

## Biblical Understanding of Fasting

Sunday School

February 22, 2015

### A. Prayer

- B. Introduction: Fasting often evokes the image of a medieval monk or something else just as radical in our minds because it is a forgotten practice for many. Fasting almost sounds un-American with all the advertisements for food and drink that are cast before our eyes on a daily basis from TV to billboards. Feasting is more natural than fasting in this culture. However, the Bible tells us that fasting with prayer is a discipline that all Christians should be involved in to strengthen our spiritual walk with God. Aside from the many Old Testament passages (many of which I will refer us to in this paper) Jesus said very clearly, *“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others...”* (Matt. 6:16-18) Then we read these words in Matt. 9: 14-15, *“Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’”* This short study is being offered for understanding and direction so that perhaps this practice can once again aid our growth in the grace of our Lord. I will give information based on the 50 or so passages in the Bible that addresses this issue so as to reclaim this practice for the Church.

### C. Fasting: a definition...

1. What have you been taught the definition and purpose of fasting is?
2. John Calvin in his Institutes of the Christian Religion says this about the purpose of fasting and prayer. *“Holy and lawful fasting has three objectives. We use it either to weaken and subdue the flesh that it might not act wantonly, or that we may be better prepared for prayers, and for holy meditations, or that it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before Him.”*
3. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21, Sect. V. *The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as, also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: besides religious oaths, and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasion; which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.*
4. I love this from John Piper, from his book A Hunger for God ; *“Beware of books on fasting. The Bible is very careful to warn us about people who advocate, ‘abstaining from foods, which God created to be gratefully shared by those who believe and know the truth (I Tim. 4:1-5). Like a great declaration of freedom over every book on fasting flies the banner, ‘Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no the better off if we do eat. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a*

***stumbling block to the weak. (I Cor. 8:8-9). There once were 2 men. One said, 'I fast twice a week'; the other said, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' Only one went down to his house justified (Luke 18:12-14). Fasting is the hunger of homesickness for God.*** He goes on to illustrate that (saying the illustration is extremely limited) this is like being away from home or a loved one for a long time...say a soldier or a couple being on each side of the country...and waiting to hear from their loved ones...longing for that letter...such a longing that when it comes even if you are preparing to eat all of a sudden you have no appetite and your appetite is taken care of by the content of the letter. Jesus said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* While this is a passive thing...there is also an active aspect of this fasting...making the decision, for a time, to do so for God's honor. Piper continues, ***"Good things can do great damage as well. According to Luke 14:18-20. A piece of land. A yoke of oxen even love for a wife can keep us from God's banquet if we let it. (Look as well to Luke 14:33.)"*** So on one hand fasting is a way of life for the Christian in that we are constantly making decision about substitutes for God...cause anything can stand in the way of true discipleship...not just evil things...not just food...but anything and yet on the other hand there does seem to be a place for a specific time of fasting and prayer for God's people.

5. "A voluntary self-denial of food and drink for the purpose of expressing to God our intense concern and preoccupation with something...His something."- Richard Pratt, Jr.- Pray With Your Eyes Open
6. "Fasting is a time of drawing close to God by a physical act of self-denial, a practice shown to us in the Bible, to demonstrate our complete commitment to Him."- Craig Keener- professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern Baptist Seminary and the Center of Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia.
7. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, ***"The issue is not food per se. The issue is everything and anything that is, or can be, a substitute for God. Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate (think intimacy between husband and wife), but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting."***
8. Richard Foster in The Celebration of Discipline says this, ***"Christian fasting is tests to see what desires control us? More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other things."***

**D. People who fasted:**

1. Individuals: Moses, David (see Psalm 35:13), Elijah, Ahab, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, Jesus, the Pharisee, Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas
2. Nations: Israel, Ninevites, Judah, exiles
3. Groups: Saul's valiant men, David and his men, Jews in Susa, God's people, the prophets and teachers in Antioch, Paul's newly established mission churches, married couples in Corinth

