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**Title: FEASTING & FASTING**

**Text: Mark 12:29-31**

Jesus said, *"I have come that they [that's you] may have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). Solomon said, *"I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God"* (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13). God wants us to live a satisfying life. Satisfaction comes in living a life of balance.

One time an expert in the law asked Jesus: *"Of all the commandments in the Bible, which is the most important?"* *'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'"* (Mark 12:29-30). Then He said, *"The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these"* (Mark 12:31). This is the proper balance of life – to love God more than anything else, and then to love others as you love yourself. AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF. Do you know what that means? If you don't love yourself, then other people won't get much love, either.

For some reason, there have always been those throughout the history of the church who seemingly sought to make the Christian life as joyless and as painful as possible. They believed that Christians weren't allowed to be happy. Apparently even John Wesley did not approve much of merriment. He once complained that conversations with the famous preacher George Whitefield were "often mixed with needless laughter." Wesley was a genius, but he wasn't right about everything, and he wasn't right about this. In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James told about a French priest who had decided that in order to be pious he must – never smell a flower, never drink when thirsty, never shoo away a fly, never show disgust before a repugnant object, never complain of anything that had to do with his personal comfort, never sit down, and never lean upon his elbows when kneeling. Can you imagine equating that with holiness? St. John of the Cross told Christians to "mortify all joy and hope...to turn not to what pleases, but to what disgusts...to despise yourself and wish that others despise you." Similarly, St Bernard (not the dog) used to cover his eyes to avoid the beauty of the Swiss Alps.

I suppose that there have always been those in the church who think it's a sin to enjoy life. Today there are those who would say much the same about conservative Christians. This is unfortunate because we'd be hard pressed to find anything in the Bible, especially in the gospels and the life of Jesus, that would support that kind of thinking. William James wrote about the priest who was too pious to smell a flower, but Jesus said... *"See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these"* (Matthew 6:28-29).

William James wrote about the priest who refused to drink when thirsty, but Jesus said... *"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'"* (Luke 7:31). John Wesley rebuked pastors for being too willing to "break into jest" ... But Solomon, the wisest man ever to walk the earth, said... *"A joyful heart is good medicine,"* and *"A glad heart makes a cheerful face..."* And... Jesus said, *"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete"* (John 15:11). Other translations say, *"That your joy may be full."*

Scripture makes clear to us that **God wants you to be happy**. He wants you to enjoy life. He wants you to feel good about yourself and about your future. He does NOT want you to feel good about your sin, but He wants you to feel good about the fact you've been forgiven and you've been set free from the past by the power of the cross. He wants you to feel good about who you are. That's why Jesus said, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

I trust you had a nice Christmas and New Year's. If I were to ask about your holiday habits, I'm rather sure that EATING would likely be mentioned. We Americans tend to eat rather well during the holidays. Anyone eat too little during the holidays? (Very Few) Confession time: Anyone eat too much during the holidays? Maybe WAY

TOO MUCH? More of us were guilty of feasting than fasting during the holidays. Which is the more spiritual discipline – Eating or not eating? Feasting or fasting? I'll let you figure that out. Know that both have their place. Let's look at eating first.

**1. FEASTING – Let's call it CELEBRATION.** I'm going to suppose that many of us had at least one feast since the end of November. The Old Testament describes multiple (10) feasts and celebrations and holidays in which the Jewish people took part. Even though these feasts were often prefaced by fasting AND prayer AND repentance, these were NOT solemn, somber events. They were FEASTS. They were CELEBRATIONS of God's goodness, His guidance, His forgiveness, His blessing, His protection. There were three feasts in which entire families would make pilgrimages to Jerusalem to participate in a week or so of celebration. There was singing, there was dancing, and there was A LOT OF FOOD. When the scripture was read, it was followed by clapping, foot stomping, and shouting. Did you catch that? These were times of revelry, HOLY revelry. Dictionary.com defines revelry as "noisy partying and merrymaking." Colossians 2:16-17 ((ESV) reads: *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup>These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."* Another translation regarding the religious festivals and celebrations reads: they are *"a shadow of the things to come; the reality, however is found in Christ."* In other words, this kind of systematic holy revelry should be part of the Christian experience as well – not necessarily these same specific feasts and celebrations, but the mindset that accompanies them: LIFE IS GOOD BECAUSE GOD IS GOOD, so LET'S CELEBRATE IT TOGETHER. So, the believer, when we honor God's Word, will always celebrate WITHOUT regret or guilt. In essence, we are celebrating THE GOODNESS OF GOD. Let me ask you a question? Does YOUR life include any celebrations? Another way to say it: Are you having a good time? I encourage you to set aside an evening sometime after our week of prayer & fasting, when you can grab a friend or two or three or four or as many as you can afford, and take them out to the best restaurant that you can manage with your budget and tell them to order whatever they want and say to them, "We're here tonight to celebrate our lives and our friendship and the God who brought us together." OR... Prepare a feast in your home for your family and friends, the very best food you can make – and if your culinary skills are as limited as mine are, it might be pancakes or spaghetti, but say to your guests, "We're having this little party tonight because LIFE IS GOOD and GOD IS GOOD and I WANT TO CELEBRATE WITH THE PEOPLE I LOVE." Such celebrations of life are good. Enjoy and rejoice in the goodness of God with those you love – those of like precious faith.

