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SERMON TITLE: *What's the Point of Fasting?*
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6:16-21
DATE: March 7, 2021
View online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

Read also Isaiah 58:1-12.

We are considering spiritual principles that will defeat the plague, that is, we are looking to heavenly things, heavenly habits rather than simply what we can do ourselves. What and how do we connect with God to find help and healing?

Today we talk about fasting. Did you know that all major religions promote fasting? Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhist, Hindu, even pagans fast. In 1756 the king of Britain called for a day of prayer and fasting because the French were about to invade Britain. On March 2, 1863 a resolution was introduced in the U. S. Senate asking President Lincoln to proclaim a national day of prayer and fasting over its factions and civil war. The Resolution was adopted and signed by Lincoln and the fast was observed on March 31. Here's how it began:

"Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day of public humiliation, prayer and fasting, to be observed by the people of the United States."¹

Imagine that today. Historically, there has been understanding of the need for fasting. What—or whom—do we rely on? Fasting helps us know the answer!

Some people fast for other reasons. My doctor (oncologist) promoted scheduled fasting to me as a cancer inhibitor. It works on reversing diabetes also!

Fasting helps the body and mind. It allows you to realize you have control over your desire to eat or drink. It teaches you that you can say no to cravings. That has huge, positive implications for your life. If you can learn to say no to eating, you can then also control other inappropriate desires that seek to control you.

Fasting not only helps the body and mind, it helps the soul. By diminishing the physical, we seek to intermingle our lives with the reality of the spiritual world, which is unseen, but all around us. Fasting, then, draws you close to God.

Drawing close to God makes you strong. Jesus is not just into self-denial. His way actually makes it possible to break habits

that enslave us. And, his command to do these things in secret before God also breaks the need for human approval.

Here's what he said:

And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

It might be of no interest to you to fast. I cannot think of a sermon on fasting that ever really moved me! The first time I fasted was in New York where I lived. It was on a Good Friday and I was twenty years old. I worked as a clerk in an attorney's office in Huntington Station, Long Island. I did not tell anyone in the office because I didn't want to be considered a fool.

But, you see that I still remember it now, many years later.

I didn't want to say anything because we live in a culture which feeds our desires, and does not value self-restraint; a culture which is addicted to human approval; which promotes the here and now. Jesus, on the other hand, offers you a life which is free of all that.

I wanted to try it out. Will it make a difference in my life and my focus? For me it did. I remember that day with affection.

Isaiah shares God's heart for the real meaning behind fasting. God gives us this tool to break the selfish desire of wanting approval; wanting success; and not wanting to go without. Isaiah put it this way: "We want to please ourselves."

Today I tell you a story that is not about fasting at all, but a story that shows our nature—our reality.

There was a small farming community and town. The town had a mercantile, a lumber yard, a bank, school, and church. The school and the church were the same. The farmers, which they all were, had good years and bad, good health and plagues. They were homesteaders; they had never had much but the farm was everything. When crops failed they were either shackled by debt or moved on somewhere else. That was their reality.

This was a community of self-sufficient families. They made everything they needed. And when the need was great, like plowing and planting crops, a barn raising or building a house, they helped each other. Little girls had a dress for school and

¹Proclamation of a Day of Fasting, The History Place, Abraham Lincoln, at <https://www.historyplace.com/lincoln/proc-3.htm>, accessed March 4, 2021.

another one for church on Sunday; often no shoes. Cash was scarce.

It was 1888, the year my grandmother was born. She bore nine children; the last surviving one, my mother.

It was a caring community—neighbor helping neighbor.

A lawyer came to town one day and seeks out one of the farmers:

“Your uncle has died.”

“What uncle?” the man replied.

“The eccentric one. He lived in St. Louis.”

“Oh yeah, I remember going to his house when I was ten.”

“He owned a fortune,” the man said. “You are his heir.”

This was quite a surprise.

Word traveled fast. The whole town was talking! The farmer’s neighbor—they had for years partnered their plowing and planting each spring—the neighbor became jealous and found another farmer to partner with thinking, *well he’s got money; he can just hire someone*. The children’s friends wouldn’t play with them anymore. Others changed too.

- The fortunate man also worked at the lumber mill. His boss tried to sell him the business.
- The pastor asked him to buy the church an organ.
- The school board wanted books for all the students.
- The mercantile owner said, “You can buy the store out, and sold them expensive new clothes on credit.
- The man bought his wife a fancy brooch watch.
- The wife bought him a fancy box of tools.

All of this was purchased on credit. The store owners were very happy!

But then the lawyer told them it would take a while for the fortune to arrive.

Time passes. The creditors come knocking. That put the store owners on the spot so they called on the man and had him sign a lean on his farm.

It was a hard day for the farmer. His farm was everything.

Finally the lawyer shows up. The family gathers around him. He has a box. He says, “I have some bad news. Your uncle was a bad manager. And there were debts—the banker, the broker, lawyers, court costs and . . . This is all that is left.” He set a small trunk on the kitchen table.

The wife looks at it and then opens it. It is packed with money. She squeals with delight. “We’re rich, we’re rich. Now we will be okay!”

She pulls out a bundle of bills. And then the man sees it. It is all Confederate money.

Now the reality of all the spending comes home to roost. The farm and all their possessions will have to go on the auction block. What will they do?

On the morning of the auction, the townspeople show up but no one else. The auctioneer starts the bid. With each item someone bids.

- ✓ The disgruntled neighbor buys the farm for 2 cents.
- ✓ The lumberyard owner buys the tools for 2 cents.
- ✓ The pastor buys the team of horses for 2 cents.

The man who owned the mercantile, who sold him all those items, had stood on the road outside of town with a sign that said “this auction has been canceled.” That’s why no one other than the townspeople came.

After the sale, those people who had been there went over to the farmer’s house where he was waiting. The neighbor said, “I bought the farm for 2 cents.” The pastor said, “I bought your team for 2 cents.” And the tools went for 2 cents. They offered to sell him back his property, his team, and his tools for the price of 6 cents. He began to cry. The school board said, “And we’ll buy the books.” Then the owners of the mercantile told him, “The rest can wait until you get on your feet because we are confident you’ll be able to work it off.”

The pastor spoke up and said “We’re sorry.” It wasn’t just you who changed—we changed when we heard about the money. But now we are on the way to being back to normal. And they all agreed.

Why spiritual disciplines like fasting? Jesus wants to grow in you the character of caring about your neighbor in good times and bad, not taking advantage of them, and helping them when trouble comes.

“Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be” (Matthew 6:19-21).

AMEN