

When You Fast

MATTHEW 6:16-18

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey

March 2, 2003

TODAY I WANT TO SPEND TIME CONSIDERING that part of the devotional life represented by the words, “when you fast.” This is the part of the devotional life that prepares us for intimate communication with God.

Last week we considered the part of the devotional life that flows out of prayer. Our private conversations with God naturally produce a desire within us to help other people by expressing the love of God to them in very practical ways. Now, this week we will deal with the component of the devotional life that comes before the prayer. I will wait until the next time I speak to introduce the subject of prayer itself, which is the centerpiece of the devotional life.

Another way we can think about this threefold division of the devotional life is to think of it in terms of relationships. In my private life, I must think about three things. I must think about how I am going to relate to other people. I must also think about how I am going to relate to God. And I must think about how I am going to relate to myself. Today we are going to think about how we relate to ourselves and try to answer the question of what we are to do with ourselves.

Last week, Fred Rogers (host of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*) died of stomach cancer. For over thirty years, Mr. Rogers used television to communicate with pre-school children. According to one commentator I heard, Fred Rogers had a simple message. He told children to love themselves and to love other people. By preaching the message to love oneself and to love other people, Mr. Rogers was really emphasizing the first and last components found in the devotional life as it is described in MATTHEW 6. Had he also preached our need to love God, then all three components would have been covered.

The best way to love other people is to help them know God so they can give praise and glory to God. That is a summary of what we talked about last week. And, the best way to love oneself is the same. It is to help oneself know God. We do that by creating for ourselves an environment that will allow us to have intimate communication with God. It is during that time of intimate conversation with God that we grow to

know and love Him more and more.

This whole business of creating or improving upon our environment to make intimate communication with God possible does not come naturally. It is not something we are naturally given to do. It requires subduing the flesh in a special way.

Now someone might want to disagree with this point. Perhaps you have already developed a discipline in your life that provides for you a good environment for prayer. And this discipline, whatever it may be, has become so much a part of your life that you would feel very uncomfortable and unnatural not to do it. If that is the case, then you have much for which you should be thankful. Most people lack such a discipline.

But, when I speak of subduing the flesh, I am not talking about maintaining a discipline or certain level of communication with God that we have already achieved. I am talking about creating an environment for a level of communication that does not already exist. From time to time and for various reasons there is a need for all of us to improve upon what we already have. We need to recognize when those times come, and we need to be willing to take the necessary action.

So, what I am talking about today is something very special, and it is something all of us need to do from time to time. There are occasions when we need to abstain from doing something that is good and natural for us to do so that we can concentrate on drawing closer to God. There are several ways in which we can subdue the flesh through abstinence. The most prominent way is to abstaining from eating food for a period of time. Another example of abstaining would be when a husband and wife mutually agree to refrain from having sex for a period of time. 1 CORINTHIANS 7:5 says, “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” And as we think about it more, I am sure we could come up with other examples. When Jesus spent forty days in the desert after He was baptized by John in the Jordan River, He abstained from food, but I am sure He also refrained from doing other things during that period of time including

socializing with other people.

Please notice that all these examples deal with abstaining from things that are good things. When we subdue the flesh to create an environment for prayer, we are not abstaining from bad things. We should always try to abstain from doing things that are bad to our mental, physical, or spiritual health. So when we decide to refrain from eating too many sweets or refrain from watching television, our prayer life may be helped, but these are not good examples of what I mean when I am talking about subduing the flesh. I am talking about abstaining from something that we normally do and should do. For that reason, what I am talking about is special and should only be done for a period of time.

TODAY WE WILL BE TAKING A CLOSE LOOK AT fasting as a means of subduing the flesh; but whatever means we use, the purpose must be the same. And, that purpose is to draw us into a deeper and more intimate time of prayer with God. We must first be convinced of our need to come into a deeper level of communication with God; otherwise, whatever kind of abstaining we do will take on another meaning. My observation tells me that the average person who calls himself an evangelical Christian has little experience in the area of subduing the flesh. And, I believe the reason for that, at least in part, is because the average evangelical Christian is not convinced of his need to enter into a deeper level of communication with God. Today, I hope I can convince some people that they do need to enter into a deeper level of communication with God.

