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Matthew 6:16-18

Various: Prayer & Fasting

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I tried fasting for the first time when I worked at the Farm Credit Administration in McLean Virginia.¹ I tried it because my pastor preached a sermon on it. In his sermon he turned to our passage tonight, Matthew 6:16-18, and pointed out something that really **convicted** me. In Matthew 6 Jesus teaches on prayer and fasting and when he does this he says, “**when** you fast” **not** “**if** you fast...” He says it **twice** (c.f., Matt 9:15).

Have you ever fasted? **Neither** had I. So I tried it that week and God did some really neat things. The first day I was fasting I was walking by one of my **coworkers** whose **mother** was **sick** and without thinking (and I think **moved** by the **Holy Spirit**) I asked her, “How’s your mom?” Her **face melted**. She started **crying**. I barely knew her. She said her mom was **dying**. I told her I was sorry and asked her mother’s **name**.

She told me her **name** and then asked me to pray for her... which was surprising. She added, “I’m **spiritual**, and I can tell you’re spiritual too. You asked for my mother’s name. I knew you’d pray for her.” I told her I would and I talked with her a few times after that about church. When her mom died I tried to offer her some encouragement. Now all of that to say I’m not sure it would have happened if I hadn’t been praying and fasting and seeking the Lord. The **Holy Spirit** moved me in my weakness.

Today I have three goals for this sermon. I want to define **what fasting is**. I want to show **why it’s important**. And I want to **explain how** to do it. I hope you’ll give it a **shot**. I hope my opening story will intrigue you and make wonder, “How might God use me if I seek him through prayer and fasting? What **surprises** might he have in store for us **as a church** if we **fast together**?” So let’s jump in.

What is fasting?

Fasting is when you deny yourself good things, things you enjoy and go to for comfort, for a period of time so that you can use that hunger to intentionally draw near to God. There’s a wide variety of ways to fast:

- **Water fast** - You could give up food and only drink water for a meal or several days up to 40 days.

Obviously the longer you go the harder and actually more dangerous it can become. According to the two documentaries I watched on Amazon Prime there are lots’ of **potential health benefits** to fasting, but **I don’t advise** anyone walk out of here and only drink water for the next 40 days. Talk to your **doctor** if you have any **medical conditions** that might prevent you from fasting safely.² Even in the Bible, not many people fasted for 40 days. **Moses** did it **twice**, fasting from food and water, which was only possible because God **supernaturally sustained** him (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18).³ The prophet **Elijah** fasted 40 days when Jezebel tried to kill him (1 Kings 19:7-8). And Jesus fasted for forty days at the beginning of his ministry (Matthew 4:1-4). So only **three people**, so fasting for 40 days isn’t for everyone. But you could try skipping a meal or not eating a snack. If you didn’t eat snacks during the night and ate “break-fast” than you’ve already done a form of fasting but now be **intentional** about it or try it for longer.

- **Juice fast** - You could drink fruits and vegetables to keep you energy up but not eat food.

A variation of this is the Daniel Fast where you only eat fruits, vegetables, and water.

- **Foods fast** - You could give up **certain** types of food for your fast, like sugary foods or comfort foods that you go to when you’re stressed.

Fasting is different from **dieting**. Dieting is about losing weight or getting **physically healthy**. Fasting is about drawing near to Christ Jesus and getting **spiritually healthy**. Fasting is not a rejection of the **goodness of food**, but an intentional setting aside of it to seek God (1 Tim 4:1-4). Key word “intentional.”

- **Media fast** - You could give up watching television, or Netflix, or the news, or surfing Reddit, Facebook, or Youtube.
- **Other fast** - You could give up anything that you turn to when life is tough or anything you really love and enjoy, just to make sure it’s not a substitute for God (Luke 14:18-20; 2 Corinthians 7:7).

In fasting we don’t just skip meals or foods but **intentionally** turn from what normally satisfies us and **intentionally** turn to God in our **weakness** and **need**. Have you ever gotten **bundled** up in a bunch of **clothes**, thick **winter jackets** and coats and then had your brother or friend hit you in the **stomach** as hard as they can? Why wouldn’t you do that? You can **imagine** that it doesn’t hurt that much. You got a **cushion**. You got **padding**. You’re **good!** But what if you take all those outer garments and just stand there in a **t-shirt** and that same person hits you as hard as they can in your stomach? That will **hurt**, won’t it? That’s what fasting does. It takes away all of our padding and cushion and it **exposes us**, who we really are. It makes us **vulnerable** before the Lord, and **weak**. It helps me **admit** I’m not strong and I need God. But...

Why do we fast?

