

Incredible Role Models
(sermon for November 13, 2011)
By Dr. David R. Mains

Text: Luke 4:1-2.

Subject: Fasting.

Desired Response: Follow the example.

How To: Simple thoughts on the praying side of fasting and prayer.

How Long: November – December (40 days).

Sermon in a Sentence: When we fast and pray, we not only follow the example of numerous heroes of the faith, but that of our Lord as well.

In one of his sermons, John Wesley, the famous revivalist and founder of Methodism, put into words the dilemma with which I've been wrestling as I prepared this sermon. My topic again is fasting, and here's what Wesley said:

"Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it."

Do you find yourself at one of these extremes?

If so, I doubt that you hold the position that Wesley classified as "beyond all scripture and reason." More likely, you're among those who "have utterly disregarded" fasting.

Then again, maybe regular fasting is a practice you're quite comfortable with. I know some Christians who are like this. When fasting is appropriate, they move into it quite naturally. They're also careful to avoid scriptural prohibitions. An example of how not to fast would be the self-righteous Pharisee that Jesus talked about. This man boasted to God, in a voice so loud others could easily hear him (even as he wanted them to), "I FAST TWICE A WEEK."

If the truth be known, Muslims understand experientially way more about fasting than most Christians do. During Ramadan, the ninth month of the year, they fast from sunup to sundown—fast both food and drink. And Ramadan is often during the hottest time of the year!

Many of our Jewish friends practice fasting, and could probably teach us more on the topic than we could teach them.

Hindus and Buddhists fast as well. You recall how Gandhi of India used fasting both as a penance and also a way of making political protests.

I'm aware that for Christians the topic of fasting sometimes comes up during the Lenten season, or the season starting on Ash Wednesday and leading up to Easter. Too often, however, I fear the fasting is more superficial, such as fasting from chocolate, or from watching too much television. Generally speaking, for too many of us, fasting usually doesn't equate with going without food or beverage for an entire day or longer.

To be clear, I would say that unless someone's health prohibits it, when I'm preaching about fasting, I'm referring to refraining from food and probably liquids as well.

In Deuteronomy 9:9 Moses testifies, *"When I went upon the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water."*

To use a feminine example, in Esther 4:16 the queen says, *"Go, gather together 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 maids will fast as you do."* I'll talk more about Esther next Sunday.

My personal feeling is that to be flippant about the food-and-drink aspect of fasting takes the teeth out of what's being discussed.

Now, I know some believers shun fasting because it smacks of asceticism. That word means extreme self-denial. And there are more than enough accounts of brothers and sisters in the Lord who, during earlier generations, apparently believed that God took great pleasure in their self-imposed suffering and hardships. It's what Wesley referred to when he said some have exalted the practice "beyond all scripture and reason."

Actually, you can still find religious voices who make fasting a time of intense, agonized groanings of the spirit. They talk about "travailing in prayer." While there's a place for that, what I'm presenting as a challenge is to view our participation as a joyful privilege. Why? Because we love our country and want to once again see it strong spiritually, and we enter into these upcoming 40 days with a response of, "It's an honor to participate. Thank you for asking."

Anyway, asceticism is hardly the dominate spirit in our churches. I would say that what too many Christians in the U.S. manifest is the opposite extreme, of wanting to be blessed abundantly ... to prosper ... to know comfort ... to be affirmed ... even occasionally pampered ... entertained ... and whenever we gather for fellowship, if at all possible, to be fed!

But it's certainly not to be made uncomfortable, or told to purposely abstain!

"In fact, pastor," I can imagine a person or two asking, "Why bring up fasting in the first place? With all the topics on which you could preach, you must have found this one close to the bottom of the barrel, right?"

The truth is, I discovered it in any number of the lives of spiritual heroes, such as the one I quoted earlier—John Wesley.

I have decided, however, to confine my illustrations to just a couple men and women in Scripture. The reason for this is not only will these few suffice, but also because my samplings include the ultimate illustration for which anyone could ask.

Well, I mentioned Moses already, and I'll talk about Queen Esther next Sunday.

King David—he fasted. In 2 Samuel 12 we have the account of him refusing food for a whole week while crying out to God for the baby he had with Bathsheba. Then the infant died. Here's the shepherd-king's words when his extreme prayers were to no avail:

"While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Apparently fasting while praying wasn't all that uncommon to David. These words are from Psalm 35, where he asks God to *"fight against those who fight against him."* Listen:

"They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn. Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting."

