

February 11, 2024

“Not So Fast”

Matthew 6:16-18

Intro:

This morning, I am going to do something that I don't normally do: I am going to sort of recycle a message I have already delivered. It's not really cheating though, as I haven't actually preached this message in the church. You might recall that early on in the COVID lockdowns in 2020, I made a series of videos working through Spiritual Disciplines as presented by Richard Foster in his excellent book “Celebration of Discipline”. You can find the whole series on our church YouTube channel, if you are interested in exploring spiritual disciplines further.

Alternatively, you could get your hands on a copy of the book. Foster's isn't the only book on the topic, but it is a good one to begin with as he presents things in an accessible fashion that is not overwhelming.

I am going to re-visit the content of the three videos on the discipline of fasting. This past Wednesday, we entered the season of Lent, which is 46 days (40 observed, plus 6 Sundays) of preparation for Easter. Often during this time Christians will give up something in their lives as a way to help with focusing on that preparation. This is a season of fasting. So, it seemed fitting this Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent, to remind us of how the Spiritual discipline of fasting intersects with our lives as believers.

As we talk about fasting, I can imagine that some of you are already feeling uncomfortable, and if you are like me, are already feeling the uncomfortable pangs of hunger – even though we haven't actually done any fasting yet! Just the thought of what we imagine it to be can be enough to get our stomachs rumbling. But, don't let that distract or discourage you. Fasting isn't as scary or as daunting a thing as you might imagine it to be. It just takes a little work to get started.

Background:

Why is it that we are uncomfortable when the topic of fasting comes up? I'm sure there are any number of reasons – it seems something that only hyper spiritualists from Eastern religions do, or perhaps because it flies in the face of our consumer mentality of eating a lot that is promoted in our western culture, or perhaps it is simply because every time you have had to fast in the past it was due

to needing to do some medical test. But I think that underneath most of the fear and uncertainty that we have about fasting is the knowledge that fasting costs us something that we desire and find comfort in. Most commonly, this is food. We don't want the discomfort of being hungry. We don't want to be denied the comfort of eating whatever we want whenever we want. This cost, however, brings with it the benefit of opening the way for a deeper relationship with Jesus, and that is worth any cost we might have to pay.

When fasting is mentioned in the Bible, it is usually connected to a veritable "Who's Who" of biblical persons. Fasting was practiced by Moses, King David, the prophet Elijah, Esther, Daniel, the apostle Paul, the early church (to give just a small sampling), and of course Jesus.

There are some 75 verses in the Bible that talk about fasting, and it would take more time than we have to go over each of them, but I encourage you to do a study on your own to determine for yourself the value and importance of fasting. This morning we look at the instruction for fasting in Matthew 6.

In Matthew 6:5-18, Jesus is teaching about prayer and fasting in His Sermon on the Mount. The first verses deal with how we should pray, and then in verses 16-18 moves to instruction about fasting. Listen again to what he says:

"And when you fast, don't make it obvious as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your (Heavenly) Father, who knows what you do in private. And your (Heavenly) Father, who sees everything, will reward you."

Notice that Jesus said, "when you fast". He did not say, "if you fast", as if it is optional. No, the words he used assumed that the people he was talking to (which because this is recorded in the Bible now includes you and me) have already made fasting a regular part of their lives. He uses the same language when teaching on prayer – assuming that it was something already being done. He is simply teaching how we can grow deeper in the practice in order to grow deeper in relationship with God.

Ultimately, the purpose of fasting is to abstain from something good in order to focus on a spiritual purpose in our lives. Most commonly, we give up eating food (although fasting is not restricted only to food), and then fill that void with seeking the presence of God. The purpose of the spiritual exercise is a deeper relationship with God, not to earn His favor. Sometimes, especially as recounted in the Old Testament, fasting was part of showing repentance for sin and was often marked by the tearing of clothing and covering one's head with ashes. This could get showy and by the time of Jesus, fasting had become something people used to prove they were more pious than their neighbours, and not to deepen their relationship with God.

The Bible gives us several examples of different types of fasts that we can undertake. Note that in the Bible, fasting is usually connected to giving up food.

1. **Normal Fast.** This is the most common kind: abstaining from all food, but not from water, for a period of time. This was likely the type of fast Jesus did when he was led into the desert prior to being tempted by the devil.
2. **Partial fast.** This type of fast limits the amount of food eaten, but doesn't abstain fully from food. As an example, in Daniel 1, Daniel and his three friends take on strict diet of eating only vegetables and drinking only water for ten days. For us, this could mean eating smaller portions of our regular meals, or restricting our diets to only a few foods. This might be a good option for someone just starting out with this discipline, or for someone who has health concerns that could be affected by fasting.
3. **Absolute fast.** As the label suggests, this type of fasting involves abstaining from all food and liquid, including water. This is a fairly extreme fast, and not one that should be practiced on a regular basis. It was usually reserved for particularly trying times or when a specific encounter with God was being sought. The most familiar example of this type of fast is when Esther asked the Jewish people to fast on her behalf in Esther 4, before she approached the king to ask him to save her people.
4. **Supernatural fast.** You or I will likely not experience this type of fasting, but it does occur in the Bible so I want to note it. On two different occasions, God intervened supernaturally in someone's need for food to allow for a specific encounter with Him. Moses recounts experiencing this kind of fast in Deuteronomy 9:9, when he was on the mountain with God for 40 days

and 40 nights without eating or drinking. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah is sustained by God in the same way for 40 days when an angel brings him a meal.

