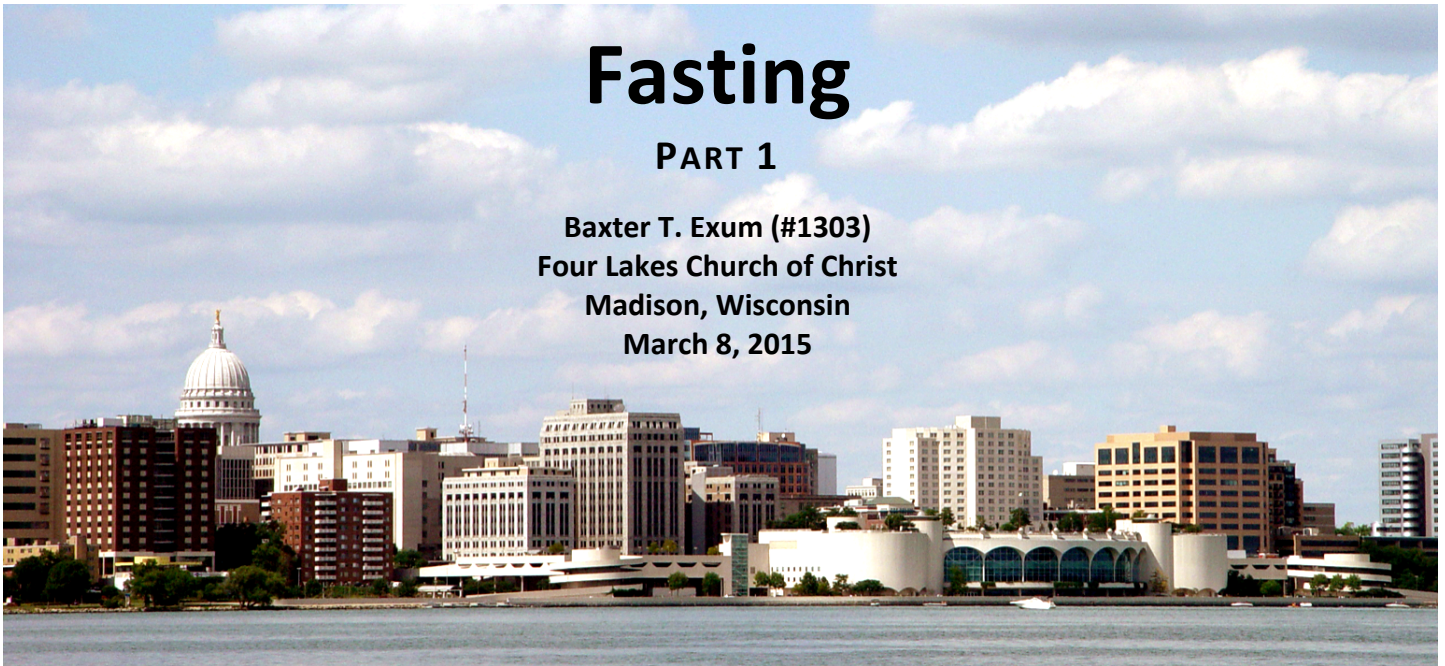


Fasting

PART 1

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This morning I would like for us to consider a request from one of our members, and the request (as it was worded on the card) is this: The importance of fasting – and specifically, how can fasting help a person to redirect their thoughts to focus on God? What an interesting question! Should we as Christians practice fasting? This past week on Facebook I posted, “Prepping for this lesson on fasting sure is making me hungry!” It was a real challenge to prepare a lesson on fasting. It was a challenge to spend three days looking at every passage in the Bible on not eating. And the question is especially relevant, because when it comes to food, we are certainly living not only in a time of excess, but also in a time of great need. Food is so important.