4. Public fasts were officially called by the leadership in the Bible: (II Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Joel 1:14; Jonah 3:5-10)
  5. Personal fasts are also recorded for personal loss and for personal sins that needed to be atoned for in the Law.
  6. Virtually every religion in the world practices fasting in one form or another. And it has been observed that even non-religious people have fasted for political and health reasons. Jewish fasting includes Yom Kippur...Muslims fast during Ramadan...and then there are the severe fasts of the Hindu high casts of Brahmans...fasts of Most American Indian tribes are for cleansing and even vision ceremonies to set goals in life...
- E. So should Christians fast? Again the answer is yes...but not entirely as was done in the OT times. Why? Look at Matthew 6:16-18 and 9:14-17.
1. What does Matthew 6:16-18 and Matthew 9:14-17 generally tell us about fasting?
    - a. The ruling religious council had instituted by this time a twice a week fast...The Didache, which was written towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, talks about this when it says, *"Let not your fasts be with hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do your fast on Wednesday and Fridays."* This was not a mandate of when to fast but an expression that fasting after Christ was to be different from before Christ...different from Judaism. (See also Luke 18:11-12)
    - b. So our practice is not to look like the hypocrites...no sign that we are fasting...in fact, we are to look fresh and healthy. These people want others to know that they are pious.
    - c. There was no need to fast while the bridegroom is with them...but does this communicate no fasting after His resurrection and ascension? He did after all leave the Holy Spirit with us....
    - d. Jesus does say that fasting is a good thing in both texts. ..in fact, He expects that they will fast once He is gone.
    - e. That the old patterns of fasting are not useful after Christ...no more ash. No more sackcloth. So while affirming fasting He teaches us how and why not to do it...
  2. Especially concerning this last point...that the old patterns no longer apply many have said that fasting doesn't apply to NT Christians. Many argue that by virtue of Christ bringing in the kingdom this radically changes the importance of fasting. Many go so far as to say that fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks true kingdom fellowship. And this point seems to be made by the fact the fasting is barely noticeable in the NT outside of the gospel. Jesus speaks of fasting but we see him only being a part of one...His 40 day fast at the beginning of His ministry...
  3. Specifically in Matt. 9, Jesus speaks of mourning while the bridegroom is present...this is pertinent because fasting in that day was associated with mourning. It was an expression of broken heartedness and desperation, usually over sin or some danger or some longed after blessing. It was something you did when things were not going the way you wanted them to go.
  4. But this is what Jesus speaks against in this text, He is saying: the Messiah is here...the long awaited blessing has come and there is joy in that coming like the coming of the bridegroom to pick up his bride to consummate the marriage...it is all good... too good to mingle with fasting as it has always been

defined. Fasting is for times of yearning and longing and hoping and waiting. The absence of fasting was a witness to the fact that the Messiah was in their midst.

5. But Jesus concludes verse 15 with, *“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* What does He mean by this statement?
  - a. Some suggest that He is only talking about the few days between his death and resurrection or even the days between His ascension and Pentecost. But this is not likely since we do see the church fasting in Acts 13:1-3, and 14:23; and in II Cor. 6:5 and 11:27 by possible inference.
  - b. So it seems obvious that Jesus is talking about the Last Days...between His ascension and His return that His Church is to fast. He expects that we will hunger for the day of His return so that we can be fulfill...filled with Him...that is why we are to fast in this age.
7. With this in mind then what does He mean by what He says in verses 16-17?
  - a. First, He is saying that fasting now is defined by the fact that the bridegroom HAS come, not just that He WILL come. Since He has come the first time we are assured of His return... Christian fasting rest upon the finished work of Jesus.
  - b. Because of this then, we want more of this “new wine” of the kingdom...Christ’s presence...His presence is so real and so good and so satisfying that we want more...true Christian fasting is a hunger for all the fullness of God (See Eph. 3:19).
  - c. Just like Jesus makes other things like brand new...the Lord’s Supper from the Passover...baptism taking the place of circumcision....just like this He gives us a new definition and purpose for our fasting rather than doing away with it. There is still longing, aching and a desire for Christ to return but it is all based in the joy and assurance that He has come once and He will come again...

