

Fasting For An Audience of One

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd open up your Bibles to Matthew chapter 6, we're making our way through the Sermon on the Mount. And last year, I pre- last year, we were at Matthew last year.

Were we at Matthew last year? Yeah, we were at Matthew last year. Well, last week I preached a sermon on the Lord's Prayer. And unfortunately, I ran out of time, so I wasn't able to get to verses 14 and 15.

And so I've heard back from a couple of you this week saying, we were waiting for you to get to verses 14 and 15. Would you please explain it? So let me explain it briefly, and then we'll get into this section Jesus talked about on fasting.

Well, in verses 14 and 15, what they are is Jesus elaborating on something from the prayer itself. And so if you look at back in chapter 6, verse 12, and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors, what Jesus is doing is, having modeled that in how we pray to our God, he now comes back in verses 14 and 15 and elaborates on it.

He says, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

[1 : 16] And so that is a sobering word for many people when they hear that. And it should be. So this is an elaboration, but it's a warning. And what is he warning against?

Jesus is warning against a kind of hypocrisy. A kind of hypocrisy that would be, I can pray these kinds of prayers, and I can ask God to forgive me for my sins, but not be willing to forgive those who've sinned against us.

Now if you want to read a parable in Matthew, turn to Matthew chapter 18. We're not going to do it this morning, but there's this parable in Matthew 18. It's the parable of the unforgiving servant.

And Jesus is making the same point. He is warning his followers that they need to forgive as many times as needed. And so the parable of the unforgiving servant is a very helpful way of understanding what Jesus is saying here.

So Jesus is giving a warning here to not be hypocritical in our prayer life when it comes to forgiving others when they've sinned against us. It's sobering, and it's a call to be self-reflective.

[2 : 25] But what we also see is at the beginning of that section in prayer in verse 5, Jesus starts by saying a warning against the hypocrites. And so here he closes that section on praying with another warning about hypocrisy for us.

Well, that's a little brief explanation on that. In this passage in Matthew 6, 1 through 18, Jesus talks about generosity, talks about prayer, and now he turns to this topic of fasting.

Just a show of hands, who's heard a sermon on fasting before? Would you raise your hands? Oh, that's surprising. Okay. All right. I thought it was going to be a little less than that, actually.

Let me read what Jesus says. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward, but when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret.

[3 : 39] And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Fasting is the purposeful forfeiting of food.

Fasting is the purposeful forfeiting of food. And there are a variety of reasons why people from all walks of life fast. People fast because they're having a colonoscopy the next day.

People fast because they simply don't have enough money to eat three square meals. It's a tragic thing. People fast in order to lose weight really quick.

They really want to squeeze into those pair of jeans. People fast so that they can compete. I had a dear friend in high school who was a top-notch state wrestler.

And the things that he would put his body through to cut weight in order to compete. And he would fast. Why? To compete. Why? To win. And he was good.

[4 : 42] People fast because they're emotionally overwhelmed. Maybe you've been there. You are just so overwhelmed by things of life that the last thing on your to-do list is to eat. Similarly, people fast because they're preoccupied with a task.

I do this. You get dialed into something, and you're hammering it out, and you forget to eat. And then there's religious fasting.

The Muslim fast of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. And it's a religious work to win God's approval. Muslims fast to garner favor with God to make themselves acceptable to God.

But praise be to our God of the Bible that only Christ's blood in righteousness can make a sinner acceptable to God.

And having put our faith in Him, we are acceptable to God. Muslims will fast out of a fear of God in order to win His approval.

[5 : 51] We don't. We don't fear God. We fast in order to feast on God. Christians fast from food in order to feast on God.

And so this morning, I'm going to give you six tasty morsels of truth that are designed to whet your appetite to feast on God through fasting.

Six tasty morsels. Now, if you read verse 16, Jesus starts with these words, and when you pray. He doesn't start with saying, and if you pray.

He starts by saying, and when you pray. No. And when you fast. Sorry about that. And when you fast. According to Jesus, Jesus assumes His followers are going to fast.

fast. But I'm not sure if we're all there. I think many of us have never fasted.

[7 : 00] And so I don't want to assume that we're all fasting. I don't want to assume that we all know what it means to fast. And so this morning, six tasty morsels to prime your pump, to whet your appetite, to feast on God through fasting.

You ready for tasty morsel number one? Fasting is a spiritual exercise with the goal of godliness. Fasting is a spiritual workout.

We all know the importance and benefits of physical exercise, don't we? My doctor is very interested in how much I exercise.

