

October 13, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Prayer, Fasting and the Triumph of the Gospel*

Acts 13:1 – 5

In this short text this morning we have a powerful statement on prayer, fasting and the triumph of the gospel. Last week we saw that God is sovereign and omniscient, and omnipotent, and He ordains everything according to His will, including the fact that we participate in His sovereign design through prayer. And here Luke gives us a glimpse into the outworking of that in the church in Antioch. Barnabas and Saul had returned to Antioch after taking the money to the church in Jerusalem for famine relief, and Luke tells us that the church in Antioch, along with their leadership were worshiping God and praying and fasting. And the sense of this passage leads us to understand that they were fasting and praying to the Lord for the next step in the ministry of the church.

It is instructive to note that before this, there doesn't seem to be an organized movement of the church beyond the eastern Mediterranean seacoast. We are told of course about the saints being scattered by persecution, and Philip's witnessing in Samaria and to the Ethiopian in chapter eight then zooming off to Azotus. But there wasn't the intentional, even strategic prayer and planning we seem to see here. Paul's intentional missionary journeys to Asia Minor and Greece and Rome were still in the future; all his letters resulting from those trips were yet to be written. It was this time of prayer and fasting that resulted in a missions movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire by 300 BC; it was from this time of prayer and fasting that 13 out of the 29 books of the New Testament were written; it was from this time of prayer and fasting that we have today over 1.3 billion Christians in the world; and it was from this time of prayer and fasting that the gospel has gone out to nearly all the inhabited world, with a significant Christian presence in virtually every country. So what I think Luke shows us here in this text is the direct link between prayer, fasting and the triumph of the gospel in the world. And because we all have a fairly good grasp of the necessity of prayer in the spread of the gospel, I'd like to focus on the less appreciated, or at least, less exercised, discipline of fasting. And to do that this morning, we'll look at what fasting is; we'll look at when should we fast; we'll look at how we should fast. The what – the when – and the how. And then we'll draw some conclusions about prayer and fasting with some application.

**So what is fasting?** There are many definitions I suppose, but I think the essence of fasting is this: **a voluntary abstinence from legitimate temporal gifts for eternal purposes.** Most of us conceive fasting as simply abstinence from food, or food and water, and indeed most of the Biblical examples support that. But a passage in Matthew gives us some glimmering of further understanding of fasting. When the disciples of John asked Jesus about fasting, He put it in terms they probably weren't expecting: *Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the Bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the Bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.* **Matthew 9:15** I can just see these guys talking to themselves: **We ask about fasting and He talks about weddings!** But we need to remember that Jesus was answering their question. Fasting is entirely inappropriate at a wedding. Weddings are for feasting, not fasting. And Jesus was telling them that while He, the Bridegroom was on earth, there would be feasting and not fasting. But there was coming a day when fasting would be entirely appropriate – that is when the Bridegroom was gone. Before Christ came, the Jews fasted as a matter of course – and it was a time for mourning their personal sin, their corporate sin, or in praying for some blessing and also fasting in anticipation of the Messiah. In Luke 2 we read the story of Anna, who spent her widowhood in the Temple, **fasting and praying for the redemption of Israel.** And one day He showed up and we don't hear about Anna fasting anymore because the Redeemer had come.

In fact, in the Lord's ministry, we don't hear about Him fasting at all, except when He began His ministry with a forty-day fast. Which serves to underscore the fact that specific times of prayer and fasting for strategic advances in the kingdom are needed. But His reputation was certainly not as an ascetic. He contrasted His ministry with that of John the Baptist by saying: *For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."* **Luke 7:33-34** And indeed there are many passages that describe Jesus feasting, but not fasting.

But one day, Jesus said, fasting would be back in fashion. And the interesting point He makes here about fasting is that our fasting will have to do with the Bridegroom being gone. And then He adds explanation: *No one puts a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wine skins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wine skins, and so both are preserved.* **Matthew 9:16-17** His example of wine skins was meant to explain the question of fasting.

