

This morning we come to the spiritual practice that is, generally speaking, the least practiced one there is: Fasting. Therefore, this will be the longest sermon in the series. 😊 **In his book, “Practicing the Way,” John Mark Comer writes that fasting is the single most neglected spiritual practice in the modern Western Church (p. 185).** This is reflected in the number of traditional hymns and modern worship songs about fasting. It’s somewhere in the range of zero. In fact, Deanna, who normally leads our worship band, is off today, and at staff meeting this week, Tim made the comment that he thought she took this Sunday off and asked him to lead because it’s hard to find songs about fasting. I replied that it’s easy: Just play fast songs. 😂 Dad humor. Sorry.

It is also, however, the spiritual practice we see Jesus practicing the least. Only one time is it recorded in the gospels that Jesus fasted – just after his baptism and before his public ministry. Of course, it is certainly possible he engaged in this practice more frequently and it just wasn’t noted. But he does encourage fasting, and he taught on it, and like last week assumes that people do it. In the Gospel of Mark, he clearly says that his followers would fast after he left them.

And it’s kind of an odd word. **When we think of the word “fast” we think of it as an adverb or an adjective: “I ate my dessert way too fast.”** (Which people say all the time). “That beginning elementary band concert went by too fast” (which, no one ever says). But as a spiritual practice, the word “fast” is being used as a noun and a verb. It’s something you do, that you put into practice. And a fast is the period of time that you do the fasting. And while the word is used that way outside of the church, it’s not real common.

So, you put it all together, and it’s a spiritual practice that is a bit more unusual than the others, a bit more of a stretch to participate in, and therefore isn’t practiced by a lot of Christians, especially here in America. So, why fast? What’s the point? What does a fast look like for Christians? Let’s read

today's passage to introduce this topic and then dive into these kinds of questions. We are in **Matthew 6:16-18** this morning. This is God's Word to you and me today.

So, as I mentioned a moment ago, we see that **Jesus assumes that people fast**. Now, this, like last week, is part of the "Sermon on the Mount" and it's spoken to a larger group of people than just his 12 disciples. In fact, the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount weren't something Jesus taught just one time. Matthew introduces the sermon on the mount back in chapter 5 with words in Greek that mean, "This is what Jesus regularly, or ongoingly, taught." These are things that he frequently taught about, not just one time. Fasting is one of those things. And he presumes that his audience fasts. There's no rationale laid out, no case made, for engaging in this practice. It's assumed.

Like we saw last week with the topic of prayer, and it's in the passage before that one as well where Jesus talks about financial stewardship, **Jesus again critiques those who engage in this spiritual discipline for the wrong reasons, and calls them hypocrites**. It's the third time he does this in just a few verses.

You see, the purpose of fasting was for spiritual growth – to lean into God more...to become more dependent on Him. But the people Jesus critiques here were doing it for reasons of arrogance and pride, to show the world how righteous and spiritual they were. Now, in the Old Testament, fasting was often associated with repentance or mourning, and there were public things that one might do in regards to them, such as spreading ashes on your face. For instance, in Isaiah 58:5, we read, **"Is it [fasting] only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?" (Isaiah 58:5)**. (Sackcloth is a material like burlap – coarse – and often worn in times of mourning.) We see sackcloth associated with fasting in the book of Jonah, as well, when the people in the city of Ninevah repented of their ways after Jonah's warnings to them (Jonah 3:5-6), and they fasted during that time of repentance.

But there were people who abused these external things, and used fasting and the outward signs associated with it, as a way of showing people how spiritual and righteous they were. **Fasting became less about strengthening their personal spiritual journey with God, as it was intended, and more about strengthening their social status.** Jesus calls them hypocrites, and like last week he uses the same Greek word to say that they have received their “reward” – their misthos. It’s that Greek word that can mean a positive or negative consequence that results from an action. That’s the fruit of this misguided fasting.

