

Two weeks ago when we started talking about our devotional acts or acts of righteousness, we defined our motives as why we do the stuff we do when no one else is looking. We talked about why we give alms and why we pray. This week we’re going to talk about the third act of righteousness, fasting, and what it has to do with our relationship with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 6:16-18

“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. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Fasting in Israel has a rich history:

- Fasting was practiced during times of mourning, such as the nation-wide fast which lasted for a whole week when King Saul was killed in battle.
- It was used in preparation for receiving God’s revelation, such as when Moses fasted for 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai.
- Israel fasted, calling on God for his favor, before entering into warfare.
- And the nation fasted as it petitioned the Lord for rain during times of drought.
- King David fasted when he was in distress and as he pleaded with the Lord for direction and intervention.
- Fasting was also a part of repentance. For example, the entire city of Ninevah fasted when Jonah confronted the people with their sin.

But perhaps the most important fast was the one commanded by God, the one which prepared the people of Israel to receive the benefits of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. Moses told the people, **Leviticus 16:29-31**, **“And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves^(a) and shall do no work, either the native or the**

stranger who sojourns among you. ³⁰ For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. ³¹ It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever.”

Everyone in Israel fasted as they prepared to receive God’s forgiveness. That’s the back-story for fasting in Israel. In Jesus’ day fasting was a very popular spiritual discipline, just as alms-giving and prayer were. But too, as was the case with those disciplines, the people’s motives for fasting were upside-down.

The market in Jerusalem was open Monday through Thursday. Very conveniently, the Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, the opening and closing days of the market, the busiest times. Without having bathed, shaved, or cared for their hair, they sprinkled ashes on their heads and white powder on their faces—the marks of people who were fasting—and they walked the streets with their tormented appearance. (Thus the advent of the first zombies.)

This is the situation which Jesus was speaking to: a people whose devotion to God was only outward, whose appearance of holiness was for other men, a people who were led astray by their own sin-filled hearts. This is a challenge for us too.

One way to set things right in our hearts and minds as regards our motives for fasting is to think about it as a state of humility before God, saying to him, “Nothing matters on heaven or on earth but you alone. From dust I came, to dust I shall return. But in Your mercy, Lord, I shall live.”

One commentator says we should “fast in the direction of the heavenly Father alone.” For everything we do is in the direction of something, thus we should challenge ourselves with the question, “Who is this for? For me? For other people? Or for God?”

To illustrate what this means using the everyday activity of shopping until we’re dropping, I quote the author and evangelist, Tony Campolo, who said, “We spend money that’s not ours, buying things we don’t need, to impress people we don’t know!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if we shopped, if we prayed, if we fasted “in the direction of the heavenly Father alone” we would live so much differently.

In the New Testament there's little direct teaching about fasting, but we do have the story of the early church. We read, **Acts 13:2-3**, **"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'** ³**Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on (the disciples) and sent them off."**

And we also read, **Acts 14:23**, **"When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."**

What this means for us is that fasting is appropriate for a congregation when it comes to making major decisions as regards its life and ministry.

Luther encouraged us to fast. He explained that fasting should be much more than refraining from eating and drinking, but that "True fasting consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, (that this pertains to) your leisure, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body or what you do to provide for it and take care of it."

St. Paul addressed this link between our body and spirit in a several instances. For example, he wrote, **1st Corinthians 6:15-20**, **"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh.'** ¹⁷**But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."**

Paul used sexual immorality as an illustration of how the cravings of our flesh can steal away our devotion to the Lord. On the other hand, when our spirits which belong to Christ are the masters of our bodies, we serve the Lord.

Over the years it has been determined that fasting has many benefits for body and soul:

- It's good for our health, purging our system of toxins.
- It's good for self-discipline: If you can go without eating for a day or two or three, you can do anything, whether it be committing yourself to an exercise regimen or a regular time for devotions.
- It's good for modifying our perspectives and priorities: Sometimes it's as though we live to eat; through fasting we can turn that around: We eat to live. Our priorities about physical things is interwoven with our spiritual priorities. Thus Jesus commands us not to worry about what we eat or drink, for your Father in heaven knows what we need.
- It's good for increasing our sense of thankfulness not only for food but for all of the Lord's provisions.
- And it's good for fighting temptation: When we fast, lust, anger, and envy all fade away.

But the most important reason we fast is to be in communion with Jesus. I said earlier the one commandment the Lord gave to his people for fasting was to fast in preparation for the Day of Atonement, that time when the high priest absolved the sins of the people which had not yet been forgiven, applying the blood of the sacrifice to the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. With true sorrow and contrite hearts the people fasted and prayed, and they gave thanks to the Lord, and they praised him for his mercy.

Friends in Christ, Jesus is our sacrifice. He died on the Cross for you and me, and we have been made whole. We didn't deserve it, but we got it; it was a gift. But we didn't fast for that day of atonement. But now we can, and we can give thanks.

This week let us consider our motives which lie behind the things we do.

This week let us reflect on how we might devote ourselves to the service of God. Alms, prayers, and fasting are excellent acts of devotion. But there are other things we can do as well, such as singing, Bible study, and acts of service. Let us find the tools that help us grow in maturity as disciples of Christ.

And this week let us take opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.