**2. STEWARDSHIP.** Initially, this was a two point sermon – Feasting & Fasting – as these deal with food and eating, BUT... I want to add a third point and put it between the two. There are times when we celebrate life with a big party and lots of food, and we aren't as selective as we should be. In our midst this morning, we may have a vegetarian or a health food fanatic or an exercise addict whose eating habits are rather pure. There may also be one among us who grabbed a Diet Coke and a tube of raw cookie dough for breakfast. DIET Coke doesn't necessarily make it good for you, AND vegetarian cookie dough likely isn't so good for you either. Let's go to Daniel chapter 1. <sup>8</sup>*"But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself."* <sup>10</sup>*"...and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, 'I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.'"* <sup>13</sup>*"Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."* <sup>15</sup>*"At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. <sup>16</sup>So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables."* This passage would tell us that we would do well to be selective with what we eat or don't eat. I'm going to assume that there may be a few that have made resolutions concerning diet for the sake of weight loss. At the beginning of the year is as good a time as any to be more selective in what you eat. The steward was to feed Daniel the king's food. Daniel purposed NOT to defile himself with the king's food. The steward got nervous. Daniel told him to observe our appearance and the appearance of those who eat the king's food and see for yourself. Verse 15 – At the end of ten days, Daniel and his friends looked better AND they looked healthier than those who ate the king's food.

Daniel's diet made a difference. The king would have done better to have eaten Daniel's diet. We do well to watch what comes OUT of our mouths AND what goes INTO our mouths. The Bible says... *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body"* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). He's saying that taking care of yourself is a matter of stewardship. Whenever you establish a pattern – a habit – of eating food that is good for you, YOU HONOR GOD. That doesn't mean that you must give up pizza and ice cream forever. Neither do you have to switch to a diet of sticks and grass, but when you consistently make healthy eating choices, you honor God with your body. And you know what else? The people in your life are worth it. Parents, you need to take care of yourselves for the sake of your children. Husbands, wives, you need to take care of yourself for the sake of your spouse. Fresh fruit and decaf coffee might be a whole lot better than Diet Coke and raw cookie dough. You don't want your kids or grandkids missing out on the joy of knowing you or missing out on the benefit of your wisdom. So, when we think about what the word "eat" represents, let's remember that it represents an attitude of stewardship toward oneself. That when you take care of yourself by eating right and exercising, you honor God, AND... You also honor your loved ones, because by doing so you may very well extend the time that they will have with you. Here's the third thing that the word EAT represents.

**3. SELF-CONTROL or the FAST.** In the Bible, ALONG with the concept of the feast, we have the concept of THE FAST. There are times when it is to your benefit to abstain from eating – either eating certain foods or to abstain from eating all foods. Let me begin by sharing with you a couple reasons NOT to fast. Let me make clear that I am not listing reasons for you to NOT fast. My attempt is to share **WRONG REASONS TO FAST**. We do well to always do the RIGHT thing in the RIGHT way with the RIGHT attitude, BUT... One can also do the RIGHT thing for the WRONG reason with the WRONG attitude. Matthew 6:16 – *"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. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>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."* Here Jesus gives us our first and most important reason NOT to fast. He tells us NOT to fast if we are doing it to be noticed by men. Basically, Jesus is saying that those who look somber and try to make others feel sorry for them because they are fasting are hypocrites. John Piper in his book *A Hunger for God* says, "If the reward you aim at in fasting is the admiration of others, THAT is WHAT you get, AND... That will be ALL you get." Our reward in fasting should be the knowledge of God - not the praise of men. If your goal is the praise of men, go ahead and fast and point out how hungry you are and how much you suffer for Jesus, BUT... The reality is that you ARE NOT doing it for Jesus and Jesus knows it. If you are going to give up 3 squares a day, don't do it for the applause of men. Do it for the Father. Let me point out one thing though, Jesus did NOT say that your fast is invalid if others find out. This passage of scripture has to do with your MOTIVE for fasting. Some have turned Jesus' teaching on fasting here into some superstition on par with making a birthday wish. You know how it goes – you make a wish, blow out the candles and if you don't tell anyone what you wished for, your wish will come true. Listen, don't fast so others will know. IF POSSIBLE, do what you can to keep it between YOU and GOD. However, that's not always possible, if you eat with people regularly and suddenly you aren't eating, it is likely that they will suspect something. If others do find out, your heart motive is not any less pure. BTW, the birthday wish superstition points out a second reason not to fast. You should NOT fast because you want your wishes to come true either. There is teaching that suggests that a person can fast for a season and get whatever they want from their generous God. Fast for a few days and ask for a car or boat, they say, and God will provide. Fast for a few days and you'll receive money to cover your debts. Fast for a few days and God will give you the job YOU want. I struggle to find that in scripture. While fasting may make us ready to know God's will and pray accordingly, it will NEVER be the means to manipulating God into conforming to OUR will. If you fast as though you are blowing out the candles hoping your wish will come true, you will likely be disappointed and disillusioned with the idea of fasting.