But before I do, let me assure you that what I am talking about is not some weird doctrine. There is good biblical and historical background to what I am saying. I would like to focus in on the subject of fasting to emphasize this point. In the Bible, fasting is presented as normal part of the Christian life, not as something obscure and weird.

Under the Law of Moses, the children of Israel were commanded to fast once a year and that day was Day of Atonement (LEVITICUS 16:29). The command to fast on that day was part of the ceremonial law intended to make the children of Israel clean.

And, there are many other recordings of fasting in the Bible. During certain national emergencies, the religious leaders called upon the nation of Israel to carry out additional fasts. There is really not much in the way of direct teaching about fasting in the New Testament, but Jesus did give us a lot of indirect teaching on the subject. In MATTHEW 9, we read how Jesus answered the Pharisees when they asked Him why He and His disciples did not fast the same

way they did. Jesus answered by telling them that the day was coming when his disciples would fast. Our Lord's answer certainly implies that fasting is not a weird thing for Christians to do. And, MATTHEW 6:16 quotes Jesus as saying, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do." These words imply that fasting is something normal and good for a Christian to do. In MARK 9:29, Jesus told his disciples that the demon they had been trying to cast out from a boy could only be cast out through fasting and prayer. And, even though most of the ancient manuscripts do not include the word "fasting" in that verse, it makes sense that the disciples had a need to fast at that time. They were confronting a problem that called for a stronger faith than they had. They needed to subdue their flesh so they could connect to God in a deeper way so that their faith could grow. And then, we must remember that Jesus himself fasted for forty days and forty nights when He was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan.

Going beyond the teaching of our Lord, we discover that fasting was practiced often by the early Church. When the church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first preaching tour, they did so only after a period of prayer and fasting (ACTS 13:3). In fact, whenever the early Church was facing some major decision or danger, fasting seemed to take place. In referring to his life, the apostle Paul talked about fasting often (2 CORINTHIANS 11:27).

And, when we study church history, we discover that the saints of God in all ages and in all places believed in and practiced fasting. This is especially true with the Protestant reformers such as the Wesleys and Whitefield.

Certainly fasting is not weird. It is normal and good for the Christians to practice as individuals and corporately. So why don't we do it more often? As I have already stated, I don't think we are convinced of the need to do it. That is one reason. The other is a reaction we have toward people who do it for the wrong reasons. It is embarrassing to admit, but what we do or don't do as evangelicals is often a reaction to wrong things that other people do rather than a simple desire to obey God's Word.

What are some of the wrong reasons for fasting? Some people teach that fasting should become a routine discipline of every Christian. This is the approach the Pharisees took toward fasting. They fasted twice a week. Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I was required to abstain from eating meat every Friday. But making fasting a routine discipline is not Biblical. God never commanded His people to do this. We find no such command either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament.

This is not to say that carrying out certain disciplines is unimportant to the Christian life. It is extremely important for us to be disciplined as Christians. In 1 CORINTHIANS 9:27, the apostle Paul said, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." I cannot imagine a meaningful prayer life without discipline. If you want to know how well my prayer life is going, ask me when the last time it was that I ran. Over the years, I have disciplined myself to pray as I run. It has gotten to the point that I feel very out of place when I miss that discipline for any length of time. Some people take walks. Others kneel down by the side of their beds or at some other special location. Whatever the discipline may be, when we do it, it helps us to pray. One hymn writer talked about going to the garden to pray in the early morning. That must have been a cherished discipline for that hymn writer. We need such disciplines and it is a very serious mistake for a Christian to go through life without such disciplines.

But, fasting was never meant to become a discipline. It is special. We do it when we are confronted with a special need that requires us to grow deeper and more intimate in our communication with God. Perhaps that special need is the need to start a discipline. I would guess that a great many people here have no discipline when it comes to prayer. That constitutes a special and very serious need. In face of such a need, it would be very appropriate to fast so that you can seek God and hear His voice and find the revelation and strength you need to begin a discipline. But, fasting itself was never meant to be a discipline, and it would be wrong for me to present it as such.

Related to the mistake of making fasting a discipline is the mistake of making it something we do at prescribed periods of time. In other words, it is wrong to make fasting mechanical. Last week, I challenged us to work hard at improving our devotional lives. I suggested using the period of time Christians traditionally consider as Lent to make a special effort at doing this. Many Christians will routinely fast during Lent. Some Christians will routinely fast at other times during the year or certain days during the year. The religion of Islam takes the same approach to fasting. But, this is not Biblical teaching. It makes fasting out to be a very mechanical thing. By taking this mechanical approach to fasting, we end up doing it because it is part of our religion and not because we recognize a need to enter into a deeper level of communication with God.

