

“KINGDOM CONSTITUTION” – Lessons in the Sermon on the Mount 5.7.17
“Righteous Living, pt. 3: The Discipline of Designated Denial” Craig Crawshaw

Matthew 6:16-18 *Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*

OK, so it appears Jesus expects me to fast, but I don't – at least not other than between snacks. So should I feel guilty? Is this a discipline I'm supposed to add to my life?

Do the Catholics (and others) have a good practice when they observe lent and give up food or some other important item? Should I not eat meat on Fridays? Or should I go all out for spirituality and become celibate, like a good Catholic priest? I guess I don't feel that guilty. But should I fast?

We've been learning about the 3 pillars of Judaism:

1. **TZEDAKAH** – benevolent giving and acts of human kindness
2. **TELFILLAH** – prayer; conforming our will to that of God
3. **TESHUVA** – self-evaluation in fasting, or designated denial

And we've been learning how these 3 pillars of Judaism mirror exactly the 3 essential disciplines of righteousness Jesus calls us to in Matthew 6:1-18:

GIVING (v. 1-4), **2. PRAYER** (v. 5-15) and **3. FASTING** (v. 16-18)

So apparently Jesus speaks of fasting in today's passage as a path to “teshuva” or designated denial. And, like the other disciplines, He teaches that this should be done humbly (not to be noticed), secretly (between me and God) and in anticipation of spiritual reward (if I do so rightly).

So let's examine the meaning and deeper extent of “teshuva” – both from the Jewish understanding and the Christian application.

JEWISH TESHUVA

“Teshuva” literally means “return.”

When Jews “do teshuva,” they examine their ways, identify those areas where they are losing ground, and hopefully “return” to their previous state of spiritual health. And in the process, they “return” to their connection with the Almighty as well.

The process of teshuva involves the following four steps (as taught by a Rabbi):

- 1 – **Regret** - Realize the extent of the damage and feel sincere regret
- 2 – **Cessation** - Immediately stop the harmful action
- 3 – **Confession** - Articulate the mistake and ask for forgiveness
- 4 – **Resolution** - Make a firm commitment not to repeat it in the future

I am sure you can see that this corresponds to the Christian understanding of “repentance.”

We are (1) contrite about our failing, (2) agree (confess) with God that it is sin, (3) ask for and accept His forgiveness, and (4) resolve to not repeat the offense.

Psalm 51:18 *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.*

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

FASTING AND OTHER EXAMPLES OF TESHUVA

So in our text, Jesus uses the discipline of fasting as an example of “teshuva” or “return.”

Fasting, by definition, is the “designated denial” of food for a period of time for the purpose of spiritual reflection and renewal. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days to prepare for His earthly

ministry, during which time He was spiritually tested by the devil. (Matthew 4). The disciples at Antioch fasted in seeking God's will regarding the sending of Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 13:2-3). Likewise Paul and Barnabas "prayed with fasting" to determine God's will in appointing elders in the churches. (Acts 14:23).

But in a more broad sense, fasting can be considered as any "designated denial" to my person that causes me to draw closer to God. It is a "giving up" of that which others might find acceptable or spiritually benign, but of which I choose to deny myself because God has called me to do so.

For some it might be the temporary denial of food. For others it might be the temporary or permanent denial of intoxicating beverage, or watching of certain adult rated movies, or even watching movies or television altogether. In Christian circles we have heard of denials for the sake of spirituality that now might make us snicker or sneer – but for many they were practices of righteousness – such as designated denial of dancing, tobacco, wearing certain types or length of clothing, jewelry, staying out late, gambling or other gaming. In Biblical times there was the designated denial of eating meat offered to idol – which some found offensive and others found spiritually benign.

We might consider these choices as naïve, or outdated, or prudish – but to many who practiced them they were, or still are, sincere attempts to keep oneself free from the world's sinful influence and draw closer to God. Of these choices of "designated denial" Paul wrote the following:

Romans 14:14 *I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean to him it is unclean.*

√ In other words, it may not be Biblically delineated as sinful, but if you have conviction that you should not be doing it, it is sin for you to partake. You must be true to your convictions.

Romans 14:22 *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.*

√ In other words, if you doubt, don't!

1 Corinthians 10:23 *All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.*

√ In other words, it may not be illegal or immoral, but it may not be spiritually beneficial or God's will for you personally. Just because it's legal and others do it don't make it right for you.

