

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Fasting Without Hypocrisy, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18

Code: 2231

Let's bow together in prayer as we come to the word. Father, we thank You for the fact that You want to do that. To make us more like You each day. We thank You for the fact that You not only want to, but You're able to. By Your great power to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. Use the word this morning in a small way to help in that shaping process to push us a little more in the direction of conformity to Yourself. In Christ's name, Amen.

Take your Bible, if you will, and turn with me to Matthew Chapter 6 and this morning I want to begin a study of verses 16-18; Matthew Chapter 6, verse 16-18. If you've been with us, you know that this means we are skipping verses 9-15. That is the passage of Scripture known commonly as the Lord's prayer. And the reason I am skipping it is only very temporary. In this particular Chapter, Jesus is confronting hypocritical religion. He picks out three illustrations; the giving of the Pharisees was hypocritical. That's in the first part of the Chapter. The praying of the Pharisees was hypocritical. And finally, the fasting that they did was also hypocritical.

In verse 2, He says, "When you do your alms giving, do not sound a trumpet like the hypocrites." In verse 5, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites." And in verse 16, "When you fast be not as the hypocrites." So these are the three illustrations of hypocritical religion our Lord gives. Now when He gets in to the subject of prayer, there is a wonderful introduction of this section on the Lord's prayer. But because we want to deal with it in such detail taking it statement by statement, we're going to deal with the three illustrations first and then back up and spend a rather lengthy time studying the Lord's prayer. So we'll be getting to that in a couple of weeks. I just wanted you not to be fearful that we had missed one of the great portions of the word of God.

It is in order that we can concentrate on it and not lose our perspective of the whole section that we're taking fasting now and we'll come back to that. Look with me after verse 16 and follow in your Bible as I read. "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, but thou when thou fastest, anoint thine head and wash thy face that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father who is in secret and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee."

Now, this obviously as the other two is a corrective to hypocritical fasting. The Pharisees and the scribes and the Jews were involved in many, many fasts. Very common part of their religious system. But it needed a corrective. It needed to be corrected. It needed to be set right. Before, however, we

can understand the corrective, we must understand what fasting is all about. He simply assumes in saying when ye fast, the knowledge and the occasions of fasting. But fasting in our society, that is in the church of Jesus Christ is a little understood factor of religious or spiritual experience.

Now fasting is a very popular phenomenon today, but that is not to be confused with what the Bible is teaching us about fasting. So let's approach our study of this text this morning by backing up from the text to give you a frame of reference relative to fasting. And I have been doing a lot of reading on this in the last week. I couldn't count all the things I've read. I've probably gone through about 20 books. And the last three or four days I've been reading secular books on fasting and then yesterday finished a couple of books written from a spiritual viewpoint so that I could get the whole picture.

Let me see if I can help you to get an understanding of this. Now, I'm very much aware of the fact that we all like food and I like it too. I'm not any different than anybody else. I am also very much aware of the fact that God in a wonderful way permits that. I mean, let's face it, God has provided such an infinite variety of tastes and such an infinite capacity in the part of the tongue to enjoy those tastes that He must have known what He was getting us into. There's no question about it in my mind. God wanted us to have the fullness of enjoying all there is to enjoy in eating. Now basically, I think that's true in every kind of thing. I think God has made a world like this world because He wanted us to enjoy color, don't you?

I mean, everything could be khaki. The whole world could be khaki. And then khaki wouldn't be in. There would need to be some variety. The whole world...I mean, it's tremendous. You know, somebody was talking the other day, it's kind of a earthy illustration, but they said, you know, think about kissing the person you love. Isn't it wonderful that God invented that? He could have just had us exchange ear wax. But I mean there are a lot of alternatives, there are a lot of alternatives...I'm just watching Clayton down here. I think I've lost him for the rest of the...there are a lot of alternatives to what God has very graciously given us. When it comes to food, I think God is very much aware of the fact that there is variety. And I think that's the way He intended it. We're not like automobiles. We don't just take gasoline. We're different.

We're not even like animals who can live on a prescribed diet of the same thing all the time and so forth. Although some human beings in this world are not so fortunate as to have the variety that we have in our country. But God has made this for us. In Genesis 1:30 it says, "To every beast of the earth and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for food."

It's all here for us. And after the flood, God said "every moving thing that liveth shall be food for you even as the green herb have I given you all things." All things from the vegetables and the fruits to the meats and nuts, everything that God has provided in this world to make eating an enjoyable thing. Now God knew we had to eat and we would eat. We'll eat anything to survive; anything. But God

gave us the wonder of taste so that life would be richer and more blessed just in eating. So it's a good gift from God just in its sustenance value.

