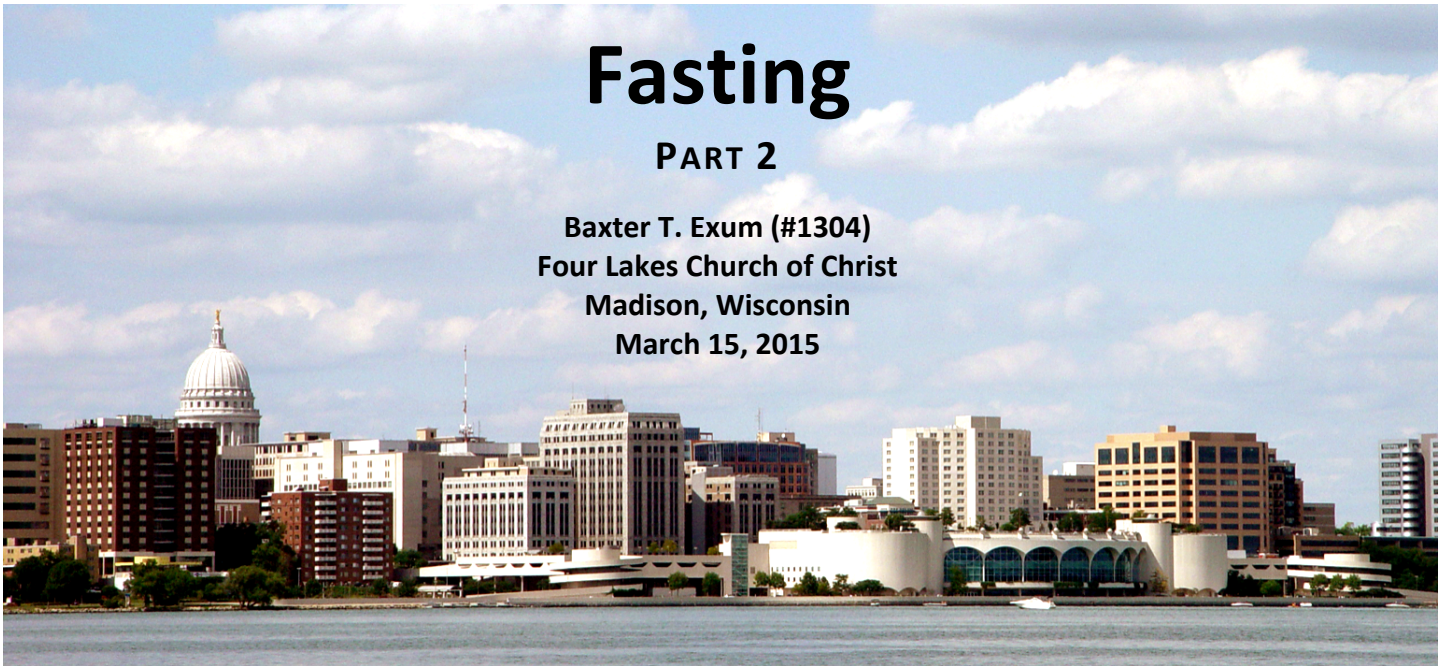


Fasting

PART 2

Baxter T. Exum (#1304)
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This morning I would like for us to continue with the conclusion of last week's lesson where we began looking together at a question that was turned in by one of our members. If you were not here but are interested, then you might want to know that last week's lesson is on the website – the audio as well as a manuscript. But last week we started looking at the question: Should we as Christians practice fasting? Last week, therefore, we started looking into what the Old Testament teaches on this. We learned that the first reference to not eating doesn't come until the book of Exodus. There are no references to fasting during the Patriarchal Age, that time from the Creation until Moses. And even during the time of Moses, there really is not a clear-cut passage demanding that God's people abstain from food. The closest we get is the passage in Leviticus where the people are told to *"humble their souls"* on the Day of Atonement. Years later, the Jewish people INTERPRETED this as a reference to fasting, but in the original command, there is no requirement to abstain from food. What we found last week, though, is that people in the Old Testament voluntarily abstained from food for a number of very personal reasons:

- 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.

