

Fasting

February 21, 2010

Matthew 6:16-18

Focus: In a world of more, fasting and self-denial helps us focus on God.

It's a tradition in my family. On Tuesday I had to eat a fashnacht. How many of you had a fashnacht? How many of you have no idea what I'm talking about? When prepared correctly, these are heavy donut like things, cooked in lard and then maybe sprinkled with a little bit of powdered sugar. Growing up, my pappy who was very Pennsylvania Dutch would get the special fashnachts and make sure we had them for the Tuesday before Ash Wed. This came about because you'd cook up something good and something sweet and use up your sugar before lent began so that you were prepared to fast through lent. That's our Pennsylvania Dutch traditions. Many of our cultures have some sort of tradition for the Tuesday before Ash Wed. The Cajun tradition has Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras as you may know it. The day where you eat all the fat and party hard because in the old days lent meant you gave up fat and partying until Easter Sunday.

That's because on Wed., we began the church season of Lent where we prepare for Jesus death on the cross on Good Friday and wait for his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Lent is a time to prepare and remember Jesus great and amazing sacrifice for us. And we prepare this lent for Jesus sacrifice by learning how we can get ourselves spiritually fit. To keep our bodies healthy and physically fit, we exercise regularly and we eat good food. We discipline ourselves to go to the gym or work out with the Wii. We discipline ourselves not to stop at the Dairy Queen or grab that bag of chips. And so as we recognize and remember that Jesus Christ gave everything for us, it is necessary to get our spiritual lives fit as well.

This season we are studying the spiritual disciplines that keep ourselves focus on God and grow our faith. When we discipline our spiritual lives, we get ourselves in shape and in right relationship with God. Over the next several weeks we will be studying the time honored disciplines that have been practiced for centuries and millennia by faithful Christ followers who wanted to deepen their spiritual lives and their relationship with God. If you would like to know more and how to practice these in your own lives, it isn't too late to jump into our depth charge on the spiritual disciplines on Wed. evening as we study the Christian book classic, Celebration of Disciplines by Richard Foster. This in depth bible study uses a brand new DVD resource and small group discussions to understand the spiritual disciplines while growing your relationship with God.

Today we come to learn about the spiritual discipline of Fasting. The Miriam Webster Dictionary defines fasting, 'to abstain from food.' And this is the common understanding of fasting. We fast before we have a medical test, means we give up food usually 24 hours before. But fasting as a spiritual discipline means to abstain from something of value to draw us closer to God. Fasting has been a common spiritual discipline since the time of the Old Testament. By Jesus' time, the Pharisees were fasting to show off how faithful they were. And so Jesus talks about the discipline of fasting in Matthew 6:16-18. [Read]

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

As Jesus speaks about fasting, he speaks in definite terms. In these three short verses on fasting, Jesus says not once, but twice "When you fast."

For Jesus, it isn't a question of IF WE FAST, but WHEN WE FAST.

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This passage comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' longest sermon and the one where he lays out for his followers how they can live out the faith. He talks about how we give to the poor, how to love our enemies, forgiveness, prayer and here, fasting. In the midst of telling his disciples how to practice the faith through the spiritual disciplines like giving and prayer, Jesus now in very certain terms talks about fasting. *"When you fast ... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Jesus is so certain about the need to fast because he knows that fasting draws us closer to God. Because when you give something up, when you go without food, you have nothing to rely upon but your faith. You see,

Fasting HAS THE ABILITY to draw us closer to God.

For all the disciplines we will discuss through Lent, Jesus speaks from his own experience. Jesus practiced these disciplines in his own life. When Jesus was about to begin his ministry, and he knew the journey of the next three years and that it would lead to the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus began in prayer and fasting. To get ready for his ministry, Jesus headed out into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. Imagine, 40 days, that's a long time. That pushes the body to the ultimate limits. And when there's nothing in your stomach for 40 days, you've got to rely on your faith. Jesus knew he would be tested and that the journey would be long and hard, so he prepared himself spiritually by relying upon God and fasting for 40 days. And this fast did indeed focus his faith and remind him of what is import. Three times the devil tried to tempt Jesus, but he was able to rely upon God because he had spent 40 days getting spiritually fit by practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting.

That's why we're talking about fasting this lent. Because when we exit these doors, we will be tempted. As we go about our every day lives, many other things, people and objects are going to try and pull us away from our faith. And we need to get spiritually fit and understand how we prepare our bodies and our souls.

How many of you have given something up for Lent? Chocolate, TV, caffeine, sweets, whatever? This is also a fast. To deny ourselves of something exterior and worldly that we may rely upon and instead rely upon our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Some of the most rewarding and faithful periods of my life have come when I have fasted. Each time I yearned for that physical thing, I have drawn upon the strength of the Lord to carry me through. When my body craved, I used those cravings as physical reminders to pray and give thanks to God. (Share personal stories)

Fasting is a physical discipline that brings spiritual results.

1. **Prepare us to serve** – Moses, Daniel, Jesus
2. **Good self-discipline** – ways of the world v. faith
3. **Do without things** – rely upon God
4. **Appreciate our blessings**

When you put the discipline of fasting into practice in your life, God will indeed work miracles. As we get ready for Good Friday and Easter, challenge yourself to Fast. Rely upon God and see the miracles and gifts.