

Prayer & Fasting

DAVE BAST

Some years back, I came across a book with the intriguing title: *How to be a Christian without Being Religious*. The book made the important point that Christianity is, at its heart, about a relationship, not a religion; and I believe that firmly with all my heart. I have often said that myself; but of course, it is also true that Christians are religious. You cannot really be a Christian without being religious – without practicing your faith. Everyone has to live out, somehow, what they believe; and the classic way that Christians live out what they believe is through a set of practices – religious practices – called the Spiritual Disciplines. One of the most important of those is fasting with prayer. We will talk about that today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, I do not know if you have done this, but for years and years as I have been preaching, I have been pounding away that Christianity is a relationship, and avoiding that word *religion*, religion can have bad connotations to people; but of course, when it comes down to it, Christianity is also a religion. John Calvin, our great teacher in the Reformed Church called his magnum opus *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and religion, as Lewis Smedes, the great writer who passed away some years ago, Lewis Smedes used to say: If by religion, you mean a set of things you do to make God love you – if religion is a set of practices to get you to heaven; well, that is bad news, because then it is all about you and your whole life is worry; but when religion is a response to the grace of God, which is the core of the Gospel, well, then it is still good news, and then it is just living out your identity in Christ; and that is why, in this series, Dave, we are talking about the Spiritual Disciplines. We introduced them in general and had kind of an overview of them in the first program in the series, and today we are really going to look at fasting, and in conjunction with that, with prayer. This is part of our religion – not in the sense that it is how we make God love us. It is how we live because we have been told God already loves us in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and the key passage, I think, in this connection is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew Chapter 6, and this is a section that, if I could play on that book title I mentioned in the introduction, I would call, "How to be religious if you are a Christian." Here is how Christians practice their piety – that is Jesus' word – and this is what He says:

¹Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. For then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

And then He gives three examples: ²Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus goes on: ⁵Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so they may be seen by others. (Again He says) I tell you, they have their reward; ⁶but when you pray, go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

DAVE BAST

And finally, to get to the subject of today's program, Jesus goes on: ¹⁶Whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen, not by others, but by your Father, who is in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the way, maybe we should point out, Dave, that today if we put oil on our heads that would be a way of calling attention to ourselves, which is the opposite of what Jesus is saying. In those days, you always put oil on your head – comb your hair, yes.

DAVE BAST

Make the cultural adjustments – shave – comb – well, maybe do not shave today, but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Look normal.

DAVE BAST

Yes, look normal.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is what is interesting; Jesus, in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6, Jesus is warning against being a showboat, being a show-off, doing these things more to have others think well of you than merely wanting to show your love for God; but what is interesting to me is that despite the warnings in here and the things Jesus says not to do, all of them are prefaced with the phrase: *When* you give alms – *when* you fast – *when* you pray – so, therefore, the assumption is Christians are going to do this; disciples of Jesus are going to give; they are going to pray; they are going to fast. It is not *if*, but *when*.

DAVE BAST

But when; yes, exactly; and that is a very important little word. The other thing I love about this passage is His emphasis on the Father who sees what is done in secret. I just love to think about that in connection with our Lord – with God – who is your audience is really the question that Jesus is asking. If you are doing these things; if you are undertaking this piety because your audience is other people and you want them to look at you and say, "Wow, that is a very holy person. That is a very generous person. That is a very spiritually disciplined person." Jesus says: Fine. You can do that, and some people do, and they get a reward, but their reward – all it is is that acclamation, that public reputation; but if your audience is the Father, who sees what is done in secret, you do not have to blow your own horn, literally, like the hypocrites did. You can do these things quietly in a self-effacing, unobtrusive way, knowing that God sees and God knows your heart, and God will give you the reward that you seek, which is really just to know more of Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; for many of us, this can be a little dodgy – a little difficult. If you are a preacher, as you and I are, Dave, you do pray in public, you preach in public; so you are seen, and people do thank you for your sermon; but you really do want the focus to be: Not me. It is God. Sometimes, even when it comes to giving – so, I know a very, very wealthy man; I will not say who it is, but a very, very wealthy person who has given much

in his life, and there is no way he can avoid the public knowing about it. He has given much; and yet, every time this person gets up to speak, every time I have ever heard him speak, the very first thing he says is, “Hello,” and he says his name. “I am a sinner saved by the grace of Jesus.” I think that is his way of saying: Look, I am really not doing all this stuff to work my way to heaven or to be a show-off; I am doing it out of gratitude to God. That is the point here; whether we are giving, whether we are praying, whether we are fasting; all of the other disciplines that we will dive into in other programs in this series, too, Dave; they are all about saying thank you to God, and I just want to get to know You better, because look what You have already given me.

