**The Surest Path To Finding Yourself**

Matthew 6:16 “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. **17**But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18**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. (ESV)

To further understand what Jesus is speaking on here we need to establish some basic truths about fasting. The question might arise in your mind: What is fasting? Fasting is such an uncommon practice in culture today, and even in Christianity itself, that there are many professing Christians that do not even know what it is or the purpose of it. Let us establish this: Fasting is abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. When a person fasts they go without food for a period of time. This period may be one meal such as a breakfast, lunch or dinner. It may be a few days. Jesus Himself fasted for 40 days! I don’t suggest His method to anyone. He was Jesus and He was supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit. Now, fasting is not starving oneself. A person that does a 7-day fast is not going to not eat food for seven whole days. But they will not eat most foods. They may just drink water and eat a little bread here and there. Others will go one whole day without eating. The methods vary but everyone must also know their body and its ability to go without food

Now, being more disciplined in one’s eating habits is NOT fasting. It is beneficial to be cautious of what one eats and to keep your body disciplined at all times but fasting is not a constant thing. It is not something you keep up day to day for years and years. Might you fast for a spiritual purpose for an extended period of time? Sure. But it is very different from trying to keep your body healthy by avoiding gluttony and over-eating

The most common kind of fasting is when a person abstains from food to spend time in prayer. Often this time in prayer is spent praying over exceptional circumstances and situations that do not arise too often. A person may fast to pray for the health of a family member sick in the hospital, or they may be a pastor fasting to seek an answer from God about what their next sermon series should be. Regardless of the circumstance, fasting for prayer is meant to be done in uncommon circumstances

Now, let us also address the fact that fasting is not always from food. What Jesus is speaking of here is specifically fasting from food as that was the only primary thing to fast from in that time period. But in today’s time many Christians take it upon themselves to fast other material things for the sake of spiritual gain. Some believers will step away from TV or social media or sporting events or other hobbies and activities to spend time in prayer, and that is just as a good a thing to do. That is the definition of fasting again: giving up physical things for spiritual gain

It is important to keep in mind that fasting is something we ought to do as Christians, but it is not meant to be something we do simply for the sake of doing so. Yes, as believers we ought to fast, but out attitude must never be that we should fast simply because we ought to. We ought to fast because we truly need spiritual insight or answers to prayer, and we are desperate for that. Fasting is not an end in itself—it is the path to spiritual breakthrough

When I say spiritual breakthroughs I do not mean that a person that prays will always receive an answer to prayer. There is a common belief amongst believers that fasting will somehow guarantee faster or better answers to prayer. No doubt, the discipline of fasting does have a bearing on our prayers and the spirituality of them but fasting is not some formula for quicker results. Our attitude should never be: “If I do this, I will get that” in the Christian life. We do not control out blessings. There is nothing automatic about it. We cannot click a button, say a prayer, snap our fingers and guarantee anything will come as a result. That is to suggest that we control the blessings God gives us. NO! That is an insult to a Holy God who has the sovereignty and right to answer as He chooses. Fasting does not guarantee answers to prayer, but it does draw us closer to God and build up our spiritual life. That is its purpose. Its purpose is to build us up spiritually

So, we know what fasting is. It is a spiritual commitment believers takes upon themselves at certain times and under certain circumstances. But Jesus does say it can be done wrong. Just as in recent weeks we discussed how Jesus says that there is a wrong way to pray, there is certainly a wrong way to fast. And the wrong way to fast is just like one of the wrong ways to prayer. That is, to draw attention to it

Seeing that fasting is such a spiritual thing to do, and most people (even non-believers) know this, it is tempting to want others to see how spiritual we are by making it obvious we are fasting. The way to do this in Jesus’ day and age was to disfigure one’s face, to put ashes upon one’s head. It was to make oneself look so unhappy and in misery. Because who would not be in misery if they had not eaten for days on end? Weight is lost and the glow in one’s face is gone that comes with the nutrients found in food and water. People would do this to draw attention to themselves. Jesus has already established several times in the Sermon on the Mount that this behavior and attitude of drawing attention to oneself is not the proper way of the believer

When we do anything spiritual we must also be natural. Not natural in that we are worldly or material, but that we are ourself. We don’t try to make a show of anything or to conceal anything too much. We must just be genuine people. Forget the impressions you are making on people. Forget your appearance. Ultimately: forget yourself. The surest path to finding yourself is to start by forgetting yourself. And this is God’s great concern here. When it comes to anything spiritual: prayer, fasting, giving, going, our mission is to glorify God and not ourselves. All glory is to God when we fast, when we live, when we breathe. God can receive glory in our eating, and He can receive glory in our fasting. It all has to do with our attitude and our position towards Him.

Don’t fast just to fast; fast because God compels you to!