



By Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18

Subject: Part 39: The Citizen's Fast

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. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Did you know some churches in China request new converts to Christianity too fast for a month, to prove sincerity and commitment, as well as preparing them for the hard road ahead? Some teach that God hears and answers much better this way. This is not a new way of thinking. Not just in modern times but also in ancient times, some people thought that fasting alone was a way of getting God's attention. For a moment, just think about how childish this is. Imagine a child saying to their parent 'I'm not going to eat anything until you come and give me what I want', but that's the childishness in us, isn't it. There are times when people do this, fasting just to get God's attention and there's nothing biblical about that idea. The idea that a really spiritual or a really dedicated person would deprive themselves of food on its own in order to get God's attention is a false premise. God notices all His people, even those who afflict themselves to get his attention. But this is not a biblical purpose for fasting.

We are considering this subject of fasting tonight as Jesus presents it to us in these verses. In my opinion, it's a subject that has faded from the church's teaching and is very much neglected by believers in the West. I don't know why, but it is.

It's important to note that in the previous verses Jesus corrects hypocritical religious practices which were exhibited by the Pharisees in particular. In this chapter He picked out three illustrations. The first was that the Pharisees' giving was hypocritical in verse 2, the second confrontation was their hypocritical prayer life, in verse 5. And now in verse 16, Jesus is confronting their hypocritical ways

of fasting. In all three instances, their reason was not to please God but to be seen by men and taught highly and praised by them as Jesus tells us in verse 1:

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Fasting has been a part of religious traditions. All over the world in ancient times, certain people believed that demons could invade your body via food. Today we don't worry so much about demons but rather genetic modifications or contamination. Other nations, for example, Native American religions people, would go on prolonged fasts to receive visions or alter their state of consciousness. In modern society, fasting has, believe it or not, become somewhat popular. It is purely for medical, physical and cosmetic reasons, and it is recommended in some diet programs. There are a great deal of health benefits to it, but that of course is by the way. They may lose weight by fasting in this way, but they are not gaining any spiritual muscle.

So what place does fasting have in the Christian's life, in our lives? Is it mandatory? Does it have to be done in a certain way or for a certain length of time? Also, what is the purpose, outcome and effectiveness of fasting? These may be some questions that you have asked which will be hopefully answered tonight as we dive into the bible and see exactly what it teaches.

Fasting in the Bible is always connected with some spiritual activity as it relates to God. Many characters in the Bible fasted for example: Samson and Samuel, and also in the New Testament for example: John the Baptist fasted and so did his disciples. Jesus also fasted, so did Paul and we see so did others in church history such as Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitfield; who all wrote about fasting and the practice of fasting. So there is a place for it in the Christian's life.

What is the purpose of fasting? As we look back into the old testament we see there were various reasons. One such instant was they fasted as an expression of mourning, such as the death of a king as we read of in 1 Samuel 31:13. We also see how people fasted for the love of others, as they sought to enlist God's help, for example a friend who was sick in Psalm 35:13, or in sorrow over a sick child for example David in 2 Samuel 12. David also fasted when he was having personal struggles as he prayed for his enemies, read Psalm 35 as we see in verses 11 to verse 15:

“Fierce witnesses rise up; They ask me things that I do not know. ¹² They reward me evil for good, To the sorrow of my soul. ¹³ But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; I

humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart. ¹⁴ I paced about as though he were my friend or brother; I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother.¹⁵ But in my adversity they rejoiced And gathered together; Attackers gathered against me”

Others fasted in condemnation and out of fear of divine judgment, for example in Jonah 3, the people of Nineveh responded to Jonah’s message, even the king seemed to order the animals to fast as they poured out their hearts, afraid of the judgment of God. Some fasted as they went into the presence of God, and their prayer intensified, for example Moses’ supernatural fast on Mount Sinai, in Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 9:9. Others fasted, seeking God’s provision for something particular, for example, Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 asking for a child.

