

When You Fast

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Today's scripture reading is taken from Isaiah 58 and Matthew 6, 16 to 18. Cry aloud, do not hold back, lift up your voice like a trumpet.

! Declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness.

And did not forsake the judgment of their God. They ask of me righteous judgment. They delight to draw near to God. Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and fight, and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose a day for a person to humble himself?

[1 : 08] Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily. 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. 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 the speaking of wickedness, if you pour out for the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday.

And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

[2 : 34] And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, and you shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to dwell in.

If you turn your back, if you turn your back, your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honorable, if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then you shall take the delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth.

I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. And this is Matthew 6, 16-18.

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. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[3 : 53] Amen. Thank you very much, Danielle. In approximately eight hours, a week of corporate consecration begins, and we will come before the Lord in prayer and fasting, seeking his will for ourselves, for our families, and for our church family in this new year.

And last week, having considered the words of Jesus, instructing us how we ought to pray, as we continue our series in the Sermon on the Mount, it's fitting this morning that we come to this passage where Jesus instructs us how we ought to fast.

And that's what we'll be doing this week. This week we will be coming before the Lord, starting tonight at seven, and ending on Friday at seven, and we will be praying, and we'll be fasting from food.

And this doesn't mean that we will all participate to the same degree and the same extent. We have different circumstances, and if you've not had a chance to look at the handouts yet, please take some time to do that after our gathering, so that you can participate in the fast in a way that's helpful, and in a way that at the end of the day we think will be meaningful to your soul.

And my prayer is that the Lord will use this sermon this morning to posture all of our hearts to seek his face in prayer and fasting this week.

[5 : 51] So let me begin by praying for us. Heavenly Father, we come this morning and we acknowledge that we need you.

Lord, we need you, and we need you to help us to seek you. I pray that you'd use this time of sitting under the preaching of your word to prepare our hearts and to posture our hearts to seek you in prayer and fasting this week.

Lord, you know where each one of us is. You know what each one of us needs. And Father, we pray that you would meet us.

Meet us individually. Meet us in our families. And would you meet us as a church family? Father, we pray that in all that we do, your name and your name alone will be glorified.

We pray and ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Although I have no way of being certain about this, I suspect that of the three acts of righteousness that Jesus addresses in Matthew 6, where he talks to us about giving and how we should give, talks to us about praying and how we should pray, and he talks to us about fasting and how we should fast, I suspect that of these three acts of righteousness, the one that we are least familiar with is fasting.

[7 : 48] And I say this because I think all of us at one time or another has given to someone who is needy. And I believe that all of us, saved or unsaved, here or listening online, prayed to God at some point, even if it was just a prayer out of desperation in some difficult situation.

So we are familiar with what it is to give to the needy. We're familiar with what it is to pray to God, crying out to him. But it would not surprise me if there are some who have never fasted.

If you haven't, you don't need to feel ashamed about that. That is just the reality of where you may find yourself this morning. And so we come to a section of Jesus teaching on these acts of righteousness that perhaps for some of us we're not familiar with at all, or some of us might be just barely familiar.

And what we see from this passage, though, is that Jesus assumed that his disciples would fast. He assumed that they would fast just as he assumed that they would give to the needy, that they would pray.

He assumed that they would fast. And so verse 16 begins, and when you fast. Not if you fast. But when you fast.

[9 : 27] But Jesus doesn't give a definition of fasting. And the reason he doesn't give a definition of fasting is because fasting was well understood in Jewish culture. It was a normal practice.

And when he talked about fasting, immediately his disciples knew what he was talking about. But I don't want to assume that we all know the definition of fasting.

So I want to give a definition of fasting. Fasting is the practice of voluntarily abstaining from food for a period of time for the purpose of seeking the Lord.

It's voluntary. It's for a period of time. And it has a specific purpose. This is what biblical fasting is. Biblical fasting is mixed with prayer. And therefore, biblical fasting is not just abstaining from food. I know nowadays intermittent fasting is a popular means of losing weight and dieting.

[10 : 42] That's not biblical fasting. Biblical fasting has the purpose of abstaining from food to come before the Lord in prayer and seeking his face.

And from surveying Scripture, when we survey fasting in Scripture, and there are quite a number of accounts accounts of people fasting in Scripture.

