

The Lord's Message: Deny Self, Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus: Fasting

Date: March 5, 2023

Where: Tilghman United Methodist Church

This morning we are continuing our Lenten sermon series: Deny Self, Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus. Today I have to admit to all of you that I do not use the spiritual discipline of fasting often enough. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that we think about most often during the season of Lent and ignore it the rest of the year. The Holy Spirit has convinced me that I need to practice this spiritual discipline more often.

Let us pray.

Fasting is defined as giving up food, or something else, for a period of time in order to focus your thoughts on God. Fasting is found over 70 times in the Bible and in both the Old and New Testament. Now, there is no direct command in the Bible for Christians to fast, except Jesus expects us to fast. In **Matthew 6:16**, Jesus says, "When you fast..," not if you fast, but when you fast. Jesus expects His followers to fast.

There are seven reasons in the Bible for fasting.

- 1. Beginning a new ministry.** Before Jesus began His earthly ministry, He fasted in **Matthew 4:1-2**. Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. He needed that time with God to prepare for what God had called Him to do.
- 2. Seeking God's wisdom.** Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted for the leaders of the church before committing them to the Lord, **Acts 14:23**.
- 3. Showing grief.** Nehemiah grieved when he heard the report of the horrible condition of the city of Jerusalem in **Nehemiah 1:1-4**.
- 4. Seeking deliverance and protection.** King Jehoshaphat called for a fast in **2 Chronicles 20:1-4** for God to deliver the Israelites from their enemies.
- 5. For Repentance.** Jonah told the people of Nineveh that their city would be destroyed because of their wickedness. The king called a fast for repentance in **Jonah 3:7-10**.
- 6. For Healing.** When King David's son was sick, he fasted, **2 Samuel 12:14-16**.
- 7. To Worship God.** In **Luke 2:36-38**, the widow Anna prayed, fasted and worshiped God in the temple.

Is fasting important for Christians today? Well, if you do not believe the Bible, then listen to some quotes from Christian leaders on this subject. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of Christian life. Such customs have only one purpose- to make disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done." Christian writer, Wesley Duewel says, "You and I have no more right to omit fasting because we feel no special emotional prompting than we have a right to omit prayer, Bible reading, or assembling with God's children for lack of some special emotional prompting. Fasting is just a biblical and normal part of a spiritual walk of obedience with God as are these others."

So why don't Christians fast? I would say there are at least three reasons, maybe others.

- 1. Fear.** They are afraid of the unknown, feeling hunger pains, starting and not being able to finish, and fasting alone. The Devil has convinced them that they could never do it, instead of trusting God to get them through it. "The Lord is my strength. The Lord is my help. The Lord is my rock."
- 2. Ignorance.** Many Christians have not been taught the importance of fasting. The church does not encourage it. It is only mentioned during the Season of Lent.
- 3. Rebellion.** Some Christians are aware of fasting, but refuse to do it, because they do not want to listen to someone tell them they have to do it. Their heart is not into fasting.

Let us look at the benefits of fasting and this may encourage us to incorporate this Spiritual discipline into our lives. Dr. Bill Bright, who is a firm believer in the power of fasting and prayer, wrote a book entitled, *"Why You Should Fast."* These are his reasons for Fasting.

- 1. Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testament eras.**
- 2. Fasting and prayer can restore the loss of the "first love" for your Lord and result in a more intimate relationship with Christ.**
- 3. Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God.**
- 4. Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal your true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life.**
- 5. Fasting will encourage the Holy Spirit to quicken the Word of God in your heart and His truth will become more meaningful to you.**
- 6. Fasting can transform your prayer life into a richer and more personal experience.**
- 7. Fasting can result in a dynamic personal revival in your own life and make you a channel of revival to others.**

John Wesley practiced the spiritual discipline of fasting. He fasted on both Wednesday and Friday each week. Wesley usually began his fast on sundown the day before and ended it the next day at 3pm.

Now you know the importance of fasting. You need a plan. You do not want to do an unmeaningful fast. First you need to decide what you are going to fast from. It could be food, video games, TV or social media. It has to be something that is meaningful to you, so that it will be meaningful to God. You can do a full fast – fasting from food or water or do a partial fast – fasting from just food or certain kinds of food. Next you need to decide how long the fast is going to last. One day, two days, a week, or 40 days, you need to decide. You need to remember to consult your doctor if you are going to completely fast from food and water for more than a day. If you are physical fit, you should never fully fast any longer than three days. It is better on your body to fast from food, but drink plenty of water. In all cases, consult with your doctor before beginning a fast. Third, you need to decide what you want to achieve by fasting. Fourth, you need to decide if you are going to fast alone or with another person or group. Last, you need to decide what you are going to do while fasting, reading scripture, praying, meditating, etc...

The one that you want to avoid is what Jesus says, do not make a display of your fasting. In **Matthew 6:16-18**, it says.

Fasting is one of the spiritual disciplines that God has given to us to deny self, take up your cross and follow Jesus. To fast or not to fast, you decide. Amen.