On one hand, we look at the world around us, and we realize that we as Americans do a lot of eating, even to the point where eating has now become an organized sport. Yesterday, for example, I ran across an article online with this headline, “Hero Sets Record by Eating 182 Slices of Bacon in Five Minutes.” My first thought was: What an amateur! But in our culture of eating, this man is apparently now a “hero.” Other fairly recent records include eating 7 quarter-pound sticks of butter in 5 minutes, 6 pounds of SPAM in 12 minutes, or 4 32-ounce bowls of mayonnaise in 8 minutes. We are certainly living in a time of great excess when it comes to food.

We understand, then, why the pendulum seems to be swinging in the other direction for many people. Just in the last year or so there have been a number of scientific studies suggesting that there may be some health benefits to intentionally abstaining from food. Researchers have found that “periodic and regular fasting – for at least 12 hours and, optimally, 20 hours – pushes cells into self-preservation mode, optimizing their function. It also sends the body foraging for other sources of energy, turning it from using blood sugar and glucose to digesting stores of fat. The process involves an increased production of human growth hormone that can protect lean muscle mass, decrease insulin production and avert diabetes” (Deseret News; Saturday, June 14, 2014). There appear to be some health benefits, then, to voluntarily abstaining from food.

So, as we study the question of FASTING, we realize that we are living in rather unusual times – some of us are eating so much it is hurting us, while at the same time scientists are discovering some benefits to abstaining from food. And I will admit, until I really got into the research for this morning’s lesson, I did not fully realize how much of an emphasis that the Bible has placed on food in the lives of God’s people. ****PPT**** We think back, in fact, to the very beginning, to the Garden of Eden. We know that God blessed Adam and Eve by

saying, ***“From any tree of the garden you may eat freely”*** (Genesis 2:16). And then right away, God gave the very first rule against doing something when he immediately said, ***“But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”*** (Genesis 2:17). Basically, then, God’s first and only prohibition in the Garden of Eden was directly connected to food and to eating. And as we continue reading in the Bible, we see many references to blessings from God coming in the form of great food. Remember how God described the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan, it was ***“a land flowing with milk and honey,”*** a reference the people could truly understand, a real motivation. We also see many restrictions on food, especially in the Law of Moses – only collect enough manna for the day, don’t eat pork, and so on. And throughout the Bible, we do see a number of references to ***“fasting.”***

So we get back to the question that led to this this morning’s lesson: Should we as Christians practice fasting? I need to tell you that there is not one passage that covers this topic in a comprehensive way, so I will be doing something a little bit different this morning. Usually we try to stay with one passage, but in the absence of a passage that addresses all there is to know about fasting in general, I would like for us to do more of an overview.

We will start this morning with an overview of what the Old Testament teaches on this subject, and then next Sunday we will move over into the New Testament, and next Sunday we will also try to tie it all together with some basic principles to remember based on the totality of all of these passages. And I will tell you now: There are many references! I don’t know how you want to handle this, but I’ll be putting all of the references up here at once – the Old Testament this week, and then the New Testament next week. And I do this to give you a chance to find each passage before I get there. I have done my best to put these in the order they appear in the Bible, to make it a little bit easier. I won’t even be reading each passage word for word due to the time involved. So, you might want to copy these down as we go and look them up later if you’re interested. I would encourage you to beat me to each one.

I. **But let us start, first, by going to the OLD TESTAMENT.**

What does the Old Testament teach us about fasting? When I first started looking into this, I was actually surprised by two things. First of all, I was surprised that there does not appear to be a single reference to fasting at any time before the Law of Moses. Perhaps I have missed something here, and I would sincerely appreciate it if someone could correct me on this, but again, as far as I can tell, there is not a single reference or example of fasting at any time before the Law of Moses. So, we are talking about several thousand years without a single reference to abstaining from food to be pleasing to God. In fact, the first reference to voluntarily going without food does not come until almost at the very end of the book of Exodus (the same event is referred to again in Deuteronomy, so these first two passages go together). The passage in Exodus is just a passing reference, so let’s skip ahead to Deuteronomy. I would encourage you to turn with me to Deuteronomy 9:15-20. This first reference to fasting goes back to when Moses was up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments and the people sinned by making the golden calf. Notice, please, Deuteronomy 9:15-20. Moses says (in summarizing what happened),

¹⁵ “So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. ¹⁶ And I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God. You had made for yourselves a molten calf; you had turned aside quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you. ¹⁷ I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes. ¹⁸ I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water,

because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke Him to anger.¹⁹ For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the Lord listened to me that time also.²⁰ The Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time.

So, we find that Moses is basically scared. So, in the very first reference to fasting in the Bible, it is not something Moses is commanded to do, but it seems to be a natural consequence of Moses' fear of God. He fasted for forty days, prayed to God, begging for God's forgiveness on behalf of the people, and God heard his prayer. So the first surprise I had in studying this issue is that this is the first reference – nothing at all before the time of Moses.

Secondly, I was also surprised (again, as far as I can tell), that fasting was never actually commanded, even under the Law of Moses. I had always assumed that fasting was a requirement of the Old Law. I had always assumed that there was some verse buried deep in Leviticus or Deuteronomy that said, "Thou shalt not eat food," on some particular day. But again, as I did the research for this morning's lesson, I could not find a single place where God ever commanded his people (in the Law of Moses) not to eat for some religious observance.

The closest I could get to a command to fast is found in Leviticus 16:29-30. God was giving instruction for the annual Day of Atonement, and God said, ***"This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord."*** In later years, the Jewish leaders interpreted ***"humble your souls"*** as a reference to fasting. And yet when we look at that verse very carefully, we find that fasting is not actually mentioned. Yes, it was interpreted to mean fasting, but fasting is not actually commanded here. God does not say: Do not eat food for some particular period of time.

Now, as we quickly skim over the rest of the passages in the Old Testament, we see a wide variety of situations where various people abstained from food for various reasons.

In Judges 20, for example, we read about Israel taking vengeance on the village of Gibeah for allowing the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine. They go to battle, but 22,000 men die. They try it again the next day, and this time 18,000 men die. They are torn up, they don't understand what's wrong, and that's where we pick up with Judges 20:26, ***"Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute."*** They then went to battle a third time and won. But here is an example of fasting – not specifically commanded, but the natural response of the people to a humiliating national defeat.

As we move forward in the Old Testament we find another example in 1 Samuel 1 as Hannah is tormented by her co-wife because Hannah was not able to have children. By the way, this passage also includes one of the worst responses that a husband can ever give to a wife who is crying. Notice what the Bible says in 1 Samuel 1:7-8, ***"It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat. Then Elkanah her husband said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?'"*** Well, Elkanah was doing

the best he could with that answer, but the point is: Here is a reference to not eating in the Bible – not in response to a command from God, but in response to intense grief.

The next example comes in 1 Samuel 7 as the prophet Samuel leads the people in what is basically a national day of mourning to pretty much apologize to the Lord for drifting spiritually. In 1 Samuel 7:6 the Bible says, ***“They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day and said there, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’ And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.”*** Again, not necessarily commanded, but fasting here was their way of demonstrating their remorse to God.

The next reference comes in the very last verse of Samuel, following the death of Saul and Jonathan, the Bible says in 1 Samuel 31:13, ***“They [the people of Israel] took their bones [the bones of Saul and Jonathan] and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”*** In this case, fasting was the outward expression of national grief. Even today, we know that when we are extremely sad or torn up over something, we just cannot bear to eat, and that seems to be the case here. The first king of Israel and his son had been killed in battle.

The next example is closely related to this one. One chapter over, in 2 Samuel 1, David finds out about Saul’s death. Notice 2 Samuel 1:11-12, ***“Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.”*** Again, David and his men were sad and refused to eat for the rest of the day as they mourned the death of Saul and Jonathan.