### Biblical Understanding of Fasting

#### Sunday School

March 1, 2015

#### A. Prayer

#### B. Review

1. A little more historical context:
  - a. In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to fast ONLY on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31, 23:26-32; Num. 29:7). However, God seems to have allowed fasting at other times which we will look at when we look specifically at the type of fasts highlighted in the Bible.
    - (1) They fasted in war or at the threat of War...Judges 20:26; I Sam. 7:6; II Chr. 20:3.
    - (2) They fasted when loved ones were sick...II Sam. 12:16-23;
    - (3) They fasted when loved ones dies...I Sam. 31:13; II Sam. 1:12; I Chr. 10:12
    - (4) They fasted when they sought God’s forgiveness...Deut. 9:15-18; I kings 21:17-29; Nehemiah 9:1-3; Dan. 9:3-5; Jonah 3:4-10
    - (5) They fasted when they faced impending danger...II Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 1:4; Esther 4:16
    - (6) Various other fast were carried out without specific command or condemnation from God...
  - b. The purpose for fasting in the OT...

- (1) Sometimes as a reaction to the above...thinking at these special times it was a way to get closer to God...
- (2) But more often, it had as its purpose "the affliction of the soul" (Lev. 23:26-32) and "*wept and humbled my soul*"- (Ps. 69:10- the English words here are trying to communicate the Hebrew words which mean "*chastening or afflicting our soul*"...point being to humble ourselves before the LORD....and in the case of the Leviticus passage in preparation to come into the presence of the LORD to celebrated the Day of Atonement.
- c. The length of fasts in the OT...
  - (1) Usually for One day...from sunup to sundown...and after sundown food would be taken...Judges 20:26; I Sam. 14:24; II Sam. 1:12.
  - (2) Queen Esther's fast took 3 days...7 days when Saul died...7 days when David's son with Bathsheba was dying... the longest fast recorded, of course were 40 days for Moses, Elijah (I Kgs. 19:8), and Jesus, but these were not usual or normative for the church.
- d. The problem with fasting outside of that which was commanded by God is that it can and did become a legalistic/works righteousness activity (the people did it mostly to see if God would hear their prayers...testing God in this way) that ended up taking away from its original purposes of repentance, prayer and preparation to meet with God in worship corporately. See Zechariah 7:1-14.
- e. That leads us into the Intertestamental period and the NT...by the time of Jesus the Pharisees had instituted the tradition of fasting twice a week and it seems the John the Baptist and his disciples were following that ordered fast...so that He and his disciples fasted more than most Jews.

### C. So should Christians fast today?

1. Again the answer is yes...but not entirely as was done in the OT times. Look again at Matthew 6:16-18. What did we see in this text to educate us about fasting?
  - a. Jesus does say that fasting is a good thing in both texts. ..in fact, He expects that they will fast once He is gone. It appears to NOT be optional for the Christian by virtue of His words. He drives home this point when He says in Matt. 6 "*when you fast*"...or..."*As often as you fast...*" not "*if you fast*". This is not an imperative...but it is a statement that assumes that we will fast.
  - b. Jesus also suggests that fasting is like prayer and giving in that it is an act of righteousness done to please the Father...The first 2 are commanded elsewhere...fasting however, commanded only on the day of Atonement for the Jews...seems to be commended when done without hypocrisy as a discipline towards humility.
  - c. But our practice is not to look like the hypocrites...no sign that we are fasting...in fact, we are to look fresh and healthy. These people want others to know that they are pious. That the old patterns of fasting are not useful after Christ...no more ash. No more sackcloth. So while affirming fasting He teaches us how and why not to do it...
2. What are some of the arguments that have been posed against the need to fast since Christ's ascension? What do you think of these arguments?
  - a. Many would argue that Christ fulfilled the Law which means the Law is done away with in their thinking.
  - b. Many go so far as to say that fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks true kingdom fellowship.

- c. Many argue that by virtue of Christ bringing in the kingdom this radically changes the importance of fasting.
- d. And this point seems to be made by the fact the fasting is barely noticeable in the NT outside of the gospel. Jesus speaks of fasting but we see him only being a part of one...His 40 day fast at the beginning of His ministry...

