

APPRENTICES OF JESUS – FASTING

Mark 2:18-22

Sermon for Peace Church

March 8, 2009

PURPOSE - To have each member commit to a spiritual discipline of abstinence for the remainder of Lent in order to strengthen the life of Christ in them.

MAIN IDEA – The life of Christ in us is strengthened by disciplines of fasting from food, company and noise.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bible to Mark 2:18, as we continue a Lenten series titled, "Apprentices of Jesus."

1. let me begin with a statement which, above anything else I may say in this sermon, I want you to remember for your life in the Lord:

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS PHYSICAL! (2X)

(i) By & large, I think we have a better handle on the FLIPSIDE of that statement:

THE PHYSICAL LIFE IS SPIRITUAL – That's also true – and we know it.

When our spirits are down - when we're depressed & discouraged, heart's beaten up - that's the time PHYSICALLY we're so vulnerable to colds & disease.

Prov. 22:17 – *A cheerful heart is good medicine ... but a crushed spirit dries up the bone!*
... because ... THE PHYSICAL LIFE IS SPIRITUAL.

(ii) But today, and again next week, I want to impress upon you that the SPIRITUAL LIFE IS PHYSICAL.

We don't tend to think of Christianity as a PHYSICAL calling. If you get called into the MARINES, now that's a physical calling ... Christianity?

We tend to think that what really matters are our internal beliefs, ideas, feelings, intentions. Yes, they do! But Christianity is also a physical religion.

A. IT'S BIBLICAL – In fact it's a THEME of the apostle Paul in his letter of 1 Corinthians.

- Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16) – it’s SACRED – what you do with it affects the Spirit within.

- Chapter 6 – “Everything’s permissible – but I’ll not be mastered by anything ... The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

- Chapter 9 - ... so I BUFFET my body, in training, for my life in the Lord.

B. Christianity is a PHYSICAL FAITH – because the spiritual life is physical.

(iii) In C.S. Lewis’ Screwtape Letters, the Senior Devil, Screwtape, advises the Jr. Devil, Wormwood, to encourage his “patient” (a recent convert to Christ) to think of prayer as, “entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularised ... “And persuade him that BODILY POSITION makes no difference to his prayers (when, in fact, they do) – for you must always remember that humans are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”

WHATEVER YOUR BODY DOES AFFECTS YOUR SOUL ... THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS PHYSICAL.

2. So what shall we PHYSICALLY DO to cultivate our spiritual life?

That’s a question Christians should ask EVERY SEASON of Lent. It’s the PURPOSE of Lent.

(i) Just as Jesus went into the physically-demanding desert to be spiritually strengthened, His apprentices at this time of year consider DISCIPLINES to strengthen their spiritual life.

(Of course this is not the only time of year to do such training - we can & should do commit to disciplines at other times, even year-round. But Lent is a time to highlight their and be renewed in them.)

(ii) Broadly speaking, those disciplines can be classified into two camps:

Disciplines of Abstinence (things you withdraw from) & Engagement (things you participate in) = Disciplines of FASTING & FEASTING (this week & next).

A. My goal that you leave here each Sunday COMMITTING TO a discipline, now through Easter.

3. Our Scripture reading is Jesus’ most important teaching on fasting. It highlights the PROMISE & PURPOSE of all spiritual disciplines.

Read Mark 2:18-22

II. JESUS ON FASTING

1. To strengthen his life in God, JESUS FASTED. To strengthen His apprentice's life in God, Jesus commanded his followers to fast.

Mt. 6 – Sermon on the Mount – Jesus taught about religious practices ... when you give, don't announce it; when you pray, don't babble empty words ... and WHEN YOU FAST, don't make it obvious to others.

- Just as He trained his apprentices to pray and give (which we do), he too expected & trained them to fast - (WHEN you fast, not if).

So what's going on in this passage?

(i) People noticed that apprentices of John the Baptist & Pharisees were fasting (many Pharisees fast 2 days per week), but Jesus' disciples WEREN'T!

- > "Are you being soft on them?" they wondered ... "Is yours just an EASY, indulgent LIFE?"

A. So Jesus assures them, v. 20, that a day will come when His apprentices will indeed fast.

But when He is PHYSICALLY PRESENT with them, this is not the time.

- He is like the BRIDEGROOM; His apprentices, like a BRIDE. – When He is physically present – the groom & bride together – each day is WEDDING TIME ... and NEVER would you want to go to a wedding banquet and there be no food!

YOU CAN'T ... the OCCASION'S too FESTIVE!!! ... "Let's eat / let's toast!" ... THE GROOM & BRIDE ARE TOGETHER!!!