As I mentioned before, the Jews had a couple thousand years of fasting history behind them. And I believe Jesus was likening that to the old wine skins. The Pharisees, who were very particular about fasting – remember the Pharisee in Luke 18: *God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.* Luke 18:11-12 – the Pharisees were fairly rigid and self-righteous in their observance of fasting. Fasting was the Old Testament way that Jews related to God and it became one of the way by which their particular degree of holiness was determined, at least by them. And I believe it was this traditional kind of fasting that Jesus was calling the old wine skin. And I think Jesus is saying that when the Bridegroom is gone, there will be a new kind of fasting – a new wine skin that is able to hold the new wine of the New Covenant. The Jews had been fasting and praying for the Messiah to come, for His kingdom to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. Under the Old Covenant, the sacrifices offered continually for sins reminded them of the day when their sins would be once-for-all atoned for and God would be fully propitiated. And they fasted for that – and that fasting was the old wine skin. But now, the Redeemer has come, our sins are atoned, God is propitiated and we await His Son's return in glory. And from the time He left to the time He returns is the time of new fasting – the new wine skin, that holds the new wine of the New Covenant.

So to return to the question – what is fasting? We need to understand it is not the old wine skin of religious duty that points to our degree of holiness, nor is it fasting for a Redeemer to come. But it is I think, first of all, **an abstinence from legitimate temporal gifts in prayerful anticipation of the Bridegroom's return.** I cannot get away from this obvious connection. I believe the central thing about fasting is that it is connected with Jesus' return. And the fact that He uses the picture of a Bridegroom should tell us something about the nature of this fast and why we should fast. The picture of a Bridegroom should speak to us of longing and anticipation. I see that reflected all through the Bible, but especially in places like the Psalms:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I [see the face of God] come and appear before God?* Psalm 42:1 – 2

*O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I have seen You in the sanctuary and beheld Your power and Your glory.* Psalm 63:1 – 2

*My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.* Psalm 84:2

*I spread out my hands to You; my soul thirsts for You like a parched land.* Psalm 143:6

The word pictures of hunger and thirst here speak to me of the kind of appetite stirred up by a fast. It is not an appetite stirred up by having never tasted the new wine, but the kind that has tasted and wants more. How would we know that we want Him more unless we have first tasted His goodness and grace at least a little? It is a kind of unsatisfied hunger for all the fullness of God that has been stirred up by the aroma of His love and the taste of His goodness in the gospel. And so the new wine skin of fasting is fasting for that. **It is abstaining from the legitimate gifts of God in order to whet our appetite for Him.**

Fasting is not abstaining from illegitimate appetites. You cannot say, 'I will fast from lying for a week' or 'I'm not gonna rob any stores this month' or 'I won't look at internet porn for a whole day'. That isn't fasting – that's sin and we are not to fast from sin but turn from it. **Fasting is laying aside good, legitimate gifts of God in favor of His presence for a season.** It is saying with our bodies '**God, I want You this much**'. And it includes more than just food and drink – although food and drink for most of us is pretty central to our lives. And the fact is, God created us with an appetite and thirst to highlight the fact that He is our real bread and drink. Christ is the fountain of living water and the bread of life, – and when we eat and drink we taste the symbol. And when we fast we are saying that we value and love the reality more than the symbol.

Any legitimate gift is an object of fasting. **Martin Lloyd Jones** wrote: *'Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not...be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.'* And the real issue is anything and everything that is, or can be, a substitute for God. For some that might mean fasting from facebook for a season – or television – or shopping – or eating – or whatever it is that keeps you occupied and full. Because fasting is designed to empty you on one hand, of all the stuff that fills your soul and leaves no room for God – and on the other to fill you with the power and presence of God Himself and whet your appetite with a hunger for God. The truth is the greatest enemy of a hunger for God is not sin but satisfaction. We are too full of legitimate stuff for there to be any room for an appetite for God. ***It is not feasting with the wicked that deadens our hunger for heaven – but feeding too long on the good things of this world that leave us no room for the banquet God has prepared for us.*** How can we say that our heart and soul cry out for the living God when they are already stuffed with the world?

