

THE FASTED LIFE

By Rev. Will Nelken

You have done so well with our 21 Days with God—devoting yourselves each day to His Word, praying for grace, giving thanks, interceding for one another, fasting!

In fact, our fasting has been so effective that today I am announcing a new program, starting one week from tomorrow: 365 Days with God, and a perpetual fast! Are you with me?!? (Just kidding)

No, God has given us all things freely to enjoy. Every kind of food is good when it is received with thanks to God.

But people often wonder, “What comes after a fast? Do we just start eating again? Do we fall back to our former lifestyle? How can we move forward instead, not losing the ground we have gained?” These are great questions!

Some of you may want to consider fasting routinely, perhaps one day each week. It would be good for your health and for your spirit!

You would think that God might have something to say on this subject, and, in fact, He does!

Religious Routine

The worship God prescribed under the First Covenant was full of routine—daily washings, daily prayers, regular fasts and feasts, sacrifices and offerings. But you know how it is with routines—they can become mindless activities (they become so rote we don’t even have to think). We end up just going through the motions, numbly. And when we do that, we lose our connection with God and slip into senseless religion.

It’s just this kind of meaningless routine that has soured so many people on church involvement.

First they blame others—the pastor, who is so boring, or the worship team, who sing such tiresome songs, or the people, who are so stuffy or hypocritical, or God Himself, for requiring such joyless emptiness.

Finally, after singing the songs and saying the prayers for so long, without finding the presence and power of God in the mix, they simply opt out, adopting other, more enjoyable, routines

for their weekends, and relegating their faith in God to the occasional inspiration of circumstance and greeting cards, or just Christmas and Easter, or Reader's Digest stories.

Who can blame them? Not I.

That's why we fast and pray here at Trinity, so that your experience of church will not be boring or meaningless, but charged by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

That worship will not be songs that you listen to, but songs that move you, welling up within you, lifting you into the presence of God, with gratitude and wonder and joy. That you will leave our gatherings feeling loved and freed and empowered.

Israel's Backsliding

Israel, under the First Covenant, struggled with this repeatedly. It was in one of those wayward, backsliding seasons, that God sent a man named Isaiah to shed light on the situation and warn the people of the danger they were in, and outline the direction they needed to go. God told Isaiah:

Isaiah 58:1 "Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don't be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins!

² Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me.

They seemed delighted to learn of God's ways, and acted like they would never depart from them, but they were only pretending. Pretending that they wanted to be near God.

Would you ask yourself this question right now... in the privacy and honesty of your own heart and thoughts... Do you really *want* to be near God? Are you *eager* to hear His voice? Are you in *awe* of His presence?

Or, is it just kind of cool to think about it? But nerve-wracking to anticipate?

One of the most common ways that religion takes over is this: You find yourself being "very hard on yourself," in Jesus' name. If your practice of religion pushes you to be "very hard on

yourself,” then you’re trying to impress someone—certainly yourself, maybe your parents or the memory of your parents, and maybe God.

You might push yourself hard in praying, or in serving, or in studying the Bible, or in fasting. You might push yourself so hard that you cut yourself off from family and friends, because (you tell yourself) you have to seek the Lord first and foremost.

And when you do things like that, inevitably, you will feel frustrated by your circumstances, because you’re always in a rush, and there’s never enough time, there’s too much to do, and other people are uncooperative or lazy, and God doesn’t answer your prayers. *Just like those Israelites.*

Isaiah 58:3 ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’

If only we could hear God sigh. His patience with our foolishness, our waywardness, our sinfulness, is nothing short of amazing!

Isaiah 58:3 “I will tell you why!” [God] responds. “It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves.

You see, such behavior is an effort to impress ourselves with how religious we are. Our pain is somehow also our gratification. How sad!

Not only that, but it’s merely a superficial aim to please God. Underneath the show, within our hearts, we can carry on like it’s an ordinary day, and God is not in all our thoughts.

God wasn’t impressed with their fasting, because He was so distracted by their sinning!

Isaiah 58:3 *Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. ⁴ What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. ⁵ You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes.*

Fasting is not just about not eating food, or setting aside some other earthly pleasure—it is about shifting your fundamental focus *away from* pleasing yourself and doing what you want, to seeking God’s presence and finding ways to please Him and do what He wants.