DAVE BAST

You can apply, I think, these words of Jesus too literally, maybe; as if every donation has to be anonymous. What He means by, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” is do not think about it even yourself; just do it and then forget it. It does not mean you can never pray in public or you can never tell anyone if you are fasting. I think that would be too literalistic an application. What He is getting at is look at your motives. Really examine yourself; why are you doing this? And as far as you are able to, do it humbly and do it secretly; do it for your Father; do not do it for the acclaim you might win from others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think most of us, if not all of us who are Christians, deep down that is what we want to do; but what we want to think about next is a lot of us know about giving – we maybe give to the offering plate every week. A lot of us know about praying; we probably pray every day. Fasting is something a lot of us do not do as often, if ever, and we are going to want to talk to somebody about that subject, and we are going to do that coming up next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

Hi, I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are talking about the spiritual discipline of fasting; and in order to help us do that, we are welcoming a special guest to our program. Now, this is someone I have known for a long time. I have had a close personal and working relationship with her, and I have asked her – I had to almost do a little bit of arm-twisting – to come and talk about her experience with fasting, because I happen to know some of what she has done – not all, not a lot – and she is a little reluctant, even, to share that; mindful of what Jesus says in the passage we have just been looking at about not drawing attention to yourself. So, we are just going to use her first name, so as not to draw more attention; but I just believe that this could be very helpful to all of us who are followers of Jesus as we think about the spiritual discipline of fasting. So, welcome, Sue; thank you for joining us.

SUE

Thank you.

DAVE BAST

Thanks for being willing, too, to share your personal experience of the spiritual discipline of fasting. Maybe I could just start by asking what made you decide to try this?

SUE

When I first came to know that Jesus was real and alive, in my mid-20s, I started reading the Bible and it was amazing, and I read in the Bible about fasting, and so I did it one day and it was just an amazing, wonderful day of being with the Lord. Sometimes you fast for – if you have a huge, major decision or if there is a huge prayer burden or something like that.

DAVE BAST

So, sort of to intensify your prayer life or your sense of needing to come to God for some specific reason.

SUE

Yes, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think sometimes, Sue, people focus on: Well, let's just see if I can do it. I will just see if I can go a whole day – but it is not about that, right? It is not about pulling off a neat trick, or something. It is about carving out space and focus for something that has nothing to do with you, right?

SUE

I definitely agree with that because if it were just me deciding, I would not make it through the day, but I have found that it is God calling you to do it and not you saying: Oh, I think I will fast and I can do it.

DAVE BAST

Just to be clear, when you are talking about fasting, you are talking about the real deal. You are talking about not eating – literally not eating for a period of time.

SUE

Yes. Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, we have the model of Jesus in the New Testament. Here is a passage, for example, from Luke Chapter 4. This is right at the beginning of His ministry:

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. So, there is that idea you are just saying, that God somehow prompts you to do this; gives you the idea. ²He was led for forty days, being tempted by the devil, and He ate nothing during those days. When they were ended, He was hungry. Well, I think that is an understatement by Luke. But, I know, Sue, that you have actually imitated Jesus in this and have undertaken some of these very long, intense fasts. Why did you do that, and what was it like?

