

MAN IN THE MIRROR BIBLE STUDY
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES – A MAN AND FASTING

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September 6, 2002

Good Morning, Men!

I have a couple of announcements to make. I want to mention that next week, Scott Smith, who used to do the sound, is going to be in town, (he has three months to do video production) and is producing a television show on ministry to men. So he's coming here to Orlando, and I'm not sure what he's going to be doing, but he'll be around next week. First of all, say "hello," and let's not act like we usually act, let's try to impress the nation. Just kidding.

I do want to begin first of all by thanking many of you who have heard about my father passing suddenly on Monday, without much warning. I do appreciate those of you who have contacted me in various ways. We are all doing quite well. We are rejoicing. His last words were something to effect, "I'm ready to go to Heaven," and the word, "Jesus." He went into the hospital with abdominal pains early Sunday morning, and by Sunday afternoon, he seemed to be improving. On Monday morning, he went into ICU, and by the time we all got there, he was in distress, his liver quit functioning, poisons were backing up, and his blood pressure dropped. It seemed like he stabilized, so we all went home. One half hour later on Monday afternoon, we got a call that he'd gone home to be with Christ. Your prayers for the family are appreciated, and he was a good man. He taught me so many wonderful things, which, of course, are reflected upon in moments like this. There is a special bond between a little boy and his daddy, so we're going to miss him. Thanks for your prayers.

Today we're going to talk about the spiritual discipline of a man in fasting. Spiritual disciplines are what? You could describe them in many ways, but they are habits that men develop so they can grow in Christ, grow in sanctification. You can say that in a lot of different ways, but, essentially, that's what spiritual disciplines are. This morning we're going to talk about the spiritual discipline of fasting. We must be very careful here to say that disciplines are not done to make God happy, to earn favor with God or earn

merit. All the merit we need, we already have in Christ. And yet spiritual disciplines are our way for us to grow in this relationship that we have with Jesus. So, fasting is a spiritual discipline. You're going to learn a little bit this morning about fasting in ways you probably haven't heard before.

What is fasting? What is its purpose? What is the problem it solves? Why should we do it? Then I'm going to tell you a little about my own experience with fasting and answer your questions, if you'd like to give it a try, and some suggestions how you can take it out for a spin and give it a try.

For some of you, you don't know this yet, but this is exactly what you've been looking for. You've been longing for a deeper relationship with Jesus. How can I humble myself before such a Holy God? How can I find wisdom for these incredible, difficult decisions I have to make? How can I find peace for the impossible situation I find myself in? You've been reading the Bible over and over and praying over and over, and there is still something missing. This discipline of fasting, for some of you, perhaps you didn't know it, but this is exactly what you've been looking for.

For others of us, we really have never thought much about this idea of fasting and yet, this morning by the end of this message, fasting is going to look very attractive to you. Others of you, maybe you're just exploring Christianity, or you're early on in your relationship with Jesus, so this idea of fasting may not be something that really rings a bell this morning. Yet, I encourage you to take notes because God has a very peculiar sense of humor, and you might well find in the near future that fasting would be something you might want to take out for a spin.

What is the purpose of fasting? What is the problem that it solves? What is it all about? Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from eating food for spiritual reasons. That's what fasting is. I suppose there is no one in the room who wouldn't already know that? What does fasting accomplish? What is the purpose and the problem that it solves? I am going to read to you some things I found that help strengthen prayer.

Jesus said once to the father of the demon-possessed boy when the disciples wanted to know why Jesus could not drive out that evil spirit. Jesus said, "Some are so difficult they require prayer and fasting." So it strengthens prayer and also to prepare yourself to receive revelation.

It is interesting that in my own experience with fasting that when you slow down the physiological parts of your existence, there is an expansion, if you will, of the spiritual side of your life. In fact, the acuity, the sharpness, of your mental faculties goes up when the blood is not focusing on the digestive process. Also to express sorrow. Sometimes men do things that are so overwhelming to them, their sins are so despicable to them that they just can't seem to let it go. Fasting is an excellent way to express sorrow to God, to be penitent to the Lord.

Sometimes we have decisions we have to make, agonizing decisions to let people go because business is not so good. Those decisions are rarely black and white. It's rarely up or down because you know if this or that would happen, then I wouldn't have to let that person go.

