

## King & His Kingdom Part 23: Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18 July 22-23, 2017

### Introduction

- Is there anyone here who enjoys pain? Anyone who seeks after it and just enjoys the feeling of agonizing discomfort? Probably not too many of us. **PP** Did you know that studies have shown over and over that physiologically our bodies will automatically seek to avoid anything painful? Think about the hand that instinctively draws back from the stove when it's burned.
- Conversely, **PP** our bodies will automatically be inclined toward anything that we find pleasurable. Think about your favorite food to eat...oh it's so good, you just want more of it. Both of these physiological tendencies are due to our "survival instinct". Our nature tells us to avoid pain at all costs and seek pleasure always.
- But how many of you know that not all pain should be avoided? In fact, there are some pains that are actually good and necessary for our growth. Today, we're going to talk about one such pain – hunger pain – and how through the spiritual discipline of fasting where we endure hunger pains, we can draw closer to the Lord in amazing ways.
- We've been going through Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount learning what it means to truly be a disciple of Christ. In chapter 6 Jesus has been directly addressing several of the hypocritical behaviors of the Pharisees and exposing their self-righteous hearts.
- In **Matthew 6:1** Jesus made his summary statement for this section **PP**, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."
  - He then went through three examples showing how self-righteousness can corrupt our walk with the Lord.
    - The first was the example of giving, and how self-righteousness in our spiritual actions towards others can inhibit our ability to follow Jesus.
    - The second example was in our prayer lives and how self-righteousness in our spiritual actions toward God Himself can inhibit our ability to follow Jesus.
    - Finally, we come to the example of fasting where Jesus will now show how self-righteousness in our spiritual actions toward ourselves can inhibit our ability to follow Jesus.
- So if you would turn with me to **Matthew 6:16-18**, we're going to study Jesus' little teaching on fasting. As you turn there, let me pray.
- We're going to look at this section of scripture in three sections: **PP** the Façade of Fasting, the Facts of Fasting, and Faith-Filled Fasting. And I want to try to get through the first two

sections a little more quickly so we can focus on the final section together. So first, the façade of fasting.

### Façade of Fasting

- **Matthew 6:16 PP** “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”
- Now to understand what Jesus was driving at, we need to understand a little of the Jewish culture with regard to fasting.
- In Judaism, there is one day a year that they are required to fast. In **Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27-32**, God commanded the Jewish people to fast on the Day of Atonement. This was to be a solemn day of acknowledging their sin before the Lord and seeking His forgiveness.
- Now, the Pharisees **PP** – the super religious Jews – not only fasted on the Day of Atonement, but by the time of Christ, they fasted at least twice a week (see **Luke 18:12**).
  - They usually fasted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> days of the week – because tradition held that they were the two days that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 commandments. Of course, one who saw the self-righteous motives behind the fasting of the Pharisees would recognize that those were the two major market days for Jews – when the most people would be out and about and aware of those who were making a scene about their fast.
  - As Jesus informs us, often when the Pharisees would fast they would wear tattered clothes, put ashes on their heads, dishevel their hair, walk around outside with pained expressions, and otherwise make very clear visually that they were undertaking this pious act of fasting.
- You see, fasting and pretty much any other spiritual discipline they undertook, was merely a spiritual façade that was designed to get them to be viewed by their community as someone spiritually devout and pious.
- So Jesus calls out the Pharisees for how they’re fasting and let’s them know there’ll be zero spiritual reward for their self-righteous and hypocritical hunger pains. And this is the same message He’s been giving throughout this whole section of His sermon – no degree of spiritual disciplines or pious acts is going to delight the Lord when they’re actually for the purpose of bringing glory to ourselves instead of glory to God.
- This is the façade of fasting, **PP** but Jesus continues and so we turn to the Facts of Fasting.

### Facts of Fasting

- **Matthew 6:17-18a PP** “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.”
- Just as with giving and praying, Jesus says twice in this section “when you fast”. Jesus has an expectation that as His disciples we will practice the spiritual discipline of fasting. In

fact, in **Matthew 9:14-15** when asked why His disciples don't fast, Jesus explained that while He was here on earth they had no need of fasting, but once He leaves then His disciples will fast. So Jesus definitely had an expectation that His disciples will be fasting as part of their spiritual pursuit of Him.

