

**Spiritually Authenticity: Fasting**  
***Matthew 6:16-18***

***Introduction:***

(Show clip from Over the Hedge: “And that’s where the humans worship the food.”)

Our animated furry friends may be more right about us than we would like to admit. We are a culture consumed by our appetites. What to eat, what not to eat, how to eat, how not to eat, eat more, eat less, eat more for less. From diet portions to jumbo sizes our stomachs define so much of our lives.

There is a wannabe archaeologist inside me. Not the Indiana Jones kind, but a real deal archaeologist. It’s amazing how much archaeologists can tell about people from some ancient garbage and a few pottery shards. From the remnants of ruined buildings and fragments of mosaics, we learn about their beliefs and religion. We learn what they worshipped and how.

I can imagine some distant future archaeologists sifting through the detritus of our remains. They would see a landscape filled with shrines to golden arches and pizza temples. I can see them excavating one of our landfills and finding millions of bits of cookie boxes, chip bags, soda cans, popsicle sticks and cheeseburger wrappers. What would they conclude about us?

We live in a culture of indulgence and instant gratification. Desire for food in and of itself is not a bad thing. But it has reached unprecedented levels not seen before in history. Generations of people for thousands of years had to work all day, every day just to have enough food to eat that day and store enough for winter.

For us, basic sustenance is not the issue, instead it’s too much: too much food, too many calories, too much cholesterol. Our blessing of abundance has become a curse. We have way more than we need or can even use, but still we want. Our desire is not satisfied. We have an appetite for more. And it affects everything we do. It influences what we think. It changes how we feel.

There may be few messages more relevant, and more timely to 21st Century American ears than biblical teaching on fasting. Yet nothing sounds more foreign, more alien, more out of touch than fasting. Fasting sounds so ancient. It’s something that was done by monastic hermits in the 8th century, not by a school teacher, or a truck driver, or by a housewife in Marshfield in 2022. And fasting seems so...well, un-American. This is a “have-it-your-way,” a “you-want-it-you-got-it” culture. And you want to tell me that I should go without, that I should abstain, of my own free will, because I want too? Puhhleeeeeze! You’ve got to be kidding.

Well, Jesus isn’t kidding. We are in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:16-18. Please follow along with me as I read our text:

*16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Much of what Jesus says here about fasting is the same thing he said about giving and praying earlier in chapter 6: We aren't to do it for show. Spiritual activity shouldn't be ostentatious. God is the only audience that matters. Same thing here, so we don't really need to cover that material again.

We should, however, look at the issue of fasting itself. It is one of the least understood and least practiced of all spiritual habits of a healthy relationship with God. And I confess, I'm guilty too. Though fasting is considered a classic spiritual discipline, an essential spiritual practice, it is completely left out in several recent bestsellers on spiritual disciplines. John Ortberg's otherwise excellent book *"The Life You've Always Wanted"* doesn't mention fasting at all in its regimen of spiritual training.

First, let's define fasting. Maybe we think we have an idea, but do we really know? Simply put biblical fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is to temporarily exchange physical food for a spiritual feast. It is the ultimate expression of the hungering and thirsting for righteousness that Jesus talked about at the beginning of the sermon.

We should not confuse fasting with a couple of other practices which also involve not eating food. Fasting is not a hunger strike even though they are sometimes mistakenly called "fasts." Hunger strikes are designed to gain political leverage, social awareness, or popular support. They are very much aimed at an audience of people, not the throne of God. Hunger strikes are designed to spark social change. Biblical fasting, though, is our response to a sacred moment, not a tool designed to get the desired results.

We should also not confuse biblical fasting with health fasts in pursuit in whatever physical benefits. Some people fast to detoxify or cleanse their system. Others think that fasting triggers natural healing mechanisms. Health fasts may or may not have such benefits, but that is not biblical fasting.

I'm not saying that a Christian may never do a hunger strike or a health fast, but that when they do, it's not biblical fasting, it's something else.

