

Happy New Year Slide

As we begin this New Year I want to preach a series of messages dealing with some very practical aspects of the Christian life because I believe God has more for us, as individuals and as a fellowship.

We need a fresh, clear prophetic word from the Lord for our own lives individually and our church as a body. We need to experience an intimacy with the Holy Spirit that will cause us to gain boldness in our prayers and intercession.

I believe if we will fast, pray and give ourselves wholly unto seeking His face and contending for His Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, our God will begin to manifest His presence, His power and His glory in ways we have never dreamed of.

Therefore, I am asking you to join me in 21 Days of prayer and Fasting beginning on January 11th through February 1st. Mark your calendars and we will have a sign-up sheet in the foyer for the 21 days next week.

The first message in our series is:

THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF FASTING

Isaiah 58:6-9a; Matthew 6:16-18

When we talk about fasting, what kind of people come to mind? John the Baptist types, maybe health nuts, or even emaciated figures with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, wearing camel hair girdles and wandering the desert? Or does Jesus come to mind when you think of fasting? He should because our Savior taught and practiced fasting, yet fasting is one of the most misunderstood of all the Spiritual Disciplines, and, the one that is probably practiced the least!

For most Western Christians fasting is seldom mentioned, taught, much less practiced, yet the Bible mentions fasting more than it does Baptism! (77 to 75)

The reason that fasting is so badly misunderstood and so rarely practiced is that it strikes deep at the heart of man's greatest idol, Self! To deny our bodies of food for spiritual advancement is to confront the most basic and carnal appetite that we have. The desire to eat is rooted in our instinct for survival and it is the strongest desire that humans possess. It is stronger than the lust for possessions, the desire for sexual gratification and the ambition to be someone important. If we can control our desire for food, all the other appetites will fall easily under our control.

Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God. (Alvin C. Plantinga)

I believe that we stand at a crucial hour for our families, the church and the nation that we love. We are facing a desperate hour that calls for a return to fundamental spiritual disciplines. As we learn the discipline of fasting it will become just as important to as Bible reading, prayer, and giving. Obviously, there are some of us who cannot fast for medical reasons, but we should all consider the benefits fasting could bring into our spiritual and physical lives.

Let us look together into this discipline of fasting and ask that the Holy Spirit open our hearts to hear the Word of God so that we too, may enter into the blessings found in this discipline of fasting.

I. FASTING: DEFINED AND EXPLAINED

- A. Throughout the scriptures fasting refers to: a voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.
 - 1. The Hebrew word means: to cover ones mouth. The one most often used in the Greek means: to abstain from food consistently, or for a religious purpose.
 - 2. If it is not for the purpose of drawing closer to the Lord, then fasting becomes no more than a diet or a weight loss program.
 - 3. For us to simply abstain from food without having our hearts set upon a deepening relationship with Jesus will accomplish little more than crash diet will. It must be with a spiritual purpose in mind.
- B. There is a broader and helpful definition of fasting given to us by the author Richard Foster:
“Fasting is the voluntary denial of normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.”
 - 1. So fasting doesn't always deal with food.
 - 2. At times we need to fast from media, from speaking, sleeping or people for the purpose of becoming more focused on spiritual activity.
 - 3. D. Martin Lloyd Jones said it this way:
“To make the matter complete we would add that fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not only be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything that is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but for special seasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.”
- C. Strictly speaking the Bible refers to fasting only in its basic sense, which is the abstinence from food. This is the aspect of fasting that we will concern ourselves with and these are the most common.
 - 1. The **Normal Fast**: abstaining from all food, but not from water.
 - a. This is the most common type that we as Christians participate in.
 - b. The total abstinence from food but drinking of water, clear liquids and fruit juices.
 - 2. The **Partial Fast**: a limitation of diet but not the abstinence from all food
 - a. This would be done by eating one meal per day or by eating much smaller portions of food for a certain time period.

- b. It can also be eating simpler foods as Daniel and the three other Hebrew children did while in Babylonian captivity. Daniel 12
3. The **Absolute Fast**: the abstinence from all food and liquid, even water.
 - a. The body begins to suffer dehydration after three days without water, which should be the length of this type of fast unless God supernaturally intervenes as He did with Moses, Elijah and with Jesus.
4. The **Supernatural Fast**: Moses, Elijah and Jesus went without food or water for forty days, which, would be physically impossible were God not to intervene on their behalf.

Deuteronomy 9:9 *When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water.*

1 Kings 19:8 *So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.*

Matthew 4:1-2 *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.*

5. A **Congregational/National Fast**: this is when the nation of Israel was called together as one to fast and inquire of the Lord.

Joel 2:15 *Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly;*

- a. Early on in our American history we find three occasion which the president and congress proclaimed national fasts. John Adams, James Madison and Abe Lincoln called a day of national fasting & prayer 3 times during the Civil War.

II. FASTING: REQUIRED OR RECOMMENDED

Matthew 6:16 *"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.*

- A. Regular fasting was common under the old covenant Jews and the Pharisees were committed to fasting twice a week and there are 46 references to fasting in the NT.
 1. Jesus did not say "if you fast," but, "when you fast!"
 2. Jesus didn't require it but clearly expected His followers to practice it as He goes on to give instructions on how to act and even to dress when we fast.
 3. God will reward that which is done in secret out of a desire to please Him and draw closer to Him.
- B. Our Lord Jesus practiced this discipline and I believe He still fully expects that those who would follow after Him as His disciples to do the same.