- And He says that when we fast we shouldn't make a show of it like the Pharisees, but instead we should practice regular hygiene and go about our days outwardly showing that nothing is any different than normal.
- Now, if you're like me, you're saying to yourself, "well, that's all well and good, but I don't really know much about fasting so I'm not sure how to go about doing it."
- That would be a very normal thought process because the reality is that most of us don't think about it as part of our regular practice of faith. In fact, in many strands of protestant evangelicalism there is little emphasis on the practice of fasting or other spiritual disciplines.
- So, I want to teach you some basics facts about fasting that will help to inform us so that, by God's grace and through the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting.
- Fast **PP** (Gk. *Nēsteuō*) literally means to abstain from food. The Hebrew word for fast literally means to cover your mouth.
  - Thus, in the biblical sense, fasting means to not eat food for some spiritual purpose. You may have heard people say that they're fasting from social media, or fasting from television, or whatever else they're not partaking in. Well, in the strictest biblical sense, that's not fasting; that's simply abstaining from something for a time. The spiritual discipline of fasting in scripture always means abstaining from food.
    - That doesn't mean we shouldn't abstain from other things for spiritual reasons, we simply shouldn't confuse abstaining from those things with biblical fasting.
- In scripture, people fasted almost as often corporately as they did individually. This is important, because often the Lord will lead a whole group of people to fast and pray together.
  - So, Jesus isn't saying in this passage that we can never tell others that we're fasting. No, often we'll be fasting in concert with others. The key is that we're fasting for God's glory and not our own.
- There are three types of fasts **PP**:
  - Normal Fast: no food, only water
    - this is the most common fast found in scripture and there are numerous examples throughout the OT and NT of individuals and groups partaking in this fast

- Absolute Fast: no food, no water – only sustainable for three days unless supernaturally cared for
  - Moses did this two times for 40 days obviously sustained by God (Deut. 9:9, Exo. 34:28). Ezra (Ezra 10:6), Paul (Acts 9:9), and Esther & Mordecai (Esther 4:16) are other biblical examples of this, though they did not fast for supernatural lengths of time.
- Partial Fast: abstaining from a particular type of food – also known as a Daniel fast
  - Daniel is the primary examples of this (Daniel 10:2-3), though Elijah can be said to have done so in 1 Kings 17 when the Lord fed him only meat and water from the ravens, John the Baptist eating only locusts and wild honey.
- We're going to look at the heart behind fasting in a bit, but it's important to know that biblical fasting – in whichever form it takes – is always undertaken for a spiritual purpose at the leading of God and in essentially every instance is coupled with prayer.
- Fasting should never be an end of itself. **PP** It's always a means to a deeper spiritual end. If fasting is ever the end, i.e. fasting for the sake of fasting, we've fallen into the pharisaical trap of self-righteous religiosity.
  - Fasting should only be undertaken when we're impelled by the Spirit...but we should be listening for this direction to be given, and should expect it to come as a means through which the Lord will draw us closer to Himself.
- In scripture we see many different reasons the Spirit of God leads us into a fast **PP**:
  - Personal sanctity and humility (Psalm 69:10, Deut. 8:2-3)
  - Repentance (Joel 2:12-14, Jonah 3:5, 10, 1 Kings 21:27-29)
  - Mourning (1 Sam. 31:13)
  - Seeking Protection/Serious Supplication (Ezra 8:21-23, Acts 27:21-24)
  - Dire situation (King Jehosaphat calling the nation to a fast during invasion 2 Chron. 20:1-4)
  - Direction/Guidance/Consecration (Jesus in the desert Matt. 4, church in Antioch in Acts 13:3, 14:23, Daniel 9:2-22)
  - Intercession on someone's behalf (Mordecai Esther 4:16)
  - Bondage breaking and deliverance (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) (Isaiah 58:6, Mark 9:29)
- But the heart and the motivation behind all of these reasons is always the same: we fast because ultimately we seek to draw closer to our God and to see His will done in our lives.
- This is the essence of the faith-filled fast, **PP** and what we will spend the remainder of our time discussing.