It's nourishing, filled with the things we need. And also in its enjoyment element, it's a good gift from God. It's also a good gift from God because it is the source of fellowship. The mealtime is when all of those independent activities stop and we come together and we enjoy each other and it's always been that way. When God and two angels visited Abraham, they dined together. All through the Old Testament the people of God came together and dined and families still find a resource of love and fellowship and discussion and understanding when they come together to eat. The body of Christ has done that. They have broken bread since the church was born on the day of Pentecost from house to house and we continue to enjoy that fellowship even today. Having breakfast or lunch or dinner with other folks with whom we love.

Jesus in John 21 made breakfast and then said to His beloved disciples, "come and dine." In Revelation 3:20, He stands at the door knocking and wants us to open that He may come in and sup with us; have supper with us and us with Him. Food then provides sustenance. It provides enjoyment. It provides fellowship. And I even think that food provides a certain amount of worship. I don't know about you, but our house we're trying to be very conscious of every meal that we eat is a gift from God. The Lord's prayer say "Give us this day our," what, "our daily bread."

It is simply the constant recognition that the source of all our sustenance is God Himself who grants to us the food that we eat. And that's why 1 Timothy says what it says in Chapter 4, and it's a wonderful verse. 1 Timothy 4, verse 3 says, "Forbidding to marry," talking about the teachers and so forth. It says, "foods which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving by them who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving."

God has created all this food and because it's good for sustenance and because it's good for enjoyment and because it's great for fellowship and because it's a source of worship, it is to be received with thanksgiving. We are to be grateful to God for such a wonderful provision. Now I just want to say that to you to let you know that it's okay to eat and it's okay to enjoy eating. You don't have to eat mush all your life and think you're being spiritual. God has created this for us to enjoy. And obviously you need to have some common sense about putting things in your body that are unhealthy. But nonetheless, we have the right to enjoy fully the provision that God has given us.

You know, the rabbis had an interesting statement. Some of them reacted against fasting and they said, "When you get to heaven and to the judgment seat, you will have to answer to God for every good thing that you didn't eat." Now that's one way to look at it folks. The next time you go out for dinner and you say oh my, I'll have one of each. I certainly don't want to have to answer in the judgment for not eating some good thing that God created. Now that's the other extreme.

But some of the rabbis went to that end. Now others went to the extreme of not eating anything and fasting and that was their pious pretense. But no matter what extreme you were on, somebody developed the theology to accommodate it. If you gorged yourself and ate everything, that was good because when you got to the judgment day you could say here I am Lord, I stand in need of nothing and I have tasted all of Your creation. On the other hand, there were the pious ones who said that they fasted and they made sure everybody knew they had fasted so they'd look holy and righteous and spiritual because of their abstinence. And these are the extremities to which Jesus applies the corrective in Matthew Chapter 6.

Now I want you to understand that food is good and food is from God and food is fine. But that being as it may, there is still a place for fasting in our lives. Now you may be aware of that because you may have been reading the things that are being said and written today about fasting. Fasting is a very popular phenomenon. There's a lot of it going on today. Many people are fasting. There are fasting diets where you don't eat anything. You go days and days and weeks and weeks without eating and they prescribe certain pills you take. You have to get your potassium or whatever and you have to drink, you know, volumes and volumes of water in order that your body can put off those toxics that are there.

So there are lots of people talking about fasting. In fact, I went to the bookstore, I was in San Jose the other day, and I thought I'm going to get the world's perspective on this. So I walked in a bookstore and I said, "Where's the fasting section?" And whenever you say that, they always look at you, you know. Just check you out to see if you're going there as a student or as somebody who's desperate. So I said, "Where's the fasting section?" The lady kind of looked at me for a moment. She said, "Oh it's over there." And I walked over and there were just a lot of books on fasting.

All different angles on it. The ones that seem to be the best sellers I found out are Fasting, The Super Diet, by Shirley Ross. And then there's Fasting As A Way Of Life, and then there's Fasting The Ultimate Diet written by a medical doctor named Allan Cott. And in the book, this is what he guarantees that fasting will do for you. Now, just listen to this. "Weight loss," that's the first thing he guarantees. Now, the very fact...the very...why are you laughing? The very fact that he said that first shows you what people are looking to fasting to accomplish.

All right, then he said, feeling better physically and mentally, looking and feeling younger, saving money. Obviously, if you don't food, you're going to save money. Resting your system, cleaning out the body, lowering your blood pressure, lowering your cholesterol level, cutting down on smoking, drinking, and drugs, relieving tension, sleeping better, digesting better, feeling euphoric, sharpening your senses, quickening your mental processes, boosting your self-esteem, gaining control of yourself, sharing with those who are hungry and even receiving spiritual revelations.

Now listen, that's an amazing thing if it can give you all that. Everything from dropping some pounds to getting spiritual revelations through fasting. And then the book went on to give testimony after testimony of how people said they got all these things from fasting. Fasting's been around a long time. Do you know that many of the pagans used to believe that demons entered the body through food and when they felt a special onslaught of demons they stopped eating so they wouldn't be taking any demons because they thought they came in through the mouth?

