

"Fast"

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[0:00] Well, good morning. It is a great time of year. This week is the week of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a time in America, for many, to feast. You think of the classic Norman Rockwell painting, if you haven't seen it, it's out there, the family gathered around the table with joy and gladness, with the table laden with food. It's a picture of richness, of abundance, of fullness, of satisfaction. Why are we drawn to something like this? Some of us are drawn to it with a sense of longing of something we haven't experienced in our lives. Some of us experience it as remembering what maybe that we have experienced as. But for all of us, we have a desire for what we see in a picture like that, for the Thanksgiving dinner abundance. Why is that? Well, I think it's because God designed us to join Jesus at His table for a greater feast. We were made to know God.

We were made to enjoy Him forever. And God gave us human appetites, not only for food, but for other things for fullness, for abundance, for satisfaction, to point to a deeper and richer spiritual reality.

Because we have an appetite to know God. And Jesus wants us to feast at this table. And so that's why this morning, ironically, in a week of Thanksgiving, we are speaking about fasting.

We are in the series on the Sermon on the Mount. If you haven't been here, we're looking at Jesus' words to His disciples, teaching them about the kingdom that He's bringing and what it's going to look like to live in that kingdom. And in the section we're in, in chapter 6 in particular, Jesus is talking about three spiritual disciplines, giving, praying, and fasting. And each of these has an overall umbrella verse in chapter 6 verse 1, where He says, don't do these things to be seen by others. Rather, do them in secret towards God, because there you will find a reward greater than you would otherwise. And Jesus is assuming that you do these things. He says, when you give, when you pray, when you fast. And He's telling us these things because these are gifts that God has given us, practices to train our hearts to live in the kingdom of God. Because when we live in the kingdom of God and do these things, we know God more. So in giving, we know more of God's gracious, abundant provision towards us, His generosity and His kindness to us, and we grow in thankfulness and contentment and our own generosity because of that. When we pray, we know more of God as our loving heavenly Father who knows what we need before we even ask. And we grow in our expectant faith that God will provide the things that we most need, and to live in trust, in His sovereign care. So what about fasting? Well, as we're going to see, fasting teaches us that we were made to be satisfied in God above all things in His richness and His fullness.

So with that, if you want to turn with me, it's page 761 in your pew Bible, Matthew chapter 6. We're going to be reading actually the whole section this morning because this is going to be our last sermon in the Sermon on the Mount until the new year. We're going to start, if you're not aware, next week is the first Sunday in Advent. So we'll have an Advent series in the book going through the book of Isaiah. So this is our last one. So we're going to look at chapter 6, and I'm going to read verses 1 through 21 to give you the big context of the verses we're going to be focusing on in verses 16 through 18. So let's read God's Word together. Jesus says this, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogue and at the street corner, that they may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

[6 : 35] But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces like—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.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Please pray with me. Lord, thank you for your word. We pray this morning that you would be our help by your Spirit. May we have your help to understand what it is that you are saying to us. Lord, I pray for your help that I might speak the words that you would have me speak, and Lord, that together we would not only understand, but that we would receive and submit to your word this morning. Lord, finding that your word is, Lord, a lamp unto our feet to guide our way to show us how to live, how to know you more. Lord, be with us, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. So the big idea this morning that I want you to take home is that Jesus calls us to fast so that we will know greater satisfaction and joy in God himself. Jesus wants us to rediscover this practice of fasting from this passage, and he wants us to know more of God through fasting.

Sermon's going to be a little more topical than usual because I want to talk more broadly about what fasting is to try to clarify and understand fasting in a Christian context and what it means.

So we'll be coming back to this passage, but I want to start by simply asking the question, what is fasting? Some of you may have not really thought about this. Fasting is basically abstaining from food or from some other thing for a period of time. That's the most basic definition. But fasting is not per se Christian. Lots of religions practice fasting during Ramadan. In Islam, they practice, they fast all day during the day until sundown. There are lots of other religions that fast in different... and fasting has different purposes. Some of them may be more religious purposes.

[9:32] Some religions practice fasting in order to subdue our human appetites, to pursue a death to those hungers and those desires so that we don't desire anything at all. Some religions seem to fast in order to earn God's favor, showing in some way that you're really serious about your religion by fasting regularly. Of course, we live in a society where there's fasting outside of any religious intent at all.

Some people use hunger fasts as a political statement to try to get leverage to move society in a more righteous way. Sometimes we fast from something simply to explore a new interest by putting aside an old one. So we might fast from a hobby. And as I'm sure all of you know, because it's very popular these days, intermittent fasting is one of the most recommended new diets in the world. How do we control our weight, right? And these are all... there is nothing per se good or bad about these things per se. But what we do want to say is that Christian fasting is distinct from these. We need to look more carefully to think about what Christian fasting is. So here are a few things Christian fasting is not.

I'm going to start with that, and then I'm going to get to what it is. First, Christian fasting is not ceasing from sin. If you are watching pornography regularly, you cannot fast from doing that and think, oh, look at me, I'm fasting. That's not fasting. That's just fighting against sin, and you should stop, and that's good. And in the same way, you might do that for other things. Gluttony, clearly, if you are overeating and just feeding your face all the time, you're not fasting by cutting back your eating. You're stopping sinning by cutting back what you're eating, okay? So I want to be clear that fasting is not simply ceasing to sin. Another thing is fasting is not a super spiritual lever to get God to do something that He wouldn't do otherwise. Some of us might have the idea, and, you know, there are times in the Bible when it seems like maybe this is what is being said, but I don't think it's actually true, where, okay, so I'm going to pray about something because it's important, but if it's really important, then I'm going to fast, too. Or if there's something that I really want for Christmas, I'm going to fast for it because then God's going to have to give it to me, right? This is not the God of the Bible. God is a loving

Heavenly Father. He knows what we need. Our fasting is not leverage that we gain so that God will do something for us that we want Him to do, right? Third thing about fasting is fasting is not a denial of the goodness of the goodness of the thing that we are fasting from. God created food. He gave it to us to sustain us, to enjoy. It's not merely just a pill so that we have the energy to live the day, but He made it with flavors and, you know, cumin and wonderful things for us to enjoy, right? Sorry, I was, you know, pick your spice of flavor, but whatever it is, God gave us something that we need, but also to enjoy. And so we don't want to deny its goodness or to think that fasting is somehow saying these things are bad in and of themselves, right? So what is Christian fasting, if this is true? Well, here's the definition. Abstaining partially or fully from something good, often food, for a determined period of time for the spiritual purposes of seeking God. So fasting is saying,

I'm going to set something that is normally good. I'm going to set it aside for a period of time so that I can do something else, have more focus on seeking God in a particular way, right? It's not a forever change. It's for a period of time, and it has a particular purpose, to seek God so that we might be more satisfied in Him. If you're not aware of Richard Foster, Richard Foster wrote a book, I don't know, 40 years ago now, *The Celebration of Discipline*. It's a great read. It will challenge you to think about a number of things in your life. But one of the things that he says in that book is that fasting is actually feasting. What we do is we fast from food or from something else so that we can feast more on the person and the presence and the riches of God Himself. Do you remember Jesus in

[14:33] John 6? He's fed the people, fed 5,000 people food from, miraculously. He's given them bread. But then he says, don't seek for this bread. Seek for the bread that comes from heaven. And then he says, I am the bread of life. Whoever believes in me will feast on me and be satisfied and know.

This is the picture that the Bible is giving us about feasting and fasting. And this is what the heart of Christian fasting is. To set aside something good so that we might get something even greater in Jesus Himself. So, that's your introduction. Now, how are we to fast? What does the Bible tell us? First, this passage in Matthew 6 is really helpful. Let's look at it again.

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

So, the first thing Jesus says about fasting, how are we to do this? First of all, we're not meant to do it so that other people see us and are impressed by us. They're not impressed by a spirituality. How do we do that? Well, don't look gloomy, right? Jesus particularly says, anoint your head and wash your face. This is because often fasting could be accompanied in the first century by people would put ashes on their face. They would not anoint their hair with oil, which means their hair would actually look like they slept in it, like some of you grad students preparing for exams.

You know, where you're getting up and it's just, it's all over the place, right? So, Jesus says, don't look like that. Take care of yourself. And when you go out, look like you're living a normal life, right? It actually says in this passage, right, they disfigure themselves, literally look like so much so that they look different from the way they normally do. And what Jesus is doing is revealing our hearts. Because when we do that kind of fasting, what we're really saying is, look at me, look at how much I'm suffering for God. Look at the great sacrifice that I'm doing by fasting. Don't you think I'm a great spiritual person? And Jesus says, if you have that, you have your reward. The praise in the moment is what you get. But is that what you really want? No.

[17:17] No, you want God. And so do it in secret and wash your face. And seek God and know that He will meet you in secret with His goodness.

Practically, what does it look like to fast? Here's a collection of thoughts. If you're looking for application, looking for a list of to-dos and not to-dos, Richard Foster, by the way, has a great chapter on this. It has some really good practical stuff. There's also good stuff on the internet. If you want more resources, I can give you more resources on how to manage this. But here, seven.

This is going to go really fast, hopefully. Seven practical tips on how to actually fast. And I'm going to focus on fasting from food, but I'll talk about some other ideas along the way. First of all, if you think about starting to fast, just like when you're starting to exercise, don't try to start by running a marathon, right? Start by running a half mile. So start by fasting a little bit and then develop the habit more. So you might want to start by skipping a meal and spending that time in prayer and reading the Bible. Or you might want to start by taking two meals. So I'm going to eat breakfast, I'm going to eat lunch, and then I'll wait until the next lunch to eat my next meal. And take those times and fast for... that's basically like a day-long fast. So take it slowly and don't forget to drink when you fast because nobody... nobody fasts without water for a long time. It's really unhealthy.