But what we learned is that all of these references are voluntary – not in response to any specific command from God, but simply as the natural result of whatever significant event they were going through at the time.

And with this in mind, I want to point out here at the beginning this morning, that this concept of fasting, the practice of voluntarily abstaining from food for religious reasons, is not just found in the Bible, but it is actually practiced in various forms in most of the world religions – in Buddhism, Hinduism, and of course, in Islam. We know that fasting plays a key role in one of the Five Pillars of Islam – there is fasting during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan. Islam, of course, is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States right now, so this is something we will see a lot more of in the coming years.

A little closer to home right now, many of us are also at least a little bit familiar with the Catholic doctrine of Lent and the idea that Catholics must refrain from certain things during the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter. The obvious problem, of course, is that Lent is never mentioned in the Bible. Ash Wednesday and Easter are not mentioned in the Bible either. So, I looked up “fasting” on the Catholic Encyclopedia, an officially recognized document of the Catholic Church, I read the article that went on for several pages, even to the point where it made my head hurt, but then I got to the very last paragraph, and I finally understood why the article was so long. Here is their official summary of fasting (listen very carefully), “Conscious of the conditions of our age, the Church is ever shaping the requirements of this obligation.” In other words, the Catholic doctrine of fasting is constantly changing! Personally, I am a big fan of Lent myself. I love the fact that for several weeks every year, the fish seems especially fresh around here. Last Sunday afternoon, for example, I had an awesome fish sandwich down at Wendy’s! The cod at Culver’s is especially good this time of year! All kinds of restaurants have their specials! But as far as the Bible is concerned, God says nothing about Lent (or about Ash Wednesday or Easter or even Christmas, for that matter).

By the way, some time ago, somebody asked me whether I personally fast, and my answer was (and continues to be), “Yes, every day!” Normally, I stop eating at around 8 o’clock in the evening and I generally do not eat until I BREAK the FAST – at some point after 6 o’clock the next morning. Every morning I BREAK the FAST, I BREAKFAST every day. It is truly the most important meal of the day!

This morning, then, I want us to move over into the New Testament, and then following an overview of what the New Testament says on this subject, I want us to consider several very practical observations based on what we have learned. And once again, we have a number of references. I passed these out after worship last Sunday, so I hope all of you have had a chance to at least glance at these at some point over the past week. But as you can see, there are a number of references. So, as was the case last week, I would encourage you to beat me to each passage. I have done the best I can to put these at least somewhat in chronological order – they are not necessarily in the order we find them in the Bible, but they are at least somewhat grouped along a timeline, and I hope that helps us to find these together. I would encourage all of you, then, to look these up with me. I certainly do not want to leave anybody behind.

But as we look at what the New Testament teaches on fasting, we see one of the first references to abstaining from food for religious reasons in Luke 2:36-38. The passage comes right after Jesus is born. As the Lord is presented in the temple, we find that there are two people waiting there. We have an elderly man by the name of Simeon, who had been promised by God’s Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Christ, the Bible says. He sees the baby Jesus and praises God. We then come to an elderly woman. Notice, please, Luke 2:36-38,

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So, as with those passages from the Old Testament, we have an example here. There is not a specific command, but we have this woman worshiping God and fasting on a regular basis as a part of her personal devotion to God.

The next example in chronological order is the example of Jesus fasting in the wilderness, as he was tempted. The account is found in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. They're almost identical, but we'll be looking at Luke's account. As the Lord prepared to begin his ministry, as he transitioned from full-time carpenter to full-time prophet, he went out into the wilderness and abstained from food. Immediately after his baptism, notice what Luke tells us in Luke 4:1-4

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. ³ And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." ⁴ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

There is not much we can say here, other than the observation that Jesus himself personally abstained from food for about a month and a half. It seems, in keeping with those examples from the Old Testament, that this is how the Lord focused his attention on the mission at hand. Not eating in some way prepared the Lord for what he was about to do.