### **Faith-Filled Fasting**

- Jesus went on to finish by saying when our fasting is filled with faith, **Matthew 6:18(b)** **“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”**
- Lest any of us think that fasting is akin to rubbing the genie’s lamp, fasting is never about getting stuff in this world. In fact, as we’ll see in a second, fasting is about leaving the pleasures of this world behind and receiving spiritual rewards.
  - Those rewards are things like knowing God more intimately, seeing His hand move in amazing ways, being filled more with Holy Spirit, and being emptied of our prideful selfish desires.
- Why is that? Well, let’s take a quick look at some of the theology of faith-filled fasting.
- Does anyone remember what the very first prohibition God gave to man was? That’s right don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **PP** Don’t eat something. God commanded Adam and Eve to fast.
- Did God tell them to fast because the fruit from the tree was bad? No. So why’d He tell them to fast? Well, put simply, because in fasting from that one fruit they showed that they were not going to allow the appetites of their flesh be enticed by the pleasures of this world. In fasting they showed they’re submission to and dependence upon God.
- Let’s fast forward to Egypt several thousand years later. **PP** God’s people have just been delivered from the Egyptians by miraculous means, God has given them His 10 commandments, but because of their lack of faith, they are made to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. And what does God do with them in the dessert? He makes them fast.
  - Now, this was a partial fast in that they were allowed to eat he mana and quail eggs that God provided, but it was another fast. And what was this fast designed to do? To teach them to trust and submit to the Lord and to put to death their appetites for the things of this world.
- Let’s fast forward again a couple thousand years **PP** to a man who had just been baptized and was then lead out into the wilderness for 40 days where He is directed to fast. You know who this is right? This is Jesus right before He chooses His disciples and begins His public ministry.
  - And what happens to Him while He’s fasting? He’s tempted by the devil just like Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, just like the Israelites were over and over again as they wandered in the wilderness. But this time, Jesus succeeds where Adam and Eve failed, He succeeds where the Israelites constantly fell short. He resists the temptation of the enemy, he endures the pain of denying His fleshly appetites, and He overcomes the call of the pleasures of this world.
  - Jesus did what none of us ever could do on our own. And He didn’t just succeed in overcoming the devil through this fast, He succeeded in defeating the devil when

He endured the ultimate pain of the cross for the payment and forgiveness of our sins.

- You see, a proper theology of fasting begins in the garden of Eden, but it ends with the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of our Lord and Savior.
- Faith-filled fasting means, **PP** being Focused on Jesus Christ.
  - Fasting as a spiritual discipline is a way to endure a little pain for the purpose of seeing Jesus more clearly, trusting in Him more fully, and submitting to Him more deeply.
- But secondly, and we've already gone over this, **PP** faith-filled fasting means very simply abstaining from food.
  - Remember how I talked in the beginning about some pains being good for us? Well, abstaining from food for spiritual purposes is one of those healthy pains as it strengthens us and prepares us to endure true tests and trials that will be far more of a struggle than simply going hungry.
  - And this reminds me of a famous story about butterflies. Most of us know that butterflies only become the beautiful whimsical creatures we know them to be after they've first been a caterpillar. And to transform from butterflies into caterpillars they need to go into their cocoons and go through the process of metamorphosis. **PP**
  - Well a famous botanist found a cocoon of a monarch butterfly on a plant he had been studying. **PP** He noticed that the cocoon was wiggling around a bit so he watched with anticipation as the new monarch butterfly fought and struggled to create a tiny hole in the cocoon. And then the wiggling stopped.
  - Not knowing what would happen next, and not seeing the butterfly really moving any longer he decided to help the butterfly out and took one of his tools and gently cut an incision in the cocoon. A little later the butterfly started moving again and this time it easily made its way out of the cocoon. Yay success, right? Wrong, the beautiful monarch butterfly tried to extend its wings to fly but it couldn't. It was too weak to do so.
  - The botanist went to one of his friends who was a lepidopterist – I just learned that's the fancy word for a person who studies butterflies – and the man chastised him for "helping" the butterfly out. The lepidopterist explained that it's only through the struggle of emerging from the cocoon that the butterfly develops the strength to fly.
  - And this is exactly what fasting and the other spiritual disciplines help us to do. As we stay focused on Jesus and abstain from food, the pain that we endure will

develop a spiritual strength in us that will prepare us to soar to new heights by the power of the Holy Spirit as He prepares us for the greater trials ahead.

