CALLED TO FAST

1. Introduction

a. We are called to fast (Mt. 6:16-18). Jesus said, "When you fast" not "if you fast," implying that it should occur in the regular course of a disciple's life. We do not fast to motivate God to love us, but to increase our spiritual capacity to receive and feel more of His heart, Word, and power.

Matt. 6:16-18 *[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.*

b. Jesus emphasized that the Father ***will reward*** fasting. This proclamation makes fasting important. Jesus called us to fast because He knows that its rewards will far outweigh its difficulties. Some of the rewards are ***external***, as our circumstances are touched by God's power. Some of our rewards are ***internal***, as our hearts encounter Him. We fast both to walk in more of God's power to change the world, and to encounter more of His heart to change our heart!

c. God gives grace to fast. If we ask for grace to fast we will receive it (2 Pet. 1:2; 3:18). Many fear fasting. However, the fear of fasting is worse than fasting itself. It is a lie that the demands of our modern pace of life make fasting impractical for today's Christian.

d. Throughout history, men have fasted with a wrong spirit as they sought to earn God's favour or man's approval. Some embrace extreme self-debasements to try to prove their dedication to Him or to earn His favour. We do not fast to prove anything to God or to deserve His favour.

e. Many who led the great revivals practiced regular fasting. Examples include John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, and Charles Finney. Wesley fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays each week and insisted that all the preachers under him do the same.

f. As we consider what the new expression of church looks like as we transition into this new era I believe it will focus far more on our lifestyle than our activity and part of that will be a revelation of the impact on our relationship with the Lord that comes from fasting.

2. WHY FAST?

The bible contains many different purposes for fasting.

a. We fast to experience more of ***God's power in our ministry***. When the disciples could not set a demonised boy free, Jesus told them that that kind of demon could not go out except by prayer and fasting (Mt. 17:21). John G. Lake (1870–1935) sought God with much prayer and fasting. God released powerful miracles through him. In South Africa, within a five-year period, he witnessed 500,000 healings and led many thousands to Jesus.

b. We fast for ***prophetic revelation of the end times.*** Daniel sought God with fasting and prayer and received prophetic insight into God's end-time plan (Dan. 9:1-3, 20-23; 10:1-3, 12-14).

c. We fast for the fulfilment of ***God's promises to our family, city, or nation.*** The Lord has plans and promises for each family, city, and nation. We contend in prayer and fasting for their fulfilment as Daniel did for the fulfilment of God's promise for Jerusalem (Dan. 9:1-3; 10:1-4).

d. We fast to ***stop a crisis*** (individual/national). Mordecai and Esther called a fast to cry out to God to reverse a national crisis—the imminent destruction of the Jewish people (Esth. 4:1-3; 16).

e. We fast for ***protection.*** Before Ezra led a group back to Israel to help rebuild their nation, he fasted and prayed to God for protection on the journey because of the danger (Ezra 8:21-23).

f. We fast for ***direction.*** Throughout the NT, the church fasted for supernatural wisdom and direction. Paul and others fasted and prayed for direction for their ministry (Acts 13:1-2).

g. At the centre of all these purposes is the need to encounter God. This is not about convincing God of our need or commitment. It is about humbling ourselves, laying aside that which would satisfy us and putting our trust fully in Him.

h. This why fasting is not just an occasional event but part of the Kingdom lifestyle.

3. THE BRIDEGROOM FAST

a. Later in Matthew Jesus speaks again about fasting.

Matt.9:14-17 *[14] Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" [15] And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. [16] No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. [17] Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."*

b. Jesus spoke of the apostles fasting out of their desire to encounter Him. We call this the "Bridegroom fast." It is motivated by desire for Jesus, rather than by desire for more power in ministry or to be delivered from a personal crisis, etc. This was a new paradigm of fasting.

c. The disciples enjoyed Jesus' presence, feeling loved by Him and rejoicing in their relationship with Him. Jesus told them that the joy they experienced in His nearness would change to mourning, or longing, when He was taken from them by His death—when the joy of His immediate presence had been taken from them, they would be heartsick. Then they would fast!

d. John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus with a sincere question. They were confused and troubled by the lack of fasting among Jesus' disciples, because John taught his disciples to fast often. Jesus answered with a question, "Can the friends of the Bridegroom mourn, as long as the Bridegroom is with them?" Jesus was referring to His death on the cross when He said that the days were coming when He, the Bridegroom God, would be taken from them.

e. Then, His disciples would fast with the same consistency and intensity that John's disciples did. Their fasting would flow out of desire to encounter the Bridegroom God. This is fasting for great intimacy with God and for spiritual renewal.

f. We do not fast to motivate God to pay attention to us, but to receive the affection He already has for us—it is not to move His heart, but our own. Fasting lessens our spiritual dullness.

g. Jesus established the New Covenant by His death and resurrection, in which the Spirit comes and dwells in every believer. Then, fasting took on a whole new dimension, new wine in a new wineskin, because the indwelling Spirit revealed the depths of God to the disciples (1 Cor. 2:10; Heb. 10:19-22).

h. A mourning heart is fiercely discontent and desperately hungry for God—this is the Bridegroom fast. We refuse to accept the current state of our spiritual barrenness and dullness.

