

# ***Shaping Our Souls - Simplicity And Fasting***

**Matthew 6: 16-34**

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Last Sunday evening we thought about the phrase WWJD – *What Would Jesus Do?* We affirmed the challenge to live by those four words. Trying to chart the course of our life by the answers we could give.

But we did so with a qualifier.

We affirmed that it simply wouldn't be enough to haul WWJD out when we were facing particularly challenging moments in our lives. Because then we'd only be doing half a job. We'd only be giving the bracelet or poster half credit.

Remember why we said this?

It was because the life of Jesus consisted not only of important challenge moments, points of major decision, and times of crisis.

In fact, those sorts of moments, moments like the time of temptation which we considered this morning, were in the minority.

Most of Jesus' life was lived in the day to day, hour by hour routine that each one of us also encounters. What the Scriptures show to us are the highlights. So, for example, our morning reading from Matthew 3 tells us of Jesus' 40 days of fasting and solitude in the wilderness in the first two verses. The rest of the passage deals with a short but intense burst of an encounter in a small time frame at the end of those 40 days.

Dallas Willard reminds us that **how** Jesus responds in the important moments was shaped by **how** he lived during the in-between seasons.

The **long** chapters were the preparation for those **short** moments.

Much, say, as an athlete will spend weeks and months training for a game or event that may last only hours, or even minutes. How those hours or minutes go depends entirely on how the weeks and months were spent.

Routines established and practised show themselves during those few powered and intense moments.

So I encouraged you to watch for signs of these routines as you read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. If you have your radar up, you'll notice some of those routines. For example, that it was his practice to attend weekly worship at the synagogue. Or that it was his practice to regularly head off for some time alone in prayer. Or that he had read much in Scripture, and knew it well. Or that he would fast. Matthew 3, for example, told us that.

These routines kept Jesus closely connected to His heavenly Father. That close connection kept His soul strong, and empowered Him to live the challenging times.

Why do I repeat it? Because the same is true for us. We are called to the same sort of living - WWJD, *What Would Jesus Do* kind of living in all the segments of our lives:

- the challenging moments
- the routine chapters in between those moments

Doing so with the prayerful desire and longing to have the riches of heaven's mystery revealed to us - as St.Paul says in Colossians 1:

***Christ in you, the hope of glory.***

You and I -

becoming filled up with Christ.

Living life in way that reflects this Christ, who is in you.

Living WWJD in real time high definition, for all to see.

And doing so with an athlete's determination, described in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 –

24 Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.

25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

Training, self-control, discipline.

A regular part of an athlete's daily routine.

And a regular part of the life of anyone who wants to be an effective Christian, a Christian whose faith is so full and rich and real that people can see Jesus alive in them;  
dare we say, becoming a personal Epiphany in them;  
Jesus being reflected, shown to the world, in them;

Christian training - those elements of life that connect us with the Lord and shape our souls so that we gradually begin to act in ways that reflect the Saviour. We train our hearts to live by new habits - the habits that were exhibited in the heart of Christ.

And for that, we use spiritual exercises, or as some refer to them -  
spiritual disciplines.

Among them are solitude, silence, bible study, meditation, worship, service, confession, fasting, simplicity, community, submission.  
These soul exercises either force us to put some part of our life away for a while, or take up a special activity for a time.

And in that putting away or taking up, we are making decisions with our will, and practising actions with our heart and body that shape us. They deepen our ability to live in relationship with God.

We make little decisions of obedience, which bear large fruit later. For example, a little decision to abstain from watching a television show for a time period helps us to deny ourselves and love others in all sorts of much bigger ways.

We become less enslaved to impulses, and learn to live obediently to God's will.

We come to see that things we thought were critically important, or simply **had** to be there, are perhaps not near as important as we first expected.

And we do these exercises as part of our relationship with the Lord.  
They're not just items on a "to-do" list.

We do them because we prayerfully desire, through them, to see our lives shaped more closely into the image of God.

We desire, through them, to shed our old nature and become closer to the Lord.

Consider the words of Jesus from Matthew 6.

He calls his disciples to fasting - but not in a show-offy kind of way. Instead, in a way that is relationship based, focuses on the intimate and private relationship with the Father in heaven. Fasting is between the believer and the Lord. No one else.

