Desperate situations:

We find instances of fasting given throughout the Scriptures in times when God's people were in dire situations. Such as you find in in the example of King Jehoshaphat over in **2 Chronicles 20:3-4** And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask *help* of the LORD: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

If you know that story, they were surrounded by their enemies and there didn't appear to be any way out. So, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout ALL of Judah and God's people all came out and fasted and prayed for the LORD to help them and the LORD did help them. We see that further down in **2 Chronicles 20:14-15** Then upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, came the Spirit of the LORD in the midst of the congregation; 15 And he said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the LORD unto you, **Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's.**

While we may not be surrounded by the Moabites or the Ammonites, we are certainly surrounded by **principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.** -That is why I called for the 9 Monday's of fasting for Revival. I feel that we are in a desperate situation in this land.

We fast because we are longing to be with Jesus. There was a time when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him why his disciples did not fast. Look at it in **Matthew 9:14-15** Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, **Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?** 15 And Jesus said unto them, **Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.**

The disciples of John and the Pharisees fasted 2-times a week. But the disciples of Jesus did not practice regular days of fasting. Jesus told them that they didn't fast

because he was there among them but that they would fast after he went away. He used the comparison of those that help the bridegroom. Since fasting was usually associated with mourning, it would be inappropriate for the helpers of the bridegroom to mourn while he was there among them. While he was with them it was a time of rejoicing and celebrating – but after he went away, then it would be appropriate to fast and mourn.

We fast because the Lord has gone away and we are expecting His return. One of these days He will return and there will be no need for fasting.

How do we fast?

So, now that we know what the Bible says about fasting, the question everyone wants to know is – how do we fast?

1. The most important thing I want to remind you of is this – only fast if you have a desire to fast.
 - a. While I made an appeal for a Church wide fasting on Mondays, you are not obligated to do it. I only want you to do it if you are sincere about seeking God's face for Revival.
 - b. You aren't doing it to please me or to impress anyone. If you fast, do it because you want to fast.
2. If you decide to fast, accept it and don't complain about it. You are going to get hungry and if you are like me you usually get cranky when you are hungry. But instead of complaining or thinking about how hungry you are, use those hunger pangs as a reminder of why you are fasting in the first place and hand it over to the Lord. When your stomach growls just say – Thank you LORD!
3. Don't endanger your health. If you need food to eat with your medicines then by all means eat something so you don't get sick.
 - a. Don't fast to the point you are unable to function.
4. Make sure you drink plenty of liquid to keep hydrated.
 - a. A pure fast is usually water only but you decide for yourself if you want to drink juices or coffee or tea.
5. Chew some gum if it would help you. You are going to have bad breath if you don't eat, the gum will help you from killing everyone around you.
6. Don't let other people judge your fasting. Some may say "you are doing it wrong," or "you aren't really fasting if you drink coffee and not plain water." Who are they to say is the right way to fast? It is your fasting not theirs.
7. Don't go around bragging about your fasting or appearing like you are about to die because you are so hungry. We don't want to be like the Pharisees with their **"sad countenances,"** and **"disfigured faces."**
8. Don't forget to pray. Fasting accomplishes nothing if you aren't praying. The two go hand in hand.
9. Be looking for a spiritual change in your life. Fasting will draw you closer to God and cause you to see things within your own self that needs to be improved upon.
10. When your fast is over, thank the Lord for all of the blessings that he has given you and for all the times he has allowed you to have food and pleasure in life.

† All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version