

Why Don't You Fast? Matthew 9:14-17

Why don't you fast? This question is sometimes asked of us Presbyterians this time of year. For Wednesday begins the season of Lent, a time when the members of many denominations engage in fasting of one sort or another, giving up something they like during the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter. The general idea is that, whenever you crave the thing you have given up, you will be reminded of Christ and His sufferings. What could be wrong with that? So why don't we Presbyterians fast during Lent?

The disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus a similar question. They were fasting, and the Pharisees were fasting, so why didn't He insist that His disciples do the same thing? As we explore Jesus' answer to their question, I think we will discover why Presbyterians don't prescribe a 40-day fast every year during Lent. But we will also discover some reasons to take another look at fasting, and how it can help develop our own relationship with God.

Okay, so what about the Pharisees – why did they fast? Well, in spite of their great knowledge of the Scriptures, most of their fasts were not actually required by the Old Testament. In fact, the Law of Moses prescribes only one fast per year, on the great Day of Atonement, the day when the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to put sacrificial blood on the Ark of the Covenant, gaining atonement for the sins of all the people.

But in their self-righteousness, the Pharisees had turned this profound annual expression of corporate humility into a cause of individual self-congratulation. Because they came to the wrong conclusion that it was somehow the self-denial of fasting that averted the anger of God, and thus that earned God's favor, they believed that the more they denied themselves, the more they would be considered righteous in God's sight. Thus, they fasted not once a year, but twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays.

In contrast, the disciples of John the Baptist fasted for a very different reason. Like the Pharisees, they believed that fasting was connected with forgiveness, but in a very different way. You see, they knew that throughout the Old Testament, the people of God engaged in periods of fasting in order to express sorrow for their sin and thus to plead with God for forgiveness. And so, because repentance for sin was a key element in John's teaching, it was only natural that his disciples would fast, not as a way of somehow earning God's forgiveness, but as an expression of the contrition and humility involved in confessing their sin.

But God's Old Testament people also fasted for a different reason: in times of crisis they would fast as a way of focusing their attention completely on God. Just so, John's preaching focused on the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, the day when the Messiah would clear his threshing floor, burning up the chaff with fire. So it just makes sense that John's alarmed disciples would fast as they devoted themselves to fervent prayer, pleading with God that they would be spared in the impending conflagration.

Now, it is easy enough for us to dismiss the reasons the self-righteous Pharisees had for fasting, and indeed, Jesus doesn't even bother to address them. But it is much harder to dismiss the humble fear of John's disciples, and Jesus is careful not to do so. However, His response shows that the reasons that John's disciples had for fasting didn't really apply to Jesus' own disciples. And that's because John's disciples didn't really understand Who Jesus was, or what He had come to do.

For think about it: John's disciples fasted in part because they were sorrowful for their sins. But Jesus insisted that it would be inappropriate for His disciples to fast for such a reason at that time. And why? He gave an illustration with which we are all familiar, going to the wedding of a friend. How would it look, Jesus asked, if you showed up for the ceremony wearing black mourner's clothes, shedding tears of sorrow instead of tears of joy? Moreover, if you were fasting during the reception, you could not partake of all the sumptuous food that is such an integral part of the celebration. Fasting at a wedding would not only make you stand out like a sore thumb. It would not only be intolerably rude. No, your mournful presence would cast a pall over what ought to be a joyful occasion.

And so Jesus made it clear that His disciples could not fast because of sorrow for their sins— instead they had to rejoice while Jesus was with them. Moreover, they had no reason to fast out of anxiety over the coming Kingdom of God and the imminent crisis they expected it would bring – after all, they knew that the Kingdom had already come! So, how could they fast in fear of the coming of their Messiah when His presence with them was such an obvious occasion of joy and indeed of feasting?

No, it's no wonder that Jesus concludes his response to John's disciples with a pair of parables: two situations in which trying to mix the new with the old are destructive. If you sew a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old, well-washed shirt, the patch will shrink and tear the shirt even more. If you try to pour fresh, still fermenting wine into old wineskins which have lost their elasticity, the pressure of the fermentation process will burst the old leather, spilling the wine and destroying the skins.

The meaning of the parables is clear enough, but what could they have meant to John's disciples? Simply this: because the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament ceremonies that predicted His coming need no longer be observed. We thus no longer need to fast once a year while taking the blood of animals into a Temple to make atonement for us. Likewise, because Jesus has come, we need not fast in anxiety of His judgment. For we know that He is the lamb of God who was slain to atone for the sins of the world.

So, why don't we fast in the way the Pharisees fasted? Because they sought to save themselves by their own good works, and only Jesus can save us. Why don't we fast in the way John's disciples fasted? Because such sorrow and fear in the face of Christ are as outdated as old wineskins.

But does that mean that we should never fast at all? No. After all, in this very passage, Jesus says that his disciples would indeed fast, after He had been taken away from them. And remember that Jesus taught fasting by His example during His forty days in the wilderness. Moreover, Jesus taught that certain demons could only be driven out by prayer and fasting. And in His sermon on the Mount, Jesus went so far as to give rules for fasting, exhorting His disciples to fast in secret, so that only God would know what they were doing. Clearly, Jesus never intended to do away with fasting. He was simply trying to explain that fasting after the coming of the Kingdom would be done in different ways, and for different reasons.