Others fasted to seek God’s mercy, even on behalf of nations, for example in Esther 4, Mordecai, Queen Esther and the Jewish community sought God following the decree for their destruction. Overwhelming danger often prompted fasting, for instances King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in Judah when they were threatened with attack from the Moabites and Ammonites there in 2 Chronicles 20:3, *“And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.”*

Others, fasted for God’s guidance and wisdom for example Daniel and Daniel’s friends, in the book of Daniel. In fact, Daniel received a special revelation from God during a time of prayer and fasting. As Daniel was contemplating Jeremiah’s prophecy of the desolation of Jerusalem it says in Daniel 9:2-3. *“in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. ³ Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.”*

As Daniel continued to seek the Lord, he tells us that he had an angelical visitor and he called the angel “the man” Gabriel. Now you will note that in chapter 10:3 that he was doing a partial fast, but this was not the means of receiving visions and revelations. Daniel’s fasting was part of his deep and desperate seeking of God’s will continually, as well as living righteously before God.

One of the longest discussions on the practice of fasting we find in Isaiah 58, where the focus is on its misuse, explains why the people’s fasting had not led to healing (Isaiah 58:3) as well as teaching

that righteous actions must accompany ritual practices. In short, the prophet tells them that their unjust acts would not result in God's favour (Isaiah 58:3,4 and 8)

Notice how all these examples show that fasting is connected with a deep mournful spirit and confessing sin. It is inextricably connected to a great sense of spiritual anxiety. It involves a time of confession of sin and seeking forgiveness at the hand of God as well as seeking His will. This is interesting because the only time God ever commanded fasting was for the greatest of all days, which was the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur or in Hebrew "*Kipperim*" which means atonement. See Leviticus 16:29 and Leviticus 23:27. You will recall this was a time when the people "*afflicted*" themselves and the sacrifice offered was foreshadowing the Cross. It was a national fast day, involving every man, woman, and child. But it occurred only once a year and on that particular day. That is the only fast ever given as compulsory by God in the entire Scripture. That's it.

Nowhere, even in the New Testament is it commanded by God, yet, both testaments, old and new, speak favourably regarding it. It was used in order to repent and draw near to God in a very serious way, allowing for total focus. It lasted from sunrise to sunset. It was for all intents and purposes a holy day and no hypocrisy was allowed, whatsoever. Let's just remind ourselves exactly what hypocrisy means; it means - insincerity, pretence, duplicity, two-facedness, falseness, we might also add, doing it just to be seen by others and that is for most part, is what the Pharisees who Jesus was speaking to were doing.

By the time Jesus was face to face with these hypocrites, did you know that there were two extreme views held by the Jews in the time of Christ. One group believed that no-one should fast as food is a gift from God. 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." So they didn't want to insult God, and ate what they saw fit at all times. Now others went to the extreme of not eating, fasting a lot, and that was their pious pretence. And when these Jews fasted, they made a show of their fasting because they wanted everyone to know what they were doing. They went so far as to appear gloomy, not a hard thing to do for actors. They would even wear old clothes, sometimes purposely torn and soiled, dishevel their hair, cover themselves with dirt and ashes, and believe it or not, they even used makeup to look pale to the point of sickly, something we Irish people wouldn't have to do! They were ahead of Max Factor. These were class one actors and what they were doing was simply putting on a show for man, seeking attention and have people believe they were spiritual. And it

would work as someone might say *'Oh Ruben you look very pale, and not quite right, are you o.k. ?'* and they'd say *'Thanks for asking, I'm actually fasting, I didn't realise it was taking its toll!'*

We read in Luke 18:12, the following *"I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."*

They usually did this on the second and fifth day of the week, claiming that these days were the days Moses made two separate trips to receive the tablets of the law from God on Mount Sinai. But what do you know, it was also the two days in Jerusalem and all over the country, that were major Jewish market days. So it was in order to get the crowd.

