

**Feasting on God: A Call for Corporate Fasting at Bridgeway
Matthew 6:1, 16-18**

If there is a single driving force in our society today it may well be what I call *instant self-gratification*. There is, of course, nothing wrong and a whole lot that is right about seeking *someone else's* gratification, assuming, of course, that our aim is to help them find gratification in God. But we have moved far away from this noble endeavor to *self-gratification*. Very few seem to care any longer for anything that doesn't begin and end with personal pleasure and self-indulgent satisfaction. Then, on top of it all, we demand that it come *instantly*. People are not inclined to wait patiently or to endure hardship but instead insist on instantaneous gratification of one's lower, sinful, selfish nature.

It is into this mindset in our society that the Bible speaks about fasting. Is it any wonder that few people are listening? Nothing seems as silly to the natural mind or as repulsive to the body as fasting, especially when you place our demand for instant self-gratification in a consumer-oriented world where life is all about seeking and obtaining whatever suits our fancy. "You deserve the best," they tell us. "You can have it now!" "Grab for all the gusto you can!" To this mindset, fasting makes absolutely no sense at all.

Even from a Christian point of view, it seems a little odd. If God has generously created food "to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. 4:3), what possible reason could there be for abstinence? It seems like something reserved for weird people, odd people, or at worst, the masochist who somehow enjoys inflicting pain upon himself!

The reputation of fasting has also suffered because of its association in the minds of many with the ascetic abuses of medieval monks and hermits. In centuries past fasting was often subjected to rigid regulations and was combined with extreme forms of self-mortification and self-denial. Little wonder, then, that fasting seems so often to contribute to that "holier-than-thou" mentality we all want to avoid. There is no getting around the fact that fasting is inseparable, in the minds of many, from **showy and ostentatious self-righteousness**.

One thing that will help us in our attitude toward fasting is to distinguish it from other reasons why people don't eat. For example, fasting must be distinguished from a *hunger strike*, the purpose of which is to gain political power or to draw attention to some social cause.

We must also distinguish fasting from *health dieting*, which insists on abstaining from certain foods for physical reasons. Saying No to burgers and shakes so you can look better in this summer's swimsuit is not what biblical fasting is about. Biblical fasting has nothing to do with *anorexia nervosa*, an eating disorder in which a person starves herself to lose weight, either out of self-contempt or in hope of becoming fashionably and loveably thin. Finally, fasting must be distinguished from how it is practiced in numerous *pagan religions*: to control or appease the gods, or perhaps to make contact with spirits in order to manipulate their power.

So we need to take a moment and determine, as best we can, what the Bible says about fasting and why I'm calling us to a corporate fast during the next five days. Let me do this by highlighting seven fundamental truths about fasting.

(1) First, the key is to remember that fasting is always motivated by deep desire. Whereas there is certainly a measure of physical pain or inconvenience that comes with fasting, I want to insist that, contrary to popular opinion, **fasting is not the suppression of desire but the intense pursuit of it. We fast because we want something more than food or more than whatever activity it is from which we abstain.** We say no to food or certain conveniences for a season only to fill ourselves with something far more tasty, far more filling, far more satisfying. That is to say, if one suppresses the desire for food it is only because he or she has a greater and more intense desire for something more precious. Something of *eternal* value.

That is why I say without apology that *fasting is feasting!* The ironic thing about fasting is that it really isn't about not eating food. **It's about feeding on the fullness of every divine blessing secured for us in Christ.** Fasting

tenderizes our hearts to experience the presence of God. **It expands the capacity of our souls** to hear his voice and be assured of his love and be filled with the fullness of his joy.

Let me say it again: Fasting is **not** primarily about **not** eating food. ***It is primarily about feasting on God.*** In other words, *what* you don't eat or *how long* you don't eat or whatever activity you deny yourself isn't paramount. What you *do* eat, spiritually speaking, is critical. Feed on God. Don't simply taste, don't nibble, don't snack. Feast on him! Seek him. Cry out to him. Focus on him. Worship him. Invite him to fill you up "to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Entreat him to sustain you and supply you and succor you. Lay your heart open before the Lord and ask for him to search and stretch you (cf. Ps. 139:23-24). Repent often! Then, when your fast is finished, rejoice in the food or the fun he has provided and give him thanks for all good things.