SUE

Well, it was not like – Oh, Jesus fasted for forty days and I think I will imitate Him. It was a time in my life – 15 years into my walk with the Lord that I was just in a real spiritual desert and just found myself being a hypocrite and a Pharisee and just cold spiritually to the Lord and everything. So, I happened to have a book on my shelf for a few years about fasting and prayer, and humbling yourself and coming close to God. So, I read that book one morning, and I thought – and I had been feeling for a while that God had been saying: You need a change in your spiritual life. So, the next morning I felt like I needed to start fasting, and more than that, I needed to start fasting for a time to get all this junk out. Like stuff that nobody can see. You do not even know, maybe. Deep things in your heart that are just – because I was past the time in your life where you are swearing or where you have some outward physical thing.

DAVE BAST

Something really obvious.

SUE

Yes; and more of those things of pride and “how come they did not notice me when I did that act at church,” kind of thing. So, I never started out thinking I was going to fast for forty days, but I realized that just after a day there was no way I was even starting to chip away, and I read II Chronicles, where Hezekiah, the priest, cleared out the Temple. It took him eight days just to throw out the junk into the Kidron Valley, just to get to the portico, and eight more days to really clean out the Temple, and I really experienced throwing out this junk into the Kidron Valley, and it took a while; but pretty quick God became just so intimate; and so, okay, I will keep fasting; and then starting to intercede and pray and those things kicked in; and I found out that there was – at that time, in 1996, there was a huge movement of people fasting and praying. Not like I am the only

one who has done this. There are lots of people – thousands of people – and leaders like Paul Eshleman or Dick Eastman or whatever.

DAVE BAST

Praying for the world; praying for missions; praying for people to come to Christ.

SUE

And revival for this country. I ended up about the 15th day I realized that God was saying He wanted me to fast for forty days and I said, “Okay, God.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is so interesting just to listen to you. I have fasted at times, now and then. Much to the shock of my wife, when we were preparing for this program I told her that in college once I had fasted an entire week. She could not believe that I actually could do that; but I remember when I did that I thought initially going in all I am going to think about is food. I am just going to keep thinking about.... But I found that actually was not true. Not only did you actually have more time to pray because you were not making food or sitting down to eat it, but I also found I did not think just about food; I thought about a lot of other things I had not thought about for a long time, and that sounds like what your experience was as well, that it brings things to mind, and brings them to prayer in a way that somehow – I do not know – it just does not happen if you are not otherwise focused in that way.

SUE

You really need to be spending time in the scriptures and in worship, and I am sure I was not out shopping or anything during that time period. You really are devoting your time and your thoughts and everything to the Lord.

DAVE BAST

It is not just giving up; it is taking in, as well.

SUE

Yes, and you need to worship, and really depending on God’s strength; but I actually had to prepare food because I had kids; I had grade school, high school, a husband who came home at night; so, that was...

DAVE BAST

You were putting oil on your face and acting normal and going through all the things that a wife might.... What was the hardest thing about that experience for you?

SUE

Maybe being around food sometimes, but one time I woke up in the morning and the Lord said, “You are going to be attacked today about fasting,” and a dear family friend of ours kept calling me Gandhi. I wanted to be with Gandhi, or something, I do not know, just something like that. So, sometimes you get that; people do not understand or, “Oh, well, who do you think you are?” or whatever; if they happen to...

DAVE BAST

To know.

Sue: And also, you have hunger pangs, and actually it is very hard coming off of a long fast, and you really should be doing that carefully; and so, that is very hard.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Probably once you emerge from a fast, particularly a significant one of a week or two weeks or forty days, obviously there are things you need to do carefully to start your digestion going again; you have to be careful; but, I am guessing life looks different even once you start eating again.

SUE

Yes, that is true. I can remember when I went to the grocery store and looked at all of the vegetables and fruits that I got to eat; but actually, I think life was different for me because I had prayed during that time, you know, I want to hold onto the Lord for my whole life; and after experiencing that, I was worried about – even people in the Bible, they fell away toward the end of their lives; so, that was one thing that changed for me.

DAVE BAST

You came away with the assurance that He was with you and you were with Him.

SUE

And I would hold onto Him my whole life, yes; because you have those times – it is kind of like stones of remembrance, I guess; you just know who the Lord is and you have experienced being intimate with the Lord.