i. The Bridegroom fast is primarily centered on desire—both understanding God's desire for us and awakening our desire for Him. When we fast, God changes our desires and increases our desire for Him. Once we taste the nearness of God's presence, we cannot live without more of Him.

j. Fasting positions our hearts to be expanded; as we encounter Jesus as our Bridegroom God, our spiritual capacity to receive from Him increases. Fasting before our Bridegroom God is a catalyst to increase the depth and the measure to which we receive from the Lord. We receive greater measures of revelation at an accelerated pace, and with a deeper impact on our hearts.

k. The idea that fasting changes us internally is a new idea to some. Fasting results in tenderising our hearts. When this occurs, we make different choices, which lead to different outcomes in the places we go to and the people we meet. When our values are different, it affects who we marry, how we raise children, how we spend our money, and the focus of our ministry.

l. Fasting restrains our physical pleasure, but enhances our spiritual pleasure. Our greatest pleasure comes from feasting on the person of Jesus. Fasting is an exchange: we abstain from legitimate things to "feast" on God's Word and prayer, whereby we experience more of His grace.

m. Five rewards of the Bridegroom Fast:
   1. Fasting ***tenderises our hearts*** so that we feel God's presence more.
   2. Fasting ***changes our desires*** and enlarging our desire for righteousness (Heb. 1:9).
   3. Fasting ***increases our understanding*** of the Word and receiving prophetic dreams.
   4. Fasting ***makes our body healthier*** and changes what we desire to eat and drink.
   5. Fasting ***strengthens our sense of identity***—as sons of God, before the Father, and as the Bride, before the Son. Our identity becomes rooted in knowing God's affection for us.

4. WHEN YOU FAST

a. Though many view fasting as archaic or even as optional, Jesus is clear that He expected believers to fast. Jesus said, "When you fast" (Matt. 6:17) implying that fasting was to occur in the normal course of a disciple's life. Fasting is not reserved for the "elite" Christian or for radical Christians. It is to be a part of our normal Christian life.

b. Fasting may seem foreign and radical to some in the Western church, but it was normal to the early church. Church history documents that fasting two days a week was a common practice for the early church and for believers over the next several hundred years. It is not true that the demands of our modern pace of life make fasting impractical for today.

c. There is a deep connection between food and our spirit, because our body and our spirit are dynamically connected. Although we would like to think they are separate and do not affect each other, there is a deep connection between food and the condition of our spirit—whether it is vibrant or sluggish. Godly restraint from food encourages our spirit to be more vibrant because it positions us to receive more from God.

d. My personal testimony is that introducing fasting as a regular part of my lifestyle has definitely made me more sensitive to receiving revelation.

5. HOW TO FAST

a. There are several different ways we can choose to fast:
    i The first is a regular fast, which entails going without food and drinking only water, or liquid that has very little or no calories.
    ii The second is a liquid fast, which is going without solid food and drinking only light liquids, such as fruit and vegetable juices.
    iii Third, the partial fast includes abstaining from tasty foods and eating only vegetables or nuts. This was the fast chosen by Daniel, who ate only vegetables and drank only water (Dan. 1:12).
    iv Fourth, the Benedict fast was established by Saint Benedict and consisted of eating only one meal a day.
    v Lastly, the absolute fast, or Esther fast, includes abstaining from food and water. This fast should only be participated in with extreme caution, as going without water should never be done for more than one to three days.

b. The level at which we engage in fasting from food should be determined according to age and with regard to any physical illness or limitations. Those with a known or suspected physical disability or illness, or with any history of an eating disorder, should never fast except in consultation with and under the supervision of a qualified medical practitioner.

c. Participation in regular fasting as a lifestyle necessitates a healthy lifestyle on days when we are eating, and should include exercise and a proper diet. A fasted lifestyle includes a disciplined life in which we steward our bodies and time with wisdom. As we continue to give ourselves to fasting, our desire to live a healthy lifestyle and be intentional about stewarding our bodies and time will naturally increase.

d. Fasting is always voluntary and each of us has to decide how to respond to this call. However, we would recommend considering how you can make some form of fasting a regular part of your walk with the Lord. In the past we have identified Monday as a day when we would fast together as a community and we gave that day to be together in worship and prayer.

e. You could consider setting aside one day a week when you would abstain from food and focus on prayer, worship and meditation on the Word. Or you may choose to just abstain from one meal on that day. I am always amazed how much extra time I seem to have when I don't need to think about food and preparing meals!

6. CONCLUSION

a. These "spiritual disciplines" that we have looked at in Matthew 6 are all ways to help grow the beautiful flowers of the kingdom in our lives. When we become jealous for God's impact on our spirit, living out the fasted lifestyle is essential to position ourselves to receive more freely from God.

b. Nothing so tenderises and prepares our spirits to encounter the heart of God like fasting does. Fasting causes our spirit man to more readily rise up, hear and perceive what the Lord is saying and doing. Fasting is a necessity if we long to grow in the spirit of prayer and in the ministry of intercession. Intercession is sacrifice (of time and energy) for the sake of others, and nothing so strengthens this call like fasting.