

Today's message from Matthew stresses three spiritual disciplines: alms giving, prayer, and fasting. We should do these, privately, as pious acts of worship. Others boast about them, or complain about them, and they become merely public displays of religious tradition. As we enter into Lent, all of God's people should consider such disciplines to help keep us focused on our journey to the cross. Let us think about fasting as we hear these words from Isaiah 58. This is a conversation between the people of Israel and God:

- 3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'
- "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.
- 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
- 6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
- 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

To fast is as old as Scripture and almost as varied. Israel was called to observe days of fasting. Immediately after being baptized, Jesus was taken by the Spirit into the desert and spent forty days fasting. It is still good to fast today if we fast as Matthew tells us to: in private, not to gain the respect or admiration of people, but to free ourselves from distractions. Fasting should be a quiet time during which we turn our thoughts toward God, as we listen to God.

At the time of Isaiah, fasting had become an empty ritual. Some acted as if the fast was pleasing to God at the same time that they mistreated their workers, as they quarreled, as they fought with each other. And then they wondered why God did not answer their prayers, did not listen to their voices.

Isaiah tells us that fasting is not only about what we give up, and not only the attitude of worship in the process, but it is also about what we add on. We should give up selfishness, voices full of conflict, oppression, along with food. These days the most meaningful thing for us to fast from may not be some type of food. Perhaps we should fast from a particular TV show, or the Internet, or some bad habit such as gossip. Perhaps we should fast from consumerism, taking a stand against the advertisements that tell us to get what (they think) we deserve, what (they think) will bring us happiness, that encourages us to overindulge, putting their products at the center of our lives instead of God; worshiping the man-made idols rather than the maker of mankind. Fasting from consumerism.

When we fast, Isaiah stressed that we should also share what we eat, what we wear, share shelter and love. We should all take time to spend with God in prayer and study and giving. If the most precious thing we have is time, give some to God.

This Lent, let us look at our lives, try to see them from God's perspective, a perspective often found through the disciplines of giving and prayer and fasting. God desires that we learn to say 'no' to instant gratification. In the words of Jesus, let us store up treasure in heaven, for where our treasure is, there our hearts will be as well.

Sermon  
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God's People: Those Who Fast  
Ash Wednesday

FCC  
6 Feb 2008

What will you, as one of God's people, fast from this Lent?