For me, one of the strongest Biblical teachings on that which I'm calling "designated denial" or "teshuva" is when Paul speaks of "buffeting" or "self-controlling" the body.

1 Corinthians 9:25-27 *Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*

√ In other words, there are spiritual disciplines, or designated denials, that God calls me to that may or may not be for others, but they are right to me to keep me spiritually in check.

For some this will be about food or drink, for others about the use of time, for others about sports or recreation, for others about work, for others about church involvement, for others about the spending of money, for others about what to watch, read or investigate on the internet. Or ...

Bottom line, Jewish "teshuva" or Christian "fasting" is the discipline of continual self-evaluation as to what is and is not causing a deeper and richer godly character. It is a "returning" to seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

IS FASTING FOR ME?

I believe it is no longer a spiritual requirement, yet it can be a meaningful discipline toward “teshuva” or “return” to God. To me, a particularly illuminating New Testament passage on the place of fasting today (temporary denial of good) is found in Matthew 9:14-15.

Matthew 9:14-15 *Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”*

And then Jesus follows up this comment about fasting with an analogy about new and old wineskins:

Matthew 9:16-17 *But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment: for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins: otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”*

To what does the “shrunk cloth” and the “old wine skins” refer? Does it not refer to that which immediately preceded it? – namely, fasting? And was not that the “old” way, not the “new” way? If that is true, to what does the “unshrunk cloth” and the “new wine” refer? Is it not the new kingdom of Jesus, now come – a kingdom and season of rejoicing with the Messiah present? That is why Jesus said it was not appropriate for the disciples to fast and mourn while the Messiah was present. So what about today? Is the Messiah Jesus now gone from His disciples? No! He has returned in glorious, victorious resurrection and in the person of the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer, to bring joy and hope. And Jesus our Messiah will stay with us, through the Holy Spirit, until the rapture of the saints when the Spirit of joy and hope will be taken out of the world in the time of tribulation. I believe this is what is spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

2 Thessalonians 2:7 *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.*

The “he who now restrains” lawlessness is the Holy Spirit alive in the hearts of believers. But when those believers are taken out of the world, lawlessness will reign and mourning and fasting will appropriately resume as the norm. I believe that is what Jesus is referencing when He taught the disciples that “the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Add to this consideration, that the only requirement for fasting in the Law was once a year at the Day of Atonement, when the Jews fasted for their national sin as the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the nation (Leviticus 23:27 – “humble your souls = “afflict yourselves” = fast). And now that Jesus has fulfilled the Day of Atonement through His sacrifice, that requirement of fasting has ended.

Hebrews 9:11-12 *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.*

Since this is all true, what then about fasting? I say it is no longer a requirement for the Christian, but rather an optional discipline to “return” (teshuva) and reflect on our spiritual self. It might also serve, as it did the early church, as a way of focusing (telfillah) on what might be God’s will in a particular important circumstance. So when Jesus says in Matthew 6, “when you fast” He is assuming that a kingdom citizen will do so, but not as a requirement, but as a valuable tool toward “teshuva” or self-evaluation.

SO WHY FAST?

And by this question I am thinking about either fasting in the specific meaning of refraining from food, or in the general meaning of refraining from anything else for the sake of drawing closer to God.

1. It teaches in a physical way Jesus' meaning of "man shall not live by bread alone."

Most things in life I don't "need." But I surely NEED God. As I deny myself some WANT, either temporarily or permanently, I better learn my true NEED of Him.

2. It intensifies prayer and helps me focus (telfillah) on God's daily provision.

Most of my provision comes so easily and effortlessly I can forget God's daily goodness. This discipline helps me focus on God and His gracious provision.

3. It creates a spiritual bond with the hungry and needy of the world and intensifies a spirit of merciful benevolence (tzedakah).

As I am hungry, or otherwise lacking something others might have, I can better identify with those in serious "need"

4. It teaches me to postpone gratification and sometimes say "no" to a want.

I am used to instant gratification – having, buying or obtaining what I want and need so easily. Being "without" for a season teaches me that I can say "no" or "wait" to a want.

CONCLUSION

God calls each of us to the spiritual discipline of "teshuva" or "return" to Him through continual and stringent spiritual self-evaluation.

May I learn to willingly and gladly deny myself of having virtually everything and anything available to myself, for the sake of drawing closer to my God. May I be willing to "give up" those things that are spiritually superfluous.

May I learn to "buffet" and "discipline" my body, as did Paul, for the sake of winning the ultimate prize of God's "well done!"