

Fasting

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[0:00] I have you right where I want you. This afternoon I'm, interestingly enough, preaching on fasting.

! I figure this is the best time if we're going to do it.! It's after lunch. Right now some of you are so full that you never want to take another bite again.

And so the timing is perfect for what I have to say. So here we go.

In January, we started a series called Aspects of Spirituality. And by spirituality I didn't mean anything new-agey or something like that.

I just meant we're having dealings with God. These aspects that we're talking about are routes, how we come to God and deal with Him and drink Him in.

[1:04] If you remember how Psalm 42 begins, he says, As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? At our conversion, God puts a thirst down into our souls.

And it's a thirst for Him. And it's only what He can satisfy. And so the things that we're talking about are the ways that we drink in God. And if we're not having dealings with God, if there's no desire for God, then regardless of what we're doing outwardly, our religion is not real.

And so we're talking about how we carry on real religion with God, how we drink in God. And fasting is one of those ways that we do that.

And it's not the most important, but it's probably the most neglected, at least in the American church. It's not more important than prayer or reading God's Word.

[2:17] But it is easily the most neglected, the most feared, the most misunderstood spiritual discipline that God has given to us.

And so maybe some of you, this sermon could be causing a little unease and even dread. Because when you think of fasting, you think of pain and suffering and hunger and even maybe I've done, I've tried that and it was just pointless.

I didn't get anything. I don't understand what it's all about. Or maybe you're thinking of, well, in the medieval church, you know, there were monks and they fasted and they were just trying to earn favor with God.

And I know that's not right. So I'm just going to steer clear of the whole mess. Better not do it than do it wrong. Well, you know, that's not right.

Somehow we need to wind our way through our fears and our misunderstanding and our confusion and make fasting a part of our life.

[3:27] It isn't an option. Because Jesus expected his people to fast. And so we have to do it in a way that pleases him.

And we have to do it in a way that where we have dealings with God. And so that's what we're just going to talk about today. And I'll try to be brief. We have five points today.

The first is just a brief reminder of some of the things that we talked about last time, which is two months ago. And I know you hardly remember it. And I hardly remember it. So we need to talk, say a few things about that.

Then I have four questions. What is fasting? What's the purpose of fasting? Who should fast? And how you should fast? So first, just a brief reminder of a few things.

And like I said, this is two months ago. And this is going to be really stretching. But in the first sermon, we covered just some things that are true of all of the spiritual disciplines, true of all of the aspects of spirituality.

[4:29] And the first thing we said is that none of the spiritual disciplines are magic. They're not automatic. They're roadways to meet with God.

And so they create opportunities where we can relate to God. And so there's nothing magical about that. There's nothing magical. Let's say there's nothing magical about going to McDonald's just because every now and then you meet your best friend there or you two agree and you meet there. And sometimes you have good talks with your best friend and sometimes you just you don't have that great of a talk. But it's good to be there because that's where you meet your best friend. There's nothing magical about going to McDonald's that that means you automatically get a great relationship with your best friend. The spiritual disciplines are that way. Fasting is that way. It's not a guarantee for anything. And if you think so, if you think it's just automatic, I fast, I pray, I read, and this automatically happens, you're going to be disappointed.

[5:37] You're not only going to be disappointed with fasting, you're going to be disappointed with every, all the spiritual disciplines and you'll easily give them up. Well, they're not magical, but they are the only way to be godly.

1 Timothy 4-7, Paul writes to Timothy and says, train yourself to be godly. That word train is discipline. Discipline yourself to be godly.

There's only one road to godliness and it's through discipline. So if you look around the church at large, you can see a number of different kinds of people.

There's disciplined, holy people. There's lazy, half-hearted people. But one kind of person that you'll never meet is a lazy, holy person.

They don't happen. Because godliness is only gained through discipline. And we need to keep that in mind because fasting is not easy and it's not fun.

[6:41] It requires discipline. But without it, without discipline, you won't be godly. And without fasting, you're really robbing yourself of an essential way, a crucial means of growing in godliness.