The next three references actually go together – they are three accounts of the same event and are basically the same. In just a moment, I'll be reading Mark's account in Mark 2:18-22. And in this passage, we find that a contingent of people who were fasting were upset with Jesus and his people for NOT fasting. Notice, please, Mark 2:18-22,

¹⁸ John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰ But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." ²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. ²² No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

I would make several observations here. First of all, John's disciples and the Pharisees who were in the habit of fasting were pretty much cutting on Jesus and his disciples for not fasting. That tells us something. Jesus and his disciples were not fasting like the others who claimed to be religious. You might remember some of those other passages (like Matthew 11) where the Pharisees accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard. We know Jesus was NOT a glutton or a drunkard, because it is a sin to be a glutton and drunkard, and Jesus did not sin. From their point of view, though, Jesus was different – he ate and he drank, and that is true. But notice: When Jesus is directly challenged on this here in Mark 2, Jesus does not CONDEMN those other two groups for fasting, but the Lord gave the rationale for eating here, and the argument is: Fasting is for sad people, fasting is for when the bridegroom is taken away; the bridegroom is here, though, so while I am here, my people will eat, my people will celebrate. The time for fasting is when the bridegroom is taken away, when Jesus is not with us. With this in mind, we need to ask ourselves: Is Jesus with us this morning? Is Jesus with us this morning? Are we sad and discouraged this morning because Jesus is dead, or are we happy today because he is with us? I don't know about you, but I choose Option B! I am happy this morning, because Jesus is with us. And that is why I put that next reference as Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus said after the resurrection, ***"Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*** Now, this does not seal the deal against fasting.

I'm just pointing out that if we do choose to fast, we are not to do it because of this passage. The way I see it, the Lord is saying here that fasting certainly would have been appropriate during that brief time between his death and resurrection, or ***"when the bridegroom is taken away"*** (verse 20). But now, the Lord Jesus is back! He is with us this morning.

I would make another observation about this passage in Mark 2 (and also in the two other parallel accounts), and that is, connected with this teaching is what Jesus goes on to say about putting new wine into old wineskins and putting a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Most of us are familiar with that picture, with that parallel. And we know what the Lord was saying there. He was saying: You cannot force the Old Law onto the New Law; you cannot press an Old Testament way of thinking into a New Testament way of thinking. It's easy to miss this if we were to study this little passage out of context, but in context, the Lord gives this well-known illustration in direct response to having been challenged on this issue of not fasting. He was saying, then (with reference to fasting), that the New is quite different from the Old. The Pharisees were wrong for suggesting that the old patch of Judaism could be sewn onto the new garment of Christianity or that the new wine of New Testament practices could be poured into the old wineskin of the Law of Moses [Guy N. Woods; *Questions and Answers*, Vol. 1, p. 253]. There was a difference between the Old and the New; specifically, in context, with reference to fasting. However, we need to be clear here: This passage does not condemn fasting. Instead, it seems to break the connection that most people had in their minds at that time that fasting was some kind of ritualistic requirement. Even in this passage, the Lord does suggest that fasting is connected with a time of grief or loss. The idea here is: Fasting is not a religious requirement, but it is appropriate during a time of loss.

