

“A Time of Fasting”

Daniel 1:5, 8-17; Matthew 6:16-18

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Uniform Series: “Feasting and Fasting”

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Introduction:

The Christian walk is all about living as a follower of Christ. Because of what He secured for us we are admonished by the Apostle Paul to “walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit,” (Romans 8:4). In 1 Corinthians 9:27, he stated, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection.”

There are times when we all need a spiritual tune-up, if you will; a time when we have to put aside the things of the flesh to draw closer to God in the spirit. One of the spiritual disciplines that help us fine-tune our walk with God is fasting.

Fasting, to me, is like spring cleaning, except for the inner man. It puts us in a state of humility with an attitude of total reverence toward God. It helps to clear out some of the earthly clutter and give us a clearer view to our heavenly Father.

For example, in my part of the world currently we are dealing with snow and ice on the road ways. With that comes salt all over the car and windows. This stuff can really get all over your vehicle and pile up on there something terrible. It makes your car look ugly and it obstructs your view of the roadways. Not until it sings in the car wash are you and your vehicle able to feel that “Ahh!” moment of being clean and feeling fresh (as dirty as my car gets it has to say, “Ahh!” from that warm, soapy water ☺).

Walking this life, things can begin to pile up on you and make us look ugly in the spirit and we need a refreshing; we need some stuff cleared out so that we can see our way more clearly. Fasting is one of the spiritual disciplines that can really help us to rid our flesh of some of this piled up stuff and clear off the windshield of our soul and see Jesus clearer.

Many biblical characters are noted to have fasted (Moses, Ezra, Esther, Daniel and Jesus, just to name a few). Fasts varied and lasted from 1 day to 3 days to 21 days to 40 days. Every year on the Day of Atonement, the people would afflict their souls, (Lev. 16:30-31).

Ezra was another Bible character that believed in fasting. In Ezra 8:21 it says, “Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.” He used the words, ““afflict ourselves before our God.”

When the body is “afflicted” in this manner it’s not giving into its cravings and desires; it’s not given into its natural passions and hunger. I often hear people jokingly say that it was that which went into the mouth (eating) that started the whole sin process in the first place (an act of disobedience). When one participates in a fast it puts God as number one priority over what the body naturally wants, therefore causing affliction. In essence, through their personal denial of selfish wants they are worshipping God by putting Him first.

Ezra’s purpose for the fast he proclaimed was “to seek of him a right way” for everything. One’s reliance on their own intellect and skill often leads to the wider path marked with sin and rebellion (Mt. 7:13-14).

Today’s lesson brings us to two examples of fasts. With it comes what one should and shouldn’t do to fast properly before the Lord. One thing you should notice in both points of the lesson is that above all, fasts should honor God.

Daniel 1:5

5) “And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.”

God warned His people many of times to repent or else they would fall at the hand of their enemies. Jeremiah prophesied to the people that Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon would come and take the city and destroy it, (Jeremiah 25:9; 32:28).

Going up a few verses before today’s lesson we see the very thing that was prophesied had come to pass and “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came unto Jerusalem, and besieged it,” (Daniel 1:1). With that the king instructed “Ashpenaz the master of the eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel . . . in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans,” (Daniel 1:3-4).

This brings us to today’s lesson where Daniel and his friends: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are among those that were chosen to enter the king’s training program. This training program was designed to indoctrinate the young people enrolled in it to all the ways of the Chaldeans. It was meant to corrupt their way of thinking from all they knew before to change their thinking to the ways of their captors.

Those selected and enrolled in this program, because of the task before them, were treated favorably received **“a daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank.”** This was intended to make them suitable to **“stand before the king”** and under his inspection they would be fitted to enter into services other captives were denied.

Daniel 1:8-10

8) “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, not with wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

9) Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.

10) And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king."

"Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself." Any decision one makes for God has to first be a decision of the heart. "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts," (Proverbs 21:2). The heart is what matters. The **"heart"** is the seat of man's will and emotions. So what Daniel was really saying is that his will is to do His will; and he didn't want to participate in anything, even if it seemed pleasurable for that moment, that would take him out of God's will.

Defiling himself with the king's meat and wine would do just that. The Jews were raised, by the initial teachings of God, to live and eat according to very strict guidelines. Read through Leviticus 11 where it specifies foods that can and cannot be eaten with regard to meat. "This is the law of beasts, and of fowl, and of every living creature that moveth in the waters, and of every creature that creepeth upon the earth: To make a difference between the unclean and the clean, and between the beast that may be eaten and the beast that may not be eaten," (Leviticus 11:46-47). Of course, in the New Testament we are no longer under this.

It is presumed that the king's meat on his table more than likely falls into the "unclean" category. It is also supposed that more than likely the food, drinks and everything on the king's table, since it was considered the best of the best, was probably offered to false deities, of the which, Daniel was determined not to **"defile himself"** with.

He may have been in a strange country now and under strange human leadership but his heart was still tied to God and His ways and he was determined to follow God.

With that, Daniel took his concerns to **“the prince of the eunuchs.”** God had allowed Daniel to find **“favour”** with him to where he took a compassionate look at Daniel’s plight and treated him with **“tender love.”** Those words are not something that is synonymous with living in captivity, yet **“God”** is the one who established it so. “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will,” (Proverbs 21:1). Just as God can move in a king’s heart, so can He is the heart of this eunuch toward His people.

When God knows that the heart is right and intent on doing what’s right before Him, He will help you to find favor among those who are even supposed to be your enemies. This reminds me of Psalm 23:5 where it says, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies . . .” Favor where you least expect it. “For thou, LORD, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield,” (Psalm 5:12).