I could not even fast for a year after that because there were hard things about it; but it is wonderful; but the next year I fasted one day a week, and in a way, that is really neat because you just go from week to week kind of just, okay, just step into the sanctuary. So, that is a wonderful way to fast, and I know a lot of people who do that; they just fast one day a week for their life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that ties in to, actually, Dave, what we looked at in the first program in this series when we talked about spiritual hygiene and how do you stay fit? There are little things you do every day – maybe you do a couple of push-ups or just a chin-up or two or you take a brisk walk for 15 minutes – these things are not the equivalent of a forty-day fast, but they are like a once a week fast; little things that just keep us limber and keep us spiritually healthy. Sometimes you train for the marathon, but other times you train just to stay healthy, and I think, Sue, that is what you are saying about just a little fasting, which I am sure, looks a lot more manageable to most people; and yet, it has longer-term effects.

DAVE BAST

I love that phrase you used: Step into the sanctuary – because it is really about coming closer and being intimate with God, and I think that is the goal that all of us have of intimacy with the Lord who loves us and gave Himself for us. So, thanks so much, Sue, for sharing and the Lord be with you.

SUE

Thank you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In just a moment, we are going to dig more into prayer, which is something that we are able to do more of when we have periods of fasting, and so we will take a look at that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are continuing in this program, which is part of a larger series on spiritual disciplines, and we just had a guest with us in the last segment who talked about fasting and her particular experience with fasting.

DAVE BAST

Pretty intense fasting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Pretty intense fasting; but as she also noted, and as Jesus notes, and as I think almost every passage in scripture that mentions fasting makes clear, fasting is yoked to prayer. They are linked together inextricably; so, let's just think for a little bit before we close out this program on prayer and on why we pray – the Heidelberg Catechism calls prayer the chief part of our gratitude to God – it is the best way to say thank you. John Calvin called it the chief exercise of our piety is prayer. Why is that? How does prayer connect us to God?

DAVE BAST

There is probably nothing among the spiritual disciplines that Christians have more questions about. I mean, maybe fasting is not on most people's radar, but prayer – it is something we know we are all supposed to do, and yet, lots of problems – how do I pray? Where do I find the right words? Why do I even pray? Doesn't God already know everything anyway? What am I doing? Well, it is pretty easy to dispose of that one. We do not pray to tell God what He does not know or to inform Him or – it is not like the kid who makes out his Christmas list to give to Santa – God knows what we need before we even ask Him; so, prayer is not so much for His sake as it is for ours; and it is the way probably that we most exercise and develop our intimacy with God – our relationship with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you are right; in terms of the information side of the equation, Dave, prayer is more for our sake than for God's because He knows everything that we are going to say anyway; but I would actually say insofar as – and this has been true from the beginning – insofar as God does want a relationship with us, there is a sense in which prayer benefits God as much as us, because He wants to hear from us. You cannot imagine having a best friend – you cannot imagine, certainly, having a spouse – you cannot imagine having a good relationship with any of your children and never talking. So, it is just a natural outgrowth of our relationship by grace to God through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit that we are caught up, engulfed in the Triune community of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and communication is a natural part of that. Thanks and praise, but also confession, petition, all of it is just part of how we stay in relationship with God. We talk about what is on our heart. That is what we do with a spouse at the end of the day. That is what you do with your kid. We share what is on our heart; and you cannot have a good relationship with somebody and not ever do that.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I think maybe there is a bottom line reason why we pray – because we are told to. It is easy to over-think prayer and theorize too much about it. You just do it because God tells us to. Jesus says, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." So, just come to God and share what is on your mind and share what is on your heart and share what you know you need and share what you want; and do not worry about the theory of it; just do it because Jesus tells us to.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Certainly there is truth to the line from the old hymn: As I breathe I pray, right; where we are constantly in communion with God. We have all had that; but there is also that need to carve out the time, and this is part of what makes it a discipline. If husbands and wives never carve out some dedicated time for conversation – they go out for dinner together or they sit together in the living room – if it is always just on the fly, little snippets – the relationship will not grow; so, you need those concentrated times, and that is part of what makes it a discipline; to carve out the time. Fasting, as we just heard, opens up some of that time; but even when we are not fasting, that intentionality of being intentional and carving out the time.

DAVE BAST

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