Consider Jesus' words to his disciples in John 4:31ff. I'm sure Jesus appreciated their concern for his welfare, but he wanted to make a point. So when they insisted that he eat something, his response was startling: "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (4:32). No, Jesus didn't have a double-meat Big Mac or an extra large Hideaway Pizza hidden inside his robe. Nor were his words "a clever metaphor, but a genuine reality. Jesus was, in fact, being nourished and sustained by the power of God" (Foster, 56).

The point is that ***fasting is a feast.*** Fasting is all about eating! It is about ingesting the Word of God, the beauty of God, the presence of God, the blessings of God. Fasting is all about **spiritual gluttony!** It is not a giving up of food (or some activity) for its own sake. It is about a giving up of food *for Christ's sake.* As Jesus himself made clear in Matthew 6:16-18, either we abstain from food for the praise of men or for the reward of our heavenly Father.

The point is, ***we are always driven to fast because we hunger for something more than food.*** As strange as it may sound, ***fasting is motivated by the prospect of pleasure.*** The heart that fasts cries out, "This I want more than the pleasure of food!" And "this" can be the admiration that men give to people with will power, or it can be the reward we seek from God alone without regard to the praise of men.

Therefore, we don't fast because we hate our bodies and look to punish them. Whatever immediate discomfort we may experience, it is a sacrifice that pays immeasurable long-term benefits. We do not fast for pain, but for the pleasure of experiencing still more of Christ Jesus and the revelation of his powerful presence.

(2) ***Second, fasting is not something you do for God. It is instead your appeal that God in grace and power do everything for you.*** Thus fasting is not an act of willpower but a declaration of weakness. It is not a work of our hearts and bodies but a confession of our utter dependency on God and his grace.

(3) ***Third, fasting is not a statement that food or other things are bad, but that God is better!*** In other words, fasting is not a rejection of the many blessings God has given to us, but an affirmation that in the ultimate sense we prefer the Giver to his gifts. Fasting is a declaration that God is enough.

(4) ***Fourth, perhaps the most instructive insight about fasting is what we learn when we compare it to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.*** The Lord's Supper is a feasting that looks **backward** in time, whereas fasting is a feasting that looks **forward** in time. The breaking of bread and drinking the cup is done "in remembrance" of our Lord's historic, and therefore *past*, act of sacrifice. Thus by *eating and drinking* we celebrate the finality and sufficiency of that atoning death and that glorious resurrection. We should never fast from the supper of the Lord, even when we are fasting from other ordinary "suppers". On the other hand, as Piper explains,

"by not eating—by fasting—we look to the future with an aching in our hearts saying: 'Yes, he came. And yes, what he did for us is glorious. But precisely because of what we have seen and what we have tasted, we feel keenly his absence as well as his presence. . . . we can eat and even celebrate with feasting because he has come. But this we also know: he is not here the way he once was. . . . And his [physical] absence is painful. The sin and misery of the world is painful. . . . We long for him to come again and take up his throne and reign in our midst and vindicate his people and his truth and his glory'" (*Hunger*, 84).

When we sit at Christ's table with other believers we gratefully, fearfully, joyfully feast upon that food and drink that remind us of what has happened. And when we turn away from the table where otherwise daily meals are served we declare our deep yearning for what has not yet happened.

(5) Fifth, it is crucial that we understand the difference between being seen fasting, on the one hand, and fasting to be seen, on the other.

In Acts 13 *they fasted together as a group*. Clearly they did not believe that Jesus' warning about fasting to be seen by men (Matt. 6:17-18) precluded corporate fasting. When you fast as a group others obviously know, but this is evidently not a violation of Christ's instruction. Evidently the church leaders at Antioch take Jesus to mean not that we sin if someone knows that we are fasting, but that we sin if our motive is to be known for our fasting so that men applaud us. **To be seen fasting is not a sin. Fasting to be seen is.**

The real danger of fasting is more than the potential physical side effects. Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:16 not to be like the hypocrites. Hypocrites are those who undertake spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, *to be seen by men*. This is the reward they are after. All of us at some time have felt the satisfaction of this kind of reward: the ego-boost that comes from being admired for our "spirituality" and acknowledged publicly for our "zeal". It truly gratifies the flesh when people make much of our accomplishments, especially our religious accomplishments. Jesus says that if this is the reward that motivates your fasting, you shall surely receive it. But that's all you will receive! If the praise of men is what you desire, you shall have it, but none from God.

