

Lent Midweek 2 –March 12, 2014
Text: Matthew 6:16-18
Theme: Lenten Customs: Fasting

Matthew 6:16–18

"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."

Fasting has long been a religious custom within almost all faiths. Christianity is no exception and if Christians ever try a fast, they will likely try it during the season of Lent. In our text, the Lord Jesus himself approves of fasting to increase spiritual discipline. Fasting is not done to impress God or human beings. It is not done to feed our ego as we starve our body. It does not replace daily acts of love and compassion. But true fasting is to gain mastery over the desires of the flesh.

In our text, our Lord reflects on the words of the prophet Isaiah. Centuries before, Isaiah spoke God's word of judgment upon the less-than-spiritual fasting that was going on in his day. Listen as the prophet describes the fasting that only serves oneself and does nothing for the other person:

"On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." (Is 58:3–5)

Then God goes on to describes what pleases him:

“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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

**“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.”
(Is 58:6–8)**

It’s funny how people love to jump on some tradition that denies them comfort or pleasure but ignore something as simple as going out of one’s way to help, to be of service, to love. If fasting helps you to serve God or serve others, great! But if it is for some other reason, rethink it. Lent is an important time of the church year and it is not God-pleasing to make ourselves feel miserable for 40 days. But it is God-pleasing to spend 40 days helping and serving others.

Mardi Gras is an example of fasting gone wrong. Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday.” Originally, Christians ate no meat and no sweets during Lent and they were supposed to give the money they saved to the Church. Fat Tuesday was the day to use up all the sugar, shortening, eggs and milk (the fat in Fat Tuesday) and also any other perishable food before the fasting that began on Ash

Wednesday. The point of Fat Tuesday was good stewardship to prepare for Lent. Of course, the religious practicality of Fat Tuesday has been forgotten and it is just another day to over indulge.

If you fast, ask why? Are you hoping to develop more self-control? Are you hoping to save money on food to give more to God? What good thing do you hope to accomplish? Fasting is not to despise the body. The Lord is our Maker. He intends that we enjoy the human body and use it as he planned.

Fasting is not to atone for our sins. Christ's once-and-for-all atonement makes that unnecessary. We don't need to punish ourselves. Christ was punished for us. His death is the one sacrifice for all the sins of the world. No further atonement is necessary.

Fasting is not intended to impress others. Rather, in our text Jesus urges us to do things like wash our face and smile so that no one will even know we are fasting.

Fasting also is not done to impress God. God loves us unconditionally and he calls us to serve others in love as he has loved us. In Isaiah, he spells it out for us. We are to love others by providing for their needs. At all times, but especially in Lent, we sacrifice our wants for the needs of others. In the act of sacrificing, we grow in our mastery over the urges and compulsions of this life and gain in living for Christ instead of for ourselves.

So maybe literal fasting is not the best way for you to accomplish that. What can you do deny the sinful flesh to better live by the Spirit? What can you actively do to show your sinful flesh who is boss during these days of Lent?

Are there bad habits you need to bring under control? Are there good habits you need to develop? Use these 40 days of Lent. You can work out your own kind of fast, to meet your own needs. Maybe you need to commit to daily exercise or better nutrition to care for the body God has entrusted to your care. Maybe you need to commit to tithing for these 40 days to help the Church and teach yourself that man does not live by bread alone but by every Word of God. Maybe there are people to whom you need to show love. Whatever your fast is during Lent, remember that it is only for the glory of God, and for your spiritual good as we continue growing in Christ.