B. Later in the Bible, at the end of the book of Revelation, Jesus' return – His 2nd coming – is likened to a time when He, the Bridegroom, unites with the Bride, His Church.

Rev. 19:7 – *Let us rejoice & be glad ... for the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.*

That too is a time for FEASTING – "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb" – again, because the groom is physically present with his bride.

(ii) But IN THE INTERVAL – v. 20 – *When the bridegroom will be taken from them ... on that day (which is TO-DAY) ... they will fast.*

2. WHY? In the next paragraph He explains with this ANALOGY: V. 22 – *No one pours new wine into an old wineskin.*

That was not done back in Jesus' day – new wine / young wine had to ferment / expand. An old wineskin was already stretched. If it's filled & expansion occurs ... BURST!

(i) Jesus describes to HIS MINISTRY as “new wine”

And the “old wineskin” is a reference to the fasting of John's disciples & the Pharisees. Specifically, John & the Pharisees fasted for a DIFFERENT REASON than would Jesus' followers:

(ii) John called his disciples to fast to EMPTY their hearts - to repent of sins and claim forgiveness. That's Old Covenant fasting.

A. But that's now that Jesus has come, his apprentices fast to FILL THEIR HEART. God's here. The Kingdom has begun! And Christians fast to FILL the heart with the thoughts & desires of the Spirit within.

A. The Pharisees – at least some of them – fasted for even LESSER REASONS, false ones.
= to show how good they were to God ... and to others.

They liked to fast in public – sackcloth & ashes – so that people could admire their religious devotion.

3. Jesus' disciples don't fast for that reason.

ANY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE – prayer, worship, giving – ANY CHURCH PROGRAM which supports these disciplines is always done for the sake of drinking the new wine = gaining kingdom strength to love God & others.

(i) When we do it for Pharisaical “show” reasons, it's like a weightlifter who pumps iron not to be stronger to serve others, but to look in the mirror (or have others look at him).

That's not why we TRAIN as Christians – to admire ourselves! We train for the sake of LOVING GOD & LOVING OTHERS!

(ii) Christians fast to be full of the Spirit!

Today Jesus is with us. Not yet like He will be when He physically returns, but today He is with us in WORD & SPIRIT. He is a presence, a power, a reign – who lives in us sharing God's thoughts & desires.

This is THE NEW WINE of the Spirit.

4. So we fast to let the WINE FLOW from our hearts – into our minds, emotions, will.

(i) As John Piper puts it (outline):

We have tasted the powers of the age to come, and our fasting is not because we are hungry for something we have not experienced, but because the new wine of Christ's presence is so real and so satisfying. We must have all that it is possible to have. Christian fasting is a hunger for all the fullness of God, aroused by the taste of God's goodness in the gospel.

5. In other words, we fast to FEAST on Jesus. BUT HOW DOES FASTING HELP US FEAST?

(i) Well, within us there are yet so many habitual thoughts of pride, anxiety, self-protection, self-justification, lust, manipulation, using others, comparison, anger, fear, vengeance that BLOCK the flow of Jesus' wine.

Those CRAVINGS of the old nature must be STILLED, even put to death – so that the life of Christ will flow in and through me.

(ii) FOR EXAMPLE – We come here to worship – and what a Christian wants to do on a Sunday morning is just worship freely / deeply in Jesus love for the Father. And also to be an encouragement to all the others gathered here for that same purpose.

But instead, we get here & look around, and thoughts of anxiety come (what's the future hold?) - dampening worship. Thoughts of comparison arise, evaluation, even judgment of others – killing worship. How can I love on God when I'm lookin' down on others? – you can't!

These sin-habits are what the KJV calls "cravings of the flesh". They are habits of mind & heart which plug the flow of the new wine through its channels.

A. HOW DO WE STOP THEM?

Not by coming here thinking, "OK. I'm not going to judge anybody ... I'm not going to be anxious ... I'm not going to evaluate". That just makes things worse.

The way that the CRAVINGS OF THE SIN NATURE are MORTIFIED is THROUGH a discipline like FASTING!

(iii) Fasting is a MEANS whereby our heart GAINS CONTROL over those thoughts – keeping the sin nature AT BAY ... or, if it arises, putting it quickly in check – so that, by the power of the Kingdom in me, I can love on God and love on others!

Fasting WITHERS the cravings of the sin nature that war against the kingdom within. THAT'S WHY JESUS' APPRENTICES FAST.

We have “tasted the power” of the age to come. That wine is so satisfying. We want to live in those thoughts / that spirit all that we can!