Jesus calls this sort of fasting "hypocrisy". Why? Because **true, godly fasting is motivated by a heart for God, not human admiration**. If these Pharisees wanted to be totally open about their reason for fasting, they should have distributed an explanatory tract which read: "The ultimate reason why we're fasting is to win the praise and admiration of men and women." Then they would no longer be hypocrites. It wouldn't make their fasting godly, but it would at least eliminate hypocrisy from their list of sins! Their hypocrisy consists of putting a public face on their fasting which purports to be their way of seeking God's approval when in fact it is their way of seeking man's approval.

Someone might understandably ask at this point, "Does this mean that if someone discovers I've been fasting, I've sinned or I'm a hypocrite?" No, not necessarily. The value of your fasting is not undermined if someone notices that you skipped dinner. As I said earlier, this statement by Jesus does not rule out group fasting either. It is possible to fast with others or it be known that you are fasting and it not be sin or hypocrisy. The deciding factor is your **motive** for fasting. Being seen fasting is merely an external, and often unavoidable, reality. But fasting *to be seen* is a self-exalting motive of the heart.

What, then, is the "reward" that God promises to give if our motive is only to be seen by him in secret (v. 18)? God sees us fasting and knows that we are motivated by a deep longing in our hearts for him and for his purposes to be fulfilled in the earth. He knows that we are not fasting to obtain the applause of people. "He sees that we are acting not out of strength to impress others with our discipline, or even out of a desire to influence others to imitate our devotion. But we have come to God out of weakness to express to him our need and our great longing that he would manifest himself more fully in our lives for the joy of our soul and the glory of his name" (Piper, *Hunger*, 77).

And when he sees this, he responds. He responds by giving to us more of himself and the blessings secured for us in Christ. He "rewards" us by answering the prayers we pray in accordance with his instruction in vv. 9-13 (that his name be hallowed, that his kingdom come, that his will be done on earth). Surely God can and does give us other things that we seek through fasting (physical healing, guidance, etc.). But chief among the results of fasting is the exaltation of God's name and the expansion of God's kingdom.

(6) Sixth, fasting opens our spiritual ears to discern God's voice and sensitizes our hearts to enjoy God's presence. The gentle words of the Spirit are more readily heard during times of fasting. During times of fasting God often grants insights and understanding into his will and purpose, or perhaps new applications of his Word to our lives.

In Acts 13:1-3 we see Saul (Paul) and Barnabas, together with leaders of the church in Antioch, seeking direction from the Lord as to where they should go as a church, in terms of ministry. Their desperation to hear God's voice and follow God's will could find no more appropriate expression than through bodily denial. As they turned away from physical dependence on food they cast themselves in spiritual dependence on God. "Yes, Lord, we love food. We thank you for it. We enjoy it as you want us to. But now, O Lord, there is something before us more important

than filling our mouths and quenching our thirst. Where would you have us go? Whom shall we send? How shall it be financed? Lord, we *hunger* to know your will. Lord, we *thirst* for your direction. *Feed* us O God!”

Their fasting became the occasion for the Spirit's guidance to be communicated to them. Don't miss the obvious causal link that Luke draws. It was *while* or *when* or even *because* they were ministering to the Lord and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke. I'm not suggesting that fasting puts God in our debt, as if it compels him to respond to us. But God *does* promise to be found by those who diligently seek him with their whole heart (Jer. 29:12-13). People who are merely “open” to God rarely find him. God postures himself to be found by those who whole-heartedly seek him, and fasting is a single-minded pursuit to know, hear, and experience God.

What God said to them in the course of their fasting changed history. This revelatory word was spoken in a moment of spiritual hunger for God's voice to fill the void left by mere human wisdom. The results, both immediate and long-term, are stunning, for prior to this incident the church had progressed little, if at all, beyond the eastern seacoast of the Mediterranean. Paul had as yet taken no missionary journeys westward to Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, or Spain. Neither had he written any of his epistles. All his letters were the result of the missionary journeys he was to take and the churches he was to plant. This occasion of prayer and fasting birthed Paul's missionary journeys and led to the writing of 13 of our NT books!

