

**Series: Sermon on the Mount, Chapter 6**  
**Sermon: Fasting - Why Should I?**

**Matthew 6:16-18**

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**Daniel 1:3-5, 8, 11-16**

Then <King Nebuchadnezzar> ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility - young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

We are always aware of that of which we lack. We are always aware of that which we lack. I remember a time when I made a miscalculation in our checkbook and forgot to post a check - a big one. I discovered it later, but our family checkbook got down to \$25 before the next paycheck several days later. We were keenly aware of our lack of money. All of a sudden, all of our decisions were made through that unfortunate fact. No out to eat, we had to watch ourselves a lot more than usual. We are always aware of that of which we lack. I think most of us have had this experience: I was a kid and was swimming in the deep end of the pool. Now, I could swim, but I went all the way down to the bottom, ten feet deep. And I stayed there longer than I should have, and I started to go to the top, and I had that sinking feeling, huh, huh, that I wasn't going to make it to the top before I needed air. And in those last two feet, I thought I was going to die. I made it, in case you were curious. Air. We are always aware of that of which we lack. A while back, my car's gas light went on. No big deal, it's been on before, and I figure I got another fifty miles before I'm in trouble. But on this occasion, it started to flash. "Hey, stupid, person, go, get, me, some, gas" And of course, there is no gas station for miles. We are aware of that which we lack. Do I need to go through more examples? I like to go to bed around 10:30 at night. Now, there are some occasions when I am gone from my family overnight, maybe a pastor meeting somewhere else or

training somewhere else. I find myself in a hotel room or retreat center. I put on my PJ's and try to go to bed at 10:30. Can't do it. I'm up till 2, it just seems weird. We are always aware of that of which we lack. Got it yet? Several years back, my father lost his legs. Well, he didn't lose it, he knows where it went, it's just no longer attached. He was keenly aware of that of which he lacked and what that meant. Someone like me, I take being a biped for granted. We don't miss something until it's not there.

This morning, I want to share with you some wisdom and practical application of a spiritual discipline that we do not practice anymore. A spiritual discipline is something that draws you closer to God. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, called them means of grace. Ways to find grace. And for an individual, he had three biggies. Scripture reading, prayer, and fasting. Scripture reading, yeah, we do that - occasionally. Prayer, yeah, we do that, especially if we need something. Fasting? Not so much. Unless it goes by another name like South Beach, or Weight Watchers. Who in their right mind would voluntarily go without food? Without water? And why would they do that? This is America! We have people who wrestle in jello! We have hot-dog eating contests! All of our major holidays center around food! Let's see, what's coming up? On Halloween, we eat: Candy! On Thanksgiving, we eat: Turkey? At Christmas, we eat: Anything we want! Fruitcakes! At New Years, we drink: Champaign, wine; On Valentine's Day, we eat: Chocolate! At Easter, we give out: Candy; On Groundhogs day, we eat: Groundhogs. OK, that one's different. We are known by our food consumption! Our plane seats have to be bigger. They had to refurbish the "It's a small world" boat ride at Disneyland three years ago because the ride kept bottoming out and getting stuck. The average weight of a male in 1963 was 175, a female 135. Now, a lot of people push the 200 mark and those boats couldn't get through. We love our food. But one of our spiritual disciplines is fasting. So what does fasting have to do with us here and now?

We all know the story of Daniel in the lions' den. We all know the story of Daniel's three friends in the blazing furnace. Shadrack, Meshak and Abednego. I want to tell you, the same resolve and determination displayed in the lions' den and the blazing furnace is evident, according to today's passage, in the dining room of Nebuchadnezzar's palace. In fact, just as much resolve and courage is required in the dining room as in the lion's den or the blazing furnace.

We are told that Daniel was on his guard. He "resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (Dan 1:8). You need to realize that Daniel and his friends were only young lads around 13 or 14 years of age. Somehow they recognized what was at stake here. They knew that even there, in the king's dining room, their enemy the devil was prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And, if Daniel and his companions had not been faithful to God here, seated at the king's table, they would never have survived the lions' den or the blazing furnace.

This incident in front of us this morning, this matter of choosing the daily menu, gives us our first glimpse of the resolve and the faith and the courage of the four young Hebrew boys. They show us how to put godliness into practice. They show us how to live out our faith. They show us how to be different from the world. Daniel and his three friends "resolved not to defile themselves with the royal food and wine" (Dan 1:8). They asked for "nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink" (Dan 1:12).

