

Faith And Spiritual Focus

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Given 16-Sep-21; Sermon #1617B

On this day true Christians afflict their souls by fasting to show that only when we see ourselves in proper comparison to God, will we have the right attitude to be truly at one with Him. This solemn day of fasting is very important for us because we must realize that we are just made of flesh and flesh does not last that long (as we found out today in a very heartfelt way).

It means that we cannot trust in the flesh because when we realize how weak we are and how helpless we are, how can that condition resist and fight against Satan? We cannot overcome the Adversary with physical resources, and if we try to overcome him with physical resources, we play right into his hands, giving him control, and our own limited physical power is no match. But God's supreme spiritual power has no limits. Realizing our weaknesses and our helplessness teaches us total reliance on God because everything we have comes from Him.

God must put Satan away for 1,000 years so He can become reconciled with the rest of humanity and so that mankind can at last be made at one with God. By resisting and overcoming the Adversary triumphantly, Christ qualified to rule as King of kings and Lord of lords over the earth. On the Feast of Trumpets, Christ's kingly role as conqueror is accomplished and continues. And then on the Day of Atonement Christ's priestly role as High Priest for humanity is established, in a sense, and continues as well, so that mankind at last can be made at one with God. By resisting and overcoming the Adversary triumphantly, Christ has accomplished this, as well as His own personal sacrifice, the shed blood and crucifixion, and His resurrection.

The Day of Atonement is not about Satan or who will be chained in outer darkness. It is primarily about Jesus Christ, the Conqueror and the High Priest who is the atonement for sins and provides forgiveness, not only for the firstfruits, but also for the whole world. The Day of Atonement does have a direct meaning for us, but it is similarly going to have a wonderful meaning

for the people in and of the world when Christ returns and establishes God's government on earth. We have our forgiveness with the Passover, but the world is going to have their forgiveness beginning with the Day of Atonement.

One of the main truths that the world will have to admit to is the answer to: "Is Jesus really God's Son?" That is the question answered in chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel, where we read of Jesus' temptation by Satan. While Jesus was fasting for 40 days, Satan endeavored to tempt Jesus with promises of power and grandeur at the end of those days. But because of His faith and spiritual focus while fasting, Jesus was empowered with conviction and with God's Spirit and He was empowered to conquer the Devil and the world. His mental and spiritual clarity was completely focused and devoted to God in faith, as ours should be today as we fast.

Let us look at that great attack on our Savior Jesus Christ to see what spiritual principles may be applied to the Day of Atonement. Keep in mind that the central figure here is not the Devil, it is Jesus Christ, and the same thing holds true on the Day of Atonement. Jesus Christ, the conquering King and High Priest, has dealt with Satan by imprisoning him, which rids humanity of a powerful hindrance, making it easier for humanity to become at one with God. Now turn over to Matthew 4, please. (You will want to keep your finger in Matthew 4 for a good part of the sermon.)

Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Since the initiative in this account is with God, the verse says Jesus was led by the Spirit to be tempted. So let us start with, What is the nature of temptation? In English the word tempt has come to mean almost without exception, tempt to do evil. But the word tempt in Hebrew and Greek means to test or prove. This can include tempting to do evil, but it often means only a testing to prove the value of or good quality of.

So just as a person might test gold by submerging it in acid, if the gold is pure nothing happens. If it is not, the impurity is burned off. It was in this sense that Abraham was tested by God when he was called to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Job was tested by the things that happened to him. And when

the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, the act was a test designed to show that Jesus really was God's Son and that He would follow the path God had laid out for Him. But Satan's purpose for the temptation was evil and it was an attempt to get Jesus to question God's Word, to misuse God's promises in the Scriptures, and to try to win the world for himself by linking up with the Devil rather than by staying loyal to and worshipping God. Because, continuing on in verse 2,

Matthew 4:2 And when He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.

To me right now, that is an understatement. And I am sure it is for the rest of you. But after 40 days and 40 nights, I cannot imagine what the hunger was like! Satan used three temptations: The temptation to turn stones into bread, the temptation to test God by jumping from the Temple, and the temptation to escape crucifixion by falling down and worshipping Satan. And each of these temptations is related to what Jesus had heard from heaven at His baptism—that He was God's Son with whom God the Father was well-pleased.

The first part of that endorsement came from Psalm 2, where Jesus is identified as the divine Messiah to whom the rulers of the world should bow. The second part comes from the Suffering Servant songs of Isaiah, which speak of suffering as the only possible pathway to that triumph. What do these three temptations tell us about the Messiah and the Suffering Servant? Well, the first temptation involves *self-preservation*.