Because he's very much interested in my overall health. But we all know that physical exercise, working out, isn't limited to physical bodies.

If you would just turn in your Bibles to 1 Timothy, just flip over a few pages, Matthew, Acts, General Electric Power Company, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and then you should be in Timothy.

[8 : 22] 1 Timothy 4. 1 Timothy 4.7, the Apostle Paul strongly urges this young pastor named Timothy. And here's what he says.

If you look at halfway through, he says, rather, train yourself for godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

And so, what Paul is saying is, Timothy, you really got to spiritually work out, buddy. Spiritually work out. It will result in spiritual health, what he calls godliness.

And that godliness bears fruit both now and in eternity. And then if you look down at verse 16, not only is it healthy for Timothy, it's going to be healthy for his congregation.

So, Paul commands Timothy to train yourself for godliness. And that Greek word translated train is where we get the English word gymnasium from.

[9 : 26] Gymnast. And when you think about that, you probably think of some kind of gym, people exercising in it, training their bodies, athletes working out. And so, literally, what this would read is, but you, Timothy, you train yourself for godliness.

Christians don't drift into godliness. Christians purposefully pursue godliness like an athlete trains for an event.

Godliness. So, Paul is urging Timothy to spiritually work out so that he experiences increasing spiritual health, godliness.

And it benefits him, his flock, all to the glory of God. So, train yourself for godliness. The goal of a spiritual discipline like fasting is godliness to become more like God.

To be like him and his character. To be like Jesus. And so, when we bring it back to Matthew chapter 5 and 6, it'd be like this. Jesus says in Matthew 5, 48, it's a command, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

[10:44] perfect. What he's saying there is, hey, train yourself for godliness. Train yourself for perfection. Train yourself to become mature.

And so, as we come full circle back to Matthew 6, 1 through 18, what Jesus is doing here is he's cautioning his disciples in how they practice their righteousness. He's saying how to go about their spiritual workouts.

Don't go showboating with your spiritual exercises. Nowhere does Jesus forbid giving to the needy. Nowhere does he forbid publicly praying.

Nowhere does he forbid fasting. What he forbids are acts of piety that are to be done to be seen by others. That's what he's forbidding.

So again and again, Jesus says, do your spiritual exercises for an audience of one. Your Father who is unseen and who sees the unseen.

[11:53] Our pursuit of godliness through the spiritual disciplines is first and foremost for God's eyes only, which reminds me of a 1980s hit, for God's eyes only.

Way back machine. fasting is one spiritual exercise to grow in godliness for the glory of God.

And I just want to remind you again of those first four words in verse 16. And when you fast. It's not an if. It's a when. When you fast, Jesus assumes his disciples will train themselves for godliness by employing this particular spiritual exercise called fasting.

And what I'm going to tell you in a little bit is that fasting is forfeiting food to feast on God. So morsel number one, fasting is a spiritual exercise.

Morsel number two, fasting is one of many spiritual exercises exercises for a Christian. There's a bunch of different exercises you can do.

[13:09] I mean, I'm not sure if you've ever been to a gym before, one of those kind of build your muscle gyms, but you walk in and all of a sudden there's all these kind of machines and all these different ways you can work out and build your physical health.

I've got some friends that every week they get this, this email goes out and they are describing this exercise they're going to do and invite everybody to come and do it.

But the thing is, these exercises are crazy. But when they do it, they do it in order to benefit and grow in their physical health.

The spiritual disciplines, and this is Donald Whitney from his 1991 classic *The Spiritual Disciplines*, the spiritual disciplines are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And he goes on to list ten. Here, let me just tell you. Bible, prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, learning.

[14:21] Ten disciplines. Ten different workouts for a Christian to grow in godliness. It's a great book. I've got an old version. It looks like this.

But this past year, I read another book on the spiritual disciplines that I like more. And it's this book. It's called *Habits of Grace* by David Mathis. And I would just strongly recommend this book.

It's outstanding. And so, it's *Habits of Grace*, our habits, His grace. This is God at work in us. And he, just to give you a taste of it, he organizes his book in three categories.

Hear God's voice, getting Bible in you. Having his ear, prayer, and in that section includes fasting, and then belong to his body.

Spiritual disciplines of one anothering, of being together, all about growing in godliness. So, fasting is one of many spiritual disciplines.

[15:32] But, I want to, I want to steer you clear of two mistakes when it comes to the spiritual disciplines. The first mistake is one of legalism. And here's the thinking.

It's, it's thinking that your right standing with God depends upon your practice of the disciplines. It's thinking that the practice of something like fasting earns us favor with God.