And from there Jesus moves to a discussion on possessions. On having. And wanting. And getting. And hoarding.

Fasting - doing without. Saying "no." Putting away. Simplifying.  
Abstaining from something to some degree for some time.

Think of it as the discipline of **simplicity**.

Where we move some of the accumulated clutter out of the way, so that there is space for God to linger in our lives.

Simplicity.

I think most of us could use a dose of that now and then.  
Perhaps more than a dose.

Think about it - how often don't we say that "we're **so** busy; going in ten different directions"?

We regret it.

And yet there seems to be this undercurrent around that makes it almost a virtue to be over-busy.

And where, if we are honest, does the Lord get left when we are hyper-busy? What happens to our prayer habits in busy seasons? What about time devoted to worship?

Does there, perhaps, need to be a simplifying of our schedules and commitments?

Simplicity.

Perhaps it means deliberately making a commitment to God to cut back on the number of things we own that might tempt a thief to break in and steal.

Perhaps it means making a deliberate pledge to the Lord to become less concerned about amassing credentials in order to further a career.

Or dropping our concern about what our community reputation is.

Doing these things, not just because we want to be less stressed.

But doing them so that we have more space in our head and heart which can be devoted to a relationship with the Lord.

It's hard to be focussed on becoming good friends with Jesus, when you're all bent out of shape about what someone might be saying about you behind your back.

Meaning also that we make sure not to start passing judgement on the next person in the pew because they're not living simplicity as we might do it... or as we figure they should do it if we were in their shoes.

Because then, too, motivations are skewed away from relationship building with the Lord.

Simplicity.

Here's a little experiment that Jan Johnson suggest you could try this week. (*Simplicity & Fasting*, IVP Study Guide, p.15) Walk around your room, or apartment, or house this coming week. When you see something that you really value, stop for a minute and ask why that is. What makes it so important? And what would have to happen inside of you in order for you to be willing to part with it?

And then, take a few moments to visit the place where you "treasure" the presence of God. Perhaps that's the bed where you read your bible; the path where you walk and meditate; maybe the driver's seat of the car where you do praying while on the way to work. Say a prayer of thanks for the moments that you've known there, moments where God is your great treasure. Ask for the Lord's help to live a truly God-centred life.

Simplicity.

How far we are from simplicity when we indulge, or overindulge - grabbing one more plateful at a buffet; buying one more blouse just because you like the colour; taking in one more movie; heading out for one more networking contact (Johnson, p.16).

And how easy it is in those situations for  
the frenzy to eat,  
or supposedly save money,  
or experience the thrill,  
or build the influential contacts –  
– for those things to take over.

How easy.

If we struggle with any of those, then perhaps a fast of some sort is in order.

In other words, disciplining and training ourselves to steer clear of those cravings before they dominate us.

And then devoting the space that these cravings might otherwise consume to the glory of God and the enjoyment of His presence in our lives.

A quick peek at the bank statement or daytimer might very well give some clues as to where a bit of disciplined cutting back might be in order.

Cutting back for good.

Or for a time.

Perhaps it is simplicity in decorating.

Perhaps simplicity in speech.

Perhaps in the vehicle we drive.

Perhaps in the vacations we take.

Perhaps in career ambitions we set.

Perhaps in our eating patterns.

Perhaps in our media habits.

Not that we need to cut whole areas out.

Often scaling back - a partial fast - does the trick.

It jogs us enough that we are able to connect again with the Lord.

And when the Lord begins to nudge you towards such a discipline of simplicity in one area or another, please pay careful attention to what goes on in your heart when you're doing it.

Watch what you begin to think or say or do when you're in the time of self-deprivation. Because entering a time of doing without, when we're used to having more than enough of whatever it is can be risky. It pushes buttons.

And we'll start to see the things that are challenges and obstacles and control issues in our lives.

Pay attention to those.

And remember Jesus' admonition that we can only serve one master.

Period.

In our busy, wealthy society

let us hear the Lord's call to simplicity and fasting.

Like they say, less can be more.

Here that means -

Less stuff cramming our lives

means

More room for Jesus.