Jesus is directing his followers away from that, and back to the proper intentions of fasting. He wants his followers to see fasting as a personal spiritual practice that draws people into a deeper faith walk. In fact, he directs his followers. **“When fasting, put oil on your head and wash your face” (Matthew 6:17) In other words, when fasting, take good care of yourself.** Don’t neglect regular, normal care for yourself. Don’t look all disheveled, lifeless, and depressed when you’re fasting. As John Mark Comer writes, “[When you fast] You are practicing suffering, and through it, increasing your capacity for joy in all circumstances.” The Pharisees seriously lacked joy in their fasting, in an effort to draw attention to themselves.

Now: **We might wonder about how long to fast or when to fast, and what to fast from.** Jesus, as I mentioned at the start, famously took a fast in the wilderness just after he was baptized. So, he goes from spiritual high point of baptism, to a Holy-Spirit led fasting in the desert for 40 days. We’re told that he ate nothing during that time, and in case it’s not obvious, Matthew and Luke tell us that at the end of the 40 days, he was hungry. He’s not trying to insult us, but rather emphasize Jesus’ humanity. Jesus hungered like you and I do. And if you think fasting for 40 days sounds more like a physical torture than a spiritual blessing, let me remind you that is also tempted by the devil three times, with his identity as the Son of God being called into question with each one. It was a physical and spiritual test that prepared him for his public ministry.

Besides Jesus, Moses once fasted for 40 days as well, on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28). That’s just a really long time to go without food. Praise God,

there are shorter fasts in the Bible, too. Daniel and his companions fasted for three weeks and it wasn't a complete fast. They ate vegetables and drank water, but otherwise avoided all other food and beverage. In the book of Esther, we see Queen Esther call for a three-day fast, for the Jewish people to pray for deliverance, as their future was in jeopardy. Then there's the annual Day of Atonement, also called "Yom Kippur," which was observed with a 24-hour fast from both food and water, and you can read about that in Leviticus 16:29-31. Others who fasted include King David, Elijah, Nehemiah, Anna, and others. It's a "who's who" of biblical heroes of faith. The point is: the roots of fasting go deep and there are various lengths of time that people would do it for, and they weren't always complete fasts. There were partial fasts.

Now, as I said, **Jesus is only shown fasting one time in the gospels, for the 40 days in the desert.** And maybe he fasted other times, but he didn't advertise it if so. Can you imagine, after this teaching and regularly teaching it, that he'd be on a fast and say to his disciples, "Hey, I'm in the middle of a three-day fast...could you make sure this gets recorded when my life's biographies get written later?" Talk about hypocritical, right? But, he may very well have participated in other fasts besides the one we know about. If nothing else, Yom Kippur, the annual holy day I mentioned a moment ago, would have been something he participated in, and a 24-hour complete fast was a part of that. At a minimum, he would have done that.

But why not fast more? Why not do it with his disciples and encourage them? For instance, there seems to have been a practice by some of the religious leaders of the day to fast two days a week, believed to typically be on Mondays and Thursdays. Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18 where a religious leader fasts two days a week. Jesus' parables were usually drawn from familiar things to them – farming, eating, relationships, and so forth – so this two days a week fasting by religious leaders was also probably commonly known, and is probably the hypocritical fasting that Jesus is speaking against. But why not have his guys fast once or twice a week, and learn how to do it more properly?

Well, later in Matthew's gospel (chapter 9), some guys who still followed John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast but your disciples do not?" So right there we see that Jesus did not have his disciples fast regularly – whether it was twice a week or some other frequency. It's not just that it wasn't recorded: They didn't do it. And Jesus' reply is, **"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast"** (Jesus, in Matthew 9:15). So, again we see fasting associated with grieving and mourning though that was not the only reason people did it as we've seen. But most importantly, Jesus doesn't deny that his disciples don't fast, but a time will come when they will.

