

Fasting

[Psalm 77 & 1 Corinthians 9:24-27]

#4 in Lent series based on our CMCC jointly written Lent Devotional.

When I read through the 1st draft I was struck by the strong message for us from this week's contributions! We have been challenged; given a challenge that requires a response! Note that 4 ½ out of 7 of the writers are from the East! (Paul Utley has lived here for 35 years = 1/2 !) Fasting does not fit easily in individualistic Western societies where the feel good factor dictates how we live, and our individualistic outlook on life can so easily pervade our Christian lives too; in our international church it is good for us with a Western mindset to be challenged by those who are heart and soul Eastern; to see our Christian life in a corporate dimension, and to be willing to embrace spiritual disciplines which are just that - discipline!

READ Psalm 77; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Scott McKnight in his book "FASTING" describes Psalm 77 as "The Fasting's prayer"

- Vv. 1-3 describes the writer's grief. He's not afraid to say what is on his heart
- Vv. 4-9 describe the big questions that arise from his grievous situation...just the sort of situation that can prompt fasting
- Vv. 10-20 we sense his faith as he prays his way into and through his grief, arriving at a better place than where he started!

He didn't pray in order to find relief; he prays (and fasts) because he sensed the severity of the moment - he felt that God should be doing something and yet he couldn't see God working.

Global Day of prayer for Burma - ...what to do; how to pray?

A question: when was the last time that some situation touched your heart deeply?

GRIEF: Personal
Family
Ministry
A people group
A country

What do you do? Is it appropriate to feel deep sadness, overwhelming grief and then...just carry on as normal? *Eating & feasting; singing & playing?*

Do you need an appropriate response? → The bible's response is **fast and pray!**

Fasting is a "whole body response". Fasting is embodied spirituality. The bible describes the human being as **a whole person**: body, mind soul and spirit, and with such a view fasting is inevitable. A unified perception of the body, mind, soul and spirit creates a spirituality that includes the body, and where fasting is a natural response.

Fasting is "body talk" – the body talking for the whole person.

In our Moobaan 3 Burmese sisters heard about the death of their father on Friday – what is their cultural response? It is to spend the next 10 days together, fasting – eating one meal of plain food a day; dressing modestly and not beautifying their hair = a whole body response that appropriately expresses their grief.

A question: when was the last time that you had a burning desire / need to hear from God?

What was your response to last week's sermon on prayer, on Esther's focus for us to listen for God? Did you notice the theme on "hearing God" that came out of our devotional readings about fasting from Mon – Sat?

Mon : Paris's testimony of "**hearing God speak**"

Tue : Paul's story of "**hearing God's guidance**".

Weds: Paris reminding us of **God's promise to hear** when we come before him in repentance and confession, with fasting and prayer.

Thu : Mike telling us how fasting helped him to have a focused time spiritually so that he could **hear God**.

Fri : Bijoy pointing out that fasting helps us to shut out noise and **tune into His voice**.

Sat : Margaret describing the point of fasting as "denying our fleshly desires so that we **get in tune with God and hear Him clearly**."

When we desire to hear God's voice than we want dinner, that will be the proper time to fast!

As Ramona very descriptively pointed out in the first devotional, we need some correctives about fasting, an understanding of what fasting is not:

- It's not $A+B=C$. Focusing on results causes us to entirely misunderstand fasting.
- Fasting is never towards men – it is always towards God, but that doesn't mean that no-one else can know about it when you are fasting! How can you keep it from your family or your housemate; your work colleagues or friends in the ordinary course of living? We don't fast to impress others, but we should be able to fast without it appearing as odd, extreme or extraordinary behaviour!

Biblical fasting is often a collective exercise, as the scripture verses used in the devotional illustrate. Bijoy writes: "In God's Kingdom, true spirituality is complete only when practiced in community. And so it should be with fasting. As a church, we should be ready to be accountable to each other in our own practice of the spiritual disciplines in our life. As a church we should also regularly practice community spiritual disciplines. Community fasting and worship needs

to be an integral part of the life of the every church. Who knows what we may hear the Holy Spirit say to us?