It's really dangerous. And Jesus didn't do it. God didn't do it. So don't... don't... so keep drinking. And then you can progress. There are people... when I was on staff with crew, there was a movement among crew. It was an encouragement for us to do 40-day fasts. And I did not do a full 40-day fast, but some of my staff team did. And it was a very rich experience for them. So there can be longer long fasts that you might build up to. So think about progression if you're going to start doing this and you haven't been doing it. Second thing is recognize that when you fast, you know what's going to happen? You'll feel hungry. This is normal. And in fact, this is the very point. When you feel those hunger pangs, this is the opportunity to say, oh, my body is hungry for food, but my soul is more hungry for God. And to take that moment of feeling that hunger and to take it... whether it's sitting down and praying or actually studying Scripture or doing something like that, or whether it's just thinking in a moment while you're at work and you feel that hunger pang, just remembering, oh,

I want God more than this. And simply reminding yourself of that. Third thing about fasting is be intentional about your time with God. As much as you can, take some extra time, maybe the time you spend to prepare your food or to buy your food or to eat your food. Take that time and set it aside for basic time for communion with God, whether it be worship, whether it be reading Scripture, whether it be prayer or journaling. Take the extra time to do that. Having said that, it's also true that you need to think about how do you fast in the overall commitments of your life. Some of you will be able to take days and just fast and go on retreat, and that's wonderful when you can do that.

[21 : 07] But a lot of you won't be able to do that. You'll be fasting in the middle of parenting and jobs and teaching and studying and whatever it is that takes up your day. If that's true, even meal times, right? If that's true, do what Jesus says. Wash your face, comb your hair, shake your bottle of water at dinner, and enjoy fellowship with other people while they're eating.

It's sometimes hard because you're watching other people eat and you're hungry. But you don't want, again, Jesus says, let your fasting be a part of your life, not this grand show where you're upending every responsibility. So recognize that you will have some commitments that you will need to follow through on and think about how do you navigate that. Fifth one, be aware of your health.

Jesus says when you fast, but general wisdom is not everybody should fast, right? There are, don't necessarily need, but are able to enjoy. Think about slimming down your diet to very basic for a season if you're one of those people who shouldn't fast from food completely.

Another thing to do is to consider fasting. So recognize that if your health is an issue, fasting may look different for you. But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater and just say, oh, well, then I can't fast. Find the way that's going to be meaningful for you to enter into this practice of fasting that Jesus requires us to. One last thought about thing. Recognize if you are a crazy exerciser and you stop eating, that will be an effect. You'll want to think and read more than I can give you advice on this morning about how you do that. Don't run a marathon while you're fasting.

That's one of my, that's my one thing I can say pretty confidently. So, okay. Third, or no, sixth. We're now to sixth. Find the fine line between discipline and legalism. Fasting is a gift that you would break the fast because this isn't, this isn't a law and this isn't some structure that, that God wants to impose upon you and make you a really difficult person to live with, right?

[23 : 33] This is a gift that God has given you. Now, having said that, we're all lazy. And as we start fasting, you'll find, do I really need to fast? Okay. So that's my laundry list of practical.

What are the benefits? What is it spiritually? What is God doing? You know, as with all of these spiritual disciplines, giving and prayer and fasting now, the purpose is heart orientation, not free at people, or I'm greedy, or I'm covetous of certain things, or I'm proud, or I'm struggling with unbelief, or I'm despairing and doubting. Fasting just takes away a layer of comfort that we throw on top of our lives and allows us to see our hearts. And when we invite God to do it, He does this for us. He shows us what the prophet Jeremiah says to Israel in Jeremiah chapter 2, where God comes to His people and He says, this I have against you, with so many things to try to satisfy our soul when we were made for God. And this is what God is doing in fasting.

He reveals the idols of our hearts. In Acts 13, it says that the church in Antioch fasted and prayed for discernment as they were looking to see who to anoint to send out on the mission where they picked Saul and Barnabas. So there are other places where fasting has some other roles, but I think at its core, it's for fellowship and communion and the fullness of the celebration while He's here. But Jesus is saying, my disciples don't fast because I'm here. And when I go away, and I believe that means after His death and His resurrection, as He goes to heaven, as we wait for His return, what do our hearts really hunger for? We don't hunger for Cheetos and for ice cream and for whatever it is that you, jambalaya, whatever, you know, you really, what our hearts really hunger for is for forgiveness of our sin and relief from guilt. Our hearts hunger for peace with God, with one another, and even within our own selves. We hunger for hope. Never want to go back to this world.

Lord, that we do not long for you the way we ought to. Lord, how full we are of the junk food of this life that we don't know the richness and the fullness of what you have prepared for us in Christ.

Lord, I pray today that, Lord, in this coming week and in the coming month, as we feast and as we fast, Lord, that we would know you more and more. We pray this in Jesus' name.