... So please commit to trying it– in one of these ways:

III. SOME FASTS TO CONSIDER

Fasting from food / company / noise. Biblically, fasting is about food. But some of us may not be able to do that, so I’ve added company & noise. There are others. The point is to abstain from something that is a part of your everyday life.

We live in a day where we have so MUCH to consume. We live in a time which so readily encourages consumption. Above all times in modern history, fasting has never been more important than today (even as we’re least inclined to it.)

So come up with one for the next month of Lent (and thereafter).

1. A food fast embraces hunger for God’s sake. It’s a means of prayer.

Joseph Wimmer writes, *“The weakness of hunger which leads to death brings forth the goodness and power of God who wills life. Here there is no extortion, no magic attempt to force God’s will. We merely look with confidence upon our heavenly Father and through our fasting say gently in our hearts: “Father, without you I will die; come to my assistance, make haste to help me.”*

Fasting embraces hunger to be fed of God.

(ii) John Piper adds – *Fasting is not a no to the goodness of food or the generosity of God in providing it. Rather, it is a way of saying, from time to time, that having more of the Giver surpasses having the gift. If a husband and wife resolve to give up sexual relations for a season to deal earnestly with a problem keeping them at odds, this is not a condemnation of sex but an exaltation of love. Food is good. But God is better. Normally we meet God in his good gifts and turn every enjoyment into worship with thanksgiving. But from time to time we need to test ourselves to see if we have begun to love his gifts in place of God.*

Fasting enters hunger to love God.

(iii) Fasting too helps us know what’s in our hearts.

Food can be a medication. It covers up the anger, bitterness, disappointment, jealousy, strife in our hearts.

Citing David who wrote – Ps. 69:10 – *“I humbled my soul with fasting”*, Richard Foster states, “Fasting reveals the things that control us.”

What a servant fasting is! Humbly and quietly, with scarcely a movement, she brings up out of the dark places of my soul the dissatisfactions in relationships, the frustrations of the ministry, the fears of failure, the emptiness of wasted time. And just when my heart begins to retreat to the delicious hope of eating supper with friends at Pizza Hut, she quietly reminds me – not tonight. It can be a devastating experience at first. Will I find spiritual communion with God sweet enough, and hope in his promises deep enough, not just to cope, but to flourish and rejoice in Him?”

Consider a FOOD FAST for these remaining weeks of Lent.

- One meal a week ... one day a week / one meal a day
- Or, pick a particular food which may be for you a “medication” blocking your spiritual growth.

Commit to a food fast – that you might better drink of God’s new wine!

2. Second, a fast from COMPANY – Embrace solitude – a hour a day / 3 hours a week
= Make space to be alone.

(i) Dallas Willard writes, *“Solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings. It frees us, actually. The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought and action. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order.”*

- What he’s saying is that when others can always ring us up / text us at any time, those relationships dictate our life – even at the expense of paying attention in our relationship with God. We want HIM to dictate our life – cause He is altogether good!

(ii) So often in the gospels you read of Jesus going off on his own.

People wanted to contact Him – in fact, they’d search him out. He’d go to the mountain to be with God. He wanted God’s agenda for his life, not others; God’s priorities & values, not people.

A. And imagine if Jesus had a cell phone and a texting plan! Everybody would want his number!!!

Lent is a good time to give up FaceBook, texting, even your cellphone!

Lent is a time to retreat on a walk through nature each week.

CONSIDER A FAST FROM COMPANY – that you might better drink of God’s new wine!

3. Related to solitude is SILENCE.

We live in a noisy age. We're so used to it – we turn on the radio as soon as we enter the car. We turn on the TV as soon as we get up in the morning.

(i) Henri Nouwen asks: ... “May the diversions we look for in the many things outside us be an attempt to avoid a confrontation with what is inside ... Where do I turn when I have no more friends to talk with, no music to listen to, no paper to read, and no films to see?

Unless we embrace silence, *“the questions which are asked from within remain unanswered, unsure feelings are not cleared up, tangled desires are not straightened out, and confusing emotions are not understood. All that remains is a chaotic tumble of feelings which have never had a chance to be sorted out.”*

(ii) As followers of Jesus, we want to discipline silence INTO our lives so those deep questions can be asked ... and ANSWERED by the flow of God's new wine in you.

- So consider a fast from NOISE through Lent.

IV. CONCLUSION

You will be blessed for whatever commitment you make.

Pray to God. Ask Him to help you create a WINESKIN to carry the NEW WINE of the Spirit.

That's what fasting & all the spiritual disciplines are. Lent is a season to be renewed in them – so that you can drink of Jesus.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink”, said Jesus.

“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from WITHIN him.” By this He meant the Spirit.

AMEN!