- So a faith-filled fast is focused on Christ as we abstain from food, but thirdly **PP** it also entails surrendering our sin.
  - Throughout scripture, including in our passage today, God warns His people of empty self-righteous fasts. Read through **Isaiah 58-59** or **Zechariah 7** and you'll see the Lord crying out against worthless fasting.
    - If our lives are filled with unrepentant sin and abuse of those around us, instead of service to God and others and surrendering our sinful desires to Him, then our fasting is worthless.
  - **Jeremiah 14:12 PP** "Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence."
  - One of the early church fathers, **St. John Chrysostom PP**, put it this way, "Fasting is a medicine. But like all medicines, though it be very profitable to the person who knows how to use it, it frequently becomes useless (and even harmful) in the hands of the one who is unskillful in its use. For the honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices, since he who limits his fasting only to abstinence from meats is one who especially disparages fasting. Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see an enemy, be reconciled with him. If you see a friend gaining honor, do not be jealous of him. And let not only the mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all members of your bodies."
  - Fasting is a wonderful expression of our devotion to our Lord, but He'll reject our spiritual discipline if we're not also seeking to submit to him with all areas of our life and addressing the sins that he reveals to us. In fact, in my experience, often when we fast, the Lord will show you sins that you're not dealing with. It's almost as if He says, I appreciate your desire to draw closer to me, but why aren't you dealing with this?
  - **C.S. Lewis PP** wrote "Fasting asserts the will against the appetite – the reward being self-mastery and the danger pride. . . . Ascetic practices, which in themselves, strengthen the will, are only useful insofar as they enable the will to put its own house in order, as preparation for offering the whole man to God." C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p 112.
- So as we focus on Christ, and abstain from food in preparation for the greater tests ahead, we must seek to surrender any sinful thing that the Lord shows us so that we can offer more and more of ourselves exclusively to our god. And as we do those three things, by



the grace of God we'll learn to do the final aspect of faith-filled fasting: **PP** taming the appetites of our flesh and turning away the pleasures of this world.

- The problem often begins when we learn to satisfy our desires as soon as we feel them. We live in an instant gratification world. We fast because fasting says, "I'm not going to live for my appetites. I will not give in to the constant pull of my stomach."
  - **Philippians 3:18-19 PP** "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."
- When we fast we battle the relentless pull of our appetite. When we fast, the body grows weak, and that reminds us that we don't live by our strength, our provision, or our planning. When we fast, we declare, "Lord, you are my strength, my joy, and my chief desire."
  - One author wrote, **PP** "You need to experience how weak and fragile you are so that you know how strong and faithful God is. Fasting brings you to weakness and God always meets you in that weakness." - **Mark Nysewander**, The Fasting Key p. 54
- Fasting is about declaring that we will neither be ruled by our appetites nor by the pleasures of this world and that we're willing to be brought to weakness to learn that lesson. Not that those pleasures are bad all the time either. In fact, they can be good, godly things.
- **John Piper PP** wrote "The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but mindless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime time dribble of triviality we drink in every night....The greatest adversary of love of God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are . . . for the simple pleasures of the earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable." – John Piper, A Hunger for God, p 14.
- Fasting, enflames our spiritual hunger for God and helps us to lose the taste for the cheap and unsatisfying pleasures of this world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, fasting squeezes out the desires in our flesh that fight against God's will in our lives and aligns our hearts to God's desires for us.
- Faith-Filled Fasting **PP** is focused on Christ, abstaining from food, surrendering our sin, and taming our appetites and turning away pleasures all for the sake of being more like Jesus.



## Conclusion

- And this brings me back to our physiology lesson on pain from the beginning of our time together. It's a physiological reality that we are wired to flee from pain and pursue pleasure. But it's also a physiological fact that we're able to endure far more pain than we think we're able to. **PP**
  - Did you know that the most important part of any exercise is pushing yourself past the point when you think you can't do anymore? Whether that's running, lifting weights, or whatever exercise you like, your body will tell you a lie to get you to stop feeling pain.
  - And that lie is that you can't take anymore. But guess what? You can take more. In fact, once you push past the point of exhaustion, physiologically your brain creates new pathways, new definitions of what it knows it can handle. So that the next time you work out, you will have a new exhaustion point that's harder to get to than the last.
- And this is the same way it works spiritually with fasting. **PP** When we undertake faith-filled fasts, the Holy Spirit will create new spiritual pathways within us that will allow us to draw closer to the Lord and endure more effectively the temptations of this world. We will be able to walk in new places overcoming new trials as we follow more closely after Jesus.
- By the grace of God, let us not be a people who neglect the gift of fasting. Keep your hearts and minds open to the Lord leading you into a fast. **PP** If you want to learn more I would encourage you to read the book, God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis, it has wonderful insights into the spiritual fertilizer that is fasting.
- Let's not be self-righteous in our fasting, let's ask the Lord to fill us with His Spirit that we may stay focused on Jesus, abstaining from food to grow stronger for the greater trials ahead, surrendering the sin that the Lord reveals to us, even He tames our appetites and strengthens us to turn away from the pleasures of this world as we hunger more deeply for our God.
- Amen. Amen.