It does not. Our standing with God is accomplished in Jesus alone. It's only on the basis of Jesus' blood and righteousness imputed to us by faith that we're made right with God.

So, a spiritual discipline, fasting, for example, is actually an outworking of our salvation. It's not to earn salvation. It results from being saved.

God's good works don't save us, but we were saved for good works. Ephesians chapter 2, 1 through 10. And so, reading your Bible, praying, giving, evangelism, those are all outworkings of what God has already established in us through Christ.

[16:52] It's all to grow in godliness, not to win God's favor. That's legalism. The second, second caution, the second mistake is much more subtle.

And I think that it's the mistake that many of us make. It's the self-dependent spiritual disciplines. It's thinking that my growth in godliness depends on me. Now, Paul does command Timothy, train yourself for godliness.

And so, we do have a responsibility, but God gives the growth. Our habits, His grace. Now, in order to help you understand this, I want to share with you an illustration.

An illustration of oars and sails. The difference between a rowboat and a sailboat. I'll never forget, 20 years ago, I was mentored by a man named Thomas, and he shared this with me, and I've held on to it ever since.

[18:03] When somebody becomes a Christian, Christians can think about the Christian life as a rowboat. It's like, I've got to make progress in the Christian life, and I've got to row this boat.

And so, hand me the oar of Bible reading, and hand me the oar of prayer right when you're saved. I've put my trust in Jesus by faith alone, and now it's on me to make progress.

And so, I grab the oar of Bible reading, I grab the oar of prayer, and I start, I start pumping through the water. Oh yeah, I'm making progress. And then someone else says, you know, you should really start giving some of your money back to the Lord.

Okay, alright, I can work this. Three oars now, I'm working it. I should start fasting. Okay, I'm working four oars now.

And then Donald Whitney comes in and says, actually, you've got ten oars, and so, I am going to somehow manage ten, what's going to happen? I'm done. I'm lying in the bottom of my rowboat thinking, what just happened?

[19:10] The Christian life is not a rowboat. Christian life's a sailboat. And so, what we're called to is hoist sails in order to capture the movement of God's Holy Spirit.

And so, when I read my Bible in the morning, I'm raising the sail so God will act upon me and move me. And I raise the sail of prayer.

I raise the sail of fasting. I raise the sail of evangelism. I raise the sail of stewardship. These are all sails and they're made out of the same fabric.

Bible. And the Holy Spirit of God fills my sails. Fills your sails. You know that scene from Master and Commander when Captain Jack's on the front of his boat and it's blowing and all the sails are up and he's just smiling.

When you are, when God's filling your sails through the disciplines, there is great joy. But when you're trying to row your boat, there is just drudgery.

[20:20] And so, you know how you can avoid these mistakes? You raise your sail every morning. Fasting is just one sail. The difference between the two is who is powering the boat.

Who's powering the rowboat? Who's powering the sailboat? Sign me up for the sailboat. So, this second point I've tried to make here is fasting is one of many spiritual disciplines and they're not oars.

They are sails. The third morsel. Fasting is an act of humility. Fasting is an act of humility.

James 4, 6. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. When I hoist my sail in the morning, it's an act of humility. I want to be empowered by God.

Fasting is a self-imposed forfeiting of a basic need. And classically, that basic need is the need to eat.

[21:34] Eat food. So, fasting means going without something good in order to gain something great. We're going to forfeit food in order to feast on God.

And so, all throughout the Bible, we see people fasting for different reasons but the fasting is always moving towards God. It is always this act of humility towards God.

Humbly seeking God. And so, we see corporate fasts throughout the Bible. So, the nation of Israel were commanded by God to fast once a year.

This is the command on their calendar that wouldn't change. And that fast was linked to the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur. A day in which a goat lost its life and its blood covered the people.

And so, the people of Israel would fast and mourn their sin towards God on the Day of Atonement. It was a command. The whole nation did it. Big corporate fast.

[22 : 39] And then, if you read Jonah, there's this other kind of fast. This city of Nineveh. Now, Jonah was a really cranky prophet. Just, he was cranky.

And so, he shows up in the city of Nineveh and he spoke out of his crankiness. He essentially told this whole city, walks in, turn or burn! And he walks away.

And you know what God did? God moved in those Ninevites. And they turned. And you know what they did? The king of Nineveh called a fast for all people and animals.

No eating. No drinking. We are repenting before the God of Jonah that He would have mercy on us. Remember Esther?

