

## Strengthening

### Fasting – Matthew 6:16-21

#### Matthew 6:16-21 (NIV)

<sup>16</sup> "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

<sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

<sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

<sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Over the last couple of weeks I have been challenged to fast, to do without food for a period on order to strengthen my health life and my prayer life, the only trouble with all that is that I really don't like fasting but over the last couple of weeks as I have been studying the Bible on fasting, for the first time in my life God is beginning to intrigue me about the secret of fasting.

#### Questions for the congregation:

- What is Christian fasting?
- Do you find it difficult?
- Do you find it helpful?

The church I grew up in had no tradition of fasting at all. In our church a fast was the gear we prayed the preacher might find in order to get to the end of the sermon. In complete contrast the church I joined in my late teens fasted continuously. They fasted for finances, they fasted for healing, they fasted for direction; it seemed to me that the pastor would call a fast for practically anything and everything. But I don't like not eating, and you can ask Deb, you can ask my waistline. Consequently, I'm naturally on the lookout for reasons not to fast. Some time ago I got very excited by an article in a health journal, entitled "why we need to eat more bacon". Unfortunately it was meant ironically and was targeting people who needed to eat less fatty meats –in my books that was just unethical journalism. If only God had made Kale taste like bacon. Unfortunately for me the medical opinion is mostly on the side of the benefits of fasting.

As you are probably aware a very popular form of fasting is intermittent fasting - the best known being the 5:2 Fast Diet - a plan that involves eating the recommended calorie intake for 5 days a week but reducing the daily calorie intake by 25% for the remaining 2 days, 500 calories a day for women and 600 a day for men. There is good evidence that such fasting is at least mildly beneficial for most people. Which makes sense when you recognise that our bodies and metabolisms are engineered for seasonal variations in food availability. What fasting does is mimic that period

long ago when we hunter gathers would come home empty handed. When there was a break in food availability our body are designed to dip into the glucose is stored in our livers and muscles. This begins around 8 hours after the last meal is consumed. When the stored glucose has been used up, the body then begins to burn fat as a source of energy, which can result in weight loss. The use of fat for energy can also help preserve muscle and reduce cholesterol levels. A detoxification process also occurs, because any toxins stored in the body's fat are dissolved and removed from the body. During this process higher levels of endorphins - "feel-good" hormones - are produced in the blood, which can have a positive impact on mental well-being. While the evidence for long term health benefits are still a little mixed, generally medical authorities say that the benefits of moderate fasting out-way the disadvantages which is very disappointing for me personally because it means I can't write off fasting from a health perspective.

So if you haven't worked it out by now I'm pretty keen to find a good justification for eating rather than fasting, so the next cab off the rank for a Christian looking for a loop hole is to find some Bible verses that supports my point of view, now there's nothing wrong with that surely? Everybody does it? Don't they? I suppose the Bible can hardly be God's authoritative word if I simply use the bits I like and ignore the bits I don't like. However I did get excited when after some careful study I discovered that nowhere in either the Law of Moses or in Jesus teaching is there any kind of command or instruction to fast. There are commands and instructions for just about every other kind of spiritual activity under the sun, but not fasting! You little ripper I thought – no fasting for this little black duck. But you know, I really should have stopped right there, because as I kept searching the scriptures about fasting it became clear to me that fasting was somehow important in the spiritual life of some people I deeply admired like Moses and in the life of one man I particularly love, Jesus, which meant I had to keep look into it.

The first time fasting appears in the Bible is in the life of Moses and particularly during two forty day periods when Moses was seeking to remain in the presence of God and learn from God all that was necessary for the Children of Israel to become a new nation under God. This was when Moses received the Ten Commandments.

*<sup>28</sup> Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant--the Ten Commandments. <sup>29</sup> When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. (Exodus 34:28-29)*

During that time of praying and fasting on the mountain the presence of God was so powerful to Moses that it was still burning away in his face and in his eyes when he came down from the mountain. Now was that because of fasting, no, that was because of the presence of God, but fasting is something that people in the Bible found helpful when they needed to get serious with God. The second time Moses fasted was when Israel acted like a big bunch of idiots and made a golden calf to worship and Moses knew instantly that was spiritually very bad and so he spent another month, up the mountain praying, fasting and asking God to forgive the people.

*<sup>10</sup> Now I had stayed on the mountain forty days and nights, as I did the first time, and the LORD listened to me at this time also. It was not his will to destroy you. (Deuteronomy 10:10)*

When Jesus was about to launch into his life work He went out into the desert and he prayed and he fasted. This is definitely a moment in Jesus life when it all became fairly serious. In less than three years he will have proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom up and down the country only to be horribly crucified and then rise from the dead. That's something you probably want to get ready for and it seems that fasting can help you get ready for things when you are getting serious with God. Part of that getting ready involves Jesus in a fascinating struggle between good and evil, between God's plan and the devils plan, in which Jesus faces a number of critical decisions about the way he was going to live his life.

*<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:1-4)*

There is something very interesting here, the devil comes and tempts Jesus to eat something. Where have we heard this story line before? That's right, in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, the devil says it will be really good to eat this fruit, even though God has specifically said, not to eat the fruit, but Adam and Eve look at it and it looks really good, it probably smells like bacon, so they eat it and they shatter their spiritual life, they shatter their relationship with God. So two questions arise, first, why does the Bible picture the act of eating something as having such a profound impact on human life? And why does the Bible tell us that we have an enemy called the devil who is seeking to destroy us. To answer the first question we must move beyond the surface meaning of the story and understand that at its heart the story is about the struggle between two powerful forces seeking to define our life. One of those forces is our human appetites and the other force is God seeking to set us free from our appetites.

