

“When You Fast” Delivered 09-02-18 by Pastor Ed Terry
Isaiah 58: 1 – 14; Acts 13: 1 – 3; Matthew 9: 14 – 17; **Matthew 6:16 – 18 (Sermon)**

We are all grieving over the violence and the killings in Cameroon.

As individuals we have all been praying for an end to the violence and killings in Cameroon.

Our church held Special Prayer Services on July 1st and August 5th and asked God to intervene and to bring peace to Cameroon.

Your Session decided to designate September 29 as a day of prayer and fasting to ask God to bring peace in Cameroon because the only way to have peace in Cameroon is for Almighty God to intervene.

So to help us to properly prepare for a Day of Prayer and Fasting on September 29th we will look at the discipline of fasting this morning.

I invite you to take out your bulletin insert and follow along.

We do not hear much about fasting in the church today.

So what does the Bible say about fasting?

In the Old Testament fasting was usually a sign of repentance and was accompanied with sackcloth, ashes, and ceremonies of mourning.

Fasting accompanied by prayer was also used in a time of crisis or in time of a great need for The Lord’s help.

There are many examples of fasting in the Old Testament.

Esther, Daniel, Samuel, Elijah, David, and Moses all fasted when they wanted God’s forgiveness, God’s guidance, God’s deliverance, and /or God’s healing.

However the only fast commanded in The Old Testament was on the Day of Atonement.

As you know, the Day of Atonement was an annual feast where The High Priest made a blood sacrifice for all the sins of the children of Israel.

You can read about The Day of Atonement in the 16th chapter of Leviticus.

All of the sacrifices and ritual on The Day of Atonement is a picture of and points to the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world.

Remember Hebrews 9:22 tells us, **“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”**

In the New Testament there are several references to fasting, which tell us fasts were customary for Jews desiring to lead a specifically religious life.

Fasting has always been a practice in the Christian church. Acts 13:1-3 tells how the church at Antioch fasted and prayed before commissioning Paul and Barnabas and John Mark as missionaries.

Acts 14:23 speaks of appointing Elders in the church with prayer and fasting.

In Luke 2:36, we are told of the prophetess Anna, who was an eighty-four year old widow.

“She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day”

However we find only four indisputable references to voluntary fasting for religious purposes.

Two are by our Lord Jesus in the gospels and two in the Acts of the Apostles.

If you remember in our text from Matthew Jesus said, ***“When you fast...”***

Here Jesus is implying that His disciples will choose to fast.

Jesus practiced fasting but Jesus did not command fasting.

While fasting is not commanded since Jesus practiced fasting and Jesus implied that His disciples would fast, we need to dig a little deeper.

We need to look at Jesus’ words in our text.

First what is fasting?

Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from any physical pleasure for a specific period of time.

However most people associate fasting with abstaining from food and / or drink for a specific period of time.

Since fasting is choosing to give up a physical pleasure a fast could be giving up watching television or talking on your cell phone for a specified time if that time was used for prayer and studying your Bible.

Fasting is not something Christians have to do; fasting is something Christians choose to do.

I hope you noticed in our scripture lessons that fasting was always accompanied with prayer.

Also in Matthew 6 Jesus told us that fasting is to be a joyful act of worship.

There are different types of fasts.

There is the total fast.

When Jesus began His ministry Jesus fasted without food or water for 40 days.

Next, there is a partial fast.

This could mean skipping one meal a day for several days.

Or it could be no food, but liquids for a day or two.

The important thing to remember is a fast is not just denying yourself.

But rather a fast is replacing physical food with spiritual food.

Fasting is using the time previously used to prepare and to eat a meal to pray and for Bible study.

Remember Jesus said, ***“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*** (Matthew 4:4)

Let’s be crystal clear. Fasting is not dieting.

Fasting is not just abstinence.

Fasting is an act of worship and fasting is always accompanied by prayer, reading The Bible, and spending quality time with The Lord.

In 1st Corinthians 8:8 Paul says, ***“But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”***

The purpose of fasting is denying yourself of any physical pleasure for spiritual gain.

Fasting is giving up something to gain something better.

Fasting is a discipline in order to recapture our hunger for God.

In effect fasting says, *“God, I am forgoing a physical pleasure to be in your presence.”*

Fasting says, *“Lord, spiritual food is more important to me than physical food.”*

Fasting expresses a passion to know The Lord, to spend time with The Lord, and / or to know The Lord’s will for your life.