Making yourself miserable, in Jesus' name, does not attract the presence of God.

Isaiah 58:5 *Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?*

Fasting has its place. Jesus said of His disciples, that after He had been taken away from them and had returned to His glory with the Father in Heaven, that then they would fast (Mark 2:20). In His physical absence, we fast for His spiritual presence.

Of course, we cannot fast from food perpetually, 365 days a year. (Although, that most certainly would put us in His presence—in Heaven!)

And we will continue to fast occasionally, whenever we recognize the need to quiet our flesh, so that our spirit may flourish.

Yet, there is a kind of everyday fasting that God recommends, fasting that really grabs His attention. Isaiah described it:

Isaiah 58:6 *"No, this is the kind of fasting I want:*

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

⁷ Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

This fasting has nothing to do with our eating, but everything to do with our relationships with other people.

How do we regard those who are wrongfully imprisoned? Do we care? Do we seek justice for them? The International Justice Mission is an excellent resource, worthy of your support in the battle for justice in the face of persecution and slavery.

How do we treat those who work for us, whether your employees, or the service people who collect our garbage or deliver our mail or fix our plumbing? Do we look for ways to make their jobs easier, to lighten their burden? What about offering them a cup of coffee or a glass of water? How about a gift at Christmas? Or an occasional note of thanks?

What about people who are oppressed (even here in 21st century America)? Or those we look down on as unworthy? Will we set them free from our prejudice and scorn? Will we learn ways to serve their needs?

So many people around us are bound—by drugs and alcohol, poverty, racial and religious prejudice, abuse, self-hatred, fear, unbelief. Can't we remove some of those chains? In Jesus' name!

We can share food with the hungry. Or volunteer in programs that do.

We can give shelter to the homeless. Or support organizations that do.

We can give clothes to those who need them. Goodwill may be a money-making machine, but the Salvation Army is a faith-based service. Better yet, connect locally with Ritter House, and find out what you can contribute more directly to the homeless and needy in our City.

We did help reach over 700 families in San Rafael last month through the Santa Cop program. Was God pleased with that? Yes!

And finally, God asked us not to hide from relatives who need our help. Just because you're grown up and live in your own apartment or house, doesn't conclude your responsibilities to your family. Just because you don't see eye to eye or get along well, doesn't relieve you of your obligation to love them. "A brother is born for adversity" (Proverbs 17:17).

This is the kind of fasting God is looking for. Fast from injustice, from increasing people's burdens, from oppressing others, from stinginess, from indifference, and from alienation. If we do these things and develop them as an everyday lifestyle, God promised five wonderful rewards!

Rescue

Isaiah 58:8 **"Then** your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.

Answered Prayer

Isaiah 58:9 **"Then** when you call, the Lord will answer. 'Yes, I am here,' He will quickly reply.

Provision

Isaiah 58:9 “Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors! ¹⁰ Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. **Then** your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. ¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring.

Restoration

Isaiah 58:12 Your people will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. **Then** you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes.

Success

Isaiah 58:13 “Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don’t pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the Lord’s holy day. Honor the Sabbath in everything you do on that day, and don’t follow your own desires or talk idly.

¹⁴ **Then** the Lord will be your delight. I will give you great honor and satisfy you with the inheritance I promised to your ancestor Jacob.
I, the Lord, have spoken!”

This last one is particularly significant. It harks all the way back to the Ten Commandments. Is there any day of the week that you regard as holy? A day set apart for God’s pleasure, instead of your own? A day without idle talk, but full of respect for God? If not one day, how about all of them?

He said if we practice that—honoring God intentionally—then the Lord will be our delight. And when the Lord has become our delight, success follows, with great honor and satisfaction.

Psalms 37:4 Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you your heart’s desires.

This is the path of the fasted life. We may do without food from time to time, in order to draw closer to the Lord, hear His voice more clearly, and receive fresh grace and power for our service.

But we should undo oppression, prejudice, injustice, disrespect, stinginess, gossip, and indifference every day, for all of our days. This is the fasted life that God has chosen for us.

May it be so.