We had a Board of Directors' telephonic meeting last week, and we're in some cash flow problems. I said to the Board, "Does anybody have any wisdom?" Nobody had any wisdom, so all that was left to do was pray and invite God to show up. Sometimes you just don't have enough wisdom to solve the problems that you have. Fasting is an excellent way to seek God's face, to prostrate yourself before the Lord; to humble yourself before God.

Are you proud, are you struggling, are you angry because when you do good evil is right there with you and you feel this pride of life? How do you beat that back down? Fasting is a great way because it's a tangible expression of humility before God.

Sometimes a serious illness – I'll tell you a story about that in a moment. You need to find your way back to God. Fasting is a way to do that. Me, I'm a workaholic. I'm a recovering workaholic, but I am a workaholic. If I don't watch myself, I love to work, I love production, I love creativity, and I love to work. If I'm not careful on any given day, I can literally work myself into a stupor, a mind-numbing stupor. So fasting is a great way to slow down your RPM's. Even fasting on a regular basis is a great way to slow down your RPM's and make sure you keep your mind and your heart focused on the Lord, Jesus Christ. I'll tell you how you might do that in just a moment.

Now, a little background on fasting. Fasting is mentioned throughout the Bible starting with Moses, David, Nehemiah, Ezra, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul and many others. Fasting is mentioned throughout the Bible.

Jesus began his ministry with a 40-day fast. That is becoming a new popular thing today, and I'll mention that in a moment.

You should be opening your Bible to Luke: Chapter 5, Verse 33 and let's read verses of Scripture about fasting. Jesus was being questioned and they said to Him, "John's Disciples often fast and pray and so do the Disciples of the Pharisees." So there was a lot of fasting going on. "But yours, Jesus, go on eating and drinking." Verse 34: Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests for the bridegroom fast while He is with them?" There are some points where you and Jesus are so tight, He's so with you, you're so close, there's so much joy overflowing you that fasting would be crazy to consider. However, there are other times, and Jesus goes on, Verse 35, "But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them and those days they will fast." We really live in an age where fasting is part of normal Christian life.

Here's the big idea for this morning. I would like everyone to write this down because this really applies to so much more than today's topic. If I never sacrifice anything for Jesus, how can either one of us be sure that I really love him? If I never sacrifice anything for Jesus, and this is a cultural phenomenon. The Christianity culture we live in doesn't require much sacrifice. It is a blessed culture for something like 85% of Americans. We are a blessed people. Even the least among us are generally more blessed than the less blessed of another developing nation. We are a blessed people. So, it makes it more difficult for us to live in the line of fire of sacrifice. We have to manufacture sacrifice. We have to step out and do something. I just say to you brothers, if I never do anything as a sacrifice to Jesus, can any one of us be sure that I really love Him?

In the Book of Acts, fasting is a regular practice. Paul said in the King James version of the Scriptures, "In fasting often, the Divache, which is recommended to be a canon, but was not the original, there were a lot of people who were writing teachings in the name of Apostles who were not actually Apostles so we're pretty sure that the Scriptures that we have are authentic. But there are a lot of Scriptures that were close but no cigar. The Divache is one of them and is generally regarded as something being written so sooner than 90 A.D. It's interesting because you find out a lot about the culture of the times, so the Divache says, "Before baptism, the one who baptizes, and the one who is being baptized must fast and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days

beforehand.” That’s interesting. “Your fast must be identical to those of the hypocrites.” This is written at the time where the Pharisees running around were called hypocrites. “They fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but you should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.” So you can see that fasting was part of the culture then. It is not part of the culture now, and these little bits of information will help you paint a picture in your mind.

In the Middle Ages, extreme asceticism was the highest expression of Christianity in the Middle Ages. What was the highest expression of Christianity in the early church? It was generally regarded as martyrdom. In other words, the highest expression of the Christian faith if you were in the early church would be that you were martyred for Christ. Then in the Middle Ages, the highest expression of your commitment to Christ, and I’m not saying this is right or wrong just an idea of what was regarded to be so, was monasticism, so fasting, asceticism, self-sacrifice that was considered the highest expression of faith. Now, since the reclamation, the highest expression of faith has been and you could come up with a lot of different idea. I would settle in the idea of Lordship. The Lordship of Jesus is the highest expression of Christian faith today that we can make. In other words that we come humbly to the foot of the cross, negotiate the terms of a full surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. That’s the deal. That’s what we’re trying to do here. That’s what we’re trying to negotiate here.