So, regardless of what the position you took, theology was developed to accommodate it. So if you ate everything without fasting, that was good, because on judgment day you could tell the Lord, that you tasted all of His creation. On the other hand, if you were pious and fasted, you ensured everyone knew just how righteously spiritual and holy you were. Both of these extremes, Jesus is correcting in these verses.

Jesus was right to call them out on this, their hearts were not right. In fact, what they were doing was mockery; it was a sham. We see similar things going on today within Christianity that grieve the Lord and His true disciples. All show, but no heart, no reality. Everything these people were doing was all about them. It centred on them. God had no place in their motives or in their thinking because God was not in their heart. They were not seeking to be rewarded by God, they had their reward of men and that is what they really craved for. Jesus said at the end of the verse that they had received their reward in full.

Having exposed their hypocrisy, Jesus teaches us the correct way in verses 17-18.

Fasting is recorded around 30 times in the New Testament and while not commanded, it is always commended. It must be noted that in Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29, Acts 9:29 and I Corinthians 7:5 where fasting is mentioned in most versions, they are not in the original text but they were inserted. It is called textual criticism, but it does not take from the message of the Bible. The other favourable accounts both in the Gospels and Epistles show the proper and legitimate form of fasting as a spiritual devotion.

Jesus said in verse 16, *"moreover, when you fast"* clearly indicating that fasting, be it for a period in the day or for the day or more, is acceptable in the Christian life and also a given, assuming His

followers will do so on occasions either personally or even collectively. When it is practiced it is to be according to the principles that Jesus teaches us here. Note, that He does not give a command as to when or even where or even method. Remember, the Day of Atonement ceased when Jesus made the once and for sacrifice on the Cross - Hebrews 10:10: ***“By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”*** Therefore, the command for this single prescribed occasion of fasting on Yom Kippur has ceased because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ. So it is now voluntary, and commended, not a command.

We know from Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus’ disciples did not fast because as I have said that fasting was associated with mourning and even other times of overwhelming spiritual need or anxiety. You will recall that in Matthew 9:14 - ***Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”***

and Mark 2:18. ***Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”***

Note Jesus reply in verse 15 of Matthew 9 - ***“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.”***

Fasting here is associated with mourning and throughout Scripture, fasting is never shown to be a tool just as a means for heightening spiritual experiences, visions, or special insight or awareness. This is what the mystics do, including some *“Christian”* mystics. Having said that, fasting is appropriate for us today but only as a response to special times of perhaps testing, like the church going through a trial or seeking God’s will in a situation or you personally are seeking God’s specific will for your life, or perhaps a struggle in your life. We can do it on our own, and sometimes it is appropriate, as God leads, to do so corporately. Fasting can help us focus on our communication with God, as we put to one side the everyday things of life, even food. In fact, it is well known medically, that after fasting, a total abstinence from food for a period of time, more blood is pumped to the brain which is why your senses such as hearing become clearer, you even think better.

There are other types of fasting. For example you can do a modified fast or a partial fast where you don’t totally abstain from food, but you abstain from banqueting, you abstain from lavishness, you

abstain from the rich foods, to eat a rather bland or common food. Daniel often did that. Remember when Daniel wouldn't touch the delicacies of the king's meat, but would only eat pulses, vegetables and drink water. In other words, it was not a total fast, but it was a restricted fast for spiritual priority reasons. People tend to do this over a longer time, but it is more common to abstain from food for a short period of time. There are also health issues that a person needs to consider prior to fasting, this may mean they would do a totally different type of fasting.

Did you know that a call for national fasting was something that was done, even after biblical times? For example Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national fast for March 30th 1863 not because they were being threatened by a natural enemy but by a spiritual one. It makes for a very interesting read.

He started the proclamation stating:

Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation. And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

It is worth reading if you get the chance, as it acknowledges God's divine law and that every nation and individual are ultimately subjected to His sovereignty and His judgment. Later on in it, he stated why they should fast when he noted -

But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behoves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

Interesting in more recently time *Andrew Scarborough, a member of the Australian National Day of Prayer and Fasting team said,*

"Both America and Australia desperately need to return to come back to God in repentance and humility.