So we move on to Matthew 6:16-18, a passage in the Sermon on the Mount. And as we look at these three verses, we need to remind ourselves that fasting (at this point) is a Jewish custom, and that nearly all of the Lord's followers at the beginning were Jewish. Most were quite devout in their Jewish faith, and nearly all would have grown up with the tradition of fasting at various times throughout the year. So with this in mind, we find in Matthew 6 that Jesus regulates the practice of fasting. He isn't giving a new command, he is not springing something on these people, but he is regulating what they are doing, he is correcting an error. Notice, please, Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus says,

¹⁶ "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

And so it appears that some had taken the custom of fasting and had turned it into an opportunity to brag about their own righteousness. This is connected to the next passage in Luke 18, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where Jesus condemned the Pharisee. The Pharisee made it very clear that he was in the habit of fasting twice a week. The Pharisee used his fasting as an opportunity to brag about his own righteousness. The Lord, though, said that the Tax Collector is the one who went home justified. The Tax Collector's attitude was, ***"God, be merciful to me, the sinner."*** The Lord went on to say, of course, ***"I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** How interesting! Remember how the Jewish people interpreted the command to ***"humble your souls"*** as fasting (back in Leviticus)? In Luke 18, one man bragged about his fasting, and the other man is the one who is praised by Jesus for his humility. This, then, is the attitude Jesus wants back in Matthew 6. The purpose of fasting is not so that we can look righteous to the world around us.

And so the regulation is: When you fast, do not make a big deal out of it. Do not go around bragging about how hungry you are! Instead, if we choose to fast, it is to be more of a private matter. Some have said that this passage would condemn any situation where a church might choose to fast together. The reasoning is: As soon as somebody else knows about it, we have violated God's law here. However, if you are still in Matthew 6, I would point out that the Lord says basically the same thing about prayer and giving as he says about fasting; yet, we still have public prayers, and we still have at least somewhat public giving! So to me, there is clearly a parallel. The point is: Our hearts need to be right! Just as with prayer and giving, we can do it as a group, but we are to be extremely careful that it is done with the proper motives.

We have another brief reference to fasting in Acts 9, in those days leading up to Saul's conversion. Saul was persecuting the church when he was blinded by the light on his way to Damascus. He was confronted by the Lord and then led the rest of the way where he waited to be told what to do. The Bible tells us in Acts 9:9 that Saul **"...was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."** At that point, Ananias explained the gospel, Saul's sight was restored, he was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins, and in verse 19 the Bible tells us that he **"...he took food and was strengthened."** The fasting here seems to be an outward expression of Saul's repentance. He was torn up over what he had done and could not eat. Some people make the argument that Saul was saved on the road to Damascus when he saw the Lord. Not so. He might have seen his sin on the road, but he did not eat until his sins had been washed away in baptism.

The next reference to fasting comes in Acts 13 as the church in Antioch prepared to send out Saul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Starting in Acts 13:2, the Bible says, **"While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."** Like some of those examples we studied last week from the Old Testament, it seems that fasting here was a way to express their dependence on God as they went to God in prayer, asking for God's advice on what they were about to do. And notice: This is at least somewhat public – this is something they apparently did together as a congregation, somehow without violating the Lord's instruction in Matthew 6.

And then, as far as I can tell, the last real reference to fasting in the Bible is found one chapter later, in Acts 14:23. Within that three-year period of the First Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas established a number of congregations in the Roman province of Asia Minor, and on their way back out, they appointed elders in those brand new congregations. Notice, please, Acts 14:23, **"When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."** As with the reference in Acts 13, fasting is once again connected with prayer, asking for God's help, and I would also point out: In both of these cases, this seems to be something they did as a group – they prayed, they fasted, they sent out missionaries, they appointed elders in every congregation. Somehow they were able to fast as a group without violating the Lord's instruction from Matthew 6.

And that, as far as I can tell, is the last reference to fasting in the New Testament. We have nothing in the letters of Paul, nothing in the general letters from the other inspired writers, and nothing in the book of Revelation – no commands to fast, no references to fasting, no schedule for fasting, no punishment for not fasting.