The call to a GOOD FRIDAY FAST

Why? As an expression of the seriousness of our intention to live wholeheartedly as followers of our Lord Jesus who gave his all for us.

Why? As a response to this collective exercise over this Lenten period: "to our collective exercise of taking stock and carefully and prayerfully seeking to live up to the challenge of our calling." Good Friday, the day when we especially remember and meditate on Jesus death for us; the day when we meditate on what it meant for him and what it cost God to buy us our salvation – freedom from sin, freedom from fear, redemption from an empty way of life to live in communion with God, lives filled with hope, reason and purpose! Good Friday is the ideal day for such a fast. I suggest that we fast from eating food from daybreak until our Good Friday service in Hamlin Chapel – when we can break our fast with communion.

For an Englishman like me "Super Bowl" is an extra big bowl in which I can have an extra big portion of cornflakes! However, for you Americans I am aware that Super Bowl is of greater significance!

In his book "So you want to be like Christ?" Charles Swindoll writes about meeting the coach of the Dallas Cowboys. *Anyone here support the Dallas Cowboys?* He writes: "Once, during a breakfast with a group of men, someone asked him how he was able to forge a team out individuals so that they could win, something he had managed to do for 29 years. I'll never forget his answer. The table grew silent as he paused for a moment, and then said, "My job is to get men to do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to achieve."

How do you get yourself to do what you don't want to do in order to achieve what you've always wanted to achieve?

Paul says that it takes discipline: *"Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise both for the present life and the life to come."* 2 Timothy 4:7-8

Just as you can't lease someone to diet for you, or to do a physical workout for you, in the same way, it's up to you to practice the discipline that lead to Godliness! Doing this collectively gives expression to our collective intention – a shared aim, a shared goal and a shared

Maybe some of you cannot abstain for food from medical reasons. Here is what Jim Packer has to say: *We tend to think of fasting as going without food. But we can fast from anything. If we love music and decide to miss a concert in order to spend time with God, that is fasting. It is helpful to think of the parallel of human friendship. When friends need to be together, they will cancel all other activities in order to make that possible. There's nothing magical about fasting. It's just one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with him, sorting out whatever is necessary, and you have canceled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill **that priority**.*

"Your Father Loves You" by James Packer, (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986),

At the Men's retreat the theme was "The Sound of Silence". We were considering the silence and solitude that we need if we are to hear God – the quiet place that we need to keep within us as we go out into the hustle and bustle, the noise and distractions of the world – the stillness that we need to hear God's voice. In the introduction to the weekend, Tim quoted from the New York Times that quoted a recent survey among young people which found that on average young people spent 7 hours connected to electronic equipment *after school hours*, and some up to 11 hours – how can you do that for 11 hours on top of a 7 hour school day and have time to sleep? ipod + facebook; computer game + music! The new generation is very good at multitasking when it comes to electronic technology!

So here's a challenge to the young people: hold a technology fast! 1 day without: ipod / music / facebook & twitter / computer games / email.

How could you survive? What would you DO all day?

Here's an idea

- talk to each other face to face!!
- make music together!!
- ask your Youth pastors to help you survive the day by doing something that would profit you spiritually

...listen to Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*:

"It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion...Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained...Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by 'every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matt. 4:4)...Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. **Fasting is feasting!**"

We abstain from one thing in order to do another; we refrain from one thing in order to pursue another; we deny ourselves input from all these other voices and noises – so that we might hear God and grow in godliness.

In 1 Cor.9:24-27 (Tuesday's verses) the apostle Paul is saying: "If the body won't do what the Spirit knows is good and right, then the body must be brought in line."

So the questions we have to ask ourselves are:

- how badly do I want spiritual growth; a godly Christ-like nature; a heart that hears God and does His will?

John Piper writes: "[The saints of the church] were hungry enough for God's leading that they wanted to say it with the hunger of their bodies and not just the hunger of their hearts."

**As a church let's rise to the challenge brought to us
by the church, for His glory!**