I heard the most extraordinary interview during the week on ABC radio's The Conversation hour with Richard Vidler. He was interviewing an Icelandic national Thordis Elva and an Australian by the name of Tom Stranger who raped her when she was sixteen. Having lived with the devastation of the rape for many years Thordis finally wrote a letter to her rapist explaining how this violation had damaged and defined her life only to be shocked when the rapist, Tom, wrote back accepting all the responsibility for what he had done and all the responsibility for how that had continued to work its way out in her life and in his view of himself. Tom says; *"I disavowed the truth by convincing myself it was sex and not rape. And this is a lie I've felt spine-bending guilt for."* After this they continued to correspond for many years and eventually collaborated on a book entitled; *"South of Forgiveness"* and appeared just recently in a Ted talk. One of the things that jumped out for me in this amazing interview was how dramatically two people's lives were impacted when one person became lost in their appetites. How many people's lives do you think have been destroyed by people becoming lost in their appetites, lost in sex, lost in infidelity, in greed, in gambling, in jealousy, in ambition? So when Adam and Eve decide to eat

the fruit it really is about all of those things that bring destruction into our lives. But when Jesus decides not to eat he is changing Adam and Eve's history.

*Jesus says; 'Man does not live on bread alone (on appetite alone sic), but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*" (Matthew 4:1-4)

This is the force in the world seeking to free us from the destructive prison of appetite, God's word. When Jesus chose God's word over appetite he was laying a foundation for freedom. Paul describes it this way, beginning with people who are lost to their appetites:

*<sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* (Philippians 3:19-21)

So let's put a few things together. Fasting is not commanded or instructed by God because at its heart it is a personal decision, a personal exercise in restraint, a pause in the flow of living out of our appetites where for a moment we oppose Adam and Eve's decision to give in to appetite and we affirm Christ's decision not to be a slave. The act of restraining from eating is spiritually a powerful statement about freedom.

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.* (Romans 8:1-2)

Which brings us to the second question; why does the Bible tell us that we have an enemy called the devil who is seeking to destroy us? In one way the introduction of the Devil into Bible's plot line is completely unnecessary. Adam and Eve, the fall, the problem of human sin, our self-destructiveness, the cross, the good news of Jesus, all hang together nicely without the unnecessary complication of the devil being in the detail, so to speak. So the only reason I can think of for including the devil in the Bible story is that it is true and without this element certain things are just not explainable.

Years ago a friend and I were helping out with a Christian activity in Hyde Park during the festival of Sydney and we were staying overnight at a youth worker's place who lived in the city. During the night I was woken up by this man calling out my name and telling me that he wanted to have sex with me. What followed was one of the most harrowing nights of my life. What came out of this man's mouth was utterly vile and profane and the sense of evil in the house was terrifying. By the grace of God, we both survived and we both had a sense that God had answered our feverish prayers and had sent us a protector, perhaps an angel who had silenced the mouth of the man. Because the only thing which has ever made this experience make any kind of sense was the belief that there was more than just a sick and twisted man in the room, that there was a being or beings of genuine evil and malice. That same evil and malice that is the only real explanation of holocausts, massacres, tortures and all manner of unspeakable horrors.

So why does the devil hate us so much? Well you need to understand his motivation. The Bible teaches us that the devil is a fallen angel (Isaiah 14: 12-15, Revelations 12:9). He is an angelic being who once lived close to the heart of God and is now forever banished. But to make things worse God has opened His heart to these other creatures who are not even angels and God cares for these creatures, God loves these creatures, and these creatures are us and devil hates us for it, with this jealous enmity, this malice, and literally he wants to destroy us and make our lives a living hell.

Look at what Peter says about this; *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* (1 Peter 5:8). These are the two qualities that Jesus exhibited in the desert during his time of praying and fasting. When the devil tempted him to use his powers to feed his appetite Jesus very clearly chooses self-control and is alert to what the devil is seeking to do. Adam and Eve lacked self-control and were not alert to what the devil was doing and ended up having their lives shattered. In this way fasting is good for battle, our spiritual battle, it's good for getting our heads clear in the fight of our life. Paul describes this in the strongest terms possible:

*<sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* (Ephesians 6:12)

So let's sum up; despite my very great desire to ignore fasting, God's word has really been challenging me about how fasting can strengthen my Christian walk because it strengthened Moses walk and it strengthened Jesus walk. That there is something very powerful about choosing to deny ourselves, it speaks volumes in our spirit, it helps us achieve freedom from our appetites and clarity in our fight against the powers of this dark world. Fasting is a good choice for the believer who wants to get serious with God. Because at the end of the day fasting is our spirit saying yes to God. That's why God is not at all interested in proscribed fasts, why God is not at all interested in ritual fasts (Isaiah 58), why God is not at all interested in fasting as a religious thing, God is actually interested in us. As Jesus said

*But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*  
(Matthew 6:17, 18)

Jesus knows that the only fast that really matters is the fast in which we say yes to God, and when we say yes to God in the secret places of our heart, God promises that something good will be coming our way.