Now let me share **REASONS TO FAST**. Throughout the Bible, God's people consistently took time to fast and pray to grow closer to God and experience breakthrough. If you are wanting to deepen your relationship with

God (and you should want that) this is THE PERFECT TIME to commit time and energy to fasting and prayer. Fasting is when we go without food (or specific types of food) for a period of time and instead direct our attention more fully to God. Fasting is FEASTING ON GOD. Jesus said if you fast without the motive to impress others, your fasting in secret will be rewarded by the Father. In the secret place, God is there. Your Father in Heaven is your reward. Fasting is the means through which we draw near to God, and He rewards us with the knowledge of His presence. Fasting is not suffering for suffering's sake. Someone said it's passing up the appetizers and desserts for the main course. It is **ZEROING IN on an opportunity to KNOW GOD and to KNOW HIS WILL**. Too many times we keep on eating the appetizers and desserts and say they're good enough, without realizing there is a main course that is far greater and more satisfying. Many of the examples of fasting in the Bible occur in the face of great danger. When the armies of Moab and Ammon were bearing down on Judah, King Jehoshaphat *"resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah."* When Queen Esther was made aware of Haman's plot to kill all the Jews, she instructed Mordecai, *"Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my friends will fast as you do."* There are times when we realize the ONLY hope we have is the Lord's favor. In those times, when you and I need to inquire of the Lord, fasting is ONE WAY to turn our attention to God. In fasting we express our desperation for Him above everything else. Fasting makes us still to HEAR His voice and SEE His hand. Jesus said, *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."* (What is Jesus' food?) Likewise, OUR food is to do the will of the Father. Our "god" is far too often our stomachs. Filling our appetites is far too high of a priority much of the time. Fasting is a means to declare that the thing that sustains us most is NOT the food we eat but DOING THE WILL OF THE FATHER. Another reason for fasting is to **EXPRESS SORROW FOR OUR SINS**. When Jonah finally got around to preaching in Nineveh, the Ninevites believed God. *"They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."* Sackcloth was a rough, coarse cloth or baglike garment that was worn as a symbol of repentance. When Nineveh heard the message of coming judgment, they did a quick moral inventory and realized they were about to get what they deserved. They began to mourn over their sin and cover themselves in hope of finding mercy. Listen to the decree of the king from Jonah 3:7-10 (ESV) – *"And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup>but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.' <sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."* Fasting AND repentance made the difference. Dare I say it – fasting AND repentance always makes the difference. Fasting can be for us a means of wearing the sackcloth. It is a way to enter into mourning over the sins that separate us from God. When you are fasting, you will likely be amazed at how aware of your sinfulness you become. The fast provides a great opportunity for repentance – putting off the old self and putting on the new. A view of God's mercy calls us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. There is spiritual benefit for denying the flesh. Jesus used one little phrase in Matthew 6:16 that we should take to heart. He said... *"WHEN you fast..."* That's WHEN, NOT if. His assumption is that fasting is part of one's spiritual life. Another benefit of fasting is that **FASTING TELLS YOUR BODY – YOUR FLESH – WHO'S THE BOSS**. Paul said... *"I beat my body and make it my slave..."* (1 Corinthians 9:27). Other translations say, *"I discipline my body..."* Some of us have a hard time saying "no" to our whims and our desires. Saying no to food, even for a day, helps you to establish self-control. There's something about abstaining from food that helps you tune-in to things of a spiritual nature. In the Bible, people fasted for many different reasons: Before making a big decision – As an act of contrition and repentance – As an act of intercession – As an act of humility – In request for healing or for spiritual deliverance – For protection – For material provision.

