

Fasting: To Grow in Hunger for God

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[0 : 00] We're going to read together from Mark chapter 6, verses 16 to 18, and then from Mark chapter 2, verses 18 to 20. Jesus says, In Mark chapter 2, verses 18 to 20, This is God's holy word.

We're working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we finished up looking at the Lord's Prayer, and so we carry on towards the end of Matthew chapter 6. And when Matthew wrote these words after Jesus had taught them, I don't think he would have ever guessed that fasting would be cool today for a completely different reason than the spiritual life.

So today people love fasting, and they love intermittent fasting. And all sorts of types of fasting. But we do it today, many people do it for fighting disease, and weight loss, and all sorts of good things. And it is pretty effective. But in the Bible, fasting is not there for physical health. It's there for spiritual health. And so fasting is an important practice that we see in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A religious practice. But here when you look closely at what Jesus teaches about fasting, we see, first, the heart of fasting. Secondly, the nature of fasting.

[2 : 03] And then finally, an answer to the question, how can you take a step towards it, especially if you've never fasted before? So first, let's think about the heart of fasting that Jesus points us to here.

We learn here in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus says that there are hypocrites who are making their faces look gloomy, disfiguring themselves so that their fasting could be seen by others in public. So who are these people that are making their faces look gloomy so that they can be seen by other people on days that they're fasting? Well, it's probably the Pharisees. And here we're having just a brief reference by Jesus, a bit veiled to this battle that takes place all throughout Jesus' ministry. And the battle is between Jesus and tradition. Jesus and religious tradition in particular. And so we read also from Mark chapter 2 where the Pharisees come up to Jesus because his disciples never fast.

And they say, why is it that John the Baptist's disciples fast and we fast, but you, Jesus, none of your followers, you don't fast. And Jesus says, can the people that come to a wedding feast, can they fast when the bridegroom, when the groom is there with them?

[3 : 23] That's the question. Just after that, they come back to him. His disciples are walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath day and they're picking ears of grain to eat, to grind in their fingers and eat.

And the Pharisees say, how in the world can your disciples pick grain on the Sabbath day, a day of rest? Can they do this work? And you see that over and over again there's this battle taking place in the Gospels between Jesus and religion, Jesus and tradition, Jesus and the religious practices that were normal in the first century.

Now, it's been about 75 years since religion and the practices of religion were something that could get you social capital in this culture.

When religion really mattered for your standing in society, probably at least about 75 years since then. And just before that, in the 19th century and into the early 20th century, public leaders, philosophers, sociologists said that religion was going to die out.

So we would eventually reach a time in the 20th century and especially in the 21st century where we lived in a religion-less society. So people like Karl Marx and Freud and Nietzsche all said we're moving towards a religion-less society.

[4 : 39] That never happened, right? So we have many, many religious people still in our society. But today we're in a strange time where religion and religious practice will not get you any public capital, social capital, right?

It doesn't really help you in your job, in your career. It doesn't help you advance in any obvious way in society. And at the same time, people are less hostile to religion than 20 years ago.

So people are more interested in religion. They're curious. There's a resurgence of interest. We've felt that even here at St. Columbus with more and more people coming to explore the faith, religion, religious practice, and what people do at church and all these sorts of things, right?

The thesis, the thesis I have for you tonight, if a sermon needs a thesis, maybe not, is this. We don't need a return to religion. When you read the Gospels carefully, you see we don't need a return to religion.

Why? Because Jesus Christ came to go to battle with religion. He came to go to battle against religion. We don't need a turn to what we might call mere religion, but true religion.

[5 : 44] We need a return, a revival, a reawakening, a renewal of gospel religion, not mere religious practices. And that's exactly what Jesus is drawing out here in this passage.

What is mere religion? We learn about it here. We could call it false religion, mere religion, mere tradition. And it's doing publicly respectable works of faith in order to be seen by other people.

So mere religion is reputation management. It's doing public practices of faith in order to be seen by other people and known as a good, decent religious person.

And underneath it is a work of self-justification. So underneath mere religion, traditional religion, the formalism of religious practices is on the one hand pride, the deep desire to be known as a good person.