Haman is the bad guy and he wants to destroy the Jews. Esther tells Mordecai, will you call a fast for three days? Get all the people in Susa praying so that when I go before the king, He will give me, God will give me favor and I will be able to be used by Him to help deliver God's people living in Susa.

[23 : 57] We see corporate fasts. And it doesn't stop with the Old Testament. It goes in the New Testament. In Acts 13, we see churches fasting. The church in Antioch, after fasting and praying, sends out Paul and Silas on their first missionary journey.

They're fasting and praying towards gospel advance. Acts 14, 23, there's more prayer and fasting connected to the appointing of elders in a church.

So we see all this corporate fasting taking place all throughout Scripture. We see nations, we see cities, we see churches fasting together towards God.

It's a seeking of God. And then we see individual fasts as well. David fasting, seeking God on behalf of his son that was born of Bathsheba, that was born of infidelity.

Do you remember that? Daniel, in Daniel chapter 9, upon reading Jeremiah, he reads that there's going to be a 70-year desolation upon the city of Jerusalem.

[25 : 06] And he looks at his calendar and he's like, oh man, that's getting close. And so what does he do? He fasts and pray. Confessing the sins of the people, petitioning God, oh Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary which is now desolate.

Send forth a remnant God to get reestablished in Jerusalem. And of course, then there's Nehemiah. When he hears the report that Jerusalem is in shambles and the walls are broken, he responds personally by fasting and praying for days.

Pleading with God. Confessing the sins of the people. asking God to give him success on behalf of God's people because remember, he was a cupbearer of the king. And of course, when we turn to the New Testament, you don't have to go beyond Matthew chapter 4.

Jesus has himself fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in order to be prepared for being tempted by the devil. In Matthew 9, some disciples come up to Jesus and say, Jesus, why aren't your disciples fasting?

And Jesus is like, I'm the bridegroom. I'm here. They won't fast while I'm here. But when I leave, you better believe, they'll fast then. What's the point of humbling yourself through the forfeiting of food?

[26 : 38] food? It's so that you can have a focused time of seeking God. You're essentially saying, Father, I want to seek you more than I want to eat.

We forfeit food in order to seek God's face and feast on Him. So fasting is a humble act that was morsel number three.

Morsel number four is fasting is a feast. Fasting is a feast.

We forfeit food in order to feast on God. When we think about fasting, I don't know if you're like me, but when I think about fasting, I'm kind of like, all right, what am I going to have to give up and what's going to be the effect?

I really like scrambled eggs. I really like juicy cheeseburgers. Mmm, I don't want to give those up.

[27 : 54] And then, man, if I go without coffee, I'll have a headache and I might be a little cranky, there's the hunger pain things, and then there's the food lust. You know, if I'm fasting secretly, I'm watching somebody else eat, I'm like, ooh, juicy cheeseburger.

so we're always aware of what we have to give up and the physical effects, so yes, fasting means forfeiting food, which is not easy, nor is it fun.

But what makes it all worth it is the spiritual feast it allows. Christians forfeit food forfeits food in order to feast on God.

So let me try to get specific. let's say you say, this coming Thursday, this is, you're not going Facebook with this. This is for your father's eyes only.

This Thursday, you're like, okay, I'm going to fast. But you need a feast. We know what you're going to go without. What are you going to feast on?

[29 : 10] Feast on God's word. So you're like thinking, okay, Thursdays I usually have ham and cheese sandwiches and instead of a ham and cheese lunch, I'm going to feast on Ecclesiastes. I'm going to feast on Proverbs.

I'm going to feast on Hosea or Romans or 1 Corinthians or Jude, which is a great book. That's what I'm going to feast on. Man cannot live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

I'm going to feast on that this Thursday. I'll let my hunger pains drive me to finding my satisfaction in God's word. Or maybe it's not feasting on Ecclesiastes.

You're like, you know what, I am just, this whole fellowship thing is new to me. I don't know what the Bible says about one anothering and so you just pile up all the New Testament says about one anothering and on that Thursday you're like, I'm feasting on what the New Testament says about one anothering and I'm going to let God do a satisfying, filling work in my soul over that.

Or maybe it's joy in the book of Philippians. Or maybe it's the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John. You just camp out and you feast on God's word.

[30 : 29] So there's one way you can feast on God and then there's another way you can feast on God. You feast on God's presence by communing with Him through prayer.

You could do the Lord's prayer. We talked about that last week. Oh, Father, I know that I can't claim You as Father.

I can only claim You as Father because You've claimed me as Your Son by the Son. Hallowed be Your name. And so your feast for Thursday, lunch, is taking your time and praying through the Lord's prayer.