Fasting is something strictly between you and God.

Fasting is not something we do to be saved.

Fasting is something you choose to do because you are saved.

Next let’s look at the benefits of fasting.

In verse 18 of our text Jesus said, ***“Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”***

When fasting is done for the right reasons and when fasting is done the way Jesus taught, God will reward you!

God will reward us with His will, His presence, His power, and / or His provisions.

I believe this is true because fasting shows our desire to get closer to The Lord.

Fasting humbles us and reminds us of our dependence upon God. Fasting reminds us that every good and perfect gift comes from God.

Fasting takes us out of our daily routine so we can focus on seeking The Lord.

You see when we see ourselves as God sees us God can change us.

Fasting does not change God; fasting changes us.

When we get close to God great things will happen in our lives.

In verses 8 - 12 of our lesson from Isaiah God promises that when fasting is done for the right reasons and is accompanied by righteous living we will have a credible witness, The Lord will answer our cry for help, we will experience healing, The Lord will protect us, guide us, and provide for all of our needs.

These are certainly great benefits and we can count on receiving them because God is faithful in delivering His promises!

However, we must never forget God plainly said unless you are living a godly life your fasting will be of no benefit.

This is also crystal clear in our lesson from Isaiah.

In verses 6 and 7 God specifically talks about the sins of exploiting other people, quarreling, fighting, not sharing food, clothing and shelter with those in need.

You see to get the benefits of fasting God promised fasting must be accompanied by righteous living.

Next let's look at some potential dangers of fasting.

Again in our lesson from Isaiah we saw God rebukes Israel for fasting incorrectly.

Israel was attempting to manipulate God with their fasting.

Israel was living a life of sin but then they would fast in an attempt to get the things they wanted from God.

When Israel's fasting did not produce the desired results, the people got mad with God and complained that God did not notice their fasting.

So, if we fast knowing we have sin in our lives, we are defeating the whole purpose of fasting.

Fasting does not to change God!

Fasting is done to change our attitude and to change our circumstances.

In our lesson from Isaiah 58 we see that The Israelites wanted the blessings of God, they were not interested in allowing God to change their heart, their attitude & their actions.

Fasting will not get God's stamp of approval on our plans.

Fasting does not produce a blank check from God.

When we fast to discern God's will we must be prepared to accept the answer as God's will.

Next, we need to make sure our fasting is not done to impress the people around us nor do we fast to make us look pious.

Jesus warned us about this in our lesson from Matthew.

You see fasting can make us prideful.

In Luke 18 we can read about the Pharisee who bragged about his fasting and tithing.

If we fast no one is to know we are fasting.

Fasting is to be between the person and God.

Fasting can also become legalistic if we just go through the motions.

Remember fasting is not commanded; fasting is totally voluntary.

We fast to recapture our hunger for The Lord.

Fasting by abstaining from food should not be done by people with certain medical problems.

So you if you have any questions about your health you should check with your doctor before beginning a fast.

Fasting in of itself has no spiritual significance.

So, in order for a fast to be effective the fast must always include a time of repentance, a time of concentrated praying, and a time of serious Bible study.

You see when properly done, fasting gives us more time for prayer and Bible study.

Jesus said fasting is to be strictly between you and God.

So no one else is to know you are fasting.

Remember Jesus told His disciples that fasting is to be a joyful act of worship.

Remember God promises spiritual blessings to all who are living a righteous life, to all who are fasting for the right reasons, and are fasting in accordance with God's instruction.

The question that always comes up is should Christians fast?

Or should I fast?

I can not answer that for you because the answer is that fasting is an individual choice.

You need to pray about it.

However, I will say this.

Our life on this earth is a time of preparation.

As Christians we are preparing to spend eternity in heaven with our creator God.

Our life on this earth is designed as a time to know, to love, to trust, to enjoy, and to depend upon The Lord Jesus Christ.

Fasting and prayer are a means to help us understand God's perspective on situations.

Fasting, prayer, and Bible study help us to turn our focus away from worldly things to spiritual things.

Fasting helps us set aside carnal hindrances so we can receive strength and blessings.

Fasting is done to strengthen our relationship with The Lord. Fasting is not intended to punish the flesh but is done to focus on God.

And fasting is not just giving up food or any other physical pleasure.

Christian fasting is a way of living and thinking.

So if fasting is done for the right reason of getting closer to God fasting is a good way to accomplish your goal.

AMEN