Daniel was also a hero many times over. This short verse is from Daniel 9:3—

"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him, in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."

Do you recall the prophetess Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher? Luke records that as a widow, *"She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying."* When Joseph and Mary came with their new baby son, this 84-year-old woman was one of the first to see and recognize the Christ Child. The Bible reads:

"Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

In Acts 13 we get a feel for this double discipline of prayer and fasting as it was exercised in the early church. Here are verses 2 and 3:

"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

Well, these few examples set up my final one, and I'm using a poem by Arthur Wallis to do that. He wrote the earlier best-seller *God's Chosen Fast*.

On Sinai's mount, with radiant face to intercede for heaven's grace upon a stubborn wayward race, he fasted. (That's Moses.)

Once lifted from the miry clay, when opposition came his way, the soldier-king would often pray with fasting. (David.)

A seer, possessed of vision keen, who told the troubled king his dream, had light on God's prophetic scheme through fasting. (Daniel.)

The prophetess in temple court beheld the Babe the two had brought; for him she long had prayed and sought with fasting. (Anna.)

Now here's my ultimate example.

He came to break the yoke of sin, but 'ere his mission could begin, he met the foe and conquered him with fasting.

Now the New Testament church—

“Set these apart,” the Spirit bade. A spring that soon vast rivers made, broke ope by men who as they prayed were fasting.

So shall they fast when I am gone; was there no word to act upon? Ask countless saints who fought and won with fasting.

When we shall stand on that great day and give account, what shall we say, if he should ask us, “Did you pray—with fasting?”

In a sentence my message could easily be summed up this way: *When we fast and pray, we not only follow the example of numerous heroes of the faith, but that of our Lord Himself.*

When you are in your first full day of fasting and your stomach says a time or two, “I want something to eat, and I want it right now,” remind yourself that our Lord began His ministry with 40 days of fasting in the wilderness! To make the case even stronger, in all the places where this event is recorded, it reads that our Lord was led there by the Spirit.

My key sentence again is: *When we fast and pray, we not only follow the example of numerous heroes of the faith, but that of our Lord Himself.*

We all pray to be Christ-like. So tell yourself when you fast your first full day, “I’m getting a little feel, anyway, Lord, for what it was like when You fasted and prayed for those 40 days in the wilderness. Thank You for doing that to ensure that You were spiritually ready for what was ahead.”

Are we spiritually ready for what’s ahead?

This was a question I believe the Egyptian church wrestled with last year. I think they knew the battle was bigger than what they as humans could handle on their own. That’s why they humbly called for a 40-day fast. And they have experienced the Lord’s hand acting in a marvelous way.

Now they need the fervent prayers of their Christian brothers and sisters around the world. Will we join with them in asking for heaven to do something even more wonderful on their behalf?

Will we fast and pray for the people of Libya—Syria—for Israel—for all countries of the Middle East—or will we say their problems are of no concern to us?

What about America? Are you troubled by the drift of this once-great nation?

This country has known powerful times of spiritual awakening. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people had their revival heroes like Samuel and Elijah and Hezekiah and Josiah. So

America has had her Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, the aforementioned John Wesley, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody and numerous others. But I believe it's fair to say that there has never been a major outbreak of the Spirit of the Lord anywhere—not this country or any country—anywhere or at any time, without first certain of God's people paying the price prayer-wise.

Yes, this nation needs some powerful prophetic voices to rise to the surface, voices that explode in listeners' hearts with the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. But that's not going to happen if behind that powerful preaching there isn't first powerful praying.

I'm told that Charles Spurgeon, the great London pulpiteer of a past generation, used to humbly take people to the basement of his great church so they could see his "power plant." There on their knees were the faithful prayer warriors who were always there to lift him before the Lord, even before he got behind his pulpit.

During this time of still considering a 40-day period of fasting and prayer to close out 2011, I'm asking for us all to now begin to take to heart this challenge that I believe we already know is from God. Next Sunday I will request that you put in writing the commitment you sense the Holy Spirit is prompting you to make. You won't have to show it to anyone. It's between you and the Lord. I just hope that what you write down will put you in the position called Heroes of the Faith.

When we shall stand on that great day and give account, what shall we say, if He should ask us, "Did you pray—with fasting?"