The eunuch’s response was not one of mockery and derision; rather, his only concern was the king himself. He told Daniel, **“I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.”**

To the eunuch, honoring Daniel’s request would not only jeopardize his life, but the eunuch’s as well. It’s one thing to risk one’s own life but to put others in danger was something totally different. The eunuch assumed, according to his human perspective, that if Daniel and his friends went without, their appearance would tell the signs of it. Recap, these men were chosen because they were good looking as well as their skill. If the eunuch would present them to the king looking sickly he would lose his head – literally!

Daniel 1:11-16

11) Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,

12) Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.

13) Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.

14) So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.

15) And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

16) Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

May I briefly interject here a comment about Daniel's courage to even speak up for his convictions in the first place? That says a lot about his character and his devotion to God. Even by force, he wasn't willing to contaminate his faith.

What an awesome perspective he had that some would have taken advantage of. But, Proverbs 23 give us this warning, "When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee: . . . Be not desirous of his dainties: for they are deceitful meat," (vss. 1, 3). Craving wrong things will only bring harm.

After addressing his concerns with Ashpenaz, the prince of the eunuchs, Daniel was inspired to try to remedy the situation by means of a test. He could fight for his faith and Ashpenaz could be assured of his own safety in the process.

The king was obvious looking for something specific when the young men would stand before him. Ashpenaz and Melzar both would be keenly aware of this; that there was some sort of predetermined standard he expected to see. Daniel boldly stated that a comparison be done between he and his companions and their food choices which was **"pulse"** (of the vegetable/grain family) and **"water"** and the other guys who ate **"of the king's meat."**

Seeing they had nothing to lose, for Daniel stated **"as thou seest, deal with thy servants;"** meaning he was leaving the final evaluation/examination results up to them, they acquiesced and allow the **"ten day"** trial period to commence.

The end results were astounding. After the trial period the examination of each group of young people ensued. The findings were not at all what they expected. Remember, Ashpenaz originally was concerned at the appearance of Daniel and his friends being in a **“worse”** condition (vs. 10), resulting in his own head being endangered.

But here, God has flipped the script, so to speak, and it is Daniel and his friends; the men who have kept themselves free of anything that contaminate their relationship with God and followed His ways, they are the healthier ones. They are the ones whose appearance is measured to a stand-out performance. There is a marked difference between those who follow God and those who didn't and their faces showed it **“And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.”**

When you have a made up mind and a heart that is fixed to follow God, people may expect to see the **“worse”** in you, but boy are they surprised when God blesses you to appear **“fairer.”** Living by God's standards will ALWAYS put you in a better position than those who choose not to, as the next verse suggest.

Daniel 1:17

17) “As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”

“God gave them.” Because of their devotion to God with a stand-up attitude, God blessed them with stand-out blessings of **“knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”**

All this meant so much more than the food on one's plate. It was all about a heart that desired to honor God even in difficult circumstances and because of that God blessed these men. God has the final say! He will not suffer His loved ones to go through for nothing. In the end hope satisfies. In the end obedience pays off.

Many have their attentions divided in what they are seeking after. Divided attentions are what cause individuals to obsessively worry about the basic issues

of life, which then leads one to always pursuing the things that care for the natural side of man, thereby, neglecting the spiritual. Daniel chose to nourish the spiritual appetite by withholding the natural appetite.

Matthew 6:16-18

16) “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear to men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

17) But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

18) That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

Have you ever dealt with a child that pulled the face? You know what face I’m talking about. Pouty lips, eyes drawn down and maybe even produce a little tear or two to show you just how upset they are at you. Often it’s not as serious as all that. They didn’t get their way and they are bound and determined to put on a show to display, with their countenance, how displeased they are over the whole affair. I have had four children and let me tell you, they all do it 😊.

Jesus never tolerated people putting on a show of religious fervor for the sake of making it known to everyone around them just how holy they are. He called them **“hypocrites”** which is not something you want Jesus to say about you.

“Hypocrites” are great pretenders. William Shakespeare said, “All the world’s a stage, and all men and women merely players . . .” (Brainy Quote), and the **“hypocrites”** seem to live as if they are in a religious show for all the world to see.

Jesus knew their hearts weren’t right in following their prescribed rituals. Jesus was not against fasting but he was against the motives behind their reason for doing it. They weren’t doing it for God; rather, they were doing it to gain the attention and respect of man. Jeremiah 17:10 says, “I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.” Jesus basically said they have the “fruit of his doings;” **“They have their reward.”**

Attention from man is what they sought and that's what they got. That's it! Jesus' instructions for His disciples were **"But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast."** Get up and get yourself together and don't put on a show for man of your supposed piety. God doesn't need the show. He already knows your heart whether your worship is real or not. ". . . the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart," (1 Samuel 16:7).

"Oil" was a multitask tool. Not only was it used in setting apart things and people ordained to God, but here we see, as in other areas of the Bible, it was used in the daily ritual of being clean and making oneself presentable (compare Psalm 104:15; 2 Samuel 12:20).

Jesus encouraged us that the real worship that goes on on the inside does not go unnoticed. He said, **"Thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."** Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us, "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God . . ." One's faithfulness to God never goes unpaid. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," (Hebrews 11:6).

Conclusion:

In both of today's instances, we saw the need for fasting; for withholding oneself from pleasure of food, etc., to the honor and the glory of God. What we do, we do for God and not to gain recognition from man; rather, to show man that God's ways are always right and He will bless them that follow the path of righteousness.