Because there was a reaction to the severe asceticism of the monastic period of the Middle Ages, then fasting started to fall into, I won’t say disuse, but lower use. Then we had a Civil War. You know that in any Civil War, 364,000 Americans died in combat or related. That was in the early 1850’s and 60’s. Then 1870, when the census was taken, there were 38 million people in the United States. That means that approximately one out of every 100 people in the United States was killed by another American. Isn’t that interesting? So, Abraham Lincoln, on March 30, 1863, made a Proclamation for a day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer. It’s interesting – by 1865 the war was over, and one of the most evil institutions of all history was dismantled and that is slavery. One out of every 100 Americans died by the hand of another American in order to rid our land of the evil and justice of slavery. No doubt this national fasting and prayer had a profound effect on that.

Bill Bright has noted that between the years 1861 and 1954, not one single book was written on the subject of fasting so there you see it falling

somewhat into disuse. Then on July 5, 1994, Bill Bright felt led by God to go on a 40-day fast. I was involved with him at that time in a heavy way so I was with him several times during those 40 days. When he ended his 40-day fast, I went to the meeting where he spoke and had it in his heart to challenge other Christians around the world to fast. Last year, on the declared day, it was estimated to be two million people around the world fasting and praying for spiritual revival awakening.

Turn with me if you would to Matthew: Chapter 6, Verses 16 & 17. “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do for they disfigure their faces to show when they are fasting. I’ll tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” A couple of important points there. If you fast and you try to make sure everybody knows you’re fasting, this is bad, and the praise that you seek by letting people know that you’re fasting is just your full reward. Then Jesus goes on, “When you fast put oil on your head and wash your face.” That’s a cultural thing. Today you basically get dressed and go to work, if you end of going to work, shave your face and look normal. “So that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting but only to your Father who is unseen. And your Father sees what is done in secret will reward you.” Does this mean that if anybody ever finds out that you’re fasting, that you’re out? No that’s a little legalistic. In fact it says the idea is that it won’t be obvious to people that you’re fasting. For example, when I’m fasting my wife needs to know that because she would be very irritated if she made a meal and I said, “I’m sorry, I can’t eat that.” “Well why can’t you?” “Oh, I’m just not hungry today. I can’t tell you it’s a secret.” You get the picture. Don’t be legalistic about it.

I want to take some of my experiences, and this is actually something I have experience with, and I want to tell you how fasting is developed into being a regular part of my life. I want you to know that I am doing this for the Glory of Christ, alone, no other reason, and for your instruction. This is something good for you to know.

Ted Bywater, who usually sits at this table when he’s here, got me involved in fasting back in the 1980’s. I was having an extremely difficult time in business, and Ted shared how he had fasted and it had had a very significant impact on his life. I happened to find this week my notes on that day when I made the decision. There are three paragraphs up here about fear and feelings. Monday afternoon 2:00, just got back from lunch, fatigue swept over me, and I’d been calling on the Lord for months and months. My

emotions were raw from the ups and downs of the last few months, and I could not bear another minute of these problems. I was sitting at the desk with Ted Bywater so I made the decision that I would fast at an active pace, that God would honor it and reveal His will, His purpose for me, and His plan for these problems. I simply needed for God to make Himself plainly known to me. I didn't actually know how I would know when the fast should end, and had no idea what I was looking for from the Lord. I only knew I could not go on another instant. I decided I would fast until God came to me or until I died. I had no earthly idea what I expected God to do. I only knew I couldn't go this way, and I needed God to come to me personally, and in a very spiritual way.

I decided I would begin a fast so I called Patsy and told her. Patsy has always been very careful to listen to the voice of the Lord in her life, and she had been equally perceptive for His voice in my life, and this afternoon she seemed to be filled with a reverent respect for what I was announcing to her. I don't remember how long that was, but it was something like about four days of fasting. Nothing really changed that I can remember except my heart. That was 1973(?) when I was soaring in a way that I felt like I'd been locked in a cage with some lead weights on. I felt like He had taken the weights off and opened the door to the cage, and I was flying again. Nothing had changed circumstantially.