(7) Seventh, fasting is a powerful weapon in spiritual warfare. See Mt. 4:1-11 (Jesus fasted in preparation for resisting the temptations of Satan) and Mark 9:29 (Mt. 17:14-21). Fasting heightens our complete dependence upon God and forces us to draw on him and his power, and to believe fully in his strength. This explains why Jesus fasted in preparation for facing the temptations of Satan in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11; see Mark 9:29; Mt. 17:14-21).

It is important to note that as Jesus was standing on the brink of the most important public ministry the world had ever seen, he chose to *fast*! Have you ever paused to reflect on the eternal consequences of what transpired in the wilderness of Judea those forty days? Heaven and hell hung in the balance. Had Jesus wavered, had he faltered, had he balked, all hope of heaven would have been dashed on the very rocks with which the Enemy tempted him. Of the dozens of things Jesus might have done to withstand this temptation, he is led by the Spirit to fast. “Therefore, we owe our salvation, in some measure (not to overstate it), to the fasting of Jesus. This is a remarkable tribute to fasting” (Piper, 55).

Are we commanded to fast? Am I in sin if I choose not to? No. But the Bible assumes we will fast. According to Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus simply *takes it for granted*. Twice Jesus says, “*when* you fast” (vv. 16,17). As Foster notes, “It is as if there is an almost unconscious assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of Christian devotion. We have no more reason to exclude fasting from the teaching than we do giving or praying” (52). Therefore, although Jesus does not say “*If* you fast,” *neither* does he say, “You *must* fast.” He says, simply: “*When* you fast . . .” In Mark 2 we see the same emphasis. When the Pharisees queried why Jesus' disciples didn't fast, he explained it in terms of his own physical presence on earth. “The days will come,” he said, “when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”

The point here is that the Messiah has come like a bridegroom to a wedding feast. Such a moment is too joyful and stunning and exciting to mingle with fasting. Groomsmen don't fast at the bachelor party! The rehearsal dinner is no place to be sad. Jesus is present. The time for celebration is upon us. When the wedding feast is over and the bridegroom has departed, then it is appropriate to fast.

This indicates, by the way, that in those days fasting was by and large associated with **mourning**. People fasted as an expression of deep personal longing for something more precious than mere food. Their self-denial was symptomatic of a heartsickness borne of desperation. ***Fasting is for times of yearning and longing.*** When the bridegroom is no longer physically with us on earth, *then* it is appropriate to fast. In this age there is an ache, a homesickness of sorts, inside every Christian because Jesus is not as intimately and powerfully and visibly and personally present as we want him to be and as we know one day he will be (cf. 1 Peter 1:8). And that is why we are to fast.

Practical Guidelines for Fasting

Fasting comes in a variety of different forms. Contrary to what many think, one need not always fast from food or drink to achieve the desired goal. Do not feel pressure from others to fast in precisely the same way they do. Never impose your choice in regard to fasting on someone else or judge anyone for the decision they make in this regard. Fasting is always susceptible to legalism, so beware! Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and your *own* conscience (not someone else's!). So let's note some ways in which you might choose to approach our corporate fast.

(1) Technology fast – Many choose to fast from some form of technology: TV, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, E-mail, Instagram, etc. This can be a total fast from all participation or a partial fast from just one form. The choice is yours. The length of your fast may also differ: from one day to one week, etc.

(2) Activities fast – Some choose to withdraw from a certain activity that has become a regular part of their rhythm of life, such as participation in some athletic event or some routine social gathering (other than a Bridgeway community group or D-group).

What is of critical importance in regard to both of these sorts of fasting is that you not simply refrain from these things but that you fill the time and energy otherwise devoted to them with prayer, Bible study, worship, witnessing, or some other spiritual endeavor.

(3) Food and Drink fast – This, of course, is the most popular and explicitly biblical expression of fasting. It too, however, comes in a variety of forms.

NOTE: It is very important to remember that some people simply cannot refrain from eating and drinking in any degree at any time. This is usually due to certain medications that they cannot cease taking and often have to ingest only after eating. If you have unique physical problems that would make fasting dangerous or unhealthy, please do **not** alter your prescribed regimen of medication or of eating and drinking without first consulting with your physician. There is nothing to be ashamed of if you cannot fast in regard to food and drink. Simply choose another way to fast, such as those noted above.

You may choose to fast from caffeine or soda or wine or other special liquids that you regularly imbibe. But you need not go “cold turkey”! If you are fasting from caffeine, come off coffee or sodas gradually, reducing your intake over a span of days before you stop drinking them entirely.