Communing with your God. Or maybe it's not that. Maybe it's you're acutely aware of a spiritual need.

You lack wisdom in a particular area. You're like, I don't know if we should move. I don't know if we should sell our house. I don't know if we should go from two incomes to one income. But you know what? Here's what I do know.

[31 : 30] I'll set aside that Thursday in order to just go before my God and commune with Him over. That's how important it is to me. Maybe you're gonna, you, you, you, there's this one sin that's got this headlock over you and you just can't pull out of it.

Set that Thursday aside to, to fight, to confess, to plead, to ask God to deliver you, to weaken and strengthen.

Feast on that. Or maybe you're just aware of marriages in crisis or children who are wandering spiritually or you've just been so aware of this country called North Korea and you just want to spend one lunch just asking God to open up this country to the gospel of Jesus Christ and He radically changed the whole regime.

You've got a lot of options. This is no little feast. You've got a lot of options to feast on God.

Fasting is a feasting on God. I hope that's whetting your appetite. Morsel number five.

[33 : 07] Fasting can get hijacked by hypocrisy. Remember Jesus' warning? Look at chapter six. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

He doesn't call it hypocrisy there but that is what it is. And then we see in verse three. Excuse me, two. Thus when you give to the needy sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites.

Verse five. And when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites. Verse 16. And when you fast do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. What's so hypocritical about going public with your fasting? What's so wrong about that? Well, it's when you turn a humble seeking of God into a prideful desire to be seen by men.

That's the hypocrisy. And Jesus says keep it secret. Just do it for your father's eyes only. It's all about your motive.

[34 : 12] That's what it boils down to. Who you are fasting for. Who you are seeking by fasting. That's what Jesus is getting at.

So faster beware. Fasting can get hijacked by hypocrisy. That was a little bit of a bitter morsel, wasn't it? A little bit of a sour morsel, but an important one. Morsel number six. Fasting doesn't need to be intimidating. Fasting doesn't need to be intimidating when you realize it's a gracious feast that awaits. remember Jesus assumed his disciples would fast. It's not if you fast but when you fast. And remember we forfeit food in order to feast on God. Communion with God is the goal. We're pursuing godliness through this spiritual exercise but ultimately it is to experience his presence for his glory.

[35 : 26] So let me just encourage you very specifically. if you're new to the whole idea of fasting start with lunch. Just start with one meal and just start with forfeiting the food.

Enjoy the coffee. Enjoy the orange juice but just start simple. And when you start make sure you plan your spiritual feast.

Make sure you know what you're going to do when you fast. fast. You've got a feast you're going to dial up a feast whether that's Ecclesiastes or praying for North Korea. And when you are fasting let the hunger pains lead you to your God.

Let them focus your feasting on God. Let them help you to think about God's word or to pray about a specific thing.

You're saying I'm doing this because I want to bring glory to God. Keep it on the down low.

[36 : 36] Remember this is for God's eyes only. And if someone finds out don't panic like your private fast has now gone public on WikiLeaks. Don't worry about that.

Just be matter of fact about it and change the subject and move on. Now you maybe notice this call for our church to fast and pray on November 6th.

Remember there's precedent in our Bibles to pray corporately but more importantly it's why we're going to pray. We're not going to do this in order to be seen by men.

We're going to fast and pray together on November 6th in order to seek God together for wisdom and the welfare of our nation. This falls along the lines of Esther and Nehemiah and Daniel.

So six morsels this morning. I hope they whet your appetite to feast on God through fasting. But in closing I want to remind you of this that Jesus fasted for you.

[37 : 47] Jesus fasted that we could feast on God and I'm not talking about the 40 days and 40 nights he spent in the wilderness getting ready. I'm not talking about that. He was faithful.

That was essential to our salvation but I'm talking about another kind of fast the Son of God conducted for you. He gave up his glory. He fasted from the rightful worship he deserved in order to make himself nothing.

Taking the form of a servant. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death so that we could feast on the salvation God has provided.

He lived a 33 year fast from glory that we could feast forever in the presence of God. Jesus fasted that we could feast on God.

Let pray. God in heaven we do thank you so much for your word.

[39 : 03] We thank you God that you are a God who speaks and is speaking. God would you move the ball in as we seek to follow you. Would you help us to take these steps of practicing our righteousness in a way that pleases you.

God we want to be perfect as you are perfect and we want to do that in a way that's pleasing to you. God would you give us strength would you fill our sails by your spirit for the glory of your name Amen.