In eastern mysticism, the mystics were very, very involved in embracing fasting. Yogis were very committed to fasting as a source of receiving mystical revelations. The disciples of Buddha fasts. Frankly Buddha doesn't look like he ever got anywhere near a fast, but his disciples fast and the disciples of Buddha believed that you induce a vision situation when you fast. There are many, many in the history of the world that have given themselves to fasting. But let me say this people, be that as it may what is physical is not spiritual and the Bible never presents any place in the entire Scripture fasting for physical reasons. Never.

The only even remote hint that that could be consider is in Isaiah 58 which we'll get to next week where the would health is used, but in my judgment, it has reference to a spiritual wholeness, not a physical one. The Bible never deals with fasting on a physical level. Fasting, in order to get the body beautiful, is not the issue. And frankly that's why people fast in our society. It is for a sense of social acceptance. It is to fill the need of their ego. And by the way, I read that people who are models today live in a constant state of malnutrition. And some medical journals are now redefining the scales of what the proper weight is for the proper height and the proper age and adding seven to ten pounds to it. Because people tend to be healthier when they fill out a little bit.

But because of this insatiable desire for the beautiful body, we have even created a new disease, this anorexia disease, where people get a mental aversion to eating. They can't put it in their mouths without eventually vomiting it back out again and they continue and continue and continue and continue to lose weight. And it's a very serious disease. Now this is not a biblical approach to fasting. Fasting is not to give you the body beautiful. Fasting is not to take you on an ego trip so you don't have to be self-conscious about the fact that you're a little pudgy.

Fasting is not to feed your pride. Fasting for that reason may be sinful. Now fasting as a way to reduce your gluttony is okay. I mean, then there's some virtue to it. Although it's not the biblical definition of fasting. If you're gluttonous and you've just gorged yourself, you've overspent your money, you've indulged yourself beyond the point where it was right and it became sinful, then withholding food may be in some sense virtuous, but that is not the biblical fast. That just makes sense.

You know, there are even people who fast in anticipation of being gluttons? Have you ever done that? Boy I know that tomorrow I'm going over to their house and their really going to...I'm going to really put it on. They've got great stuff, so I'm not eating today. That is not a spiritual fast. Preparation for gluttony is the same as gluttony. You know, all I'm trying to do is to somehow make a distinction between what the world is talking about when it's talking about fasting and what we're talking about.

If you are on some kind of a fast for physical reasons don't think you have the right to feel spiritual, because you don't. It has no spiritual value at all. Fasting in and of itself is unknown in Scripture as an end in itself. All of the benefits of fasting in the Scripture are indirect, not direct. Fasting is never isolated to create some virtue in and of itself. You don't just say well, I'm going to be spiritual, I will not eat. You are no more spiritual because you don't eat than because you do eat. "The kingdom of God," says Romans 14, "is not food and drink." That is not the issue. That is not the substance of spirituality. John Calvin said many for want of knowing its usefulness undervalue its necessity. And some rejected all together as superfluous, while on the other hand where the proper use of fasting is not well understood, it is easily degenerates into superstition.

So on the one hand you have the superstitious approach and on the other, you have the indifference. And so if we can correct both of those, we'll perhaps do a service to you. Don't be superstitious about fasting. It isn't going to get you any super spirituality. In and of itself, it doesn't isolate itself to be a spiritual virtue. It is always connected with something else and we'll see that as we go today and next time through the study. So we're not interested in a physical, self-centered mystical kind of fast to get a better looking body or to get yourself ready for a gluttonous activity tomorrow. We're not interested in a fast just for the sake of saying you fasted. That isn't the issue. There must be a spiritual context for a fast to be biblical.

And that is essential. And I think that that is basically outlined in the only fast ever commanded in all the Bible. There's only one. Only one time did God ever command a fast. There is only one compulsory fast from one end of Scripture to the other, just one. And it was a general public national fast. Leviticus 16, God said, on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, that one day a year when sacrifices of the nation are given for the sins of the people for the year past. On that day from sunrise to sunset, you will fast, Yom Kippur. That is the only fast ever given as compulsory by God in the entire Scripture. That's it.

But notice it is a fast connected with a deep mournful spirit in confessing sin. Now that ought to give you a hint of what fasting is all about. It is never isolated from something else. It is extricably connected to a great sense of spiritual anxiety. A time in that case of confession of sin and seeking forgiveness at the hand of God. In fact, the Jews went so far as to say on the day of atonement, it is forbidden, says the Talmud, to eat, to drink, to bathe, to anoint oneself, to wear sandals or to engage in conjugal intercourse. And even the little children on the day of atonement couldn't eat. And that's hard on little children, but they had to learn that that was to be a prescribe fast and they had to learn it

when they were young so they would maintain it when they became older.

Now, beyond that, now get this beloved, beyond that, the Bible never commands a fast. The New Testament never commands us to fast. The Bible commands us to give again and again, commands us to pray again and again, but doesn't command us to fast. That just is not a biblical command. And yet isn't it interesting that it fits right in with these other two things in this section. Fasting then, was a personal, watch this, non-compulsory, spontaneous, voluntary act. There's no structure to fasting delineated in the Scripture.