Another false teaching about fasting that has gained popularity in recent years is to regard fasting as means of receiving a blessing. It is to separate fasting

from the rest of the devotional life, and say that we can actually force God to do things for us if we fast. Of course, that is not how it is taught, but that is the final meaning of the teaching.

The way people present this teaching is through testimony. People will share how they faced some major problem or crisis in their lives. Then they will testify that they fasted for a period of time and the problem or crises went away. The implication is that if we fast, our problems will also be solved. Though it is impossible to deny such testimony, such teaching is not Biblical. We should not fast, expecting direct and immediate results. I have personally struggled with this issue and have concluded that I should not even fast expecting to receive any specific blessing at all. I should not even make fasting a means of achieving a closer relationship with God. It is prayer, and not fasting, that will draw me closer to God. I fast because I need to enter into a higher spiritual realm of prayer with God. Such prayer often includes deep meditation and intense intercession. There is no other Biblical reason for fasting.

One final false teaching about fasting is to focus in on the obvious physical and emotional and even spiritual benefits it produces. This is different from what I have just talked about. I just said it is wrong to make fasting a means to the end of receiving a particular blessing. But, the mistake I now want to emphasize is to make fasting an end in itself.

There are popular books now being sold that talk about the practical benefits of fasting. These benefits have been scientifically proven. These books tell us how fasting can flush out toxins that have built up in our bodies. And, they also emphasize the emotional and even spiritual benefits of fasting. They describe how, after the preliminary physical misery of the first three or so days, a period of unusual mental clarity begins to take place. During that time, people feel very spiritually sensitive and aware of things they never had been aware of before.

Now, I am not saying it is a sin to fast in order to remove toxins from your body or to experience a higher level of mental clarity and spiritual awareness. I am just saying that this is not the motive for fasting that is presented in the Bible. Even non-Christians fast for these reasons. Fasting as an end in itself may provide practical benefits, but it has nothing to do with the devotional life. Another example of using fasting as an end in itself is to abstain from eating food to make a political point or to empathize with a cause. This has and continues to be done by people around the world. Again, I am not saying that fasting for these reasons is wrong. However, we must not become confused and

connect this kind of fasting with the devotional life. When we are living out the devotional life, there is only one good motive for any kind of abstinence we might choose and that is to draw closer to God in prayer.

So, why don't we fast more than we do? Why is fasting so neglected, especially among people who call themselves evangelical Christians? Some people are reluctant to do it, because they are reacting to one or more of the things I have just mentioned that have nothing to do with the devotional life. Our overreaction to false teaching often causes us to neglect the very thing we should be doing. This is true with the devotional life, and it is also true with other very important doctrines, including the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I hope that you are now able to better understand the difference between fasting that is part of the devotional life and fasting that is not. And, I hope that this understanding will reduce the amount of overreacting that may exist in our congregation.

But, there is another reason why we don't fast as much as we should. In my opinion, it is a more serious reason, and it is a harder one to correct. It is because we do not feel the need. According to the Bible, fasting that is connected to the devotional life is always done in the face of some very serious challenge by an individual Christian or a congregation as a whole. Often, when the children of Israel were about to enter war, they fasted. You see examples of this in JUDGES 20:26 and 1 SAMUEL 7:6. People fasted when they were about to embark on some new journey or perform some very important task that involved great risk. You see examples of this in EZRA 8:23 and ESTHER 4:16 and ACTS 13:3. People fasted when they were confronted with bad news that caused great distress. The Children of Israel fasted when King Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle (1 SAMUEL 31:13). David fasted when his son became deathly ill (2 SAMUEL 12:21). And, King Ahab fasted when he heard about the disaster that was to come as a result of the sins he had committed (1 KINGS 21:27). People fasted when they became aware of their sin and their need to confess and repent. John the Baptist taught his disciples to fast often (MARK 2:18), and that was in relationship to his ministry to persuade people to repent. The citizens of Nineveh fasted when they became aware of their sin and the impending judgement. And, people fasted when they were confronted with major decisions and needed special revelation from God. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights before God revealed to him the Ten Commandments. Daniel fasted when he was seeking revelation from God (DANIEL 9:3).