**D. Now let's look at Matt. 9:14-17...**

**6. What do we see here being taught about fasting?**

- a. There was no need to fast while the bridegroom is with them... Fasting would have a place in the lives of the disciples, but only on appropriate occasions (not necessarily as a ceremonial rite.) That there is a right time and a right place to fast.
- b. **Jesus concludes verse 15 with, *"The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."* What does He mean by this statement?**
  - (1) That one of the reasons for our fasting is to be for the purpose of longing for His return...we no longer have to mourn for He will be leaving the Holy Spirit with us...but we are not to be satisfied in this life with this world...but we are to long for His return...
  - (2) Some suggest that He is only talking about the few days between his death and resurrection or even the days between His ascension and Pentecost. But this is not likely since we do see the church fasting in Acts 13:1-3, and 14:21-23; and in II Cor. 6:5 and 11:27 by possible inference.
  - (3) So it seems obvious that Jesus is talking about the Last Days...between His ascension and His return that His Church is to fast. He expects that we will hunger for the day of His return so that we can be fulfill...filled with Him...that is why we are to fast in this age.

**7. What was the point of the whole discussion concerning wine skins to John's disciples?**

- a. That change had come, in Him, and it wasn't possible to keep doing things status quo...it was not time, while He was there for either fasting or feasting but for spending time with Him.
- b. The old ways cannot hold the new...the old ways have little to nothing left in them that resemble their original intent...and if you mix the 2 then both are ruined...need to get back to original intent which requires all new wine skins...
- c. God is not interested in ceremony for the sake of ceremony and religious rites. Rather He commands that we commit ourselves to Him.
- d. Because of this then, we want more of this "new wine" of the kingdom...Christ's presence...His presence is so real and so good and so satisfying that we want more...true Christian fasting is a hunger for all the fullness of God (See Eph. 3:19).
- e. Just like Jesus makes other things like brand new...the Lord's Supper from the Passover...baptism taking the place of circumcision...just like this He gives us a new definition and purpose for our fasting rather than doing away with it. There is still longing, aching and a desire for Christ to return but it is all based in the joy and assurance that He has come once and He will come again...

**Biblical Understanding of Fasting**  
**Sunday School**  
**March 8, 2015**

**A. Prayer**

**B. Review**

**1. So should Christians fast? Support your answer with Matthew 6:16-18 and Matthew 9:14-17.**

**a. For 6:16-18:**

- (1) Jesus does say that fasting is a good thing in both texts. ..in fact, He expects that they will fast once He is gone. It appears to NOT be optional for the Christian by virtue of His words. He drives home this point when He says in Matt. 6 *"when you fast"...or..."As often as you fast..."* not *"if you fast"*. This is not an imperative...but it is a statement that assumes that we will fast.
- (2) Jesus also suggests that fasting is like prayer and giving in that it is an act of righteousness done to please the Father...The first 2 are commanded elsewhere...fasting however, commanded only on the day of Atonement for the Jews...seems to be commended when done without hypocrisy as a discipline towards humility.
- (3) But our practice is not to look like the hypocrites...This is actually the main point Jesus is making throughout this section...we are not to look like the hypocrites in our giving our praying or our fasting.

**b. For 9:14-17:**

- (1) There was no need to fast while the bridegroom is with them...
- (2) Fasting would have a place in the lives of the disciples, but only on appropriate occasions (not necessarily as a ceremonial rite.) That there is a right time and a right place to fast.

**2. What was the point of the whole discussion concerning wine skins to John's disciples?**

- f. That change had come, in Him, and it wasn't possible to keep doing things status quo...it was not time, while He was there for either fasting or feasting but for spending time with Him.
- g. The old ways cannot hold the new...the old ways have little to nothing left in them that resemble their original intent...and if you mix the 2 then both are ruined...need to get back to original intent which requires all new wine skins...
- h. God is not interested in ceremony for the sake of ceremony and religious rites. Rather He commands that we commit ourselves to Him.
- i. Because of this then, we want more of this "new wine" of the kingdom...Christ's presence...His presence is so real and so good and so satisfying that we want more...true Christian fasting is a hunger for all the fullness of God (See Eph. 3:19).
- j. Just like Jesus makes other things like brand new...the Lord's Supper from the Passover...baptism taking the place of circumcision...just like this He gives us a new definition and purpose for our fasting rather than doing away with it. There is still longing, aching and a desire for Christ to return but it is all based in the joy and assurance that He has come once and He will come again...

**C. Why fast...what do we see in the NT? Now let's look at the places we see fasting in the NT for some direction, namely; Acts 13:1-3, 14:21-23; II Cor. 6:3-13 and II Cor. 11:23-28.**

**1. Acts 13:1-3...The church in Antioch. What was going on here? What do we learn about the purpose for fasting and praying in this text?**

- a. Just so we are clear...fasting and praying go together.
- b. These were the leaders of the church in Antioch and they were seeking the Spirits leading as to whom to send on this missionary journey to Cyprus.
- c. So we see here a practice of leaders in the church fasting and praying for guidance from the Lord...

2. Acts. 14:21-23... the Churches in Galatia. What is going on here? What do we learn about the purpose of fasting and prayer here?
  - a. Paul and Barnabas appoint elders and the whole group fasted and prayed as these elders are set apart for the ministry...
  - b. This was done in every church as a practice for the church...
  - c. This was done in churches that were not necessarily Jewish churches thus pointing out that fasting was not just a Jewish thing...
  - d. They would have been asked to fast before the men were installed...in our case before an election...the church could be asked to fast the day before the election...and/ or before the installation...seeking the Lord that the men who will be elected be godly and Spirit-filled and humble before the Lord and His people and that as members of the church that we would be submissive to their leadership.
  
3. Fasting seems to be a mark of Paul's ministry- II Cor. 6:3-13 (specifically vs. 5 "hunger") and II Cor. 11:23-28 (specifically vs. 27- "often without food" seems to speak of fasting separately from normal hunger and thirst as he mentions.
  - a. As a mark of his ministry...
  - b. As a mark of his good standing as a minister as if this is what minister can do as well...
  
- D. Sooo...Should Christians fast today? There seems to be enough evidence to state that fasting is a Christian discipline for today.
  1. It is a teaching of Jesus as we have seen...
  
  2. We saw examples of the Church fasting in the NT for specific purposes...
  
  3. We even saw a personal practice of Paul as a leader in the Church...
  
  4. At the very least, we can say except for medical reasons it would not be inappropriate for Christians to fast today.
  
  5. But let's just consider this question. Why should Christians fast today?
    - a. For many of the same reasons as seen in the OT...as a congregation when seeking blessing, guidance, seeking to repent, forgiveness, leadership and vision...as such should be done in conjunction with prayer...as called by the elders of the church...
  
    - b. Personally and privately as well...but this get a bit tricky when you live with others... because when we are faced with an overwhelming temptation we need to seek counsel of the elders and when you faced with a serious illness of a loved one...once again the general practice of the NT Church is that everyone would pray together...so then we could be back to congregational fasting and prayer...
  
  6. Why shouldn't we fast?
    - a. Col. 2:20-23 tell us why not to fast...if we make such fast mandatory or salvific in anyway...
    - b. To be seen by men...
    - c. As a ritual...it can be done when the occasion calls for it...possibly led by the elders...
    - d. Not without repentance...Is. 58:3-9... all praying and fasting is of no avail if not accompanied with penitent obedience.
    - e. Not to do it unless we have set aside a good amount of time that is devoted to undistracted prayer.
    - f. If medically, not a good idea...



**Biblical Understanding of Fasting**  
**Sunday School**  
**March 15, 2015**

1. Prayer
2. How to fast.
  1. Fasting seems mostly to be highlighted in the context of and under the authority of the church leadership in the NT. (See Acts 9:9, 13:1-3, 14:23, again)
  2. Why is there so much talk about using or not using food in a fast if that is only one way to fast?
    - a. It is the easiest thing...doesn't cause us to have to think too hard.
    - b. Bread/food is such a central part of our life representing both physical sustenance and spiritual sustenance in the Scriptures...
    - c. The heart of the matter is this...we are to find more contentment in Christ than in food...and often we are more focused on food than Christ...spending hours working so we can put food on the table...spending literally hundreds of dollars at restaurant getting the "best" food rather than tithing.
  3. Rising early for ministry can be a fast. Even making a Bible Study or a prayer meeting when it is hard to get there is a kind of fast. When we make choices that glorify the Father we make war on the deceitfulness of our desires and declare rising early and prayer are of more important than our own creature comforts or time...
  4. But it is interesting that there is not much said about fasting in the NT. It is true that certain things come with a cultural understanding...like the hospitality people were required to exhibit in the OT seems to be the same in the NT...even how you were to treat enemies in your home...all of that was mentioned and then assumed to be a quality of God's people. Placing the sign and seal of the covenant on our children even after that symbol was changed to water seems to be another one of those MAJOR things that were expected and understood...given that they fell under the moral law of the covenant. Being a blessing comes with a high price tag since we are to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others... first our family then branching out to others as we have the ability and calling to do.
  5. We looked at Isaiah last time and how he describes the fast that God would find acceptable. Let's look again so we can see the contrast he draws between the fasts of men and the fasts that He would find acceptable for His people Isaiah 58:1-12. I think it is interesting how Newer Testament it all sounds...thinking about Jesus' words in Matthew 6 and 9.
    - a. Why according to Isaiah does God not notice their fasts or their acts at humility? (See vss. 1-5)
      - i. As the prophet God calls on him to convince And show the people their sins...no matter the consequences...because the people are unable and/or unwilling to see their own sins God sends His man to tell them and show them just like He did with Nathan and David...with different results, of course.
      - ii. They have proved themselves to be unrighteous and unwilling to listen to God's Word...blessings or judgments.
      - iii. They have presumed upon God... "Hey, Look at me and how religious I am...doing what you command."

- iv. As long as they “look” religious...they can do as they please...we can always pray about our “less than perfect” actions, towards our employees, our employer, our spouses, others in general; in the morning...or offer another sacrifice...or say another Hail Mary...or give a bit more this week to the tithes and offerings.
- v. Outward traditions have no power or authority if there is not a humbled heart...
- vi. I heard the other day that Tim Keller was speaking about the Scriptures and their authority and he said something like this. *“The Bible...It will either crush you or make you a Pharisee.”* I would add that true humility begins with being crushed and living with that reality by God’s grace to be able to do for God and others. It is being in a state of humility before God that God honors. For He is more about “being” than “doing”. Humility is a sign of freedom in Christ and freedom in Christ leads to obedience...bringing God glory.

**b. What kind of fasts will God find acceptable according to verses 6-12?**

- i. Verses 1- 5 speaks to the lack of true inner humility...now verse 6 and forward speaks of the actions of the one who is in a state of humility before God and his fellow men...and the NT affirms these...Matthew 22:34-40...as seen in the type of fasts that God finds acceptable.
- ii. ***“loosing the chains of injustice...setting the oppressed free...to break every yoke (of slavery) (vs. 6)...***
  - 1. That we must be just in all our dealings with others...even God’s remnant seemingly have been found not dealing completely justly with their neighbor...no Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12)...an old popular proverb that Jesus restates in a positive fashion which reflects how we are to love our neighbor as our self.
  - 2. Proclaiming the gospel because it is the only thing that sets people free indeed, so our life should exhibit the qualities of living the A to Z of the gospel...keeping our word...fighting for the “rights” of the widow and the orphan...standing up to injustice...stand up for the right to life...
- iii. ***“sharing your food...”“...providing for the homeless poor...”*; *“...when you see the naked, to cover him...vs. 7, “...pouring yourself out for the poor...vs. 9***
  - 1. The poor will always be with us as a reminder of how we are to be before God but also as a way to be obedient to God’s word to care for the poor.
  - 2. Our fast is not merely to deny ourselves but possibly to determine a way to supply the needs of others...giving up the cost of eating out for a time period to give as an offering toward the needy...hunger, clothing, housing, etc.
- iv. ***“Bringing the homeless into your house...” – Hospitality...a true Christian virtue...inviting even the stranger for a meal...to stay overnight...***
  - 1. think of *The Hobbit* for a minute- Bilbo invited Gandalf to stay, sit and talk even before he knew who he was...saw a tired stranger and gave him refuge...or later on when the dwarves start showing up...he serves this rabble everything he has...they had a need and he filled it...even to great “cost” to himself.
  - 2. When I was a child my grandfather often talked about life between the two World Wars and how hobos would ride the rails and the towns people would leave their homes open so they could rest...or even place food out on the porch in an area where they knew these folks would wander.
  - 3. I don’t remember ever locking our car doors, they had locks but I don’t remember them being used that often unless we were somewhere we didn’t know...and the only time I remember us locking our house doors is when we left town for a day or two.
  - 4. And churches were always open...the doors were unlocked so that anyone could take refuge inside or come in and pray any time of the day.
  - 5. There was a time not that long ago when members of a denomination could contact a church in the area they were traveling through and ask if someone in the congregation couldn’t put them up for the night or a few days while they took care of business. (This is still offered sometimes for presbytery today.)
  - 6. Hospitality is a highly overlooked virtue in our day and age...one that the Testaments talks much about.

- v. ***“...and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”***- Sympathy and empathy are to be displayed...compassion... these help us to remember that we were once homeless and poor...at least in spirit if not actually. See Hebrews 13:3. This is the fast God requires: We are not to hide ourselves from those in need... we are to be willing to give up of ourselves when a true need is made known. Could be rendered, ***“...and that you hide not yourself from the needs of your own flesh and blood.”***- Putting immediate family needs first...another NT concept about giving and taking care of family.
  - vi. ***“...Removing the yoke from your midst, (what is that yoke= prejudice)(removing) the pointing finger and speaking wickedness...”***- Literally the Hebrew means, “removing the sending of the finger...”, which could mean in today’s understanding, “remove yourselves from the giving someone the finger”...of course this doesn’t have to just mean an actual hand gesture...but as Jesus defines these things for us it also means ...doing that in our hearts toward someone...especially another brother or sister in the faith. This is not just pointing at someone...the meaning is an obvious insult...in deed , word or heart. So we are to fast from having impure thoughts about the poor and needy.
  - vii. ***One more thing: “if you pour yourself (your soul) out for the hungry, and satisfy the desire (the soul) of the afflicted...”*** The point? The ministry is soul to soul...(it is unfortunate that the English doesn’t see this clearly). In short this is simply doing the will of God.
- c. **What are some of the obvious blessings for these types of fasts?**

6. **What example does Daniel give for us today in Daniel 10?**
7. **It is clear that Jesus expects His disciples (us) to fast in the joy of the Lord as it was proclaimed by the prophet Zechariah, *“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘The fasts... will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.’*” (Zech. 8:18-19)**
8. **Though the practice is seen as regular and often (Zech. 8:18-19), part of the life cycle of God’s people and as a commanded act of righteousness by Christ, fasting was never meant to become legalistic.**
  - a. ***“Rend your hearts and not your garments.”*** (Joel 2:13) Jesus said, ***“I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners.”***
  - b. **He is opposed to the *“rules taught by men”*.** (Matt. 15:9, see also Luke 18:12)
9. **Why are we so slow to fast and so quick to feast?**
  - a. **It is because we have yet to learn about denying ourselves and following Christ.**
  - b. **However, fasting and feasting are both appropriate behaviors for the child of God. In both we have the opportunity to be closer to our heavenly Father- one through self-denial the other through fellowship with His people neither of which should be neglected. Let us not give up either. We too often see them as mutually exclusive when they are not. Each to its own time.**

**Biblical Understanding of Fasting**  
**Sunday School**  
**March 22, 2015**

**A. Prayer**

**B. Review**

1. How did all the discussion in Isaiah 58 help in your understanding the concept of fasting?
2. Why are we so slow to fast and so quick to feast?
  - a. We are convinced that these two are mutually exclusive and they are not!
  - b. It is because we have yet to learn about denying ourselves and following Christ.
  - c. However, fasting and feasting are both appropriate behaviors for the child of God. In both we have the opportunity to be closer to our heavenly Father- one through self-denial the other through fellowship with His people neither of which should be neglected. Let us not give up either. Each to its own time.
  - d. Matthew Henry; *"See what we should value as the true treasure. The kingdom of God is not just meat and drink, neither the abundance nor delicacy of food, but also and more so the righteousness and peace and joy of the Holy Ghost...The more dead we are to the delights of sense the better prepared we are for the pleasure of heaven."*

**C. A few questions:**

1. Why does John Piper in his book on fasting called Hunger for God, tell us to beware books on fasting?
  - a. They have a tendency to miss the mark and focus on legalistic stuff.
  - b. Piper does say this, *'Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no the better off if we do eat. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.(1 Cor. 8:8-9). There once were 2 men. One said, 'I fast twice a week'; the other said, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' Only one went down to his house justified (Luke 18:12-14). Fasting is the hunger of homesickness for God. Good things can do great damage as well. According to Luke 14:18-20. A piece of land. A yoke of oxen even love for a wife can keep us from God's banquet if we let it.'*
  - c. So on one hand fasting is a way of life for the Christian in that we are constantly making decision about substitutes for God because anything can stand in the way of true discipleship...not just evil things...not just food...but anything and yet on the other hand there does seem to be a place for a specific time of fasting and prayer for God's people.
3. Martin Lloyd Jones reminded us: *"The issue is not food per se. The issue is everything and anything that is, or can be, a substitute for God. Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate (think intimacy between husband and wife), but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting."*
4. How do Matthew 6:16-18 and Matthew 9:14-17 answer the question concerning whether or not Christians ought to fast today?
5. Where and for what reason do we see fasting specifically spoken of in the NT, outside of the gospels?
  - a. Fasting and praying in sending out the missionaries...Acts 13:1-3...
  - b. Fasting and prayer concerning the appointment of elders in Acts 14:21-23

- c. Mark of a leader's ministry, especially Paul's...but probably an example of piety for all the leaders...Acts 9:9; II Cor. 6:3-13, II Cor. 11:23-28
6. A couple of concluding remarks:
    - a. As with any study, the Bible is the final authority on this subject. I only hope that this will stimulate a continual study on your part to determine the best use of a fast to bring God glory... as a Session I can say we will as well...
    - b. I would recommend that if you are thinking of fasting that you talk it over with the Session so we can pray with you and hold you accountable. There is so little in both the OT and the NT that suggests an attitude of doing these things privately in that we need to refresh ourselves for ourselves.... everything we do is to be seen and done ultimately for edifying the greater whole...by seeking the Session's assistance you can be sure you are being watched over properly and you can be certain that your motives are pure...
  7. Have you ever fasted? If you have, did you tell anyone you were doing it at the time? If so, why? Is fasting to be normative for today? Why or why not?
  8. What is to be gained by fasting?
    - a. Seeking and experiencing God's guidance...being more spiritually aware.
    - b. It would give us a clearer focus as to why we live the way we do.
    - c. Closer relationship with God and His people in our sanctification...
    - d. Interesting these are supposed to characterize our days whether we are on a "fast" or not...because we are to be fasting from things that distract us from our love of God every day.
    - e. Others are to gain from our fasting...just like everything else we do it is to be done to give glory to God and to edify the body.
  9. So, in conclusion, what would you say are some reasons for us to fast today? Reasons that we shouldn't?
  10. So, what have you learned you didn't know before?
  11. So just so we are clear...fasting seems to be more centered on how we can glorify the Father while at the same time seeking to meet the needs of others while fasting from having our own needs met.

*"One final word. It is popular for Christians to think fasting somehow brings them closer to God in a way that nothing else does. No matter how much people may protest their own experience to support their position, I don't buy it. You shouldn't either.*

*The Scriptures sanctify us. We are transformed by the renewing of our mind, not the restriction of our diet.*

***The Law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalm 19:7).***

***Sanctify them in the truth, Your Word is truth (John 17:17).***

***All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).***

*Don't look for external fasting to do for you what God has appointed the Scriptures to do. Fasting is not designed to put righteous desires into you; it's meant to be a means to express urgent desires that already exist. Fasting is an effect of a spiritual urgency, not the cause of it.*

*Look for God in His Word, not in bodily hunger pangs. That is what will produce the spiritual growth you desire in your walk with Christ."*

Don Green, pastor at the Grace to You Ministries