It is the worries, yes, but also the riches and pleasures of this life, Luke 8:14 says that choke us and stop our appetite for God. It is the desires for other things Mark 4:19 says that enter in and stifle a hunger for the word of God. And riches and pleasures and other things are not bad things – they are the good gifts of God. They are things like good coffee and wholesome hobbies and recreation and reading and exercising and parties and internet-surfing. ***But they are also the very things that left unchecked will fill our souls and become deadly substitutes for God.*** And so we fast. We say with our fasting, *'My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord'*. We say with our temporary abstinence from the good gifts of God, *'O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You'*. We proclaim as we fast, *'We have heard You say, Seek My face and our hearts respond to You and say, Your face, Lord, do we seek'*. I think that is the central reason why we should fast – to empty our souls of the bread of this world and fill them with the bread of Heaven and to declare that we would rather feed on the manna from heaven than feast on the finest of foods here below.

**So when should we fast?** In Matthew 6 the Lord Jesus says this: *And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18* The **when** here is assumed. Jesus did not say ***'If you should happen to fast...'*** But ***'When you fast...'*** indicating that fasting was assumed to be a normal part of a believer's experience. In other words **we should fast regularly**. The mere fact that we are in the world living our lives, engaged in legitimate pursuits, involved in stuff, means that we are liable to get so filled with the good gifts of God that we begin to lose our appetite for the Giver. ***And so we need to have some 'When' time to regain that hunger for God.*** So we need regular times of fasting because we are so prone to being filled with other stuff.

But **special times of fasting** for strategic advances in the kingdom are also needed. The fact that Jesus began His earthly ministry with forty days of fasting ought to speak to us of the importance He placed on fasting. What happened in that fast was that the enemy of His soul was defeated. Satan tried everything to get Jesus to abandon the path of the cross, the path of humility, obedience and suffering and he failed – Christ triumphed over His enemy through fasting, and as a result, Christ went to the cross and our salvation was accomplished. If Jesus had yielded in His fast, our salvation would have been forfeit, because He never would have made it to the cross. So I think one other thing we can take away from this is that ***fasting is necessary and appropriate before strategic advances in the kingdom – just as they were doing in Antioch.***

**The how of fasting** is also indicated in Matthew 6. Unlike the fasting of the old wine skin – this new fasting in the Bridegroom's absence is virtually undetectable by any outward signs. In the old wine skin, when people fasted, they wore sackcloth and put ashes on their faces to indicate sorrow and mourning. And those who wanted to look like they fasted without really doing it, made sure other people noticed their piety by wearing long faces to boot. Their whole object was the praise of men. But the new wine skin is a fast that others can't necessarily see – because it is not a fast to be seen by men but by our Father who sees in secret. Fasting is to be seen by God and not by men. This is not to say that fasting is only a personal, secret thing – most of the New Testament examples are about corporate fasts. But rather that ***our fasting is not for the purpose of being seen by others, but for the purpose of being seen by God.*** Jesus talks about prayer in the same way in the earlier part of this chapter: *But when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who is in secret will repay you.'* Matthew 6:6 And the point is not that you have a room with a door – but that prayer is for the purpose of communing with God and not men.

Finally, there are a couple of conclusions I draw from this. **The first one is that fasting represents the intense desire of the bride for the bridegroom.** And it follows that if fasting is first of all, an abstinence from legitimate temporal gifts in prayerful anticipation of the Bridegroom's return, then I think we must conclude that the absence of fasting in the church as a whole represents our inadequate longing for His return. The constant cry of the early church was '**Maranatha – O Lord Come!**' And at the end of the Bible the Lord Himself says: *Behold I come quickly!* and the church's heartfelt response is '*Amen, come Lord Jesus!*' Revelation 22:20 And Paul speaks of loving the appearing of the Lord and makes it a test of authentic faith: *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.* 2 Timothy 4:8 And so loving the appearing of the Lord is not some optional thing – it is what authentic faith says. 'Thy kingdom come O Lord, Thy will be done. Come back O precious Bridegroom – come vindicate Your people and gather Your Bride! In his book, **A Hunger for God**, John Piper says, "**Fasting is the exclamation point at the end of Maranatha!**"