And so still, to this day, Jesus' disciples fast. Maybe not very regularly, but people still do, and it's certainly upheld as a spiritual discipline to make use of. The reasons for fasting are closer to the reasons Jesus fasted in the wilderness – as a time of preparation for ministry. It was a time of trusting his heavenly Father. It was a time of prayer and staying focused. We see this in the book of Acts, 13, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" So here we see a time of prayer and listening to God, focusing on him and his leading in worship and fasting is a part of it. Fasting and worship go together in that Acts passage.

So, fasting has a fair amount of freedom in how we go about it. The main thing is drawing closer to God, and seeking him first above all things. In fact, when you look at the whole of chapter 6 in Matthew up until this point, there's a common theme of cultivating our spiritual life, our walk with God, and focusing on it as an internal thing. It's a heart thing. That's where God works. Whether it's our finances, our praying, or our fasting, all three of these topics are addressed by Jesus, all three when practiced by people for the sake of spiritual pride are critiqued as hypocrites, and all three are encouraged to be done "in secret" where our heavenly father will see.

In other words, at the core of these three things, including fasting as we see in today's passage... **At the core is our relationship with God.** It's about getting centered on Him. It's about depending on him. Trusting him.

Eliminate distractions for a bit, eliminate physical nourishment even, and be reminded that God is the one who nourishes us. He's the one who feeds us. It's our souls that need the deepest nourishment and care. Remember when Jesus is in the wilderness and facing temptation, one of his responses to the devil is, **“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4)**. That's where our real nourishment is found – in our relationship with God and listening to his voice, reading his word, and letting it sink into us and satisfy us. And when we fast, it helps us to remember that and focus on that.

There are other things we can fast from, besides food: phones and computers, social media, all television, the news, driving your car, shopping for clothes or shoes or ski gear...you could fast from secular music and listen only to Christian music... The day after the Super bowl, you could take a 6 month fast from watching NFL football games. Fasting from the Seahawks already started a couple weeks ago. Ok, that doesn't count. That's like me saying I'm going to fast from listening to country music. **The point is, there are all kinds of things we can set aside for a time to remind us of our dependence on God.** The serious things I mentioned, and so many others like them, often feed us in some way, shape, or form – food feeds us physically, of course, but the other things feed our ego or the part of our brain that gives out dopamine, or they feed our emotions. And fasting from them is a Biblical way of setting those things aside and stopping that thing for a season, to cultivate our walk with God and be drawn into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

So, Consider trying a fast of some kind, especially if you're in a season of spiritual dryness or seeking God's will in some particular facet of life. And use that time to intentionally be with God – reading Scripture, praying, being in Christian community and seeking his will. I know for health reasons, that fasting for a full day from all food may not be at all possible for some folks. That's fine. Fast from something else, as I just mentioned. Fast from something that you would normally engage with (not football in the offseason!), and use the time you'd otherwise be using for that thing to pray, or read your Bible, or listen to worship music, or serve God, or just bask in the glory of God. Fasting is a common practice during the season of Lent,

which is the 40+ days that lead up to Easter. Lent starts in early March this year. Maybe you fast from something this year during that time – for all 40 days, or for one or two days a week during that time. Or try something sooner, even for a day. At the risk of placing myself with the hypocrites Jesus calls out, I'll let you know that I've done full day fasts from food a couple times in my life. I've done partial fasts – either skipping a meal I'd normally eat, or fasting from some certain thing for a few weeks. They were all intentional for my own spiritual nourishment.

Does fasting feel like willfully entering into suffering for a day or a longer time period? It might. Especially fasting from food, or from your phone. Between those two, it might be debatable for some people which would be harder. But whatever bit of suffering we might go through (hesitate to even use the word “suffering”) nothing compares to the suffering that Jesus willfully went through on the cross for you and me. And yet, in our effort to apprentice under Jesus and live like him: maybe fasting, just a little suffering, is exactly what we need to take a step along the path of following him. Let's pray...Amen.