The next reference is also a reference to mourning. Over in 2 Samuel 12, the child born to David and Bathsheba is about to die, and the Bible says in 2 Samuel 12:16-17, ***“David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them.”*** David was torn up inside and refused to eat. Eventually the child dies. Notice, please, David’s response, in verses 20-23. Immediately, upon learning of the child’s death, the Bible says,

So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate. Then his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.” He said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’ But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”

David refused to eat, then, as long as the child was sick, fasting to aid his prayer to God. But once the child had died and there was nothing else he could do, so David cleaned himself up and ate.

For the next reference, we skip forward to 1 Kings 21 as the prophet Elijah has a special message from God to King Ahab. The message is absolutely horrific, and it seems to have really scared King Ahab, at least a little bit. Notice, please, 1 Kings 21:27-29, in response to Elijah’s message from God,

27 It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. 28 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29 “Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days.

Did you notice how God acknowledged that Ahab had ***“humbled himself”***? Here, then, is somewhat of a link to that passage back in Leviticus – fasting seems to be a sign of humility before God. But also, we find that Ahab tore his clothing and dressed himself in sackcloth. There is a connection, then, between fasting and the tearing of clothing and ashes. Ahab was convicted of sin and responded with fasting.

We have another reference in 2 Chronicles 20. King Jehoshaphat received a message that an enemy army was on the way, and in response, the Bible says in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4, ***“Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.”*** In this case, fasting was combined with prayer in an effort to reach out to God.

The next few references in Ezra and Nehemiah are somewhat related. We are now on the other side of the Babylonian Captivity. As God’s people are returning to Jerusalem, several fasts are proclaimed. They fast before the journey back home, asking God to be with them (Ezra 8:21-23). They also fast before conducting the investigation into the unscriptural marriages. Before asking those illegally married couples to separate, they proclaim a fast and ask God’s blessing (Ezra 10:6). In the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah is still in Babylon but hears that those who have already returned are living without the protection of a wall. The Bible tells us in Nehemiah 1:4 that when Nehemiah heard these words, he ***“sat down and wept and mourned for days,”*** that he was ***“fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”*** Once the wall was completed, they got together as a nation, and according to the opening verses in Nehemiah 9, ***“...the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.”***

We have another reference to fasting in the book of Esther. As Esther is getting up the courage to approach the king, she sends a message to all the Jews in captivity. She has Mordecai assemble all the Jews. She says, ***“...fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day”*** (Esther 4:16). She did the same with her own people in the palace, and we certainly know that this must have had an effect on what happened next.

We have two references to fasting in the book of Psalms, the first in Psalm 35:13-16 as King David prays for his enemies. He refers to how he ***“humbled [his] soul with fasting.”*** He dressed in sackcloth; he bowed down in mourning. It almost seems like a reference to the death of Saul and Jonathan as we noted earlier (David and Saul were enemies, yet Saul was God’s anointed, and Jonathan was David’s close friend) – David was conflicted. The other reference in Psalms comes in Psalm 69:9-12 where David refers to facing his enemies all alone, weeping in his soul ***“with fasting.”*** This is why we regularly pray for our President here. We can hardly imagine the weight and burden of leadership, the feeling of being all alone. And in light of what has happened in Madison this weekend, this certainly goes for our mayor and our police chief as well.

We then have several scattered references throughout the prophets. One of the most comprehensive passages on the negative side of fasting from God’s point of view is found in Isaiah 58. Starting in verse 3, the

people ask God why he doesn't seem to care about their fasting, and God gives his answer. Notice, please, Isaiah 58:3, ***"Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?"*** That's the question: God, why don't you seem to appreciate what we're doing for you by not eating? Now we have God's answer. God says,

Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.

⁴ "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.

You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

⁵ "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?

Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?

⁶ "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness,

To undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?

⁷ "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?

The problem with the fasting going on in ancient Israel, then, is that their hearts were not right. They were abstaining from food, but they were ignoring the poor, they were mistreating their workers, they were abusing their slaves, they were ignoring the homeless, they were failing to give clothing to the naked. The fasting, then, was more of an irritation to God than it was a blessing. Not that God didn't appreciate the fasting, but he wanted their hearts to be right. He wanted them to actually take care of the poor, and so on.