And we would always see fasting mixed with prayer in Scripture. And the kinds of things they fasted about were urgent things and important things.

They didn't fast for trivial things. They fasted when, for example, in Judges 20, 26, when the Israelites had been defeated by this small tribe of Benjamin.

And they knew something was wrong. They knew that, humanly speaking, it was not possible for this little tribe in Israel to defeat all the other tribes in Israel two times consecutively.

[11 : 53] And so they fasted and prayed before the Lord. In the opening verses of 1 Samuel, chapter 1, we see Hannah, a lady who had been married and gone without child for many, many years.

We see her fasting and praying before the Lord and crying out to Him. Not just that He would give, that He would give her a child, but that He would give her a son.

In Ezra chapter 8, verses 21 to 23, we see the exiles from the Babylonian captivity coming back with Ezra.

And they had been allowed to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. And it was a long journey, and it was a dangerous journey, and we see Ezra and the exiles fasting and praying and crying out to God, asking that He would protect them on their journey and that He would guide them along the way.

My prayer for us this week is that we will come before the Lord seeking Him in prayer and in fasting personally, as Hannah did, for things that are dear and near to our hearts, but also corporately, as Ezra and the exiles did, asking the Lord that He would be gracious to us this year, that He would be kind to us, that He would go before us as a church in 2025, that He would guide us, that He would protect us, that He would make His face shine upon us as we journey together in this new year that holds for us what we don't know, but He knows.

[14 : 00] And that is my prayer for us, that we would bring urgent and important matters before the Lord during this week as we fast and pray to whatever degree that we're able to do that based on our circumstances.

For some of us that is the full week, for some of us that's a partial fast, and for some of us that's not being able to fast at all.

And those guidelines have been handed out to you. Please avail yourself of them and read them so that you be guided by them.

And we want a fast that's beneficial, not harmful to anyone. And so as we fast this week, I want us to heed these words of Jesus in Matthew 6, 16 to 18, in which Jesus shows us the fast that we need to avoid and He shows us the fast that we need to pursue.

To put it another way, Jesus condemns a particular kind of fasting and He commends another kind of fasting.

[15 : 21] And so we want to hear this morning what He condemns, we want to hear what He commends, and we want to pursue what He commends and avoid what He condemns.

And so now our remaining time at two very simple and short points, and then we will be dismissed. First, fasting that Christ condemns.

In verse 16, we see the fasting that Christ condemns. Look again at how He does so. 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. Here we see Jesus condemning fasting that is done to draw attention to ourselves so that we can be seen by others.

And Jesus uses a strong word to describe people who do that. He calls them hypocrites. And so the first time that He's calling people hypocrites, He did so concerning those who gave to the needy to be seen, those who prayed in public places to be seen.

[16 : 46] And remember that the hypocrite is someone, that was somebody in a Greek play, who wore a mask as they acted out some role. and in the play they were acting to be someone who they really were not.

And the point that Jesus makes about those who would fast in a way to make it known to others, to be seen by others, Jesus is saying they're acting the part of the righteous person, but the mere fact that they're doing it to be seen shows they're not a righteous person.

It's a mask that hides who they really are, their fasting hides who they really are, because their motivation is to be seen by others.

No doubt Jesus had in view the Pharisees. The Pharisees fasted for two days a week, that was their regular practice. Two days out of the week, they would fast.

And what's striking about that is that in Jewish religion, you were only required to fast one day.

[17 : 59] You could voluntarily fast, but there was only one day where the whole nation was required to fast, and that was the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees built into their religion fasting twice per week.

And they did it in such a way that people would know that they would fast. they would wear special clothes to draw attention to themselves that they were fasting.

And they just fasted for fasting sake. We don't see the same kind of urgency and importance that drove people to fast that we see in the breath of Scripture.

They were just fasting because the day that they chose to fast came and there was no particular reason. And they would not take care of themselves, wouldn't fix their hair, would not wash their faces.

And so Jesus points out how they would fast with a gloomy look on their face, with their faces disfigured, so that people would know that they were fasting.

[19 : 14] And what people would do when they see them fasting in that way, they would say, wow, what a religious person, what a spiritual person, what a dedicated person, to fast every single day, well, two days a week, the whole day, they would fast.

You had to be devoted to God to be able to do that in an ongoing way. That's what people would say of them. And what did Jesus say? Jesus said, they have received their reward.