Now I’ve already said fasting is an **intentional time** of hungering or seeking God (Luke 2:37). When Jesus was fasting and being tempted by the **devil** in the **wilderness** he hungered for **God** and **his word**, so should we (Matt 4:1-4) We fast because we want to know God more. That’s the **big picture**, but **why** do we do it more specifically? There’s several reasons why:

We fast as an act of repentance and confession.

We fast **because** of our **sin**. Throughout the Old Testament we find examples of Israel coming together to pray and fast as they confessed their **wrongdoing** before God. In the book of Nehemiah, which takes place after the people have returned back to Israel from exile and have just read God’s word, we find this:

Nehemiah 9:1-2 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. (NIV®) (c.f., 1 Samuel 7:6; Daniel 9:3-11; Jonah 3:5)

Fasting can be something I do **individually** before the Lord, but also something we do **corporately** together as a **church**. We can use fasting to confess our sins together, the ways we as a church have fallen short of God’s glory and will. He promises to make us **new** again.⁴

But we can’t go through the **motions** and expect God to do what we want. Fasting and repentance have to come from a place of **authenticity**. It has to come from a place of **genuine remorse** before God for the **wickedness** we have committed against his **holiness**. From the prophet Joel:

Joel 2:12-13

“Even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

Rend your heart
and not your garments.

Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity. (NIV®) (c.f., Joel 1:13-14)

We believe in a God who doesn't want our **religion** but our **repentance**. He wants our **whole hearts**. Have you ever felt so bad about something it **made you sick** and you **couldn't eat**? Have you ever felt that way about your **own sins**? **Rarely**, right? Fasting is an opportunity to **express** how **serious** our sins are but how great God's **grace is** and that he **loves** us and **forgives** us. *We fast as an act of repentance and confession.*

We fast for God's deliverance and direction.

When the people of Judah faced a foreign invasion they cried out to God for deliverance through fasting.

2 Chronicles 20:2-4 Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi). **3 Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.** **4 The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord;** indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him. (NIV®) (c.f., Judges 20:20-26; 2 Samuel 12:16; Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:16)⁵

God causes the armies coming against Jehoshaphat to **ambush** each other and **completely wipe themselves out**. Judah gets to go in and take their **plunder** (2 Chronicles 20:22-25). What might God deliver you from if you spent time seeking him in prayer and fasting? A **sin habit** that you just can't seem to shake? Maybe **illness**, or **problems at work**, an issue in your **family**? Why not dedicate time to prayer and fasting? What about us as a **church community**? We also need God's deliverance from the **troubles** we face and direction for our **future**. Pastor John Piper tells this powerful story in his book, *A Hunger for God*:

My own serious consideration of fasting as a spiritual discipline began as a result of visiting Dr. Joon Gon Kim in Seoul, Korea. "Is it true," I asked him, "that you spent 40 days in fasting prior to the evangelism crusade in 1980?" "Yes," he responded, "it is true." Dr. Kim was chairman of the crusade expected to bring a million people to Yoido Plaza. But six months before the meeting the police informed him they were revoking their permission for the crusade. Korea at that time was in political turmoil and Seoul was under martial law. The officers decided they could not take the risk of having so many people together in one place. So Dr. Kim and some associates went to a prayer mountain and there spent 40 days before God in prayer and fasting for the crusade. Then they returned and made their way to the police station. "Oh," said the officer when he saw Dr. Kim, "we have changed our mind and you can have your meeting!" (Page 65) (By John Piper. © *Desiring God Foundation*. Source: desiringGod.org)⁶

Fasting works. Fasting doesn't **entitle** us to what we want but God does embrace our weakness (Psalm 109:24). *We fast for God's deliverance and direction.*

The people didn't just fast for **physical** deliverance from their enemies, they fasted for **spiritual** deliverance. There was only **one holy day** in the Old Testament when the people of Israel were supposed to fast—the **Day of Atonement** (Lev 23:27-32). Each year on the Day of Atonement the priests made **sacrifices** for the sins of the people so that they could be **cleansed** from their year (Lev 16:34).

What do you need to be **cleansed of**? Do you have **guilt** or **shame** you need to deal with? On the Day of Atonement the **High Priest** sacrificed a **goat** for the sins of the people (Lev 16:15, 32), but it wasn't enough. A goat can't take away our sins. That's why Jesus came. **John 1:29b** calls Jesus "the **Lamb of God**, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus made atonement for our sins by becoming an innocent lamb

sacrificed on the cross. If you'll repent and put your faith in him he becomes your **substitute**. He dies for your sins so that you might live. We fast today as a way to **remember our lamb**.

We fast because we long for Christ and his return.

In the Old Testament the people fasted as acts of **repentance** and **deliverance** but we do so **differently** because **we have already received forgiveness** and **spiritual deliverance** through Jesus.⁷ Jesus **changes** what fasting is about.