There's just endless variety, endless variety. Now by the time Jesus arrives, fasting has become a great part of the Jewish society. It was in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is filled with fasts. There just a lot of fasts. Some times by the nation, some times by a small group of people and sometimes by one individual, but the Old Testament is full of them and so this was a part of their society. This was a part of their life. But when you come to Jesus time, this thing had gone beyond its bounds. What started as a true, spontaneous, voluntary, heartfelt fast had ended up as a point of hypocritical, self-righteous demonstration in front of men. Where they put on this tremendous pretense, made themselves look as wretched and miserable and dismal as they could and paraded around letting everybody know they were fasting so they'd think they were super spiritual.

Because frankly folks, fasting is hard isn't it? I mean, if you just say well, I'm going to fast, all you can think about is eating. That's true. I'm going to fast and all you can think about is food. There must be a very...almost a natural and yet a supernatural inducement to fasting to take away that anxiety there. And we'll see how that works in a minute. But the Jews were fasting for every reason and their basic motive was to be seen by men. The ego trip, super spiritual, super pious and Jesus must correct this. It's kind of interesting to me too that in Luke 18:12 it says the Pharisees fasted twice a week. Remember the Pharisee came into the temple to pray and he said I thank you that I'm not as other men, even as this public and sinner over here, I fast twice in the week. Amazing.

That is not a biblical prescription. They had come to the place where they did that and the Talmud tells us they fasted on the second day and the fifth day. And when you ask the Pharisees why the second and the fifth day, they will say because it was the second day and the fifth day which Moses went up and down from Sinai. He went up to Sinai, they say, to get the law on the fifth day of the week. He came down on the second day of the week. And in commemorating that, we fast on the second and the fifth day. But, as spiritual as it sounds, if you look a little closer in Jewish history, in the City of Jerusalem, you will find out that market day was the second and fifth day. And those were the two days in the week when everybody from the countryside came to town. And if you were going to parade your piosity that was the time.

And so on the second and the fifth day, market day, with people teaming in the city and the country all moving around and milling about, it was a great time, an ideal place for those who fasted for a public

pretense to put on their act, and they would do it for spiritual pride. They would walk through the streets with their hair all disheveled. They would put on old clothes and get dirt all over them. They would cover their faces with white stuff so they'd look pale and dump ashes on their head. And they would parade around on market day so everybody would see how spiritual they really were.

Jesus attacks this in this text. But let's back up a little bit. I want to give you several points. Number one the principle of fasting. We must understand what the Bible teaches about this, the principle of fasting. Now I'm going to give you a very simple statement here. Fasting is total abstinence from food. Fasting is total abstinence from food, that's the idea. In fact, the Greek word, it's a very simple word, *nestea*, from *nea* which means not and *estea*, which means to eat. It means not to eat; not to eat. To abstain from food.

There is a sense in which a modified fast or a partial fast can be taken where you don't totally fast and totally abstain from food, but you abstain from banqueting. You abstain from lavishness. You abstain from the rich foods, to eat a rather common food. I think Daniel did that and we'll see more of that tonight as Daniel wouldn't touch the delicacies of the king's meat, but said I only want to eat what is called pulse and water. In other words, it was not a total fast, but it was a restricted fast for spiritual priority reason. But basically speaking, those are the rare ones, it is a total abstinence from food for a short or a long period. Now there's no doubt in Scripture that this total abstinence from food was connected with a very, very troubled spirit or a very anxious heart.

Fasting is almost the equivalent of the phrase to humble oneself before the Lord. As Leviticus 16 says, fasting equals inflicting one's soul. In other words, it is a self-denial act. Fasting is to deny self, but it is not done in a vacuum. You don't just say well, I'm going to deny myself. I'm going to say no to myself and stop eating for no good reason, because then several things are going to happen. If there's nothing else in your mind, you're going to go nuts not eating and you lose the whole import of the fast. Or secondly, you're going to be patting yourself on the back saying boy, aren't I something. I'm getting spiritual.

So that fasting never occurs in a vacuum. It never occurs biblically without a corollary. There is a reason to humble yourself in that manner. There is a reason to deny yourself in that manner. There is a reason to inflict yourself in that manner and the reason is a consuming one. So that fasting is almost not something you choose to do, but something you cannot avoid. It is common in the New Testament at least 30 times and more the word *nestea* or a form of that word is used in the New Testament, so it was very common then. The Pharisees, as I said, have twisted and perverted it.

So just at the beginning then, know that fasting means total abstinence from food. That's the principle. It has an important place. And I want to add an interesting footnote, it is amazing to me that fasting became such a big deal not only among the Jews, but even in the early church, where fasting has been inserted in the text and it doesn't belong there. It isn't in the original manuscripts. But it was

such a big deal to them, that they stuck it in where it didn't even belong. Now we don't want to overstate it and we don't want to understate it. And we don't want to be superstitious about it and nor do we want to be indifferent.

