

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Matthew 6:16-18

SERMON TITLE: Opening to God: Fasting

It's the season of Lent, a time of preparation for new life in Christ. It's a good time to practice opening ourselves to God, so we're exploring together several basic spiritual disciplines that do just that—they open us to God. This morning our focus is on the spiritual discipline of fasting.

Our scripture lesson once again comes from a collection of teachings from Matthew's gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount. The text is Matthew 6:16-18. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE TELLING.**

We live in the most affluent, the most prosperous society in the history of the world. The amount of stuff available for us to consume is mind-boggling. Stores of every conceivable kind are filled with goods of every kind and description, ready to meet our every need, satisfy our every want and appeal to our every appetite. If we don't think we need it or want it—if we don't think we have an appetite for it—someone will spend some money—in many cases, large amounts of money—to convince us that we do need it or want it or have an appetite for it.

It's almost a cultural expectation that we consume that which the economy produces. If we don't it, the economy falters. Even now, as our economy goes through a rough patch, perhaps even a recession, the political response is to put money back into our hands with the expectation that we'll spend it buying stuff.

While this consumptive mentality fuels our economy, there's also a downside. We get confused. Maybe life is really about the stuff we buy and consume. Take food for example. Food is a necessity of life. If we don't eat we will eventually die. But is life all about food?

Well, sometimes we get confused. Are we angry? Order a burger and some fries. Are we resentful, irritated, over ambitious, fearful? Pig out on pizza and forget about it! Are we

depressed, embittered, suffering from a sense of life's unfairness? Eat a Mars bar it'll perk you up! No wonder obesity is one of the leading health issues of our time.

Sometimes we use food to deal with life. We get confused and food becomes like a god to us and we begin to think: Well, maybe we do live by bread and alone—maybe life is just about me and all of my stuff.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that keeps us open to an alternative reality. Fasting can open us to God. Someone said that *Fasting is feasting on God*. (*Today in the Word*, January 19, 1997, p. 26.) Fasting reminds us that do not live by bread alone; we are the creatures and not the Creator. Our stuff is no substitute for God. Food is no substitute for God. Life is not does not derive its meaning from that which we consume. Life finds its meaning and its purpose in God. Indeed, life has its source in God.

In scripture, fasting involves abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It's not the same as a hunger strike or a diet. Fasting as a spiritual discipline has a spiritual purpose: to open us to God.

Other religions practice fasting. According to the Old Testament, David, Moses, Elijah, Esther, and Daniel all fasted. Jesus fasted, going forty days in the wilderness without food. And according to Matthew's gospel, Jesus assumed that his disciples would fast. Jesus said, *Whenever you fast...* The Greek word literally means *not to eat*. Jesus then proceeded to instruct his followers on how to fast properly so that the practice would not be used to make a public show of how righteous the person was. Fasting after all, is intended to be between God and the one doing the fasting.

As followers of Jesus, Paul fasted, Martin Luther fasted, John Calvin fasted, John Wesley fasted. In fact, back in Wesley's day, Methodists fasted twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays.

So what would it look like for us to practice fasting as a spiritual discipline? Well, fasting can take many different forms. In fact, some of us may not be able to fast from food for medical reasons. That's okay. Be creative. Find another way to abstain from the stuff that tempts us to forget God.

Let me share with you one man's experience of fasting. Ben Peterson is the dean of the chapel at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. One year he entered a covenant with 30 or 40 other people to fast for the 40 days leading up to Pentecost. Since fasting is often combined with prayer in the scriptures, they agreed to fast and to pray for two things: a spiritual awakening among the churches in their community and beyond; and the spread of the kingdom of God around the world.

The mode of the fast varied from person to person. Some took only juices. He and his wife ate only fruits, vegetables and grains—no meat, fats or sugar. From time to time they would take juice only. Along with the fast, those who were in covenant together met for an hour every Friday in to be in prayer.

This is what Ben Patterson discovered during his fast. First of all, he discovered what a slave he could be to food. He writes: *Am I sad? I eat. Am I happy? Eat. Tired? Eat. Angry, depressed, bored? Eat, eat, eat.*

But during the fast something began to change. *I was surprised, then exhilarated at how free I was during the fast....As the fast came to an end, I actually became a little afraid to go back to eating normally, fearful I might lose the freedom I had gained.*

Ben also gained insight during his fast: *My mind was marvelously focused on the fact that gluttony is about more than mere volume of food. It can express itself as a inordinate interest in the “experience” of food, making taste buds promiscuous and stomachs ravenous for novelty and variety. I eat out often, and some menus describe the exotic, even spiritual experiences I will have if I order this item or that. I’ve seen chocolate desserts described as “Pure Sin.”*

The fast focused my mind on the simple goodness of God’s creation. At first the foods I restricted myself to made the prospect of a meal boring. Beans again? Another salad? Not carrots! But I rediscovered how good a mere carrot can be. Or a bare slice of bread, or a crisp apple. With simplicity comes gratitude and joy.

And finally, Ben reached this conclusion: *food is ultimately not about food, but about God. The meaning of hunger—indeed, of all desire—is to point us to God, our only Provider. We shouldn’t be too quick to make hunger go away, for it can teach us much about our frailty, need, and emptiness apart from God.* (Patterson, Ben. *Adventures in Fasting in Leadership: A Practical Journal for Church Leaders*, 1998.)

Fasting is not about law; it’s about grace—opening to God. And just as food and all the other stuff of lives is no substitute for God; neither is fasting a substitute for living faithfully in relationship to our brothers and sisters. Isaiah 58:6 reads:

*Is this not the fast I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

My brothers and sisters, during this Lenten season I invite you to consider fasting as a spiritual discipline that can open us to God.