We have another reference in Jeremiah 14. This takes place in those years leading up to the Babylonian Captivity. God was fed up, and in the middle of it, God had a message for the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 14:11-12, ***"So the Lord said to me, 'Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence.'"*** So again, the people were fasting, they had the outward form of religion, they looked good on the outside, but their hearts were terrible. God, then, said that he would not listen; he would not pay attention.

We have another passing reference to fasting in Daniel 10, right after Daniel received a vision from God. He says (in Daniel 10:2-3), ***"In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed."*** Again, we see fasting as an outward sign of mourning.

We then have several references to fasting in the book of Joel. As Joel announces the coming destruction of the nation, we pick up in Joel 1:13-14 where Joel has a message from God. He speaks out and says to the nation,

¹³ Gird yourselves with sackcloth and lament, O priests; Wail, O ministers of the altar!

Come, spend the night in sackcloth O ministers of my God,

For the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

¹⁴ Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly;

Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land

To the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.

The prophet Joel goes on to introduce the coming judgment on the nation with the picture of a massive locust attack – it would be devastating in every possible way. Joel starts describing it in detail, and then there is a pause. Notice with me, please, Joel 2:12-13, right in the middle of it,

¹² “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “Return to Me with all your heart,

And with fasting, weeping and mourning;

¹³ And rend your heart and not your garments.”

Now return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate,

Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.

There is also a reference to fasting in verse 15. So even as the punishment begins, God steps back and gives that invitation, which is basically: Please, come back! **“Return to me with all your heart, ...with fasting, weeping and mourning.”** And God was saying: If you do this, I will hold back on the punishment. The important thing is, though, God wanted their hearts.

The next reference comes in the book of Jonah. I don’t know if you remember this, but the king of Nineveh actually called for a national fast. After the fish incident, Jonah preaches, and notice what happens next, starting in Jonah 3:5,

⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.

⁸ But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

When God saw their deeds, when God saw their fasting, when God saw that they had turned from their sins, God turned back from that punishment he had planned. He did not do it.

And this brings us to our last reference in the Old Testament, a passage found in Zechariah 7-8. Zechariah was a prophet and priest to those who had just returned to the Jerusalem area after coming back from the Babylonian Captivity. He dealt with a lot of those issues: What do we do now? We’re back, but now what? You will notice in Zechariah 7 that some men from Bethel send messengers to Jerusalem, asking the priests and prophets, basically: What does God want us to do? Notice Zechariah 7:3, **“Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?”** Zechariah came back with a message very similar to the one we found in Isaiah 58. What God really wants is for you to do justice, practice kindness and compassion. Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor. Do not be plotting evil. This is what the Lord really wants. The answer continues in Zechariah 8, picking up with verse 19, **“Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.’”** The main point, then, is that the people were to love truth and peace.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on the idea of fasting in the Old Testament, it seems to me that there were several basic reasons for fasting. Although it was never truly commanded, although there were no details on exactly how to fast, and although there were no instructions on how long to fast or exactly what to do while fasting, we still find that people did abstain from food:

- Sometimes as a way of demonstrating reverence or fear of God.
- Sometimes as a way of showing remorse and regret over sin.
- Sometimes as a way of mourning over some kind of loss.
- Sometimes in response to a national tragedy, such as a devastating defeat in battle.
- And sometimes simply as a way of humbling themselves before the Lord.

In all of this, we have been reminded over and over again that God seems to be especially irritated when people fast but are hypocritical about it. With this in mind, on the table in the entryway I will put a list of references concerning fasting in the New Testament. I would encourage you to take one of these on the way out this morning and to look these up on your own and come back next week prepared to conclude our study. Hopefully next week we can look at what the New Testament says and draw some conclusions to help answer this question from one of our members.

As we close, we want to give everybody here an opportunity to get right with God, to obey the gospel (if you are not already a Christian), or to approach God in prayer, asking for forgiveness (if you are already a Christian). For those who are outside of Christ, the Bible teaches that all people must repent and be baptized. We do this to imitate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com