So that's the things that I need to remind you of. Now, what is fasting? The Bible only speaks of really one literal kind of fasting.

Carrie mentioned a metaphorical type of fasting. But fasting is a temporary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. I'll just read that again.

And it's nothing groundbreaking. But it's a temporary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Now, some people have rightly widened the view of fasting to include more than food.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote this. We must add that fasting must not only be confined to the question of food and drink. Fasting really should be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.

[7:53] So, and that's a wider definition of fasting. And so, it's abstaining from anything for spiritual purposes. Paul tells married couples that they may refrain from having sexual relationships, from sexual relations for the purpose of prayer.

And that could be called fasting in sort of a loose sense. And going without sleep might be another way that people could fast. And in the Psalms, frequently you hear, day and night, I worship, I praise.

And I think he's talking about, I go without sleep in order to do that. And that might be considered a type of fast. And other people have really widened out the idea of fasting to include things like TV and internet and entertainment.

Things that are legitimate in and of themselves. But I'm going to refrain from them. I'm going to abstain from them for a spiritual purpose. Well, that might have, we could talk about that.

There's a rightful place, a right place for that. But today we're just going to talk about food. That's strictly the only thing the Bible calls fasting.

[9:04] Well, that's the physical side of fasting. So, what's the purpose? You know, you kind of understand what it is. And here's the question, the real crucial thing.

Why am I going to do this? Well, what's the purpose behind it? Well, turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 9. Matthew chapter 9. Matthew chapter 9.

Jesus is going to tell us what's at the heart of fasting. And you'll see that in verse 14.

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

And Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he's with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them. Then they will fast.

[10:12] So, John's disciples come and ask Jesus, We're fasting. The Pharisees, the disciples of the Pharisees, they're fasting. But why aren't your disciples fasting?

What's wrong with them? Are they not serious about religion? What's going on here? And Jesus' answer tells us, and it answers the question, of why Christians should fast.

And it answers the question, why the disciples weren't fasting, and why they will fast. So, why will we fast? How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?

So, Jesus is the bridegroom. The disciples, that includes us. That includes us. Now, we're the guests, the friends of Jesus.

And when the guest, when the, even the bride maybe, is with the bridegroom, there's no reason to fast. You don't fast at a wedding.

[11:14] You don't fast when there's a reason to celebrate, when the object of your love is there. When the person that you desire is right with you, you don't need to fast. That's a time to celebrate.

But Jesus says, there'll be a time when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. And so, Jesus is saying, I'm here. I'm here right now.

I'm with you. I'm with my disciples. They're enjoying me. They're enjoying my company and my presence. And so, now is the time for them to rejoice and be happy. But there's going to come a time when I'll be taken away, and then they'll fast.

They're going to miss me. They're going to long for me. They're going to be sad. And then, out of a desire for me, they will fast.

When I'm not with them, they'll have a reason to fast. They'll want me more than food. And so, they will fast.

[12:14] They'll want me to be with them more than they want food in their stomachs. And so, they will fast. So, fasting is a physical display of our desire for Jesus.

That's the point of fasting. It's a physical display of our longing for God. And so, we hunger for God. And we say, God, I want you more than food. And so, the purpose of fasting is to devote ourselves, our bodies included, into seeking God, into saying, God, I want you.

And so, when we're fasting, we're dedicating everything that we are, not only our minds and our mouths, but our digestive system, our body and our physical strength. We're putting it on the altar, and we're saying and telling God, I love you.

I desire you. I need you. I need you. And look, this physical pain that I have, it's a physical pain for you.

[13:22] So, fasting is essentially saying, with every hunger pain, God, you are my food.

Remember, in John chapter 4, Jesus is talking to the woman at the well, and his disciples are going to get food, and they come back, and he tells them, I have food that you don't know about.

My food is to do the will of my Father. Jesus found obeying God and seeking God's glory to be so satisfying that he could do without food. And so, fasting is using our body's desire, our body's natural and good, God-given desire for food to express our desire for God.

And so, it's turning a physical desire into a spiritual desire. It's using a physical desire to express a spiritual desire. And so, that's the heart of fasting. When you fast, that's what's at the core of every single thing that you're doing.

That's what's the fasting, that's the purpose behind all fasting. And so, in fasting, we worship God. We say, God, man does not live by bread alone.

And I believe that. I live by every word that comes from your mouth. And so, I'm going to go without food because I want you. I want your word to come to me. And so, fasting is exalting God over our physical needs and our physical comforts and our desires.

[14:54] So, Anna, she was a prophetess and she worshiped in the temple day and night with prayer and fasting. She worshiped with prayer and fasting.

The one went with the other because the fasting enhanced her prayers. The fasting put an exclamation point on her prayer saying, God, I want this, I need this, I want to see you glorified in this.

And this is how much. It adds an exclamation point. It's showing that we really, really want him more than anything else. So, when we fast, we say with our mouths or we say with our bodies what we're saying with our mouths.

We say with our bodies what we're saying with our mouths. God, I need you. I need your help for this task ahead. And I need your help. I need you to be with me more than I need daily food.

My body needs food, but I need you more. And when we sin and we when we seek forgiveness, we say, I need your forgiveness.

[16:07] And then when we fast, we say, God, I need I need your forgiveness more than food. I need to be right with you because being right with you is that is my strength.

That is my help. And we're not twisting God's arm when we do this. We're not. We're not. This isn't a good work that we're somehow. Oh, I've sinned. And so I'll do this good thing and that will make it all better.

We aren't adding good works to our faith. Fasting is not a good work that you do. Fasting is based on the gospel. And so one author put it this way here.

Here that is in the place of fasting. There's no extortion. There's no magical attempt to force God's will. We merely look with confidence upon our heavenly father and through our fasting, say gently in our hearts, father, without you, I will die.

Come to my assistance. Make haste to help me. So fasting, if you're looking at it as only a bad, painful thing, you're missing the beauty of it.

[17:19] Fasting is a beautiful way for us to show God how much we need him and how much we long for him. And we're saying, Jesus, you're all I want.

You're my bridegroom and I want to be with you. And so we long for him. We long for him to be with us, not only physically, but just spiritually.

We long for him to forgive us and we long for him to meet with us. Well, fasting helps put God front and center in our lives.

It fights against the momentum of our culture and our flesh that wants just immediate gratification all the time. See, in our our we're so easily satisfied with what God has given us that we find his gifts to be more enjoyable than him.

And so what fasting does is say, you know what? I'm going to go without the gifts in order that I can have you. And it's always God's gifts that are the most dangerous thing.

[18:28] Because they can easily become our God instead. And that's what the danger Israel faced when they came into the promised land. Listen to Deuteronomy 8.

Moses says, when you have eaten and you're satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down and when your herds and your flocks grow large and your silver and your gold increase and all you have is multiplied.

Then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

In Israel, what was the enemy of remembering God's salvation? It was God's gifts. It was the promised land itself.

And so if you take them and you don't thank God immediately for them and you don't turn your heart towards God when you receive them, then your heart will grow cold.

[19:36] And it's the gifts themselves, the fine houses, the gold, the silver that can easily turn our hearts aside. And that was true in Israel. And it's true today. It's true for our church.

Physical fullness, being so satisfied with everything that God has given us can easily turn into spiritual emptiness.

Where we have we're rich in things, but we're not rich with God. And it was true in Israel and it's true for us. And so with fasting, we fight against that temptation.

Fasting fights physical fullness and spiritual emptiness. And it's purposely saying, God, you're I love your gifts. You are a good father. I thank you for them.

But I'm going to do without them because you are what I want. I don't want to be satisfied with just your gifts. I want you. And this is not a total rejection of God's gifts.

[20:41] Paul wrote to Timothy and said there's going to be false teachers that come and they're going to forbid people to marry and order them to be a to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth for everything God created is good and nothing is to be rejected.

So fasting is not a total rejection of God's gifts. It is a temporary rejection of them, a limited time rejection of them in order that we can pursue God himself.

So simply put, fasting is a God given way that we can say, God, your gifts are great, but you are better. Your love is better than life.

That's the purpose of fasting. It's a beautiful way. It's a beautiful thing when it's understood properly. Our next question, who should fast?

Who should fast? Who should fast? And here's the answer. All Christians who medically and situationally can. All Christians who medically and situationally can.

[21:54] In the Bible, fasting is expected, but it is never commanded absolutely. It's not, it's not something just for the elite.

Many ordinary Christians, many ordinary people model fasting in the Bible. Jesus said, when you give and when you pray and when you fast, he expected us to fast.

But it is never commanded absolutely. And I think there's a very good reason why. Some people medically cannot fast. God does not expect us.

God does not expect, for example, a diabetic, a doctor diagnosed diabetic to fast and so injure their bodies. And so notice I said a doctor diagnosed medical reason.

I'm not giving anyone any room to make an excuse. And I don't want anyone to tell themselves, well, I get hungry when I don't eat.

[23:01] And I get grumpy when I don't eat. And I start to sin when I don't eat. And so I better not fast. It's not good for my body to go without food.

And isn't that exactly what our culture tells us? How many meals do we need to eat these days?

According to the experts, well, probably three and four and five and six and snacks.

And you've got to fight the hunger pains no matter what. Don't be hungry because that's the enemy.

And so that mindset can come inside of us and start to so shape our minds that we simply sidestep Jesus what he expects from us.

And we'll pull excuses out of everywhere why we're not going to do what he expects us to do. Now, there are medical reasons. And there are situational reasons why you should not fast.

I understand that. But most people don't fit into that category. Jesus, who is busier than any of you, did not fit into that category.

[24:09] Well, some people can't for one reason or another. There's other ways to express your need and your desire. Going without sleep. Going without other things.

But we're all in danger of falling in love with this world. And falling in love with God's gifts to the exclusion of God himself.

And we all have a tendency to physical fullness and spiritual emptiness. And so if that is your danger, and that's most of our danger, then you should fast.

We all need to tell God and worship God better than what we do. And we need to walk and talk with him and have dealings with him. And fasting is a way that we can do that.

Well, how should we fast? How should we fast? Well, Jesus tells us on the Sermon on the Mount that fasting should not be done before men.

[25:12] The Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday. And guess what their shopping days were? Monday and Thursday. Because they loved to go into the public square looking like a wreck.

And so everyone would look at them and say, Ah, they're fasting! And think how great they were.

They would look disheveled and miserable. Because they wanted everyone to know what they're doing.

And Jesus says, That's not the way that it's going to be like with you. So why does Jesus say not to do it like that? What's his purpose behind that?

Because he doesn't want us to make a big show out of our religiosity. And not have the heart of the matter in us. But was he saying that absolutely no one should know that you are fasting?

And there's a reason I'm asking this question. Because I think in this, in Jesus' command to not let anyone know that you're fasting, there is an excuse that we find to not fast.

[26:15] So husbands, is it okay for your wife to know that you're fasting? Yes. When you don't show up at the dinner table, they're going to wonder.

And so, I'm saying it's okay for your husband to know that you're fasting. You're fasting wives.

Wives, it's okay for your husbands to know that you're fasting.

You don't have to sneak around like you're doing something wrong. Because you're not. Jesus' point was not to hide it. The virtue is not in hiding it. The virtue is in not publishing it to everyone that you know.

So your husband's going to notice that you're not there. So what should you do? You tell them, Honey, I'm fasting. Will you pray with me? Or better yet, fast together.

So how should you fast? Well, here's some practical suggestions. Start with a meal. Start small. There's no point in saying that you're going to fast for 40 days because you're not going to. [27 : 18] You won't be able to do it. So you start small with a meal, and you take that time, and you take the hunger that you have for that meal, and you give it to God. Remember, that's the point.

The physical, you're going to use the physical hunger for a spiritual good. You're not going to fight against the hunger and just be thinking, I'm hungry. I'm hungry. I need food. I need food. I can't worship. That's not the point. The point is, okay, I'm hungry. God, this is how much I want you. This is how much I love you. My body needs food, and I need you. So you read, and you pray, and you go, and you walk, and you talk with God. Go outside. Do something. But you're using the physical desire to enhance your spiritual desire. Not to distract you. You're going to use it. It's now your friend. And so with every hunger pain, every minute when you're desiring food, you're going to take that, and you're going to turn it to God. [28 : 19] And so it's going to become this wonderful, God-centered day. Well, maybe missing a meal doesn't do anything for you. You miss lots of meals, and you don't get hungry.

Then start with the whole day. Wake up and fast the whole day and go to sleep hungry. And eat breakfast like you do in a normal day.

And don't be legalistic about this. Because, to be honest, I've done this. I'm going to fast until 6 o'clock. And 6 o'clock comes around, and I gorge myself on food because I am so hungry.

And what was the point? What was that fasting all about? Well, it was just about food. It wasn't about God. And so don't be legalistic about it.

And don't say, I'm fasting all day, and then wake up at 12 midnight and pig out. Because you should know what your fasting is about then. You'll see what's inside your heart.

[29 : 22] Well, how should you fast? You do it regularly. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, When you pray, when you give, and when you fast.

How often should you pray? How often should you give? How often should you fast? Well, you should do those things regularly.

They should become a normal part of your life. Now, the only question left is, Will you? Will you start to fast?

Will you choose one day this week to fast? This isn't a command. I can't command you. God doesn't even command you.

But it is expected of us. And with things like this, if you don't do it tomorrow, or the next day, or even the next day after that, you're not going to do it.

[30 : 26] We have to strike when the iron is hot. And so you have to decide to act now. You have to decide a day now and then do it. Pick a meal. Pick a day. And you fast.

And if you don't feel anything, if you don't feel anything from it, then keep trying. Because this is about relating to God. And fasting, just like prayer, and just like reading, and just like any of the other spiritual disciplines, it's a learned thing.

It's a learned activity. It's not about how you feel the first time. It's about relating to God. And so as you learn to relate to God through fasting, it becomes more, it becomes better and better.

And so we start learning this week. And if you're lost here, God doesn't want your fasting unless you're repenting and believing, and you're pursuing Jesus.

Because that is the heart of fasting. It's about Jesus. And if you're not fasting out of a longing for Jesus, then there's no point to it. So this isn't a good work to please Him.

[31 : 43] The work God wants you to do is to believe on the one He has sent. And so it's simply repenting and believing. And if you want to fast in order to show Jesus, I really want to be right with you, that's fine.

And that's good. But don't think because you're skipping meals that you're going to earn God's favor. Because you're not. Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

Fasting is built upon the Gospel. It's not a substitute for the Gospel. So no man can come to the Father except through Jesus. And that's what we want our fasting to be about.

Well, let's pray. Our Lord, will you forgive us for being so physically full and so spiritually empty so much of the time? Lord, we want to be careful.

You have blessed us and you have shown your goodness to us. And we thank you for it. We thank you for all the food that we get to eat, all the good things that you fill our lives with.

[32 : 51] And they are from you. And we thank you. And we praise you for your goodness. Your goodness is meant to lead us to repentance. It's meant to lead the lost to repentance.

It's meant to lead your children who are straying to repentance. And yet, Father, we want to be careful not to love your gifts and not you.

And so will you show us how we can take and use fasting to come and walk close with you, to love you more and to show you our desire to stir up in our hearts a greater desire for you.

Thank you for your word that makes these things clear to us. I pray that we would be careful doers of them.

Will you help us to consecrate all of our lives to you, our physical life, our spiritual life, our mental life, the words that we say, the thoughts of our heart, the things that we feel.

[33 : 57] Will you help us to give them all to you? And will you take them and use them for your glory? We pray and ask in Jesus name. Let's stand and take our hymnals and turn to 492.