Matthew 9:14-15 *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" 15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

1. Jesus expects us to fast but there is no specific command as to how long, how often or in which manner.
2. Fasting should not be thought of a legalistic routine, but rather a privilege and a great opportunity to humble ourselves before God, grow closer to Christ and see His purpose realized in our lives.

III. THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF FASTING

- A. Without a spiritual purpose and goal in mind, fasting can be one of the most frustrating and miserable experiences of our lives. (If our goal is only to lose weight, then eat less and exercise more!)
 1. David Smith said it right: “All of our fasting must be on this basis; we should use it as a scriptural means whereby we are melted into a more complete realization of the purposes of God in our lives, our church, our community and our nation.”
 2. If we are truly seeking to draw nearer to God, gain a deeper relationship with Him and a fuller knowledge of His will, then we must Fast and Pray!
 3. We must realize, fasting is never a way for us to gain acceptance, favor or impress God and it has no eternal benefit unless we come to God through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- B. There are many reasons to practice the discipline of fasting but for brevity sake let me give you those I think to be particularly important. The Purpose for Fasting is:

1. To Empower and Intensify Prayer.

Nehemiah 1:4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Daniel 9:3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.

Joel 2:12 "Now, therefore," says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."

- a. John Calvin said, “Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer.”
- b. Fasting gives a sharper edge to our intercession and passion to our supplication.
- c. As we deny our selves the strongest appetite and put it under our control the spirit man is quickened, made alive and strengthened.
- d. In his book, God’s Chosen Fast, Arthur Wallis said this,

“Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency and importunity to our praying and to give force to our pleading in the court of heaven. The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly earnest. Not only so, but he is expressing his earnestness in a divinely appointed way. He is using a means that God has chosen to make his voice heard on high.”

2. To Seek God’s Guidance and Protection

Jeremiah 29:12-13 *Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.*

- a. There is a precedent set for our fasting throughout the Bible; that we may know and clearly discern the will of God in the situations of our lives.
- b. We are often faced with difficult circumstances and situations that appear to have no natural solution.
- c. In these times that we need the divine guidance of God and we must humble ourselves before Him, quieting the loud voices of our appetites and involvements in order to better to hear His voice.

2 Chronicles 20:3-4 *And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ So Judah gathered together to ask help from the Lord; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.*

Ezra 8:21-23 *Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.*

²² *For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him." ²³ So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.*

- d. Fasting is not a magic formula but if it is rightly practiced, what it will do is increase our receptivity to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.
- e. When faced with difficult and confusing situations we can fast and pray and tune our spirits to hear when God speaks.

3. To Break Strongholds and the Power of Darkness.

Isaiah 58:6 *"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?"*

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵ casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,*

- a. With our comfortable lifestyles it is at times easy to forget as Christians we are at War! There is a real devil and his goal is still to dishonor God and destroy His people.
- b. Our foe is not flesh and blood, and so it is reasonable to believe that he will not be defeated with carnal weapons.
- c. Prayer, empowered and intensified through fasting is one of the mightiest weapons given to us by God to break the strongholds in our lives and defeat the powers of darkness in our world.
- d. We can never be victorious over the devil until we have conquered and brought under control the appetites of our own flesh.
- e. Through fasting our flesh is humbled, our minds and thoughts are brought in line with the Word of God, and as we grow physically weaker, our confidence rests solely upon the one who has the power to defeat the enemy of our souls.

- f. Bondages can be broken, temptations overcome, lives can be changed and our city can be set free if we fast and pray.
- g. Let me quote from Arthur Wallis again:
“In giving us the privilege of fasting as well as praying, God has added a powerful weapon to our spiritual armory. In her folly and ignorance the church has largely looked upon it as obsolete. She has thrown it down some dark corner to rust, and there it has lain forgotten for centuries and this hour of impending crisis for the church and the world demands its recovery.”

4. **To Express Love in Worship to God.**

- a. Fasting can be an act of pure dedication, worship and devotion to the Living God; an expression of finding our greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God.
- b. When we deny ourselves food and spend the time we would normally spend eating in prayer, praise and worship; it honors God because we are sacrificing and devoting ourselves to Him completely. It also shows Him that He truly is our God and that our stomachs are not!

Conclusion

I believe that we find our selves now at the “hour of impending crisis,” and we must once again recover the discipline of fasting and intercession if we are to see a world recovered from the gathering darkness.

I still believe the Word of God and His promise that:

***2 Chronicles 7:14** if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

What if God would say, “Push back from the table, fast, pray and seek my face and I will save your loved ones from hell, deliver your families from the bondage of the devil and heal the nation that you love!” How would we respond? He has already told us it:

***Isaiah 58:6** "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?"*

If you have never fasted before, then start slow. If you have medical concerns, please speak with your doctor. But start somewhere...just like our Bible reading, we must start somewhere, and when we start God will meet with us! It will add a new and unique dimension to our walk with Christ like nothing else can.

Let us as a body turn our hunger and our thirst to God and seek for a fresh banquet of His mercy and grace, in our lives and in the lives of our families.