It has a place. Total abstinence from food has a place. And we must understand that place. Secondly, not only the principle of fasting, but the period of fasting. People have discussed and debated how long a fast should be. And some have said well, if you're really spiritual you fast for 40 days and 40 nights. If you're not so spiritual, you fast for one day. But if you can just hang on for 40 days and 40 nights I mean, you can practically be like Enoch, just walk off to heaven some day. You'll be so spiritual.

Listen, the Bible never prescribes the time for a fast; never. The time depends on the person, depends on the circumstance, depends on the situation, and the need. For example, in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and in 2 Corinthians 11:27, Paul says the same thing twice there. He says in chronicling his life he says, "I was in fastings often." So that in his lifetime there were fastings, different kinds and different times and different reasons and different purposes and there was no standard uniformity. And by the way if fastings often were true of Paul, you would have thought that he would have said something about the fact that they should be true of us and yet he never uttered a word about that.

In all of the commandments and directives that he gave, never is there one regarding fasting. It is such a spontaneous and such a voluntary and such an individual and such a personal thing. The only compulsory public fast was the day of atonement and when Christ died on the cross, the day of atonement stopped existing. There's no longer a day of atonement. So that the only public fast is done away with. Whatever there is a fasting that remains is a personal, private, spontaneous, voluntary fast. And it is so much that that the Bible never even commands it. It is almost as if it will happen when it should happen.

And that is because, now mark it, fasting is a corollary to something else. Sometimes in the Bible, for example, most commonly, a fast was from sunrise to sunset. You didn't eat from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun. That is a fast. There were in many cases in the Old Testament, seven day fasts, such as 1 Samuel 31. Daniel Chapter 10 talks about a three week fast. And then we saw in Luke 18:12 where the Pharisee fasted twice a week. So the times and the length of times are varied depending on the situation in each given element.

All right, the principle, the period, thirdly, and I think this is important, the priority of fasting; the priority of fasting. These are really important. Well, notice in our text in verse 16, Jesus says, "When you fast." Then in verse 17, "When you fast." Now it appears to me from these two things that Jesus assumed this would happen. He doesn't say stop fasting. He doesn't say fast. He just says when you fast, just like when you pray or when you give. It is assumed as a part of the life a person who represents the kingdom or who is a part of it. Now the Scripture speaks of many people who fasted.

Let me just give you a few; Moses, Samson, Samuel, Hannah, Saul, Jonathan, David, Elijah, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, John the Baptist, Anna, the prophets and teachers at Antioch, the apostle Paul, and most significantly, our own Lord Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights; Matthew Chapter 4 tells us.

Now that's a list of some pretty important folks, substantial list of spiritual people who fasted. The Wesleys and the Whitfields and the Calvins and the Luthers have fasted. And right on down to today the people of God fast. And I believe our Lord assumed this. Though the public fast on the day of atonement was over, I think the Lord knew that the times of fasting in individual lives were not over. And even after His death and resurrection and ascension, people would fast. And I think He points that out in Matthew 9, verses 14 and 15.

The disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus. And they said "why do we," the disciples of John the Baptist, "who are righteous people, and the Pharisees, who were unrighteous people, fast often? But your disciples fast not." I mean, we fast all the time. But your disciples don't fast. I love this answer. "Jesus said unto them, can the sons of the bride chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" Did you get that? Jesus said this is not the time to fast, because we can't mourn. Now listen to me, to what then is fasting connected? To mourning. Now there's a hint at what we're getting at. Fasting is always a corollary to some deep spiritual anxiety. That's the point.

And Jesus is saying we're not fasting because there's no reason to fast. In other words, fasting then apart from some mourning as a source inducing it is meaningless. It is as I say is a corollary to something else not in an end in itself. People who say oh I fasted and I had such spiritual sensitivities. I fasted and I rose to such spiritual heights. No, no, no, fasting is a response, not an inducement to something. And so He says, we don't fast because there's nothing to fast about. But look at this, "the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them and then shall they fast." Now beloved, we are living, aren't we in the period when the bridegroom is taken from us. The marriage supper of the lamb will occur when we are joined with Christ, but until that time says our Lord, there will be fasting. Why? Because there will be spiritual struggle and there will be anxiety and in my absence it will not be as it is in my presence.

And so I believe in Matthew 9 Jesus is simply saying there's going to be times of fasting. And throughout the history of the church there have those times when fasting would be the right response. What am I saying? There is a priority in fasting. It has a priority place in this age. It belongs to this error. It didn't belong to the disciples when Jesus was present. It belongs to this time and this place and to us in this hour. But we must come to the fourth point.

And this is...we'll just give you a couple under this one and we'll stop. The provocation for fasting. We've seen the principle, the period, the priority, and now the provocation. If fasting has a place, then what is it that causes us to fast? If it is a corollary and if it is a response then what is it that brings that

response? Well, I've jotted down about eight or so areas and we'll just cover maybe two or three this morning. All right? Number one, let me say this, fasting is a result of lamentation; lamentation or sorrow. You know, some people think that fasting is just sort of a ticket to blessing in and of itself.

Martin Lloyd Jones says "There are some people who fast because they expect direct and immediate results from it." In other words, they have a kind of mechanical view of fasting. They have what I have sometimes called for lack of a better illustration, the penny in the slot view. You put your penny in the slot, then you pull out the drawer and you have your results. That is their view of fasting. If you want certain benefits, they say, fast. If you fast, you get the results. But fasting, and he's right, is not a spiritual gimmick. It is not a penny in a slot. It isn't going to produce spirituality any more than food produces carnality.

I mean, we even eat at the Lord's table and the love feast was an act of spiritual worship. Food isn't carnal and no food isn't spiritual. That is not the point. There is no merit in a fast unless that fast is a provoke fast for reasons of the heart. Number one, lamentations, sorrow is a cause for fasting. Let me give you some illustrations. When the plague hit, the people of God in Joel 1:14 it says that there was a fast. In Nehemiah Chapter 1, verse 4, when Nehemiah heard the word that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down his heart was broken. "And it came to pass when I heard these words," he says, "I sat down and I wept and I mourned for days and I fasted and I prayed before the God of heaven."

David when his enemies became ill fasted in Psalm 35:13, and David when Abner died, fasted. In 2 Samuel 3:35, "and when all the people came to cause David to eat meat while it was yet day," David swore saying "so do God to me and more also if I test bread or ought else till the sun be down." He says Abner is dead and God strike me down if I can't fast one day in mourning and sorrow and lamentation over that misspent and wasted life. It's amazing to me that some of these people were fasting out of lamentation over personal calamity and some were fasting out of lamentation over the calamity of somebody else, not just a friend, but an enemy even. David not only wept when his friend died and fasted, but even when his enemies were ill he says in Psalm 35.

When his child by Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, was struck with a terrible and fatal disease, the Bible says in 2 Samuel 12, "David therefore besought God for the child and David fasted and lay all night upon the earth." Can't you see him there? You can identify with that can't you? I can as a parent. If a child of mine was struck with a fatal disease and the life of that little one was hanging in the balances and I didn't know from moment to moment whether that child would draw another breath, I can tell you right now, I'd be prostrate before God on behalf of the child I love and I would be ill advised to take any food because I would want any food. And you know what I believe? I believe your body even responds to the anxiety of your heart. The Hebrews used to talk about the fact that the emotions were felt in the bowels. That's why the Bible tells you about the bowels of compassion or the bowels of mercy.

The heart was the mind to the Hebrew because the Hebrew always saw something physical and so when it says "as a man thinketh in his heart," you know that the Hebrew saw the heart as the thinking or cognitive element. But when you felt it, it was in the bowels, why? Because anxieties in the mind always affect the stomach, don't they? And you go to that parent who is broken in heart and spirit and weeping and praying over a child whose life is hanging in the balance and they are not even interested in having food. Their heart is poured out to God in prayer.

And so often in a time like that, we get somebody and we say now come on with me we've got to eat, you've got to eat. No, they don't have to eat. Don't force them to do that. Don't force them to do that. When they have a preoccupation between themselves and God and they are lifting to God a prayer from their heart for the sorrow that's there, they should have that right to be unintruded on with food. They don't need to eat. They need not to eat, because they're carrying that anxiety like David did. God's people fasted at the death of Saul. God's people fasted at the death of Jonathan. So sometimes the lamentation was very personal. Sometimes they lamented over someone else, a friend. Sometimes over an enemy. Sometimes over a whole group of people that were killed. And in the midst of such lamentation they were so exercised that there was a loss of appetite and the body reacts to the minds anxieties and food is the furthest thing from their hearts desire.

That's why I say fasting is not something you just volunteer to do and you walk out and do it and think you're spiritual for doing it. Fasting is almost a very natural response to the heart and the soul of anxiety that comes in the midst of a mourning or a sorrowing time. You want to know something? We identify with that in one sense. We identify with it when it comes to our own life or our own family. Very difficult for us to mourn like that when somebody else is in trouble. It's very hard for us, but you have to realize in that society, things were very closed in. And people knew people and it was a small world. And everything affected everything and things were much more simple. Since the world that we live in has opened up so much, we can't even be concerned about one tragedy before we're bombed with another one and then another one and then another one. And we know so much about so many people who are sick and about so many tragedies that in order to protect our emotions from turning us into basket cases, we eventually grow callous.

It is a defense mechanism, but it is a good illustration of how far we are from the mind of Christ, isn't it? Jesus Christ, who knew everything there was to know, who understood every suffering there was to suffer, who could gather up all of the sufferings of every human being who ever lived into omniscient heart, that same Jesus, who if anyone, should have been callous to suffering, He should have been can sit over the city of Jerusalem and tears can run down His face. Can stand beside the grave of Lazarus and weep or one person who died.

