

Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting and the Way of Jesus

Introduction: If you're joining us for the first time - Welcome. We're currently teaching through Jesus' most famous teaching known as the Sermon on the mount.

Contrary to what some may think the Sermon on the Mount is not teaching us how to get into the kingdom of God- the Bible makes it clear that entrance to God's kingdom is only through grace - by the sacrificial work of Jesus.

The sermon is also not teaching us how we stay in the kingdom. Rather it is a description of the character and conduct of those who already belong to God's kingdom.

The Sermon is not a call to repentance, though that may be involved at times, it is a description of the expression and evidences of true repentance.

Though anyone can listen and learn from this sermon, and respond to it's offer of the fulness of life, it's primary audience and focus is the disciple of Jesus. It describes the life that necessarily results from genuine salvation; it describes what God is doing in us and wants to do in us. What he is making us into by the work of his spirit and grace upon us.

This sermon of Jesus has been used for centuries to shape and form God's people into the way of Jesus and we are believing that this is what God will do with us as well.

This morning we're gonna talk about some deep level spiritual disciplines. I hope that it is received as an invitation from Jesus, to enter into his heart and love for the world. Throughout our teaching on the Sermon on the Mount we have seen how Jesus is aiming at our hearts. He doesn't just want to give new rules or renewed laws for his people. He is giving us practices, habits, new desires and hopes, a new way of being in order to make us into a certain type of people - Kingdom of God people.

The Spiritual Disciplines contained in the Sermon on the Mount - forgiveness, mercy, righteousness, justice, charity, prayer and fasting, etc. are absolutely vital for the Christian in order to renew our hope,

refresh our faith and reorder our loves toward our king and his kingdom. And absolutely necessary for shaping us into the people God intends us to be.

This morning we are talking about Fasting.

Have you ever done a fast?

I'm not talking about an internet, social media, or sugar fast.. that's giving up something for health reasons, it might be good for you, but that's not really fasting.

1. What is Fasting?

1. In Christian tradition - we fast in order to gain some benefit - this might be personal discipline, spiritual growth, victory over a certain sin, and a greater chance at getting our prayers answered because God sees how serious we are - we skipped breakfast...
2. My understanding growing up, though I honestly didn't give much thought to it, was that fasting was in some sense a way to put God in your debt - you gave something up - he owes you an answered prayer or something..

1. The crazy thing I found is that you can't find anything close to this teaching in the Bible..

2. True Fasting

1. In scripture what we find is that fasting is a whole body response to human grief and serious conditions. In Jewish tradition it was done during times of national crisis such as drought, famine, destructive earthquakes, crop disease, military attack or attack from wild predators.
2. *"Fasting means a human being refrains from food or drink, or both, for a limited time in response to some sacred, grievous moment. Such sacred or grievous moments include death, the threat of war, sin, our neediness, or our fear of God's judgment on our sin, (whether personal or national)...The focus of the Bible on fasting is not what we get from fasting or on motivating people to fast in order to acquire something, but instead lands squarely on responding to sacred moments in life."* - Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*

1. Think about that for a moment... Have you ever been hit by something so heavy (The death of a loved one, news of cancer, family tragedy, a wayward child, 9/11, mass shooting) but the moment you were in didn't allow for you to physically enter into

the the grief that your heart and your head felt? Maybe the person or people connected we're far removed from you? Maybe you couldn't spend the whole day talking to God about it?

3. Fasting is the way we act in solidarity, and true sympathy with the sufferings of the world around us. Not only that but fasting enters into how the God of the Bible thinks and feels about death, sin, war, violence and injustice... - one example - Think about Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus..
4. **In the Bible we really have three major ideas that emerge about fasting.**
 1. Fasting is connected to Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement. The Israelites prepared for confession, atonement, and forgiveness for themselves and for their nation (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-32)
 1. On this day they were grieving their sin the term used in the Hebrew word "Anah" - it means to deny or humble yourself - food, drink -sustenance and what delights, while looking to Yahweh for forgiveness, redemption and ultimately the restoration of all things.
 2. Fasting also includes a response to a grievous event. Listen to how David responded when tragedy hit not his friend but his enemy, ***"Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about. They repay me evil for good and leave me like one bereaved. Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled (Anah) myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother."* -Psalm 35:11-14**
 3. Lastly, in Isaiah 58, the Israelites are fasting while simultaneously oppressing the weak, the poor, and the the destitute among them - total and utter hypocrisy since fasting is a mourning and grieving sin and unrighteousness. The prophet connects true fasting to doing justice, caring for the poor, and providing for the hungry.
 1. When taking all 3 of these together we see that fasting is directly related to mourning and grieving sin, the brokenness of the world -the lack of righteousness, justice and peace, the hurt of others and looking toward Yahweh in longing for forgiveness, healing and redemption.