That is what they were after. They're after people looking at them and praising them and saying how spiritual they are. Jesus said that's their reward.

That's the extent of what they're going to get from their fasting. fasting. But when we look at this verse, verse 16, there's a more fundamental problem than just this, than what the Pharisees were doing and how they were trying to draw attention to themselves.

The problem with their fasting is that their fasting was not God word. It was man word. It was towards others. Their fasting was not towards God.

[20 : 32] Their hearts were not lifted up towards God. It wasn't done for the eyes of God. It was done for the eyes of men. And therefore, their fasting was mechanical.

It didn't have God in view. Their hearts were not directed to God. And therefore, their hearts were not affected by God as they fasted.

brothers and sisters, biblical fasting is God word. Biblical fasting is mindful of God, wanting to draw God's attention, and not mindful of others seeking to get their attention.

religion. And as we fast, and we're lifting our hearts up to the Lord in prayer, not necessarily audible prayer, because we'll be going through our regular days, and attending to our regular duties, but our hearts are postured towards the Lord, praying, and contemplating, and communing with God in our hearts.

And one of the things that should happen to us, one of the ways that the fasting should affect us, as we're fasting in a Godward way, is that our hearts should experience repentance, our hearts should experience brokenness over our sin, our hearts should be more sensitive to our sin.

[22 : 10] brothers and sisters, if we're fasting and we call it a biblical fast that's directed towards the Lord, and there is no conviction of sin in our lives, there is no tenderness in our hearts towards the Lord and against sin, if there is no increase in our desire to do God's will, I think we need to question whether that is a biblical fast.

We have to question whether our hearts are really postured towards the Lord. And this was the point of the Lord's message to the children of Israel in the first scripture that was read this morning from Isaiah 58.

The Lord was rebuking the nation of Israel over their mechanical fasting that was not Godward. in their fasting, it made no difference in their lives, and the Lord told them that in no uncertain terms. He rebuked them because although they had all the outward appearances of loving the Lord and being devoted to God and wanting to do his will, they were not doing it.

They were fasting, and God was ignoring them. And so they complained to God, and they asked him this question, why have we fasted and you have not seen it?

[23 : 46] Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? It's quite an accusation to lift up to the Lord. Because behind it is injustice, behind it is this accusation that God is not fair.

God, we did our part, and you have not done your part. But God did not do his part because their fasting was not the fast that God called for.

It was a mechanical fast. It was a selfish fast. It was a fast where it was business as usual for them in terms of how they lived their lives, in terms of how they conducted themselves.

And the Lord answered them in response to their question. In Isaiah 58, the latter part of verse 3 and verse 4, he says to them, behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers.

Behold, you fast only to quarrel, to fight, and to hit with the wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

[25 : 07] The Lord is saying to them, what difference does it make that you're fasting? You're still mistreating your workers? Other than fasting, it's business as usual for you.

You're fighting and quarreling and being unjust in your dealings. He says, conduct like that, fasting like that, will not make your voice heard on high.

And I think, brothers and sisters, we need to take these words to heart. Fasting in and of itself is not enough. It is not enough that this week we push the plate back.

Our hearts must be Godward. Our hearts must be postured towards the Lord. And in doing so, they will be affected. In doing so, we will be convicted.

In doing so, we will not continue in our usual sinful conduct as Israel did. God. And so, through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord went on to describe to Israel the fast that he called for, the fast that he wanted his people to participate in.

[26 : 32] It's a fast that convicts. It's a fast that calls to repentance. It's a fast that makes us more compassionate to the needy. He said, it's a fast that causes you to be mindful of the hungry and the homeless and the naked and to attend to their needs.

He said, it's a fast that causes us to be concerned about injustice. The plight of those who are oppressed. He said, it's a fast that causes us to delight more in the things of God, to delight on the Lord's day, to delight in worshiping God, to delight in the things of God, to delight in the Lord himself.

And that's what he accused Israel of not doing, that they were not delighting in him. Brothers and sisters, the same is true for us.

Our fasting should similarly affect us. It should make us more compassionate to the needy around us, more sensitive to them, giving us eyes for them.

It should stoke our hearts to be incensed at injustice when we see it, and especially when we can make a difference concerning it.