In every scriptural account genuine fasting is linked with prayer. You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast biblically without praying. Fasting is an affirmation of intense prayer, a corollary of deep spiritual struggle before God. It is never an isolated act or a ceremony or ritual that has some inherent efficacy or merit. It has no value at all—in fact becomes a spiritual hindrance and a sin—when done for any reason apart from knowing and following the Lord’s will. It must go hand in hand with reading God’s word, if it is the will of God you are seeking.

We often see that prayer and fasting is often accompanied at the beginning of an important ministry. We see this in the New Testament, for example, Jesus - our greatest and most perfect example, in Matthew 4, when led by the Holy Spirit spent 40 days and nights praying and fasting, He was tempted by the Devil before He began His public ministry. When God moves upon a heart in relation to His desires and will for that individual, it can have such an effect on them that their zeal for God is such that eating becomes an intrusion. While abstaining from food has no spiritual value on its own, it is the willingness to forsake it, in order to communicate with God that holds the key. There will be no fan fair or announcements, as it should be done as unto the Lord, and discreetly.

Both before and after the Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for special ministry, the people set to pray and fast as we read in Acts 13:2-3.

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”³ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away”.

And the rest is history as they say. Mighty works were done for and unto the glory of God.

I personally don’t believe that it was a one off event, but from time to time, Barnabas and Paul were remembered by the church in this way; as they too, prayed and fasted especially when it came to appointing elders in the churches that under God’s direction, they founded as we see in Acts 14:23: ***“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed”.***

This was their practice, not just in the first church, but in every church. How much more does the leadership of the church today need to be strengthened, if only congregations were that determined to find and follow the Lord's will. The early church did not choose or send out leaders carelessly or by popular vote. Above all, they sought and followed God's will.

It is not the act of not eating (that's called a diet), but fasting before God enables us to draw into close communication with God so as to know His will, and to be ready for His answer, in whatever form and whatever time, as we completely depend on Him, and we anticipate His answer. Fasting before God, realines our hearts with His. It is that sincere dedication that is determined to know the Lord's will and have His power before decisions are made, plans are laid, a breakthrough is made or actions are taken, that is what makes all the difference.

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 and an act to deny self. Fasting is also linked with a pure heart and must be associated with obedient, godly living. The Lord told Zechariah to declare to the people in Zechariah chapter 7:5 and verse 9 to 10, *"When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? . . . Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another'"*.

Seventy years of fasting meant nothing to the Lord, because it was done insincerely. Like the hypocrites that Jesus would later condemn, those Israelites lived only for themselves (v. 6). After chastising the people in a similar way for their pretentious and unrighteous fasting, the Lord declared through Isaiah in Isaiah 58 verse 5 to 9; *Is this not the fast which I chose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say "Here I am."*

There can be no right fasting apart from a right heart, right living, and right attitude. *'But you, when you fast'*, Jesus tells those who belong to Him, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men. To anoint the head with oil was commonly done as a matter of good grooming. The oil was often scented and used partly as a perfume. Like washing the face, it was associated with day-to-day living, but especially with more formal or important occasions. Jesus' point was that a person who fasts should do everything to make himself look normal and do nothing to attract attention to his deprivation and spiritual struggle.

The one who sincerely wants to please God will studiously avoid trying to impress men. He will determine not to be seen fasting by men, but by God the Father who is in secret. Genuine fasting is simply a part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for the Lord, His will, and His work. It sets us apart unto God alone, so singly, that in a spiritual struggle, there's no need for food. Jesus' point is that the Father never fails to notice fasting that is heart-felt and genuine, and that He never fails to reward it. Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

Isn't it amazing that before Jesus approaches how to fast, he teaches us how to pray?

Just want to end with a quote from Andrew Murry who wrote-

Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.

Amen.