Why? Why was it so important for Daniel and his friends to live on vegetables and water? What was wrong with eating the king's food and drinking his wine? Daniel knew that the food and drink of the king's table was, by Jewish law, forbidden to him: the food was not prepared according to the ordinances laid down by God; furthermore, the food undoubtedly consisted of the flesh of animals which to the Israelites were unclean. Daniel and his friends knew that to eat of this food they would be making themselves ritually unclean and therefore unfit for the worship of God. So Daniel and his three friends "resolved not to defile themselves with the royal

food and wine" (Dan 1:8). They resolved to be different from the world.

But there is more at stake here than ritual cleanness or uncleanness. Far more! Let's take a look at why Daniel and his three friends doing there in Babylon, in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar? The Bible has this to say: Ashpenaz, in other words, was told to pick out the cream of the crop; he was to pick out those young men who someday would hold positions of leadership among the Jewish people. These young men were the future judges, governors, mayors, rabbis, generals, and kings of Israel.

Notice what Ashpenaz was to do with these young men, these future leaders. He was "to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians" (vs 4). Do you know what this really means? This means that Ashpenaz's job was to inject the Babylonian spirit into the hearts and minds of the Israelite youth who had been imported from Jerusalem. These children of the covenant were supposed to become totally Babylonian in their outlook and conduct. They were to be completely captivated by the Babylonish culture, religion, language, thought forms, and ways of life. Their wills were to be bent, their minds were to be shaped or reshaped. Those of you who know history realize that the Nazis and Communists tried the same thing with children.

The king's intention in forcing his menu on the Jewish youths was but a part of his plan to bend the wills and reshape the minds of the four boys; this menu was but a part of his plan to make the boys Babylonian in every way; this menu was but a part of his plan to make the boys forget and abandon the culture, religion, language, thought forms, and way of life of their fathers; the way of life of these boys, down to the smallest detail, was to be transformed until they became totally Babylonian. Thus for King Nebuchadnezzar the new menu was no minor detail.

Daniel and his friends knew what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do. They knew that if they joined in Babylon's meals, they would be standing with their feet in two worlds, they would be trying to have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. If they joined in Babylon's meals, they would take the first little step in separating themselves from their own faith and the one only true God. So Daniel and his three friends "resolved not to defile themselves with the royal food and wine" (Dan 1:8). They resolved to be different from the world.

Fasting isn't just about hungering yourself. And it's not about dieting. It's about making a priority about what is important to you. In Scripture, prayer and fasting go hand in hand. Almost always, fasting is about reminding ourselves to let go of our earthly wants and desires. The saints who fasted in scripture fasted when they mourned - reminding them of their mortality. They fasted before major choices, reminding them that when they are not concerned about their sustenance, they can truly live. Prayer is grabbing hold of God. Fasting is when you let go of worldly desires.

Some closing thoughts. There is a store I miss, kind of like the Costco of farm supplies back in Nebraska and throughout the place are little notecards, with catchy little sayings, Christian reminders. And the one I always think of, I can tell you exactly where it is in that store, because I've thought a lot about it in the past few years. He who feasts every day, feasts no day. He who feasts every day, feasts no day. I used to be the night custodian at a large church in Lincoln - that's how I got into this business - through night security. And I would get tapped to help run the Christmas Eve services. Make sure doors were unlocked, answer the phones, help the staff do their jobs. I did that for seven years. And I loved it. It was Christmas and all of that, but there was a kind Christian woman who would make the best cheese and sausage tray and she would leave several trays for the staff, something to snack on while they had their seven services that evening. And I'll be honest, I spent too much time in that parlor. It was a feast. I never got that stuff on my own! I was a poor college student. I loved Christmas Eve. But now, I can get cheese and sausage any day of the week. I did just that several days ago. It's good, but I wouldn't call it a feast, now it's just a snack. And I don't appreciate it as much. He who feasts every

day, feasts no day.

Back in the spring, my wife and I tried an experiment. We participated in what has been called a Daniel Fast. We took the words of our scripture today, coupled with scripture from Daniel, chapter 10, and had a modified fast. Usually, fasting means no food. Period. The Daniel fast cheats a little bit, so much that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, called it the lowest form of fasting, but I figure it is good for us beginners. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, water. Period. Basically, if it grows from the ground, you can eat it. No meats, no milk, no eggs, no butter, nothing processed. Do you know how much of our stuff has high fructose corn syrup? For 21 days, we did this. And I'll be honest. We are always aware of that in which we lack. We rejected the king's fatty and salty foods. But our bodies responded well. No toxins. No preservatives. It was the healthiest eating I've ever done. We looked better. We felt better. But every day, almost every hour, I was keenly aware of the discipline needed to keep it going. And I found spiritual blessings in it. It reminded me of the blessings that God has given me. It reminded me to focus on heavenly things, not earthly things.

This week, pay attention to what you put in your mouth. Do you eat food that blesses you, or harms you? Be like Daniel. Pay attention. And the people of God said, AMEN.