You may choose to fast from sugar or from some sort of food that is a regular, even daily, part of your diet. Perhaps you should choose only to eat fruits or vegetables for the length of the fast, refraining from all meat (or vice versa).

In the case of both of the former two forms of fasting, you would continue to eat and drink other items to maintain your strength and health.

If you should choose to go on a liquid fast, you would refrain from eating **all** solid foods for a time. You might still drink Gatorade or fruit juices or perhaps eat only soups. If you choose this approach there are several things to keep in mind.

First of all, a *progression* should be observed in your fasting, especially if this discipline is new to you and you are unfamiliar with its physical effects. Don't start out with a week-long water fast! Begin by skipping one meal each day for two to three days and setting aside the money it would have cost to give to the poor. Spend the time *praying* that you would have used for eating.

Second, remember also that there are *degrees* of fasting. There is a *regular* fast which consists of abstaining from all food and drink except for water (Matt. 4:2-3; Luke 4:2). Apart from supernatural enablement, the body can function only three days without water. A *partial* fast is when one abstains from some particular kind of food as in the case of Daniel while in Babylon (Dan. 10:3; cf. 1:8,12). As noted above, *liquid* fast means that you abstain only from solid foods. Again, most who choose this path are sustained by fruit juices and the like. A complete or *absolute* fast that entails no food or liquid of any kind (Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9) should only be for a very short period of time. For anything longer seek medical advice. There is also what can only be called a *supernatural* fast, as in the

case of Moses (Dt. 9:9), who abstained from both food and water for 40 days (enabled to do so only by a miraculous enabling from God).

You may also wish to fast from all food *only for a particular meal* each day. In other words, you may choose to skip lunch for a day or two or a week, or dinner, or even breakfast. All such forms of partial fasting are entirely appropriate.

If you've never fasted before, be aware that in the early stages you may get dizzy and have headaches. This is part of the body's cleansing process and will pass with time. Be sure that you break the fast gradually with fresh fruit and vegetables. Do not overeat after the fast. Chili and pizza may sound good after several days of not eating, but please, exercise a little restraint and say No!

How long you fast is entirely up to you and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible are examples of fasts that lasted one day or part of a day (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 1:12, 3:35; Nehemiah 9:1; Jeremiah 36:6); a one-night fast (Daniel 6:18-24); three-day fasts (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9), seven-day fasts (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:16-23), a fourteen-day fast (Acts 27:33-34), a twenty-one day fast (Daniel 10:3-13), forty-day fasts (Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:2), and fasts of unspecified lengths (Matthew 9:14; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2, 14:2-3).

Finally, never lose sight of the fact that *what* you don't eat or *how long* you don't eat or whatever activity you deny yourself isn't paramount. What you *do* eat, spiritually speaking, is critical. Feed on God. Don't simply taste, don't nibble, don't snack. Feast on him! Seek him. Cry out to him. Focus on him. Worship him. Invite him to fill you up "to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Entreat him to sustain you and supply you and succor you. Lay your heart open before the Lord and ask for him to search and stretch you (cf. Ps. 139:23-24). Repent often! Then, when your fast is finished, rejoice in the food or the fun he has provided and give him thanks for all good things.

As we enter this time of corporate fasting, we would recommend praying about several matters:

(1) Your own personal relationship with Christ and the need for deeper devotion, more sincere and regular repentance from sin, greater consistency in the reading of God's Word, more heartfelt intimacy with the Lord, a greater sense of his presence and experience of his power, a more visible and effective manifestation of spiritual gifts, etc.

(2) Your personal relationship with others in the body of Christ and any need there is for seeking forgiveness, granting forgiveness, and reconciliation.

(3) The many ministries of Bridgeway and our needs as a church: financial, volunteers (especially for BW kids), our building, new community groups to begin (together with gifted leaders for them), greater evangelistic outreach as we share the gospel with others, a more consistent commitment to and practice of personal and corporate intercessory prayer, increased fervency in worship, etc.

At the conclusion of our corporate fast, on Friday, February 21, we will gather together for a time of worship and celebration and joy in the presence of the Lord. Please join us from 7-9 p.m., or for whatever period of time you can.

[If you desire to study this topic in more depth, I highly recommend John Piper's book, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Crossway).]