Christians fast as an expression of their relationship with their Creator for spiritual reasons. Scot McKnight writes in his excellent little book *Fasting*, "Fasting is the body talking what the spirit yearns, what the soul longs for, and what the mind knows to be true." He writes,

*We worship God, we love God in our bodies and with our bodies and in concrete, physical, tangible, palpable ways. Deep in the yearning of humans is the need to 'do spirituality' with the body.*

Typically, biblical fasting involved abstaining from all food and drink, except water, for a period of time. A fast could range anywhere from one meal, all the way to Jesus' miraculous fast of 40 days. Usually, they went from 1 to 3 days. In the face of an urgent crisis, fasting was sometimes total, including even water. Fasting was usually private and personal, but sometimes there were corporate fasts or even national fasts.

We also see in Scripture what could be called a partial fast. A partial fast is abstaining from certain types of food and drink for spiritual reasons. The prophet Daniel once had a fast where he, "ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over (Dan 10:3)" You may choose to fast from all coffee or soda, or you might pass on all deserts, again not for dietary reasons, but for spiritual purposes. I've know people who have given up certain food items for a period of time, because they could no longer control their appetite for it. They couldn't say no, and it had become an idol in their life. They felt it was interfering with their spiritual growth and relationship with God, so they a partial fast was necessary.

The fact that Daniel also fasted from lotion brings up another type of fast where someone abstains from some other physical pleasure besides food for spiritual reasons. In 1 Corinthians 7:5, the apostle Paul talks about married couples abstaining from sex in order to devote time to prayer. Many believers have found it beneficial to fast from other indulgences besides food.

A guy that roomed next to me in Bible college decided to fast from all music for the school year. He felt it had become an obsession and interfered with his spiritual growth, so he needed to topple the idol. Today we might consider fasts from television, social media, or Netflix .There are many fasts that prove to be of great spiritual value depending on the person and their need. Though all spiritual fasts have some things in common, they do come in many shapes and sizes.

Jesus views fasting as an essential spiritual practice. If we consider the passages we looked at the last two weeks, we see that Jesus talks about fasting in the same discussion as giving and prayer. He sees it in the same category. Christians who would never think of not praying or not giving, unfortunately never give fasting a second thought.

Not only does Jesus include fasting along with giving and prayer, but he also assumes that it will be a part of our lives, "When you fast..." He doesn't say, "If you want to fast."

So why is fasting so important? Why do we have a need to fast?

### **I. Focus More Fully on God.**

The first, and primary, reason we need to fast is to focus more fully on God. Fasting trains us to put aside the earthly desires that usually consume our attention so that we can focus more fully on God.

In Zechariah, the Jews had a question for God. For seventy years, ever since the destruction of the temple, they had fasted twice a year to commemorate that tragic occasion. Now they had been restored to their land, they were rebuilding the temple, and so they wondered if they should continue those two fasts. In Zechariah 7:5 God gives them his answer. He says, *“When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?”* God’s asking them, *“Was it really for me that you fasted? Or was this just about you.”* Fasting must center on God. It’s all about Him!

Here in Matthew 6, Jesus portrays fasting as more than just a private exercise. It may not involve other people, but it does involve God. He is our audience. He sees and rewards. Through fasting, God invites us into a more intimate relationship with Him. Scot McKnight writes that *“fasting enables us to identify with how God views a given event; fasting empowers us to empathize with God.”*

Earlier in the beatitudes, Jesus blessed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Fasting gives physical expression to that heart-hunger, the longing of every human soul to connect with its Creator. John Piper says in his book, *A Hunger for God*, that Christian fasting is, at its root a homesickness for God.

When we allow physical hunger, the desire for food, or any physical desire for that matter to control us, it becomes an idol. It begins to take God’s place on the throne of our hearts. When something other than God is in control we can’t be as close to Him. We can’t grow as well spiritually. It becomes a spot in our lives where Satan can begin to wedge his way in. Fasting is way to stop the problem at its source, to put God back on the throne and focus more fully on Him. That’s the primary purpose of fasting.

Because fasting helps us focus more fully on God, it also leads to some other benefits as well.

## **II. Loosens the Grip of Desire on Our Lives.**

One of those benefits is that fasting loosens the grip of desire on our lives. It reminds us that there is more to life than our physical appetites. When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert in Matthew 4, Jesus rebuked him with the O.T. scripture, *“Man does not live by bread alone...”*

Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with bread. Jesus isn’t saying bread is bad. Especially the honey butter croissants at Cheddars. Mmmmm! There is nothing wrong with physical desire. God created us with those needs and appetites. There is nothing wrong with wanting certain foods and enjoying it. There is nothing wrong with desiring physical pleasures.