And if fasting is the exclamation point at the end of the cry of the church for His return, then our prayer in that fasting must also necessarily be directed toward **the triumph of the gospel in the world.** That is, if our fasting is saying to God, 'This much O Lord do we long for Your appearing' then how shall we pray? We cannot avoid the fact that the prayer and fasting here in chapter 13 resulted in a gospel explosion. The church was praying and fasting and the Holy Spirit said "Send Barnabas and Saul out into the world with the gospel". I think it is clear in Scripture that Jesus is not coming back until as it says in Matthew 24: '*...this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*' Matthew 24:14 There seems to be a direct connection between fasting and praying and the cause of world evangelism. If you love the Lord's appearing, and you know He is not coming back until this gospel goes out to the whole world – then you will be engaged in fasting and praying and working for that to happen. **So one of the great goals of fasting is the cause of Christ in world missions.** George Ladd, in a book entitled, **A Motive for Mission** said: '**Do you love the Lord's appearing? Then you will bend every effort to take the gospel into all the world.**' He might well have said – 'Are you longing for His return? Then you will not only go into the world with the gospel, you will fast and pray for that to happen'.

With prayer and fasting we are saying that we want to see the nations won to Christ – that we want His work to be done and His kingdom to come **because** we long for His appearing. We recognize that without regular times of prayer and fasting we are prone to be too filled with other things, even good things, that leave no room for God. And our fasting is saying with our bodies, '**We would rather feed on heavenly manna than feast on earthly delights**'. It is saying to God, '**This much, O Lord we want You**'. It is saying to ourselves, to one another, and to Christ '**Maranatha! Even so, come quickly precious Bridegroom!**'

So I want to call us to regular seasons of prayer and fasting – to the end that we would see the gospel go out from here to our communities and neighborhoods and city – and to the ends of the earth. I would challenge us all this morning to fast and pray at least one day a month for this to happen. Take one day and give it over to God in prayer and fasting. It might be that you fast from sundown to sundown, or sunup to sunup – or noontime to noontime; and then set aside specific times within that period to pray. But however you do it, do it.

And since prayer and fasting are also vital factors in strategic planning, the elders will be taking a couple days in November to get away for just this purpose. We don't pretend to know how best to lead the church, so we are all the time asking for the Holy Spirit to lead us. And we are adding to that prayer, a time of fasting as well. And we expect the Holy Spirit to answer as He did in Antioch.

We will also be calling the church at various times to more extended seasons of prayer and fasting and I anticipate the heavens to open and the glory of God to descend and the gospel to run and spread to the degree that we give ourselves as a church to these regular times of prayer and fasting. Make a plan right now, before you leave this room, how much time you will give to this, and stick to it. Be assured however, Satan will do all he can to prevent you from keeping your commitment. But pay him no mind – he is a toothless lion – Christ defeated him in the wilderness and all he can do is roar. I guarantee, no, not I but the word of God, guarantees that if you seek Him with your whole heart He will be found by you. **C.H. Spurgeon** speaking of his church's frequent times of prayer and fasting said, '**Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven's gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central glory**'.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*We humbly ask that You would pour out a spirit of prayer and fasting and supplication upon Your people. Wean us from the deadly delights of sin and the dulling effects of feasting too much on the good gifts You give. Forgive us for stuffing ourselves with earthly bounty and starving ourselves of heavenly fare. Let our fasting not emphasize our abstinence but rather Your fullness. Let us say with our bodies, 'This much O God we want You – this much O God we long to see Your purpose completed on this earth – this much O God we long for Your appearing'. Ignite our hearts with a passion for Your triumph in the world and grant that we would bend every effort to take the gospel into all the world, we pray in the power and grace of Jesus name, Amen.*