3. Should Christians today Fast?

1. Short answer - Yes
2. Long answer - just like in charity and prayer - Jesus says "When you fast or whenever you fast". It is assumed by Jesus that his people will fast.
3. But Jesus warns us that when we fast - we aren't to make a show of it - it shouldn't be done to draw attention to ourselves, to get people to notice how "spiritual" we are, or "closer to God" we are than others. In Jesus' day there were appointed mourners and people who would fast for the sins of the nation of Israel - if they had a good rain and good crop that year this would bring fame and recognition to these mourning and fasting individuals. -God saw their fasting and rewarded them = "super holy". Which brings on Jesus' criticism of doing it in such a way -(disheveled hair, ripped clothes, dust on your head) for others to notice. I know - it seems so weird to us, and to our context - but so it was.
4. By and large I don't think we have a problem with fasting (at all, or) in order for people to notice our personal piety... but this is what I have seen - so I'll address it. I have seen people in the church make the pain, grief and tragedy of others an opportunity for personal attention - rather than entering into true solidarity and sympathy with others, praying and physically supporting someone in their tragedy.. they make the whole thing about them... An opportunity to pontificate their theological stance on suffering and sovereignty...An opportunity for people to know that they stand for this or that cause... that they care about injustice... You love other people's drama because it's an opportunity for recognition for you to talk about how it affects you..... someone else's tragedy is not an opportunity for your virtue-signaling.
 1. We must be very careful of this. And this is why what Jesus teaches us is so powerful - if you feel for the pain of others, if you hurt for the suffering of the world, rather than looking for a soap box or opportunity to make it known, to blow a horn for recognition - enter into silent solidarity through fasting - show your pain to God, do it before him... And he who sees in secret will reward you.. Healing, restoration, redemption - the Kingdom??

4. What does true fasting look like for the follower of Jesus?

1. If we go back and take the 3 main ideas from scripture (Mourning personal and national sin, entering into the pain and sorrow of others, fasting as a connection to righteousness and justice) I believe it really connects back to Jesus' teaching on those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
 1. As God's kingdom people Jesus is calling us to be those who would stand in the gap, between our God of redemption and Resurrection Hope and Power and the suffering, hurting, broken world. He is calling us to be those who would stand in solidarity with the sufferers of our world - even as Jesus identified with the lowly, the weak, the poor, the outcast, the oppressed of his day. As we mourn, as we fast, in solidarity with the world we cultivate within ourselves the heart of God and we grow a deep longing, a hunger and a thirst for his kingdom and his righteousness.
 2. I think a good analogy is connecting Fasting to Advent - in observing Advent the Church thinks and reflects back to the longing of the people of God as they awaited God's kingdom and his King, while living under the tyranny, brutality and oppression of the Roman Empire. Think of the song, O Come O Come Emmanuel.... *"O Come thou dayspring come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here - dispel the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadow put to flight"* - all of this reflecting, creates incredible sympathy and of empathy in us and a renewed hope and longing for us - so then we can sing out - *REJOICE, REJOICE, EMMANUEL SHALL COME TO THEE O ISRAEL!* We feel with Israel, we feel their pain and their longing...
 3. Fasting creates a great longing in us for the arrival of the true King. We enter into the pain and suffering of our world, we enter the sacred, grievous moments of life while looking with greater longing, with groaning's and great ache to the ONE who will make all things new. Looking to the Great High Priest, Jesus, who did in fact stand in the gap between the God of redemption and the pain and suffering of the world.
 1. ***Listen to Paul - "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation***

itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” -Romans 8:18-23

5. **Closing:** Let's talk personally for a minute - Some of us aren't even willing to go there, and honestly I get it. who wants to look at this stuff -it's heart breaking. We don't want to face the evil and suffering of the world, we don't want to face our own darkness, and selfishness.. it's too bleak, it's too hopeless for us, it hurts too much!! So we ignore it, we avoid it, we stay on the surface in relationships and conversations, we distract ourselves with humor, new purchases and vacations. Most of us live lives in safe neighborhoods where danger does not come to our door - we are cut off, removed from the real world of pain and suffering.
 1. I have 4 reasons, for us, and especially those I just mentioned, why we need fasting in our regular rhythm of following Jesus:
 1. **First** - Because this is what Jesus has done for us - Jesus didn't just deny his hungry stomach or his thirsty mouth in solidarity with the world - Jesus gave his body as food for the life of the world as he says, in John 6:51, **"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."**
 1. Jesus stood in the gap. He didn't just sympathize with our pain, he took it upon himself - he entered into the pain and suffering of the world, he took all upon himself and there on the cross he bore all our sickness and our sorrow, in order to redeem us and bring us into the kingdom of God. This is what Jesus has done for you and in fasting he gives you and I very tangible and practical way to be with him, and to become more like him - in his heart, compassion and love for a suffering world.
 1. John Stott paints a vivid picture of the empathy of our God when he writes, *"I have entered many Buddhist temples in different asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha his legs*

crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world.' But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us." "The cross of Christ is God's only self justification in such a world as ours." -John Stott, The Cross of Christ

1. That's Our God, and we are his people. The Gospel shapes us into people who do for others what God has done for us. He entered into our pain, we enter into theirs and so become like our King..
2. **Second** - If we ignore the pain and suffering of the world around us, we will be unprepared when tragedy hits us, and it will. We will stunt our maturity and growth as humans and our ability to care for others in rich and meaningful ways. Fasting prepares us for action.
3. **Third** - if you turn your heart off to the pain and suffering of the world, toward sympathy, if you just ignore it - your heart won't just remain the same, it will grow hard as stone.
 1. *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the danger and perturbations of love is hell." - C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves.*

4. **Lastly** - we will never learn to look to God, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and justice, for hope and redemption....Fasting shapes and refines our hope.

The Spiritual Disciplines contained in the Sermon on the Mount - forgiveness, mercy, righteousness, justice, charity, prayer and fasting, etc. are absolutely vital for the Christian in order to renew our hope, refresh our faith and reorder our loves toward our king and his kingdom. They are needed and necessary for shaping us into the people God intends us to be.