Okay, so why would those who rejoice in the forgiveness of Christ, those have been saved by the grace of God alone through faith alone in Christ alone find it helpful to engage in fasting? Well, if fasting is not a way of earning brownie points with God, and it's no longer necessary as a way of looking forward to Christ's atoning work on the cross, fasting continues to be a way of putting God first, even above our most basic bodily needs. Fasting is a way of affirming that paying attention to God comes at the top of our priority list, even above eating. Fasting is thus a demonstration that it is better to be physically hungry than to be without God's guidance. Fasting is a statement of how important God is to us, and of how totally we depend on Him.

And, as Jesus says in verse 15, fasting is also a way of acknowledging that Christ is no longer with us in body. Thus, if we are to draw close to Him and seek His will, we must pray, and pray earnestly, and pray with single-minded devotion. Fasting for Christians is thus both an affirmation of our priorities and a confirmation that we are earnestly seeking God's will.

And the Church has always engaged in this kind of fasting during special times of crisis, or when important decisions need to be made, putting aside all possible distractions to allow us to seek God's face more singlemindedly. For example, when Barnabas and Saul were set apart for mission work, the church fasted and prayed before laying hands on them and sending them off. It is this kind of fasting during special seasons of prayer that continues to be appropriate for Christians today. That's why we Presbyterians don't feel obliged to fast according to the calendar. Instead, we uphold the benefit of fasting according to our spiritual needs.

But is our practice as good as our theology? Do we Presbyterians actually fast and pray when we go through times of trial? During times like these for example, times of great political instability and pandemic, do we earnestly seek God's will? When we find ourselves overwhelmed by the circumstances of our lives, do we put aside other urgent needs to spend more time in prayer? Or do we just try to figure out what to do on our own, relying on our own education or knowledge, our own common sense or reason, our own resources or connections? We Presbyterians say we believe in the power of prayer. We say we put God first in our lives. But does that really reflect our true priorities?

Imagine, for example, that you have had one of those crazy, out-of-control days, a day when so many responsibilities have crowded in on you that your normal routine is completely disrupted. At the end of the day, you realize that you only have the time and energy left to do one more thing. Out of all your daily activities, which would you choose? What is absolutely at the top of your list of necessities?

You might say, "I have to have something to eat. If I don't, I'll have a splitting headache tomorrow." You might say, "I have to get in my exercise. If I miss a day, I'll be wiped out for the rest of the week." You might say, "I have to watch the nightly news. A little TV helps me unwind." You might say, "I have to talk with my husband or wife. We have to debrief this day and make plans for tomorrow." You might say, "My eight hours of sleep must be preserved for me to be at my best." You might say, "I must spend some quality time with the children or grandchildren, reading them a bedtime story." And all of these are good things, necessary things. But which should come first? And which of us can honestly say that he would choose prayer above any of them?

But even if we modern Christians come to the conclusion that we need a time of focused prayer, and even if we determine to put prayer at the top of our priority list, maybe abstaining from food isn't always the best way to accomplish this. Perhaps, even if we realize we need to set aside some things, even some good things, in order to spend more time with God, we need to take an honest look at what is truly pulling our attention away from Him in the first place. Then, we can plan a break from those things in order to shift our focus more completely to prayer.

For example, have you ever thought of fasting from television? Imagine how much extra time you would have if you didn't watch for a week. Or what about the internet? We all know how it is: you're just going to check the headlines and the weather – and then you look up and half an hour has just vanished. Or think about social media – it's undoubtedly a wonderful tool, allowing us to alert one another to urgent prayer concerns and even to worship together at times when we are required to be physically apart. But do

we ever catch ourselves rather mindlessly scrolling and scrolling, as the minutes tick by? Maybe cutting down on a little screen time would free up more time for prayer and Biblestudy.

Yes, it's possible for any good gift from God to distract us from Him, from the Giver. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul even speaks of marital intimacy in this way: "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer" (7:5). Just so, we all know that we need to eat in order to have the health and energy to do all the things God wants us to do. But maybe, every now and then, taking a break from all the preparation and cleanup, and even from the meal itself would allow us to focus more completely on God.

Now, putting God first in this intentional kind of way becomes more natural, more obvious in times of crisis. When we find ourselves in over our heads, our priorities generally become simplified. Prayer becomes critical, especially when we come face to face with our helplessness, our need for a deliverer. Yes, it's easy to pray when the power goes out in an ice storm. It is when we are at the end of our rope that we often find ourselves closest to God.

But wouldn't it be nice to seek God in such a concentrated, intentional way, not only when we feel like we have to, but just because we want to? After all, what sort of a relationship would you have with your spouse if you only sat down for a talk when it was absolutely necessary?

And sure, we can pray while we are driving or washing dishes or even during TV commercials. But what if you and your spouse only talked when you had part of your mind on something else, or when you had nothing else you could do? After all, we all know better than to pull out our cell phones and start scrolling through social media during our Valentine's Day dinners this evening. We all know that giving a loved one such partial attention can be belittling or insulting, really worse than no attention at all. So, if total attention is important to us as human beings, why wouldn't it be important to God? Why wouldn't God enjoy us putting everything, even eating, aside from time to time, just to spend some time with Him?

And that's really all fasting is. In simplest terms, it's sitting down and looking Jesus in the face, and saying: "Nothing else is more important to me than You are. So I have put everything else aside to pay full attention to you. I need you." So, this week, let's take an honest look at our prayer lives, and let's take another look at fasting. We know that God commands and deserves the worship of all our hearts and souls and minds. So, what better way could there be to say "I love you?" And what greater blessing could we possibly receive than to spend quality time with Jesus? Let's go to our Lord now in prayer.