Fasting also has a social component, and the Bible outlines several kinds.

1. **Private fasts.** This is what Jesus was referring to in the passage from Matthew 6 that we read earlier. Just as the label suggests, this is a fast undertaken by an individual on his or her own. It could be any type of fast, but no one else is involved. It is simply between the individual and God.
2. **Group fasts.** These are fasts undertaken by a community of people, perhaps a small group, or maybe a church congregation. Acts 13 describes the early church in Antioch participating in a congregational fast together before God told them to send Paul and Barnabas out to preach.
3. **National fasts** were also part of the experience in the Old Testament. 2 Chronicles 20 tells of King Jehoshaphat responding to an invasion by calling all of Judah to a national fast. In our increasingly secularized society, the chances of seeing a national fast are not very good.
4. **Occasional fasts.** These were not part of a regular schedule of fasting, but were done when a specific need or special occasion arose. Again, Esther's call for the Jews to fast with her is an example of this. Given the rarity of such a fast, those participating probably did an absolute fast.

Whatever type of fast a person decides upon, the purpose for the fast must be clear. Otherwise, they are just going without food for no reason. Fasting is something that must be centered upon God. It is an act of worship. An act of focusing prayer. Fasting empties us of something material (most often food) in order make more room for the Holy Spirit to indwell us.

One final word on the subject of purpose: while food it is the most common thing people give up when fasting, food is not the only thing we should consider. Perhaps our fast should be from other things that can dominate our lives – TV, technology such as cell phones, social media accounts, shopping perhaps, maybe even sleep. Whatever you feel you need to fast from, remember that it is your motivation and desire for deeper relationship with God that is important, not whether you were able to stay off your Twitter account for 3 days.

Practice:

Remember at the beginning of the message I commented that fasting for many of us is probably unfamiliar and uncomfortable? For these final moments in the message we'll look at a few ways to help make developing a discipline of fasting a little easier.

First, let's touch briefly on the benefits of fasting. Obviously, since this is a spiritual discipline, the primary benefit is in growing deeper in your relationship with Jesus. But there are other benefits as well. Fasting can help to reveal to us the things in our lives that control us and that have a higher priority in our lives than Jesus. It is amazing how difficult it is for people to fast from their smart phones or their social media feeds. The level of anguish and stress this causes a person is a pretty good indication of what is Lord in their life. The same can be said about the more traditional food-related fasts. On the flip side, when we turn away from those things and towards God, we gain a deeper realization of just how much we are, and can be, sustained by God. Another benefit is that you may well find a new and better balance in your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual life.

There are also health benefits to fasting from food specifically. Be sure to consult your doctor if you have any concerns about whether you are in good enough physical health to take on fasting, but if you do, some possible benefits are weight loss, cleansing from toxins, and mental sharpness. These are secondary to the primary benefit of a deeper connection with God, but they can come, depending upon the length and type of fast you choose to undertake.

If you are going to fast from food, start small, maybe just skipping lunch for one day. Then as you get more comfortable, extend the time to a full 24 hours, such as lunch time to lunch time (that way you only miss two meals). Then you can move on to fasting for multiple days. Or perhaps you want to fast during daylight hours, breaking your fast with an evening meal each day. Make good use of water and fruit juices during your fast if you desire. Eat a good meal of fruit and vegetables prior to your fast to help with your digestion, and then eat small portions to ease back into your regular eating routine when your fast is done. The longer you fast, the more careful you will need to be with re-introducing food. There are lots of good books and article out there on how to fast from food in a healthy way and I would encourage you to explore those as you begin practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting.

If fasting from food is not the appropriate option for you, then I suggest you invite someone else to help keep you accountable in your fast. If you fast from social media, for example, you could ask a trusted friend to change your account password and only give to you at the end of the fast. If you are fasting from an object of some sort, place it somewhere out of reach and sight – or again ask a friend to keep it for you until your fast is over. This is not intended to give you a platform to announce your fast (going against Jesus' words in Matthew 6), but as a means of helping to resist temptation.

I encourage you to give some thought to where the discipline of fasting could, or should, fit into your journey of faith in God. Do a study through the Bible of those who fasted and find out what their reasons were. Talk with other believers and find out how they fast and what their experience has been. Spend time in prayer asking God how He would have you include it in your life.

May you find new richness with God as you explore fasting.

Let's pray.