So, as we come to the end, having looked at pretty much every passage on this subject, I want to make several observations based on what we have learned:

1. **First of all, although fasting is never commanded either in the Old or in the New, it seems rather obvious from everything we have considered that THERE ARE SOME POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO BE GAINED FROM THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING. And I will admit: This study has changed my view a little bit. For many years, I looked at fasting as something we simply don't need to be doing, as something almost to be avoided. I have matured in my thinking on this, though, as a result of studying these passages over the past several weeks.**

Are there advantages to fasting? If we were to ask Moses, or David, or Elijah, or Queen Esther, or Daniel, or Paul, or Silas, or Barnabas, or even Jesus – if we were to ask these Bible heroes if there were any benefit to fasting, it seems to me that all of them would have to say “Yes,” because all of them personally fasted at one time or another. As we noted last week in the Old Testament, and as we have seen again this week in the New Testament, godly people have been fasting for thousands of years and for many reasons: To show reverence for God, to show regret over sin, to mourn over loss, to express grief over a national tragedy or defeat, as a way of humbling themselves before the Lord, and also (when combined with prayer), as a way of seeking the Lord's blessing when making a major decision (such as when sending out missionaries or appointing elders). Obviously, as I pointed out last week, there may be some health benefits from a purely secular point of view. I would leave that between each of us and our doctors, as that kind of research seems to flip-flop from week to week. Just spiritually speaking, though, we have to admit there are some benefits; otherwise, we wouldn't be reading about some of our greatest heroes doing it in the Bible!

2. **With this being said, though, I want to make a second observation, and that is: Just as there are benefits, we must also understand that there are some concerns, THERE ARE SOME POTENTIAL PITFALLS.**

As we've learned this morning, for example, we have to be extremely careful (just as we are with giving and prayer) that our hearts are right, that we are not making an outward display of it, that we are not doing it to show off, “Hey, look how righteous I am! I have gone for 24 hours with no food!” That is not the point of fasting, and that attitude is to be avoided. There is danger in making an outward display of it.

And while we are talking about the potential pitfalls of fasting, I want to pass along another potentially destructive side effect here from a mental health standpoint. It seems to me that in a world of eating disorders, we should also be very much aware of those who may have a weakness in this area. There are some who truly struggle with anorexia, for example, and some of the other eating disorders. In what was probably my first visit to a psychiatric hospital, I went with my wife to see a friend from college who was struggling with this. She had to be placed in this unit to save her life. I mention this to point out at least some potential on the negative side here: With the prevalence of eating disorders, let us be extremely careful before we say, “Hey, let us stop eating so that we can be pleasing to God!” I would also point out here that some of our young people are very impressionable in this area. Just to illustrate, I remember a situation we had at camp back in the 90's. On the first day of camp, one of the 10-year old girls suddenly announced that she was a vegetarian and that she would only be eating salad from that point on. And by the end of the week, most of the little girls were only eating salads and were nearly passing out on the hikes because they practically refused to eat any food except for a few pieces of lettuce. It turned into a real health concern. So especially in our society, with all of the skinny models and all of the pressure put on teenage girls (especially) to be thin, again, the last thing they need is someone suggesting that they need to stop eating to get closer to God. We also have several who struggle with blood sugar issues. And again, just from a health perspective, we need to be very careful.

3. Before we close, I want to make one more observation as we wrap things up, and that is: Based on what we have read, it seems that fasting is to be **A PERSONAL MATTER BETWEEN EACH INDIVIDUAL AND GOD.**

I would invite you to turn with me to Romans 14, as the apostle Paul discusses matters of personal opinion. He is not talking in this chapter about matters of faith. This is not a matter of right vs. wrong, but it is a matter of personal devotion before God. I want us to notice one verse in this chapter, Romans 14:3. Paul says, ***“The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.”*** And so as I see it, there seems to be some freedom here, because food is not the main point. Food is not the main point. I am so thankful for the good brother who asked the question, and I do hope that our study over these two weeks has allowed God to answer the question.

As we close, as we always do, we want to give everyone here the opportunity to get right with God. The good news is that Jesus came to this earth to die in our place as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept the offer on God’s terms by turning away from sin – we see what sin is, and we have a change of heart. At that point, we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. In baptism, we are born again into the family of God. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel immediately, we would invite you to make your decision public right now, as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com