

SPIRITUAL FITNESS: PRAYER & FASTING

(Isaiah 58.3-8 and Matthew 6.5-18)

Introduction

Prayer is often spoken about in talks in many churches, but how many sermons have you heard in recent years about fasting? (I can perhaps count a hand full of times amongst thousands of sermons. One commentator described Fasting as "one of the most neglected spiritual practices", but nonetheless it is referred to 16 times in the Old Testament and 9 times in the New.

Prayer and Fasting are two of the three so called "pillars of lent" - the other being almsgiving (or giving). We will consider the relationship between these three a little later but for now let's consider what we know about fasting.

Collective Fasting

This morning we will be looking at spiritual fitness and our focus will be prayer and fasting as an individual spiritual discipline. It is worth noting however that prayer and fasting can be a collective experience. In the Old Testament prayer and fasting often took place during times of mourning, or repentance, or when there was a great need or crisis. For example in the Book of Esther the queen urged Mordecai and all of the Jewish people to pray and fast as she approached her husband the king about the plight of her people.

In more recent days many churches and other Christian organisations encourage members to fast and prayer collectively. At the Methodist Conference last year, recognising the challenges facing many communities today, local church were asked to launch the new Methodist year with a day of collective prayer and fasting. Some years ago Pam and I were part of a church that asked its members to collectively fast and prayer for 1 week and this was a special time in the life of the church.

What Is Prayer and Fasting?

Prayer and fasting has simply been defined as “voluntarily going without food in order to focus on prayer and fellowship with God”.

Prayer and fasting often go hand in hand, but this is not always the case. There are examples in the bible of praying without fasting, and also fasting without prayer. It is however when these two activities are combined and committed to God and His glory that they are most effective.

Andy Murray the 19th Century Christian writer and missionary (not the Tennis player) wrote “Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God”.

Prayer and fasting is about turning our focus away from ourselves and our needs and comforts to focus and rely on God for the strength, provision, and the wisdom we need.

David Mathis in his book, Habits of Grace describes fasting as “the most powerful spiritual disciplines of all the Christian disciplines. It is a way to align our hearts with the psalmist, “My soul thirsts for God, the living God” (Psalm 42:2). “It’s a means of God’s grace to strengthen and sharpen our Godward affections,”

Andrew Murray again writes...

"Fasting helps express, deepens, confirms the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves, to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."

The True Fast (Isaiah 58)

In Isaiah we read about a people who outwardly fasted and prayed but inwardly their hearts were far from their God. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Isaiah the prophet pointed out that having a dedicated time of prayer and fasting is not a way of manipulating God into doing what we desire.

Ed Cole puts this succinctly "A fast is not a hunger strike. Fasting submits to God's commands. A hunger strike makes God submit to our demands."

Our attitude of heart is vital when we fast (v 5-9) - An outward Focus

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

(Remember the three pillars of Lent – Prayer, Fasting and Giving)

Cyprian, the 2nd century saint simply wrote...

"Our prayers and fastings are of less avail, unless they are aided by almsgiving."

It seems that prayer and fasting causes us to draw nearer to our God and as we do we better understand His heart for and towards the oppressed, the poor and the needy. Inevitably we have to do something tangible about the injustices we see.

The Promise

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Prayer and Fasting are part of our spiritual warfare.

Pope John Paul II commented "Jesus himself has shown us by his own example that prayer and fasting are the first and most effective weapons against the forces of evil."

You will remember that in Matthew's Gospel (chapter 9) the disciples asked Jesus why they failed to free the boy from the demon, and Jesus said, "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).

In this particular case, the demon was exceptionally determined and Jesus seemed to be saying that a determined enemy must be met with an equally determined faith. Prayer is one of weapon in the spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:18), and fasting helps to focus our prayer.

Prayer and Fasting is part of our worship

When we fast we show God that he is more important than our own comfort. It is by nature sacrificial.

Three practical about fasting as a spiritual discipline:

Fasting does not necessarily involve going without food. For some (for example people with diabetes) it is not possible to fast for any length of time because it might be dangerous. If this is you, but you still have a heart to fast you might consider a Daniel fast (he refrained from eating the king's choice cuts of meat and eating only fruit and vegetables) or it might serve you well to give up eating sweet food such as deserts, cakes and biscuits and chocolate? (I often say that for lent I will stop eating Brussels sprouts.)

Other people give up doing something they routinely do (such as watching TV) When you fast on a personal level make every effort to keep this between you and God.

We read in Matthew 6:16-18 "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others 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."

Note: Jesus said "when you fast" and not if you fast. There is an assumption of fasting as a part of our spiritual discipline.

Importantly, if you fast from food, use the time you would normally spend preparing and eating food to pray.

In summary

Prayer and Fasting are two of the three pillars of Lent, the third being giving. In simplicity fasting is to go without food in order to focus on prayer. Prayer and fasting can be a collective experience but it is also a spiritual discipline for the individual.

True fasting as we read about it in Isaiah chapter 58 is not about taking part in a hunger strike to get what we want from God, rather it is a reflection of our heart and devotion towards God.

Prayer and Fasting is often accompanied by giving in recognition of the many needs around us.

Jesus assumes that we will pray and fast. Prayer and fasting is a part of our spiritual warfare as well as an act of worship

May God by his spirit give us His grace as we pray and fast particularly during this period of Lent.