On the other hand, it's an insecurity, a fear that says, if anybody finds out the truth about me, if I was ever really known for who I was, I'd be exposed, I'd be ruined, right?

[6 : 48] And so mere religion, religious practices are pretense. It's a pretense based in pride, driven by insecurity to publicly manage your reputation through being known as a good person, through the lens of religious practices.

Now, in this passage, there's a fasting culture that's being referred to. And it's this, in the first century, according to the way Judaism had developed in the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, people would fast on Mondays and Thursdays.

The Pharisees fasted every Monday and every Thursday. And that's probably what Jesus is talking about here, when you fast. So fasts are happening every single week on Mondays and Thursdays.

And this is part of the three religious pillars that were normal in the first century.

Jesus has been talking about them. And Ryan and Lewis both looked at different ones with us. He says, when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, like the Pharisees. He says, when you give to the needy, don't be like the Pharisees.

When you fast. So he's talking about these three different pillars. Prayer, giving to the needy, almsgiving, and fasting. And Jesus here is coming and not being down on the three religious practices.

[7 : 58] No, not at all. Instead, he's talking about the motivation of the heart here. And he's trying to really uncover what's going on in the who we are directing these practices towards when we do them.

So here the problem is that the Pharisees, when they fast, they're literally trying to change their appearance. So in the first century, there are no showers. Okay? There are no, there's hardly baths for that matter.

You can go wash in the river. That's about it. And so what the normal practice every day was is you wake up and you, if you have money, you anoint your hair with oil.

And so anointment was a daily practice, but it wasn't religious. It was, you put grease in your hair, oil in your hair to push it back, but to keep it moderately clean to some degree. And you would regularly wash your face.

And so here he's saying that they don't anoint their heads. They don't wash their faces. You can see that this is what Jesus is talking about in verse 17. When you fast, you do anoint your head with oil. You do wash your face.

[8 : 57] In other words, be normal. Wake up every day, he's saying. You know, take a shower in the modern terms. He's saying be normal. In other words, what he's saying is that the Pharisees were, in order to look great, trying to look as dirty as possible.

Right? In order to look great in the eyes of other people, trying to make their appearance look as dirty as practically possible. So they were coming around the city in Jerusalem with very messy

hair, without any oil in their hair.

They were going with very dirty faces because they wanted everybody to know, today is my fast day. I'm fasting today. And they wanted to see on the outside how starved they were on the inside. Right?

So they're experiencing a physical. They're, in other words, altering their physical appearance in order to be seen by other people to secure their reputation. Now, the irony of this is that in the Old Testament, there is only one prescribed fast day.

So the Pharisees are fasting 104 times a year. The Old Testament has one day of prescribed fasting for the community of faith. And that's in preparation for the Day of Atonement.

[10:04] And that's it. And so they want to look terrible 104 days out of the year in order to be seen as great people. In order to secure their reputation. Now, what do we learn?

Here's what we learn. Mere religion, religious practice, mere religion, false religion, is directed at other people, not God.

And let me say it a little more strongly. Mere religion is using God to accrue power by way of performance.

Mere religion uses God to pursue power by way of public performance. It's reputation management. It's there to be seen by others.

And Jesus, all throughout the Gospels, he goes to battle and he says to them, you know, you tithe. You tithe cumin and dill. And you go in the three pillars of the practices, right?

[11:03] And you go to the temple. Let me say it like this. You could make very visible and very public most religious practices, right? So the Pharisees could go to the temple on the right day and they could do their almsgiving.

And what did you do? You had to go to a public space where there were bags and buckets and you had to drop your coins in. And everybody would hear the clank of the coins hit the bottom of that bucket. And we even know that sometimes, you know, you'd sort of throw them in so that it would really make a loud noise.

You could do that. Or you could go and pray in public. And so they would go to the temple and they would pray out loud as eloquent as possible to be heard by others. But when it comes to fasting, how do you make that visible?

If your goal is to be seen by other people, if it's to accrue power by using God for your own personal gain, how do you make that visible? You've got to disfigure yourself. You've got to look a certain way.

You've got to change your appearance. And Jesus goes to battle with that. And what does he tell us? He tells us, religion is about me. The gospel is about Jesus.

[12:04] Religion believes that appearing as a good person is the key. The gospel says that being honest about who you really are is the key.