[28 : 02] We should have a heart for the oppressed, and we should delight in the things of the Lord. When we fast, we should be drawing nearer to the Lord in prayer and in his word.

We should have a pull towards the word of God and the things of God as we fast. Our fast is to be God word.

to avoid the fast that God condemns.

And again, we will only do this by directing our hearts towards the Lord as we fast this week. And none of us will do this perfectly.

None of us will do this perfectly. Our best efforts this week will all be tainted by sin. But we have a mediator with God.

[29 : 18] We have one who has succeeded where we will all fail. We have one who fasted for 40 days and nights and did it perfectly before God.

But we will fall short to different degrees and in different ways. But we bring our best, whatever that looks like, before the Lord this week.

And we seek to avoid the fast that he condemns. That it just becomes mechanical. And again, I want to urge upon you, please take the time to read the handouts.

They will help you. They will guide you in how to make this fast effective and how to posture your heart in a Godward way to the Lord.

God. But that's fasting that Christ condemns. Let's now consider fasting that Christ commends. And this is my second and final point.

[30 : 37] We find the fasting that Christ commends in verses 17 and 18. Look again at what he says. 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, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Here, Jesus is not saying that his disciples should disguise their fast. That's not what he's saying. After all, putting on oil and washing your face, those were just normal, basic, standard things of hygiene that was done in Jewish society.

And so I think the best way to understand what Jesus is saying is that we are to fast in ways that are normal and natural. We fast normally and naturally, and in so doing, we will not draw attention to ourselves.

In verse 18, Jesus says that his disciples are to fast to an audience of one. They are to fast to their heavenly Father who is in secret and who sees in secret, and he says, and he will reward you.

[32 : 14] Now, obviously, when we are fasting corporately, the fast is not a secret because we know that we are fasting together.

But that's not the point because, again, corporate fasts are found throughout the pages of Scripture. What we must not do is we must not make any effort to try to make known to anyone that we are fasting.

Yes, it would be obvious to people we live with, but we don't have to make great effort to make people who ordinarily would be unaware to be aware that we are fasting.

And why do we do that? Because that fasting is directed towards the Lord. It's directed to the one who is in secret and who sees in secret.

And what is the reward for God with fasting? And when is it received? But first, the reward varies.

[33 : 30] Sometimes, the reward is the goal of our fasting, the purpose of our fasting. Sometimes it's that. But sometimes it's something else.

Sometimes, a sovereign and wise God determines that it's something other than what we've been praying for. And so, he sovereignly rewards.

Our fasting does not force God's hand. As a matter of fact, anything that we bring before the Lord as a petition, we need to bring with open hands and trusting him that maybe what we desire may not be best for us, may not be his will for us.

And so, we don't bring our petitions to him demanding that he would do as we want. No, we bring them with an open hand before an all-wise and all-knowing God, and we trust him to answer in accordance with his sovereign will.

And when do we receive the reward? Whatever that reward is, when do we receive that? Well, we're not told when we will receive that reward, whether we receive it in this life or in the life to come.

[34 : 55] Now, I believe that since the matters that we pray about, pertain to this life, I think it's fair to say that as the Lord answers them, they will pertain to this life.

But there's nothing that precludes the Lord from rewarding in the life to come as well.

But let us not this week be presumptuous in thinking that because I am fasting, because I am praying, God, you must do this. No. That's not the right posture for our hearts.

The right posture for our hearts is to bow them before the Lord and with open hands bring our petitions to the Lord and say, Lord, your will be done. Your will be done.

And the more we understand that God's ways are not ours and they're higher, his thoughts are not ours and they are better, we can more readily come before him and say, Lord, your will be done.

[36 : 05] Let me close with some practical considerations. I want to suggest some categories that we can consider about personal matters that we might bring to the Lord.

We have indicated the corporate areas that we're going to be fasting and praying over in the handouts. But I want to suggest to you some categories that might be overlooked that you can consider bringing before the Lord this week, that we can consider bringing before the Lord this week as we fast and pray.

The first category is stubborn situations. Situations that we've prayed about and they still linger.

They linger unchanged. It might be a prolonged trial. It may be prolonged unemployment or maybe a prolonged marital or family discord.

Perhaps it's some other relational difficulty. Maybe it's salvation of a loved one we've been praying for but there's no evident change.