We don't know that in our world any more. We're too callous, too insensitive. My grandfather was walking the streets one time and he was walking along and he saw a man leaning against a light post,

and the man was sobbing and weeping. My grandfather who is a compassionate man, went over to him thinking he was in some great distress and said to him, "Sir, I just don't want to intrude, but I noticed you were sorrowing and weeping and I wonder if there's anything I can do to help you." He said, "No, not really." He said, "Well, what is it that's made you so sorry?" He said, "have you a problem?" He said, "No." He said, "Sir, have not you heard the Titanic has sunk."

My grandfather who had heard that said, "Yes, I heard that. Did you have a friend or a family member or someone you loved there?" He said, "No, sir." He said, "But all those people are dead sir." See? When's the last time you ever had that reaction? I mean, we, in our society, can watch on the news coldly and calculatingly a DC-10 flip over and crush itself into the ground and snuff out the lives of 200 and some people and we can't even wake up from that before we're flashed across the screen with a whole lot of screaming boat people and stomachs of distended children starving to death in India. I mean, we are assaulted with it all so that we become desensitized to protect ourselves from emotionally falling to pieces.

And so it tell us we're a far cry from Christ. I don't doubt that if your child was sick you'd fast. Do you fast when your friend is sick? Do you fast when your enemy is sick? Do you fast when a tragedy comes because it so deeply grieves your heart to see people cast into hell without Christ? What is your reaction? People say well, you know, I just don't fast much because I don't have those kinds of tragedies in my life. But that's really not an excuse. We would fast more if we were sensitive to things that ought to be concerns of ours. And so fasting came as a result of lamentation. And the body in a sense reacts to the heart's anxiety and sorrow by removing the desire for food altogether.

Secondly, I'll give you just two more. Protection; protection is another thing that caused fasting in the Bible. And by that, I mean this. There were times when people were in such severe danger that their fear forced them to fast. They couldn't eat, they were too scared. They were so afraid they couldn't eat. And they knew that their only protection and deliverance was God. And so they would fast and they would literally cry out to God under severe danger and severe trial knowing that their only deliverance would come from Him. They were shear filled with fear. And there was no room for food.

I think this is true in 2 Chronicles Chapter 20. In 2 Chronicles Chapter 20, verses 3 and 4, the Ammonites and the Moabites are combined against Jehoshaphat and they know that from the human viewpoint, they can't win. The Israelites can't win. And out of shear fear they go without food as they cry out to God that God would deliver them. I remember Esther, the lovely Jewess who had reached the place of favor with the king Ahasuerus. And then found out that Haman had developed a plot to slaughter all the Jews. And so she said in effect, tell my people that I will go to him and I will put my life on the line and if I perish, I perish. But I will go in behalf of my people and the people were afraid and the Bible says they fasted.

Fear knowing that there is only a resource in God's protection. In Ezra, there is the most beautiful indication of a fast. Ezra is about to lead the people out of the Babylonian captivity. And as he approaches the journey, he has a most interesting approach, this is something. 8:21 of Ezra, he says, "I proclaim a fast there at the river of Ahava," and by the way that is a tributary of the Euphrates River. They were leaving Babylon. "And we stopped and we had a fast." Why? "That we might afflict ourselves." That's what a fast does. It is self-denial, self-affliction. "Before God," why, "to seek of Him a right way for us." We didn't know how the right way to get from Babylon to Jerusalem. They were carrying a mass of people and we didn't know the right path.

"And for our little ones," that our children could cross that desert. That our children would be safe. "And for all our substance," why? Because they were brigands and highwaymen and robbers and thieves and wild nomads and enemies and those who hated Israel. And so they were fearful, they were fearful for the right path and they were afraid of crossing that desert with their little children and with all the substance that they had. And then Ezra says, and I think this is interesting, he said, "I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on our way." I didn't want to ask the king. Why? I love this, "because we told him already the hand of God is upon all them for good who seek Him. But His power and His wrath are against all them who forsake Him."

I mean, I'd have to undo my theology. I told the king God will protect the righteous. We're going to be all right king. And now as I get out here, I'm a little afraid. I can't go back and say hey king, I know God is on our side, but could you give Him a little assistance, because that would be a discredit to the character of God. And so I cannot depend on the king even though he's somewhat sympathetic. I will depend on God and in fear it says in 23, "we fasted and we besought our God for this." You see? Protection, again a time of fear, anxiety, where fasting was very much a response that could be understood.

And lastly, for this time, and we haven't gotten to the key point yet, that's for next week. Humiliation; humiliation, lamentation, protection, and humiliation. This is very common. In fact, on the day of atonement, according to Leviticus 23, the reason they were to fast was they were to fast in confessing their sin. They were to fast in confessing their sin. Humiliation and confession. You know, I think in all of our lives there's been times like this. But we have sinned against the Lord and we have been so deeply troubled by our sin we have been so overwrought by our sin, we have been so disturbed by what it's done in our hearts that we cannot eat, that we cannot think of food, but that we pour our hearts to God.