All these are just a few Biblical examples of fasting. But, they all have something in common. Each time people fasted, they did so in response to some

need. In response to an important need, they wanted to draw closer to God. They wanted to hear God's voice and communicate with Him in a very special way, so they fasted. Do we feel the same need? I am afraid that many of us don't, but we should. We face the threat of war. There are serious sins in our individual lives and in the life of our church equal in magnitude to the sins that God's people faced in Biblical times. We are confronted with serious decisions, and we are making these decisions without fasting. Shouldn't we feel the need to receive special revelation from God during these times when we have to make major decisions? In the face of terribly bad news we are failing to fast. All the reasons that compelled people to fast in the Bible seem to do very little to move the heart of the modern evangelical Christian. Why is this? Don't we care? Do we think that the salvation we have experienced in Christ has brought us to the highest possible level of communication with God and we no longer need to go higher? The New Testament Christians didn't think that way. The apostle Paul didn't think that way.

YESTERDAY I ASKED THE OTHER ELDERS IN OUR church if we, as spiritual leaders of this church, could make a plea to the congregation to fast in light of the war that our nation is preparing to enter. They unanimously agreed to do so. This is an urgent need, and we are asking the people of CCCNJ to take time this week to fast. The Church needs to draw closer to God in times like these. We need to hear his voice and be moved to pray in a deeper way about the many things that happen in times of war. Many lives are at stake. If nothing else, we should be praying in a deeper way for the salvation of those who will soon be killed. And, I am sure there are many other things God may want us to know at this time. When we fast with the motive of drawing closer to God in prayer, then we are fasting for the right reason.

We should not neglect this vital component of the devotional life. As part of the devotional life, fasting must be kept private. The Pharisees made it public by disfiguring their faces so people would notice. Some Christians, in an attempt to not be like the Pharisees, will try extra hard to be extra happy or extra caring or extra good looking when they are fasting. They go out of their way to conceal the fact that they are fasting. They even try to make the opposite impression. I have been in conferences where a speaker will say that we, as Christians, should be different from the world by going out of our way to do everything better. We should show the world that being a Christian means striving for excellence. So we should be getting better grades on our tests and we should perform better on the job and we should dress better and always go around with a smile on our face. But, there is something wrong with this kind of teaching. In

our efforts to go to out of our way to be opposite from the world, we become just as bad as the people we are trying so hard to be different from.

Jesus said, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting." In Christ's time, putting oil on one's head and washing one's face were normal, everyday things that people did. Our Lord is telling us that, when we are fasting, we should act normal so as not to draw attention from other people. Our Lord's principle is this: "Forget other people altogether." In order to avoid looking sad, don't try extra hard to put a grin on your face. Forget your face. Forget yourself. Forget other people altogether. Don't worry about the impression you are making. Just forget yourself and give yourself entirely to God. Be concerned only about drawing closer to God in prayer and meeting Him on a higher level of communication.

The only thing that matters is that we are right with God and concerned about pleasing Him only. This must be true of every part of the devotional life. The reward we receive for the devotional life is sure. We don't have to worry about that. It doesn't matter how long the reward is withheld; we will eventually receive it. Our Lord's promise is true. Jesus said, "Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Each one of us only has one life to live. In the span of a person's lifetime, each one of us is confronted with needs that should compel each of us to seek a higher level of communication with God. Sometimes, we are confronted as a church community with a serious situation that calls for a corporate effort to draw closer to God. These needs are opportunities that should not be missed. This week you have an opportunity to respond to a plea from the spiritual leaders of our church. Such pleas from the Elder Board are rare and should be taken seriously. If we fail to take advantage of these opportunities when they come our way, how can we expect to go to higher levels in our devotional lives?

Please give careful consideration to this very important part of the devotional life. Do it this week and do it for the rest of your lives. You will not regret it.

Please take the Elder Board's appeal to fast seriously. Make a special effort to fast this week and be sensitive to the many needs around you in the future. When we face such needs, God often awaits for us to fast so that we can draw closer to Him. When you meet this week in your 4W or small groups, share how you have personally responded or failed to respond to the plea and challenge of fasting.