

“Thoughts on Fasting”

Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Isaiah 58:1-12

Introduction:

Today marks the beginning of the season of Lent, which is 40 days long – not counting Sunday’s. The genesis for Lent was Jesus’ 40 days of fasting in the wilderness after his baptism. At the end of that extended period of fasting the Devil came to test him. If Jesus had given into temptation then, we wouldn’t be here now because Jesus would never have gone to the Cross, and we would still be spiritually dead in our sins.

Lent is therefore a season of penitence, of introspection, of struggle against habits, attitudes, hatreds, bigotries, and addictions that keep us from realizing the fullness of the life God intends for us. For some Lent is a time to ‘lay down’ what is interfering with God’s grace in our lives.

Lent is also a season for ‘picking up’ something new that God wants us to experience, or participate in, as a method of growing us in grace and service towards others.

Since fasting was such an integral part of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Lent is also a season in which Christians are challenged to fast as a way of

Thoughts On Fasting

developing a deeper spiritual awareness and sensitivity to the action of God in our lives. There is something about saying “no” to our bodies that also frees our spirits to ascend.

In today’s lessons there is much said about fasting, and God’s mercy and judgment.

Before I proceed I should say that fasting is abstaining from eating. It is not cutting back on the amount we eat. It is not a diet. It is a spiritual discipline. It is not eating – even when your body is saying, “feed me, Leroy”. It is a way to increase the strength of your eternal spirit and free you from the demands of your temporal flesh. There are several ways to fast.

Jesus fasted by not eating for 40 days. He no doubt drank water as he found it. The longest I could ever fast was 12 days; 40 days is beyond my comprehension.

Some people fast one day a week during Lent, such as Wednesday or Friday. Some people fast one or two meals each day during Lent. Some people give up eating certain foods during Lent, but I’m not convinced that is fasting. It is ‘laying something down’, and that has its own value. It is a spiritual discipline. That said,

Fasting Is A Template For Spiritual Growth.

Isaiah and Jesus discuss two motivations for

fasting: one is temporal. It has to do with us, and the attention fasting brings us. We get strokes being miserable and having people make over us because we are being so brave by fasting. Isaiah and Jesus weren't very impressed with fasting for temporal gain. They compared that to being under God's judgment.

The second motivation for fasting is Spiritual. It is a way of denying the flesh and seeking a deeper spiritual encounter with the living God. The gain is personal. It is between you and God. It is not for 'show and tell and slaps on the back. Isaiah and Jesus compared that motivation to being under God's mercy.

So Isaiah and Jesus present a template that connects a temporal motivation for fasting with being under God's judgment, and a spiritual motivation the same as being under God's mercy.

Likewise, there are two pathways for seeking reconciliation to God. The first is through the temporal way of doing 'good works'. Good works are good, they help people. That is not the issue.

The Issue About Good Works and Fasting is Our Motivation.

Are we doing these things to impress people or to draw closer to God? So if we do good works as a

Thoughts On Fasting

means to earn our way into God's favor then we are counting on God's judgment, instead of God's mercy. Therefore, if we fast to impress people rather than to draw closer to God we are under judgment, not mercy.

When I say we are under judgment I mean that in the sense of evaluation, or appraisal. If we want God to judge us, and our actions, then we need to comprehend that God's standards are exceedingly difficult. If we are going to earn our way into heaven then we need to become as good as God is – namely, perfect, because that is the standard God uses. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus said to the Pharisees, who were trying to make themselves perfect: *“Be ye, therefore, perfect even as my father in heaven is perfect”*. So the standard is God Himself. That is a tough pair of shoes to grow into.

Conversely, if doing good works is our way of demonstrating how much we love God, and we are thankful for God's mercy; and if we fast – not to impress anyone, but to draw closer to God – then we are not under God's judgment, we are under God's mercy.

By the mercy of God, Jesus went to the Cross to pay the penalty for all our sins. Now that the debt has been paid by God Himself, God is free to be merciful to everyone who desires mercy and is willing to recognize

Jesus as his/her savior and the Lord of their daily lives. In that merciful relationship with God, God pours grace upon us, which means we don't have to become perfect to win God's favor.

We are given assurance of heaven through the work Jesus Christ did on our behalf. Therefore, we owe Jesus a debt; but, it is a debt we cannot possibly repay.

We can't repay Him but we can willingly participate in His ministry of reconciliation by helping others become reconciled to God through Christ; reconciled to other people; and reconciled to themselves if they are oppressed by guilt or shame or any other negative imprinting from others.

Lent Can Be A Season for Us to Draw Closer To God.

By "picking-up" or "laying down" whatever God is leading us to do; by fasting and making time to pray for the many serious illnesses in our congregation, by accepting these ashes on our foreheads, we are intentionally identifying with Jesus. In Baptism the ceremony says we "*are marked as Christ's own*". Ash Wednesday makes that marking very visible, doesn't it?

The Psalmist today says there are actual benefits to belonging to God: verse 3 – *He forgives all our*

Thoughts On Fasting

sins. He heals all our infirmities. :4 – He redeems our lives from the grave. He crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness. :5 – He satisfies us with good things. Our youth is renewed like an eagle’s. :10 – We are not rewarded according to our sins or our wickedness. :12 - As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us. Wow!

It all has to do with what we treasure in our hearts. If it is acclamation from others that is what we will find, whatever it costs us. Jesus cautions us in the Gospel lesson not to go that route. Instead, store up treasure for ourselves in heaven by seeking first the Kingdom of God; knowing that everything we absolutely need in this world God will provide because God loves us and is merciful towards us.

Mercy, or Judgment? What will you seek this Lent? The choice is yours. The different paths are before each of us. This I know – Spiritual Fasting will produce spiritual growth. Which will you choose?