[37 : 31] Or maybe it's something else. Let's bring our stubborn situations before the Lord this week. And here's a reason I think this is a valid category for us. One of the things that naturally happens to us when we pray about things that just don't seem to budge is we get weary in praying and we stop praying.

But there's something to be said even though we don't fully understand it. I certainly don't fully understand it. There's something to be said about God's people in scripture regularly coming before him in prayer and fasting over difficult areas over important things over urgent things.

And this week brothers and sisters we have a prime opportunity to bring these stubborn things before the Lord and lay them before him in prayer and ask that he would intervene and that he would move on our behalf.

The second category is besetting sins. And by besetting sins I mean a sin that is prominently featured in our lives.

A sin over which we are gaining no progress in battling. And it's a sin that just dogs us day in and day out week in and week out year in and year out we find ourselves seemingly not making real progress.

[39 : 10] It might be a habitual sin like anger or gossip or grumbling or ingratitude.

It might be the sin of prayerlessness or the sin of spiritual sloth or laziness. or what might be an enslaving sin like pornography or like being addicted to some substance whether legal or illegal. We can bring those besetting sins before the Lord and ask that he would grant us growth in sanctification that he would grant us victory over besetting sin.

And then the third category is areas where God seems silent. Sometimes we pray about things in an ongoing way and there seems to be silence from God.

Even we could say intentional silence from God. The prophet Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 45 15 tells us that God is a God who hides himself.

[41 : 01] And the reason sometimes God hides himself is he wants us to seek him. He wants us to demonstrate that the matter is important enough that we would push aside things.

We would carve out time. We would push the plate back and we would seek him concerning the matter. I think all of us could probably point to some area of our lives about which we can say, I have prayed, but it seems that God is silent.

Let's bring those matters before the Lord. Let's use this opportunity that we have, that we are fasting and praying, and bring those things before the Lord with an open heart to what he would say to us and how he would meet us.

So this week, let us, by the grace of God, avoid the fast that Christ condemns, and by the same grace of God, may we pursue the fast that he commends.

no doubt there are some who are present or online who would hear a sermon like this, and even though they don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, they would think that maybe they need to start fasting about some of the challenges in their lives.

[42 : 41] And if that's you, whether present or online, I just want to say that that's not the biggest concern that you should have. The biggest concern that you should have is the fact that you are not reconciled to God, and you need to be reconciled to him.

The biggest concern that you should have is the Bible says that those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, they are objects of his wrath. wrath. And all of us once were the objects of God's wrath.

And that is the only appropriate and proper response from a holy God against sinners like you and me.

If God were otherwise towards us, if God was not wrathful towards us in our sin, it would be attained on his holiness.

But the only proper way that God can respond to sin and sinners is to be wrathful. And the way the Bible describes it is that those who do not know the Lord are the objects of his wrath.

[43 : 57] And if you don't know Jesus Christ this morning, that is your greater concern. It's a greater concern than any matter that you're facing in this life, because it only pertains to this life. But your eternal soul goes beyond this life.

And what the Bible says is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners so that they can be forgiven of their sins and they can be reconciled to a holy God.

And that should be your greatest concern this morning, if you don't know Jesus Christ, Christ, the Lord in his mercy has allowed you to hear what you have heard, what you are hearing right now, and that is that you need to be reconciled to God.

You need to turn from sin, you need to trust in Jesus, be forgiven of your sins, and to be reconciled to God.

I pray that you would do that today. I pray that you would hear the good news and act on the good news and trust in Jesus Christ. And for those of us who know Jesus Christ, we should rejoice, because in his mercy he sought us out, in his mercy he saved us, and he changed us from being objects of wrath to being objects of mercy.

[45 : 27] mercy in salvation, but mercy every single day of our lives, because every single day of our lives we need his mercy.

And we should rejoice in that. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we bow our hearts before you this morning.

Would you draw near to us, O Lord, as we seek to draw near to you this week? Would you help us by the power of your Holy Spirit to avoid the fast that you condemn and pursue the fast that you commend?

God, even in this moment, I pray that you would help us to posture our hearts to seek your face. God, meet us in those stubborn areas.

Meet us in the area of besetting sins. Meet us in areas where it appears that you've been silent.

[46 : 58] God, may our hearts be affected as we fast and pray this week. And may we do it all for the glory of your great name.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. what do you do what do