Matthew 4:3 Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

So if you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread. Most of the commentators on Matthew understand these words to be an admission by Satan that Jesus really was God's Son, meaning *since* You are the Son of God and thus merely a temptation to abuse His status by a misuse of His divine power. That was the angle Satan was taking. This would have been a genuine temptation, of course. It would have been a temptation to doubt God's willingness or ability to care for Jesus as a Son and perhaps also to misuse His divine power to avoid the sufferings inherent in His having

assumed human nature, and at that point, having fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. Satan was trying every angle he could.

The emphasis seems to be on the word "if." *If* you are the Son of God. In this case, the temptation's focus lies in questioning God's earlier statement. Back in Eden, to which this account is certainly connected, Adam and Eve were tempted to doubt the word of God. God had told them that they would die if they ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree. But Satan countered in Genesis 3:4, "You will not surely die."

Here, in a similar manner, Satan suggests that Jesus will not actually be God's Son, or if He is, He should settle any doubts on the matter once and for all by a miracle. And thus it was a temptation to question the express Word of God hidden under what seemed to be a concern for Jesus' physical hunger. Fasting reveals to us how much we still love ourselves and how difficult it is to give up some of self. And this day is a testing to see which we will put first. Will it be the cry of the body for food or the sincere desire to obey the Word of God?

Jesus had no trouble answering Satan. He did it by quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3.

Matthew 4:4 [here we see that quote] But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

So if the temptation were only to misuse Jesus' supernatural power, Jesus' reply would not be directly to the point. However, Jesus knew that the temptation was designed to cause doubt in the Word of God, and so in a sense, this is what Jesus would have said if more was put in there in a paraphrased way. If the temptation were to doubt the Word of God by testing it, Jesus' answer would mean, "It does not really matter whether I have physical bread to eat since God will preserve My life as long as He wants so I can do what He wants. I trust Him in that. What does matter is whether I believe God's Word implicitly or not. If I doubt His word even for a moment, all is lost."

Acceptable fasting requires self-discipline, which combats self-preservation. We have to apply the same thing as we fast.

The second temptation involves *self-importance*.

Matthew 4:5-6 Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down," was Satan's temptation. The truth of God's Word lies behind this temptation too. Jesus had rejected the Devil's first temptation by quoting Scripture. And so the Devil got into the act himself. And in a negative sense, Satan is a scholar of God's Word and he knows what it says. Because of that extensive knowledge, he is the master counterfeiter as seen in his counterfeit Sunday-keeping churches. Satan rejected God's seventh-day Sabbath and established his counterfeit first-day sabbath in competition with God.

Now, in this temptation, the Devil reacted directly to Jesus' use of Scripture by his deceptive use of Scripture. This verse in Psalm 91 is what Satan counterfeited or perverted.

Psalm 91:11-12 For He [the Father] shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Satan was well aware of that scripture and used it as a temptation to Jesus. So the Devil suggested, "Let's go up to the highest point of the Temple and then You can jump off and God will save You, and the people who see the miracle will realize that you are the Messiah and follow You immediately. It will make a great impression and will get Your ministry off to an exciting start." You see the twisted reasoning of Satan and what he was trying to get Jesus Christ to do. The Adversary tempted Christ to advance the work of

God by spectacular and obviously worldly means, which is exactly what many false religions are doing today when they try to impress people with so-called signs and wonders or by entertainment reminiscent of television.

Back to Matthew 24 please. We cannot accomplish invisible spiritual work by outward worldly means. And at the same time, the Devil's suggestion was also a temptation to spiritual presumption to demand a supernatural sign from God in response to an action He had neither encouraged nor commanded. Jesus replied to this suggestion by another quotation from another scripture in Deuteronomy 6:16.

Matthew 4:7 Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Satan wanted Jesus to test God, but God was not the one who was being tested. Jesus was the one being tested and that means His responsibility is not to challenge His Father, but to trust Him—and that is our responsibility as well. That is part of what we are learning here by fasting on the Day of Atonement.

In this reply, Jesus introduced an important principle of sound Bible study, among other things, which is not only to trust the Word of God implicitly and absolutely—that is what the first temptation was about—but to interpret scripture with scripture, never taking a verse out of context, but rather interpreting it using other verses or the Bible as a whole. Scripture interprets itself. When there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, it must be searched out and known by other places that speak more clearly.

The Scriptures never contradict each other. There are not true discrepancies within the Word of God, only translational and interpretational human errors. That is what we find when we find anything, it does not go parallel with the rest of the Bible. This does not mean we will not encounter passages of the Bible that are difficult for us to understand. On the contrary, it suggests we will encounter such passages and there are spiritual principles embedded within the passages of the Bible which have a universal application. But at the same time, it says that God is the author of Scripture and for that reason the statements of Scripture will always complement and reinforce each other when rightly translated and understood.

That is what Jesus was doing in encountering Satan's deception. Satan was taking it out of context, he was taking it and perverting it, and Christ was setting him straight because He knew the Scriptures, He knew what it said, and He used the power of the Word of God to resist Satan. God would be speaking out of both sides of His mouth, which is impossible for Him to do, if Jesus were to go with Satan's temptation and question the Word of God, asking for a miracle. So it is impossible for Him to do and Jesus knew this, which was why He appealed to Deuteronomy 6:16 to reject Satan's temptation. When taken as a whole, the Bible will always provide for a consistent God-trusting way of life.

Acceptable fasting expresses self-humility and combats self-importance. That is what we have to remember when we fast, every time we fast. Humility helps us to see ourselves as we truly are and to see God as He is. When Satan is bound and then people will have an easier time living humbly before God, then God's Word and Spirit will work wonders among the people of the world.

The third temptation involves *self-glorification*.

Matthew 4:8-9 Again, the devil took him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."

In this third temptation, Satan threw off all subtlety and asked Jesus for worship. "All this I will give you if you bow down and worship me." So the Devil showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their glory and offered them in exchange for Christ's worship. This is the only temptation that does not refer directly to the words "You are My Son. The other two do. "You are My Son." Those words are still in the background, however. They come from Psalm 2, where the Father promises His Son precisely these kingdoms as His inheritance.

Psalm 2:7-8 "I will declare the degree: The Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.'"

This is what Satan was offering to Jesus but he offered it in the world's way and that is by an alliance with Satan and evil rather than by submission to God, suffering, and sacrifice. Jesus has been appointed by God to rule the earth, to rule the world. No one else has.

Revelation 11:15 Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

For Jesus, the entire world was not worth a single nod in this temptation from Satan, and Jesus replied to the Adversary, using another verse from another scripture in Deuteronomy 6:13. Here is what He says,

Matthew 4:10 Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

He said it with power, no doubt, and He said it with conviction, and we have to be able to say the same thing. In all Scripture there is no better example of the power of specifying sayings of the Word of God to turn Satan away and to save the one being attempted. It is such a powerful dynamic tool.

Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left Him, and behold, the angels came and ministered to Him.

So what did Jesus accomplish by fasting? Jesus fasted to show that even in His physical weakened condition, He really was God's Son and that He would follow the path God had planned for Him. By proving this, He set an example for all His disciples from that time forward to today. He fasted to

free others from their sins, to intercede on behalf of believers with God, and for their healing to help provide for the needy, and to reveal God's will. Fasting is a gift of self-sacrifice from our Savior to be used for the good of others. And on the Day of Atonement, we must have the same humble state of mind that will be necessary when Christ is ruling as King of kings and Lord of lords following the great battle for the world that we will be standing, hopefully, next to Him for, and God will provide the greatest blessing of all upon us and the world: The unity and peace with Him that everyone seeks or will seek.

So why do we fast? How does it apply to us? Following Christ's example, we fast for similar reasons to what Christ did: To help free others from their slavery to sin by setting a good example in teaching, as a true witness of God's way of life, to intercede on behalf of others sins with God for their healing, to help provide for their needs, and to understand His will. Fasting is an instrument of godly love that we must use for the good of others and we too benefit from fasting because wonderful blessings come to those who are self-sacrificing.

It should be obvious when this confrontation in the Adversary's temptations of Jesus and how Jesus overcame them, that there is direct application for our lives when we are tempted and must stand against the Satan's wiles. Let me give you two significant ways it applies to us in addition to the ways I have mentioned.

The first significant way that this temptation of Jesus Christ has lessons for us is that we face the same battle against Satan. The Devil is not omnipresent as God is, Satan cannot be everywhere tempting everyone all at the same time, he is only a creature. We know from I Peter 5:8 that it says "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." We must resist him while remaining steadfast in the faith. This means that he tempts a limited number of people directly. He is not on omniscient. In the entire Bible we know of only a few people: Eve but not Adam, Job, Jesus, Judas, Ananias but not Sapphira, and maybe a few others, who were tempted by Satan directly.

But this does not mean we do not face spiritual battles every day. We do. Satan has millions of fallen angels, demonic beings carrying out his evil

agenda, and this battle engagement is becoming more obvious by the day. Paul wrote about these battles in his letter to the Ephesians, saying,

Ephesians 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places [or realms].

These battles are so fierce that Paul warned us to be ready for them by arming ourselves with God's armor. We are to put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation, and have our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. We find that in Ephesians 6:14-17. We must be fully equipped for the struggle and that is what God is doing to prepare us now for the future meanings of the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement, then on into the Feast of Tabernacles. We are being prepared now to stand with Christ in rulership over the earth and this is what it is taking our appropriate and our acceptable keeping of the Day of Atonement for the right reasons, and fasting for the right reasons.

We can only overcome the Devil with spiritual resources—by the Spirit of God and by the power and mind of God. And when Christ takes up His own place as King of kings and Lord of lords, the rest of the world will not have the same battle as the firstfruits do in this society because Satan will not be there.

Another significant way that applies to us is that we have the same choice that Jesus had in those temptations of Satan. We have the choice of trusting God and sticking to the path He sets before us or distrusting Him and seeking to win victories for God or ourselves in the world's way. We do not want to do that. There is no power in the world's way and it leads you in a wrong direction.

On what do we put our faith? This is something that is really coming up a lot lately. In the last month I have heard more people and more cases of distractions and challenges and trials and things like that than I ever remember hearing before the Feast of Tabernacles in the last 57 Feasts that I have attended. I have never seen it this bad before. Not just the COVID, but

it is just everything else that is causing distractions. I know Richard, I, and Mark have lost many hours of time in dealing with some distractions in just the last few weeks that kind of set us back on our preparation. So there is no doubt that Satan has beefed up his attacks and things are getting very serious. And so we are faced with some of the greatest challenges of our life.

The great paradox of the life of faith to which we are called is that blessing comes through self-sacrifice. We receive through giving and we gain our lives by laying them down. And the repentance that counts with God is the sort that can be seen in the way we live, especially how we treat other people.

One of the reasons we fast is to humble ourselves and to add and exhibit faith, which helps our understanding of the Word of God. Humility comes from recognizing what we truly are and faith is displayed when we realize what God truly is, and as a result, we trust, reverence, and fear Him.

Please turn with me to Isaiah 58. We are going to spend a little bit of time here in Isaiah 58. (It is amazing how strong the habits are. I have started to reach for a glass of water a few times in the last half hour.) Isaiah 58 reveals the contrast between true and false fasting. It begins by describing the nation of Israel during a period in its history, with some similarities to our time today. Isaiah was commanded to confront the hypocrisy of the people. *Their delight in religion and fasting is false because it is used as an emotional device for pressuring God into compliance with human desires.* When God refuses to be used, the people are offended that their religion does not work. Their unappreciated attempt to gain advantage with God is exposed in their domineering use of people. They thought they were fasting correctly and they thought God was patting them on the back spiritually. But God had the opposite reaction. Verse 3 explains how not to fast. First God is exposing the attitude of the self-righteous here.

Isaiah 58:3-4 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen [speaking to God]? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You have not taken notice.' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers [God is saying to them]. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and you strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day [God says no more of it. Stop it.], to make your voice heard on high."

So in other words, God is saying that they are trying to make Him hear them. They are trying every human angle they can think of to try to make God hear them or believe them or answer them.

Isaiah 58:5 "Is it a fast that I have chosen [God says], a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush [meaning, bow very low and look in feigned humility], and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?"

God's rhetorical question here is all about appearances. They fasted to impress other people. Isaiah 58, verses 6 through 10 explains how to properly fast and this is the type of fasting that pleases God. Acceptable fasting requires self-discipline, self-humility, and self-sacrifice. And this is not only an answer to why and how we fast acceptably before God, it also explains an aspect of the Day of Atonement's meaning and purpose for the world once it is at one with God.

Isaiah 58:6-10 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen [So He repeats Himself here because He is about to tell them exactly what He has chosen.]: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; and you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am!' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday [meaning even your darkness is bright]."

On this day we afflict our souls by fasting so that we may understand the attitude we must have toward the world when it becomes at one with God.

Also, we fast to show that only when humanity sees himself in proper comparison to God will it have the right attitude to be truly at one with Him. Eventually the world will keep the command in Leviticus 23:28-29 that says, "And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God. For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people." That is not only talking about fasting, it is talking about the spiritual aspect and the spiritual principles involved in it as well.

Fasting is a way of wiping away the distractions from our physical lives and helps us focus on the spiritual priorities. It is not penance, it is not a hunger strike to force God's own will on God.

For a final scripture, please turn with me to James 4. Since fasting should be for the purpose of humbling oneself to draw closer to God and His righteousness, then fasting on the Day of Atonement is a vital remembrance of the state of mind necessary for salvation. It is an attitude of humility and submission and passion for God and His way of life, diligence and conviction for His way of life, for God and for glorifying Him. It is this condition to which the world will be brought by catastrophic events, culminating in Jesus Christ's return and God's pouring out His Spirit upon humanity. If Jesus, our Lord and Savior, needed to know the Scriptures to draw close to God and to resist Satan and win the victory over him, how much more do we need it to win corresponding victory?

James 4:7-10 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.