Matthew 9:14-16

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

15 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

16 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. (NIV®)

If we've already received forgiveness and spiritual deliverance, why do we fast? Because we haven't yet received **complete deliverance**, which will only come through Christ Jesus. We fast **for him**. We **deny** ourselves food because we **miss him** and **look forward** to his return. Do you ever **miss a friend so bad it hurts**? That's what we're doing in fasting. We're **aching** for Jesus. Yes he's here through his Spirit, but he's not yet here in flesh and blood.

Fun fact—did you know that **Emperor penguins** spend about **4 months fasting** as they watch over, care for, and incubate their **eggs**? That is a **100** to a **115 days**.⁸ If a penguin can spend 100 days not eating because it **instinctually loves** and is **waiting for** its **baby penguin**, we can spend a day or a week fasting out of our love for Jesus. Don't let the penguins beat us! *We fast because we long for Christ and his return. Finally...*

How should we fast?

I want us to give us **three brief guidelines** for fasting.

1. Fast justly

Just like we finished studying in our series in Micah, God doesn't want our religious acts apart from loving our neighbor. In **Isaiah 58:3-7** the people are **fasting** and putting on **sackcloth** and **ashes** but they're also **exploiting** their **workers**, and **quarreling**, and **fighting**, and **oppressing** the poor and at the same time they're being very **religious** and **pious**. God isn't interested in **our religion** if it doesn't come with our **compassion**. James says **pure religion** takes care of the **poor** and **widows** (James 1:27). God wants us to love him but also love our neighbor. I learned this week the Mormons (at least some of them) take the money they save and give it to the poor. Mormons are missing the whole truth but they got this right. *Fast justly.*

2. Fast humbly

When Jesus told us to fast he also told us to not disfigure our faces or make a scene so that others will see we are fasting (Matt 6:16-18). So that means we shouldn't **moan** and tell others how **hungry** we are, but should keep it a **secret**. Now that doesn't mean others won't notice you're fasting. I read the story of one man who fasted for 40 days and people asked him **why he lost 30 pounds** and so he told them about praying and fasting. There's nothing wrong with that. But we shouldn't fast **so that** others see us because that is **pride**. *Fast humbly* (1 Kings 21:27-29).

3. Fast purposefully

This is my **closing point** that Piper pointed out to me. I want to read one last passage because it shows what God **can do** through fasting.

Acts 13:2-3 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.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (NIV®)

This right here is the **start** of the **Apostle Paul’s missionary journeys**. Right here is the **moment** that launched a **worldwide movement** of church plants and believers. Without this moment you and I might not know Jesus. And how does it **start**? With **prayer** and **fasting**!

Do you want to see what God can do in and through Cornerstone? I invite you to a time of **prayer and fasting together as a church** where we ask God what his plans are for us, where we humble ourselves and truly seek him. Sometime this week I am going to email out a **40 Days of Prayer & Fasting guide** so that together we can seek God and his will leading up to **Easter**. What we’re doing doesn’t exactly line up with **lent**, but in future years that’s also a great time to fast. Would you **commit** to praying and fasting for our 40 days? Maybe you fast one day a week but pray every day. Let’s commit to coming before God and genuinely asking what he has in store for us. *Let’s seek Christ through fasting.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.

¹ Romig, Jonathna. *How to Fast for the First Time*. Published June 5, 2012. <http://pastorromig.blogspot.com/2010/04/fasting-for-first-time-part-i.html> Accessed February 28, 2019.

² As of 2/27/2019 Amazon Prime has two documentaries on fasting, *Fasting* and *The Science of Fasting*, both of which are fascinating and explain the potential health benefits of fasting.

³ Fullerton, Ryan. *Reflection On My 40 Day Fast*. Published September 11, 2014. <https://immanuelky.org/articles/reflection-on-my-40-day-fast/> Accessed February 28, 2019.

⁴ Fasting is also an act of mourning (2 Samuel 1:12).

⁵ There's an incredible story in the Bible of an evil man named Haman trying to commit genocide against the Jewish people, but God delivers them through the courage and fasting of a young woman named Esther. **Esther 4:16** "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 attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (NIV®) God uses Esther's and the people's prayers and fasting to give them victory over Haman.

⁶ John Piper is founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For more than thirty years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis. He is author of more than fifty books, and his sermons, articles, books, and more are available free of charge at desiringGod.org.

⁷ Both Matthew 17:19-21 and Mark 9:28-29 speak of "prayer and fasting" to deal with spiritual powers in some of the early manuscripts.

⁸ See *The Science of Fasting* documentary on Amazon prime.