That got me involved to play around with fasting on a curiosity basis. Then in 1985, a friend of mine developed incurable Hepatitis Type B. In 1989, he was going downhill for a lot of reasons, so I made a commitment that I was going to fast one day a week for him until he was healed. I would, basically, skip dinner and breakfast and lunch the following day, then eat dinner the following night skipping three meals. Then I would go about my normal business although I would get a little fatigued in the afternoon and sometimes would lie down for a 10 or 20-minute nap. I did that for 40 weeks. I have migraine headaches so the bottom line is that every week this gave me a headache. After I had fasted for 40 weeks, I called him up and told him that I thought like the Lord is saying not to fast anymore. Now there were other people praying for him. I am not trying to draw one-to-one correlations here, but he was healed. I talked to him yesterday and said to him this isn't one of those things "healed today and back tomorrow?" He said, "No, I'm completely healed." Then I really got locked in on the idea. When Bill Bright did his day of fasting and called a meeting of some leaders here in Orlando in December, 1994 and I went, there were 600 who fasted.

So I decided I would try the 40-day fast. Some of you remember when I tried that.

I went out and bought a juicer and read up on it and started the fast. After a week, the appetite was completely gone at that time, but after about the 10th day, I started to become irritable. I became more and more irritable every day, and I started getting angry and more angry. On the 14th day I had to pull the plug on it because I was so irritable I thought this is ridiculous, so I am not made to do a 40-day fast. Perhaps you are, but I have a whole page of notes of what happened during that period.

Then that same year, we needed some direction at our ministry, there were five of us at that time, so I called for a Day of Prayer and Fasting. I was surprised to learn that the other four people had never fasted before. Long story short, God showed up and now today, that was 1995, in 2002, we touch over four million men as a ministry. Just those five people in that room have been able to touch over four million men for Jesus Christ. We always point right back to that meeting. Three of the five are still in the ministry and we always point back to that meeting because it does release spiritual power.

I fast one day a week. I don't fast three meals a day anymore. I fast two meals. I do a 24-hour fast from dinner to dinner and I don't take breakfast and I don't take lunch. I pretty much do the same things I do the rest of the time because it's not an extended period. If you wanted to do a three or four-day fast, then you'd probably need to stop taking caffeine, for example, and get ready for the caffeine headache, and you probably would not maintain your regular exercise regimen. You'd probably want to do some walking, but you would probably want to back off if you were to go more than a day. But I think if you just went one day probably not much to change. However, would it not make sense to take the time that you would otherwise be devoting to eating and devote those times to prayer? Want to pray more? Eat less.

I don't think there's any magic about how long you might want to pray, but if you've never tried this before, you might want to skip one meal and see what happens. Take it out for a spin. You might want to do it during the week or you might want to do it on the weekend and maybe skip breakfast and devote the morning to prayer and see what happens. You can do a water only fast or you can do a juice fast. If you do juice, it's good, because you

get glucose in you, and I don't think you could reasonably expect to maintain your normal schedule if you didn't have some glucose. I take orange juice and I cut it 50% with water so it's half and half. Apple juice and watermelon juice is good.

Medical issues: If you have diabetes or high blood pressure, you probably want to check with your doctor before hand. If you get tired during the day, take a nap. Maybe that's the body saying you need to rest.

Side effects: Hunger might be one of them. You might have a little stomach ache or headache. Maybe not. When you fast, the body is cleansing itself so be sure and keep some Certs so you don't offend your brothers at work. When you're done you want to rush right down to McDonald's and get some burgers and fries, right? When you break fast you probably want to make sure you eat a banana or something that doesn't have a lot of fatty content in it. If you were to eat a french fry or something that was real greasy, it will taste very different to you.

The point here is that if we never do anything to sacrifice for Jesus, then how is He going to know that we love Him? How are we going to know that we love Him. Fasting is a wonderful spiritual discipline to bring you into a place of sacrifice. So my purpose this morning in mentioning this spiritual discipline is to acquaint you with you something that has been a little bit of disuse and encourage you to think about it to see if this is something God could use in your life to draw you into deeper fellowship with Him.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father. Thank you for the discipline of fasting and, Lord, because it's in your Scripture, while it may fall into disuse, it's never lost, and I just pray, Lord, that literally half the men I talk to God are hurting beyond their wisdom. So I am going to guess that half the men in this room today would be in that category. They are just beyond their wisdom. They're beyond their emotional strength, they're fatigued, and like the three guys I talked to yesterday two are in the middle of getting divorces. All kinds of problems, Lord, and I just pray that some of the men here today would take fasting out for a spin and that you would reveal yourself to them in a more powerful deeper way because of it. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen