

1.17.21      What Is Fasting and How Do I Do It Matthew 6.1, 16-18, 9.14-15

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*“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no **reward** from your Father in heaven.*

*And **whenever you fast**, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are **fasting**.*

*Truly I tell you, they have received their **reward**.*

*But **when you fast**, put oil on your head and wash your face,*

*So 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.”*

Have you ever skipped a meal? Many of us have skipped a meal for one reason or another. There are people who have missed a meal because their family had no food. If food insecurity is an issue for anyone watching, our church has the Caring Cupboard food pantry, and we can help. Others of us have missed a meal to lose weight or because we were too busy and didn't have enough time to eat. Dieting is eating less for physical purposes. Hunger strikes are when people don't eat for political purposes. When Jesus talks about fasting, he means abstaining from food, but usually not water, for spiritual purposes. Fasting for spiritual purposes is not something most of us do on a regular basis. Why is that?

Living in the United States we're taught that if we don't eat three meals a day with multiple snacks in between that we're hungry. The cultural message of our age is, *“Indulge yourself.”* Companies spend billions of dollars to get you to buy their food, drink their beverage, or eat at their restaurant. It's difficult to listen to or watch any kind of media for long without seeing an ad for something to eat or drink. In 1 Corinthians 6:12 we hear these words, *“**All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.**”* Eating is a necessary and very pleasurable part of life; it makes us feel good, and often involves significant social interaction. Eating together is tremendously helpful for families and fun for friends. Food structures our time more than virtually anything else in life. We build our days around our meals. We look forward to eating and talk about it a lot. However, it's important that we not allow ourselves to be enslaved or dominated by anything, including something as basic to life as food.

The purpose of this sermon on fasting is not to make you feel guilty about having breakfast or lunch while you talk about fasting. I've preached on fasting before and I know it's not a subject that people say, "*I really hope Doug will preach on fasting again soon, it's so interesting and such an important part of my life!*" During sermons on fasting folks' eyes glaze over (like donuts) and they look like they're trying to find the remote control so they can change the channel to something more interesting.

**However, to Jesus fasting was important enough to practice and to teach about so we humbly need to consider why he did and how it may be of value for us.**

**The purpose of this sermon is to help you learn about a spiritual practice you may not have engaged in as much as giving or prayer so you might grow closer to God.** In Matthew 6 Jesus addresses giving, prayer and fasting. Most of us acknowledge Jesus' words about the importance of charity and sharing with others who have less than we do. Many of us accept his words about prayer and taking time alone with God, fewer of us have accepted his words about fasting. Jesus doesn't say "if" you give, pray, or fast. He says, "*Whenever you give (6:2), whenever you pray (6:5,7), whenever you fast (6:16).*" While these are not commands, Jesus assumes his followers will engage in these spiritual habits, so he tells us the wrong way and then the right way to do each one of them and the reward that follows. The praise and esteem of other people is alluring, but it cannot compare to the reward of our "*Father who sees in secret*" (6:4,6,18). Yet in my personal life as well as in my experience with American Christians, it seems we give more than we pray, and we pray more than we fast. Is that true in your experience? Compared to the rest of the world, we live with so much material abundance perhaps it is easier to *give money* than it is to discipline ourselves to *take the time to pray* or to make *the personal sacrifice of giving up the comfort of food* when we have so much to eat that's so easily accessible. Jesus says all three disciplines giving, praying, and fasting help us grow in our relationship with God and are part of the practice of our faith.

### **What the Bible says about Fasting**

Fasting is not unique to Christianity; virtually every religious tradition includes it among their devotional practices. Fasting is a biblical practice engaged in by many people for a variety of reasons. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for 40 days while he was

receiving the law from God (Exodus 34:28). King Jehoshaphat called for a fast in all Israel when they were about to be attacked by the Moabites and Ammonites (2 Chronicles 20:3). Nehemiah (1:4) and Esther (4:15-16) also fasted and prayed at times of national crises. David humbled himself by fasting when he learned that King Saul and his Jonathan, David's closest friend, had been killed (2 Samuel 1:12) as well as when his own child was gravely ill (2 Samuel 12:16-17; Psalm 69:10). Even the pagan people of Nineveh fasted in response to the preaching of the prophet Jonah, and Darius, the king of Persia, fasted all night after he put Daniel in the lion's den.

In the New Testament, we learn about Anna who *"worshipped night and day, fasting and praying"* at the Temple (Luke 2:37). John the Baptist taught his disciples to fast (Mark 2:18). After his baptism by John and before the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus engaged in a 40 day fast in the desert. When he was tempted by Satan to turn stones into loaves of bread that he might eat, Jesus replied with a passage from **Deuteronomy 8:3**, *"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* In Matthew 9:14-15 we have this exchange about fasting between the disciples of John the Baptist and Jesus. "Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, *"Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"* 15 And Jesus said to them, *"The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."*

This may be the clearest verse indicating Jesus' expectation that after he was gone, his followers would engage in fasting as part of their discipleship. In the Book of Acts, after the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit we see that fasting was part of the routine practice of the early church. In the verses that were our Call to Worship today, Acts 13:2-3, *"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."* Paul and Barnabas also spent time in prayer and fasting before they appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23).

While we can pray without fasting and we can fast without praying, combining these two activities seems to be a good way to give God our focused attention. **Fasting**

**is a way of emptying our selves so we can be filled with the Spirit of Christ.** That's why our tool for today is a broom. It symbolizes sweeping a place clean of debris so that it's empty and ready to for something to be put in place. We spend time fasting not to lose weight, but to gain a deeper relationship with God. Fasting helps to take our focus off the things of the world and to place it on God. Fasting is a very biblical practice, one that Jesus and many of the great characters of the Bible engaged in, and it shouldn't be ignored or dismissed by us. There may be times of crisis whether personal or national, times when an important decision needs to made, or when we're seeking God's direction when fasting is an especially appropriate spiritual practice.

Twenty years ago, when my mother knew I was going to be preaching a sermon about fasting, she told me a story about how fasting shaped her family. My mother's father John Egner, was a Presbyterian pastor and my grandmother whose name was Patience, was a woman of faith. When my mother's oldest sister was born, one of her legs was longer than the other. The doctor told my grandparents she would never walk normally. For the first year of my aunt's life my grandmother would massage her legs and exercise them, and my grandfather fasted and prayed for Nancy one day a week. When it came time for her to learn how to walk both of her legs were the same length and she was fine.

Sometimes fasting can help us to face difficult moments or situations with the Lord's help, rather than hiding from them. As much, if not more than most spiritual practices, **fasting often reveals what is inside us.** We may find when we fast that our disposition is not good, that we're grouchy, short-tempered, or irritable. At times we can use food to comfort or console ourselves, to make us feel better, to take our mind off facing something that is painful or difficult. After all there are few situations in life that can't at least be momentarily eased by a good dessert. **When our stomachs are empty it may reveal what our spirit is full of that day.**

A deeper purpose of fasting is revealed in a passage about eating. In **John 4:31-34** Jesus and his followers are in the region of Samaria and the disciples went into town to get food. Meanwhile Jesus has a satisfying conversation with a woman of Samaria. The disciples return to Jesus and say, "*Rabbi, eat something.*" Jesus says to them, "***I have food to eat that you do not know about.***" The disciples said to one another,

*“Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”* Jesus replies, **“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”** **When we fast, we are feasting on God’s presence, God’s word, and doing God’s will.**

Fasting reminds us of our utter dependence on God for our life and for our most basic needs. This may be part of why Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* Fasting renews in us a spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude – you taste and appreciate food more when you don’t have it for a little while. Jesus wants our righteousness to go deeper than the scribes and Pharisees, and that means building habits into our lives that allow us to be continually drawn into the presence of God. **Spiritual change often comes not so much from inspiration or information but from a decision to change our habits. Habits make us or unmake us.** We must decide we’re going to act.

A past issue of Men’s Health magazine listed several of the more creative excuses doctors and physical therapists heard from patients explaining why they didn’t exercise. *“An earthquake drained my pool. My wife would be angry with me if I lost weight. The TV at the gym is always on something I don’t want to watch.”* Our motivation for engaging in fasting or any spiritual discipline is not one of guilt, it’s not to impress others or because by doing them we think we’re holy, **but because they enable us to focus and feast on God’s presence, God’s word and the doing of God’s will.** Jesus says our Father in heaven who sees in secret will reward us. He never says **how** God will reward us, that’s unique to each of us, and God’s purpose in our life, but Jesus says that God will.

**Practically speaking, what should you do if you wish to try fasting?** Don’t try to be Moses or Jesus by starting with a 40 day fast. Not eating from now until the end of February would be difficult, unwise, and unhealthy. Second, there are some people like women who are pregnant or nursing, those with serious illnesses, such as diabetes or other physical conditions who should not fast from food. If you have any questions about whether you may fast, check with your doctor. However, if we can’t fast from food, that doesn’t mean we can’t fast from other things. Remember what Paul said about not being enslaved by anything. Some of us may need to fast from our phone,

computer, tablet, television, social media, or email even more than we need to fast from food.

When you fast, try to keep it to yourself. Drink lots of water, most people don't drink enough water any way and often mistake our body's need for water for hunger pangs. When you feel hungry one of the best things you can do is drink a glass of water first. When you're ready to fast from one meal a day begin by skipping lunch or breakfast and spend the time you would have spent preparing and eating your meal by reading the Bible, praying, or journaling. I think you will find this a rewarding experience. Try this for several weeks.

Then some time try skipping breakfast and lunch. Don't eat a big meal the night before you fast because your stomach will expand, and you'll be hungrier. I don't mean to be rude or hurtful, but most of us, myself included, have plenty of energy already stored in our bodies to carry us for a while. Over time we can expand our fast to a full day or more. When you break-fast (ever wonder where the word "breakfast" comes from?), don't eat a large, rich, or greasy meal. Break a fast with fruits, vegetables, nuts, and fruit juice, water, or tea and with much thankfulness and rejoicing to God. We're fasting for a spiritual purpose so take the time you usually spend eating in Bible reading, prayer or acts of service. Don't use the time just to get more work done.

### **Fasting has many Benefits.**

**Fasting enables us to focus on and draw near to God in times when we need God's direction and leading or during a personal struggle or national crisis like we're in right now.** Perhaps we all should consider fasting one meal a week and praying for our nation.

**Fasting helps us to be the master and not the slave of our habits.**

Our stomach is often like a person who has been spoiled and a spoiled person needs discipline not indulgence. Fasting increases our self-discipline and helps us gain some control over our appetites.

**Fasting also teaches an old-fashioned virtue called sacrifice;** it helps us gain the ability to do without things. The number of things we have come to call essential has grown incredibly. As we control and limit what is "essential" in our lives our freedom increases.

Rather than being a rejection of a pleasure God has given us for our health and good, **fasting enables us to better appreciate the blessing of daily bread and food and eating.**

**Fasting also helps us grow in compassion and caring** for if we occasionally go to bed hungry, it makes us more aware of the reality millions of people live with because they have no food to fast from.

In Matthew 6:1-18 **Jesus addresses our motivation for doing anything related to our spiritual life.** Jesus warns us we can give, pray, or fast **to draw the attention of other people to our selves**, or we can give, pray, and fast **to give God our attention.**

The more attention we give to God, the fuller and more satisfying our life will be.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What is your first reaction to the thought of fasting?
2. How does Christian fasting differ from dieting or a hunger strike?
3. What scriptures or Bible stories that mention fasting do you remember yourself or from the sermon?
4. What would you say is the purpose of fasting?
5. What is, or would be, most difficult about fasting for you?
6. How can fasting reveal what's inside us or even what may be controlling our life?
7. If you fast from food or from some form of media in the coming week, see what you learn about yourself and be prepared to share what you discovered.