I think about David. David sinned such a great sin. Such a heinous thing. And then when he had not confessed his sin, but still held it in, it says that his life juices dried up. He was aching from head to toe. He was sick. He could not eat. He could not sleep. He could not exist. And then he says and when I confessed my sin it was as if all that flood went out from me and I was whole again. There

have been those time in our lives when our hearts overwrought with our sinfulness and we have done something that defiles God and we come before God and we are pleading for that cleansing. Even though it's already provided for us there has to be that healing that occurs when we empty ourselves of that evil thing.

There were many times when God's people confessed sin and fasting was part of it, because they didn't stop to eat. Food was the furthest thing from their mind. What they hungered for was the joining together of a severed fellowship with God. David said I humbled my soul with fasting. The people at Nineveh repented of sin at Jonah's preaching and they fasted while they confessed. Daniel prayed to God and he confessed the sins of his people and fasted. Listen, it's amazing. Daniel actually even became so absorbed with the sins of others that he fasted. Amazing compassion.

Saul of Tarsus was smitten on the Damascus Road, fell into the dirt, rose from that place and the Bible says that in confessing his sin and turning to the Lord, he fasted for three days, Acts 9:9. Samuel went to the people in 1 Samuel Chapter 7 and says "you have strayed away to Baal. Confess your sin of idolatry," and they fasted. Ahab, that evil man, that evil king, was finally confronted with judgment. And he was told that the judgment of God was against him for his abominable activities in following the idols. And it came to pass, 1 Kings 21:27 says, when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes. He put sack cloth on his flesh. He fasted and he lay in sack cloth and he went softly.

He lost that heir about him. He wasn't a bull in a china closet any more. He wasn't throwing his weight around. He was poking around very softly, very quietly. He was a crushed broken man who lost all sense of need for physical food, but he fasted in the contrition. And do you know that God actually rewarded that man for true repentance even though he had lived a vial wretched life? And the next verse tells us that God was gracious.

Confession, and Ezra again, Chapter 10 and verse 6, "The Ezra rose up from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Johanan, the son of Eliashib and when he came there he did eat no bread nor drink water, for he mourned because of the transgression of them who had been carried away." Transgression is a cause for fasting. The distress again is so deep, the anxiety so far down in the human spirit that fasting isn't forced. It flows out of a need to focus on a right relationship with God. The physical vanishes. I understand that somewhat in my life. I hope you do. There are days when I am exercised over something that food loses all of its meaning to me when I choose not to. The hardest part, you know, is that when you have an appointment to eat with someone and the food is like dirt in your mouth, because your heart is somewhere else.

But there's a place for fasting beloved, the right place. And if you don't fast, I don't want you to run out and start fasting to get spiritual. I want you to ask God to give you the kind of a compassionate heart that'll make you care so much about sorrowful things in your life and the lives of others, about the need for the divine deliverance that only God can bring, about sin in your life and the sins of others

that the lamentation and the need for protection and the humiliation, no matter whether it's in your case or the case of somebody else will drive you to the point of concern, the point of compassion where it will cause you to focus away from the things of the world, even as routine as eating.

God has given us every good thing to enjoy. Beloved enjoy it. But when you're in a spiritual struggle and you're consumed with the things of God, know this, that it's right to abstain from those things to continue your concentration and your focus on that which is spiritual and divine. God help us to be more sensitive so that fasting in its truest sense can be a part of our lives. Well, let's pray together. Just before we pray, I might say this that I didn't really get to the major thrust. The key point on which all of this hangs and there's just one thing, this all attaches to in every case. We're going to see that next time, but there's enough for us to pray about and work on from what we've learned this morning I pray. So that God can really prepare us this week for what I have in my heart to say next time.

Father, sometimes I feel like I have failed to cover what I so wanted to cover and yet I trust Your spirit. Time seems like my enemy and yet I know that because You have bounded our lives with time, time can really be our ally. So even though we didn't get to finish, Lord, we pray that You'll keep these things in our hearts so that we can put together next week with this week and have the picture in total. Help us Lord to be compassionate. Help us not to be desensitized. Help us not to be so preoccupied with creature comforts to which we can so easily retreat that the real world never touches us. Give us the heart of Christ who could know every suffering that ever occurred in all of human history, and yet weep over one. Help us, Lord, to know what it is to be so engulfed in spiritual communion that we lose a sense of even the basics like food and drink. Help us to know that experience of being so consumed that those things are the furthest from our minds. Help us to be so much Your people called into Your presence that all else fades. But concentration on Your word and You. Thank You Lord, for speaking to us this morning and we praise You for the clarity of Your word. Help us to be obedient to it. In Christ's name, Amen.

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