How do you fast? When you decide to fast, MAKE A PLAN. Choose the amount of time and the type of fast you are going to do. Fasting can take place for any specific amount of time and can include a complete fast or a partial or selective fast. It is important to note that fasting WITHOUT PRAYER is simply not eating. Remember

that the goal is to NOT eat for a time so that you can redirect your focus, energy, and attention toward God. The goal is to replace consuming food with time reading God's Word and praying.

How long should you fast? In the Bible there are records of people fasting for one day, one night, three days, seven days, fourteen days, twenty-one days, and forty days. Sometimes people fast by giving up ALL food. Sometimes people fast by giving up one food, such as sugar or chocolate or meat. A big reason for fasting from food is to make MORE TIME FOR PRAYER AND COMMUNION WITH GOD. So, the goal in fasting is to deny the flesh for the sake of the Spirit. Basically, it is making time for the important – the eternal. Most of the time, we spend our time on the temporal or temporary. That said, you can pick any specific amount of time as the Holy Spirit leads you. For those who have more experience with fasting, you may want to challenge yourself for a longer time or with a more challenging fast (ex. Water only). For those who are new to fasting, you may want to start small and work your way up.

TYPES OF FASTS. There are a wide variety of types of fasts, which we've simplified. The COMPLETE fast. It's also known as the FULL fast. It is when you don't eat any food (and consume liquids only) for a specific period. You would do well to consult a medical professional in advance if you intend to do a complete fast for a prolonged period. The PARTIAL fast. A PARTIAL fast is when you fast all food for a set specific time of day. You might fast breakfast and lunch and eat your evening meal. The SELECTIVE fast (The Daniel fast would be such a fast.) Daniel 10:3 – *"I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks."* For 3 weeks Daniel avoided meats, sweets, and treats. You may be given to consuming rice, beans, lentils, vegetables, and fruits. Such fasts typically avoid bread, meats, dairy, sugars/sweeteners. What about fasting social media or other activities? The Bible does encourage us to abstain from specific activities for periods of time to devote ourselves to prayer. 1 Corinthians 7:5 – *"Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."* However, fasting in Scripture SPECIFICALLY refers to food. In today's culture, man is often consumed with media. The internet provides us with Facebook, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Instagram, Twitter, Quora, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube, Podcasts and who knows what else. Then there is print media: Newspapers, magazines, books, banners, billboards, brochures, flyers. There is broadcasting media: Television, radio, movies. In general, I'd say Biblical fasting refers to food. Yet if fasting would be defined as doing away with anything that feeds the flesh, media, among other things, would apply. In the last year, my iPad started giving me updates on my time spent in media. At first, I didn't believe it. I had spent more time – sometimes WAY more time than I had thought. Things – temporal things – have a way of robbing us of our time. Before long, things have taken up our day. Fasting helps us to see what's REALLY important and redirect a portion of time and energy that we have routinely given to our flesh and use it for a greater purpose – the strengthening of the Spirit man. Almost everything we give up for the sake of our relationship with God IS worth it. If giving up media makes for more time to pray and fast, it will serve you well. Fasting helps you develop SELF-CONTROL and it helps you keep COMING BACK TO A SPIRITUAL FOCUS. So, it's not a question of "IF you fast" but "WHEN you fast." I encourage you to look for ways to implement this practice into your life THIS week if it's only one meal. Start soon. This week of prayer would be the perfect time. If it's all new to you, begin by fasting one meal this week. Decide in advance when you'll do it. It can't be, "I didn't get a chance to grab lunch today, so I'll call it a fast," – but decide when you'll do it and COMMIT THAT TIME IN PRAYER. The development of this discipline is much like the development of any physical discipline. The payoff isn't always immediate, but in the course of time you will discover – more self-control, power over temptation, and a stronger sense of the presence of God.

**CONCLUSION.** This morning we've gone from feasting to fasting. Both have their place in the Christian life. Every time you sit down to a meal – or every time you intentionally skip a meal – take time to think about what you're doing, about the role that food plays in your daily life. Let it represent for you three crucial areas of balance: ONE, is that you remember that **life IS a celebration**. Life is good because God is good. TWO, is that you remember that **your body is not your own, you're merely a steward**. When you take good care of your physical

health, you honor God AND you bless your loved ones. THREE, is that you remember that **the SPIRIT is more important than the FLESH**, and that there are times when it is necessary to say “NO” to the WANTS OF THE BODY so that we can more effectively say “YES” to the THINGS OF THE SPIRIT. FEASTING reminds us that life is meant to be a celebration. FASTING reminds us that the spiritual world is more important than the material world. So, let’s strive to achieve the balance of feasting and fasting, using both to focus on God’s goodness and His work in our lives.