God created those desires. In fact, God wants us to enjoy them, each in their proper place with thanksgiving.

1 Timothy 4:4 says, *“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”*

But even good things can begin to compete for our devotion and affection for God, and when they do they become a source of evil in our lives.

The problem is that it is so easy for our physical desire and our spiritual desire to become out of balance. Richard Foster writes in his classic, *The Celebration of Discipline*, that, “Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them...Our human craving and desires are like a river that tends to overflow its banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channel.”

While fasting loosens the grip of physical desire on our lives, it at the same time...

### **III. Teaches us to be more dependant on God**

We can't provide everything we need in life. We can't supply for ourselves everything that we need to live life to its fullest. This is the essence of the second half of Jesus' rebuke to Satan in Matthew 4. The first part was, *“Man does not live by bread alone,”* but Jesus goes on to say, *“but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”* Fasting isn't just about saying “no” to our earthly desires. It's about saying “yes” to God. As we free ourselves from the grip of earthly appetites, we simultaneously whet our appetite for God.

John Piper describes it well in *A Hunger for God*:

*Half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. In the first half, appetite is lost. In the second half, appetite is resisted. In the first, we yield to the higher hunger that is. In the second, we fight for the higher hunger that isn't.*

In Scripture we see people fasting to become more dependant on God in a variety of ways. They fast as to seek God's guidance in specific situations. If you're lost and confused, you should try fasting.

They fast to pour out their grief to God and find his comfort. If you are grieving and overwhelmed with sorrow, try fasting. It's funny how in our culture when someone dies and a family is grieving, what do we do? We drown them in food. I get it. Food brings comfort. Giving them food frees them from the added stress of having to shop for food and prepare meals. But we have forgotten an essential truth— we can't eat away our sorrow. At some point in there, it would be a good idea to express our grief through fasting.

In the Bible, people also fast to seek God's deliverance or protection from a particular crisis. Are you confused? Do you have a difficult decision confronting you? Is there some looming emergency, or you've been overwhelmed by some catastrophe? Fasting is a part of the answer.

Many times people fasted to show their repentance over sin and their desire to return to God. Have you blown it? Have you screwed up royally? Have you stepped in doo doo over your head? You need to fast.

And in all of these things, fasting expresses a humble dependence on God.

There are in fact many valuable reasons to fast, but I want to leave you this morning with one other benefit we get from fasting.

#### **IV. Allows us to Devote Ourselves More Fully to Spiritual Growth**

How often do we say things like, "If only I had more time for prayer." "I know I should spend more time meditating on God's word, it's just that I'm so busy." Or "I would love to be involved in a ministry, you know to serve others in some way, but my schedule is just so crammed, and when I finally do get a free moment, I'm just so pooped, I just want to take a break." There's an answer for all of these and many other similar problems, and that is fasting.

Calculate how much time how much time you spend eating and preparing meals in a day, or watching television, or on the computer, or whatever the physical indulgence might be. Now, if you decide to fast for a day from that one thing, think of how much time then becomes available for spiritual activity.

Let's just say that you decided to fast from one meal a week and that saves you 30 minutes, and then you decide to spend those thirty minutes pursuing some spiritual purpose. In a year's time that equals 26 extra hours given to spiritual growth. You can do a lot in 26 hours. Think of what God can do with 26 of your hours.

In this rushed and busy life people always complain that they lack the time for more spiritual things. The one thing fasting most certainly gives you is time. It is time that we can devote to those things that we say we have such a hard time squeezing into our jam-packed schedules. It is to make godly things, heavenly things, spiritual things a priority. It is to give God a place before the physical pursuits that so often consume us.

#### ***Conclusion:***

Fasting was something pursued by the likes of Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah, David, Elijah, Daniel, Queen Esther, Anna, the Apostle Paul and Jesus. What proved to be so valuable and fulfilling in their lives has become so neglected in our day. We tend to fear fasting. We see it as going without. We see as being deprived of something.

However, when we more fully understand fasting we see it not so much as going without, but as an invitation to get more, to get more of God, to see more, to hear more, to understand more of Him. In setting aside the desires, the demands, and the distractions of this life, we are able to draw closer to God. In that that intimacy with him we can focus more fully on Him, loosen the grip of desire on our lives, we become more dependant on Him, and we are able to devote ourselves more fully to spiritual growth.