Being open about your struggles and your sins, that's the key. So you can buy other people's opinion of you if you're really careful and you really play good tricks.

You can do certain religious practices to buy, purchase other people's opinion about you. That you're a good person, you're a great person, you're a decent person.

You can never buy God's opinion. You can never purchase it. And the gospel comes and says you don't need to because he purchased you.

You don't need to ever try reputation management before the Lord because he bought you. You don't have to buy his opinion. You don't have to buy his value. You don't have to buy his love because his love has already been set upon you when you come to him in Christ, through Christ, by the love of the cross.

[13:11] The gospel, when you experience it, it produces true religion. So let me just move on and say this. How do you evaluate your own religious practices?

So Jesus is not down on the religious practices. Here we are tonight. You're here practicing religion. Meaning that you've come to worship. You've shown up. You've probably read the Bible passage. You've sung some of the songs. You've sung psalms. This week you'll go and you'll practice religion. You'll pray. You'll open the scriptures. You'll do all sorts of things. How do you protect yourself from religious practice becoming mere religion, false religion?

And I think the simple question to ask yourself tonight is, do I come in any sense, in the slightest sense, because I'm hungry for more of God?

Do I come? Very simple. Do I come for reputation management? Or do I come because I'm actually hungry to get more of God in my life? I want to meet with him. I want to know more of him.

[14:14] Even if I'm struggling to want to know God, do I come acknowledging that struggle, honest about that struggle? A person who's experiencing the gospel comes in honesty and says, Lord, I'm not hungry for you tonight.

But I come here practicing religion just so that I can get a taste, a glimpse of the desire of what it would be like to want more of you. How do you protect? Let me give you three things you can do. Number one, very simple. Wake up every day and take one minute, two minutes, five minutes. Very simple practice to first confess your sins. Number two, turn and meditate on the gospel, on Jesus Christ himself and his love for you.

And three, say, Lord, help me, give me the desires I need to have for you today. Three simple practices, five minutes every morning. Lord, I need to confess my sins, look straight at Jesus, preach the gospel to myself, and depend on him in prayer.

Every single day, and it'll help protect you from turning the gospel into mere religion. Now, here's a way, here's a quote. Jack Miller, one of the late pastors in the U.S., he says that you know that you've got the gospel life in you, not mere religion, when you can say something like this.

[15:32] Can you say this tonight? He says, cheer up. You are far worse than you've ever imagined. And cheer up. God's grace is far greater than you've ever imagined.

So cheer up. The spirit is at work today in your weakness. And if you can say that about yourself, you know that you've got the gospel at your heart, at your core, not mere religion, not mere religious practice.

Now, secondly, we haven't said a word really about fasting yet. Okay, what is fasting? Secondly, what is it really? Why should we take up this practice of fasting?

Fasting, what is it? Okay, it is occasionally withholding from food or other pleasures and comforts in life in order to create a spiritual hunger for God.

So in our 2025 practices, Christian habits at St. Columba's, one of the fasts that is recommended on our practices sheet that are right over here is to have a weekly fast from screens and social media.

[16:34] And so you can fast from food, you can fast from all sorts of other things. Obviously, in the first century, it's primarily fasting from food. But Mark 2, that other passage we read, is really helpful on what fasting is.

Because in it, when the Pharisees come to Jesus in verse 19, and they say, why are your disciples not fasting? His answer, so insightful, he says, well, because you don't fast during a wedding.

You don't fast when the groom is with the guests. Now, this worked in the first century. It still works today. So imagine that it's wedding week.

Imagine that it's your wedding week, somebody's wedding week that you know. And it's, you know, the wedding's coming, it's the day before, it's two days before. And the groom gets the groomsman, the best man, the dad, and they all go out and they play golf.

Right? And they do whatever you like to do. They go play golf, they do whatever. They go to the steakhouse. And the waiter comes and says, what would you like? And the groom orders this feast, you know.

[17:36] And his dad orders this feast, and all the guys order the feast. And it gets around to the best man, and the waiter says, what would you like? And he says, well, I'm actually fasting today. It's my fast day.

Right? Now, I know that that illustration doesn't work for you if you're vegetarian. But imagine any, whatever food you want to put in that place. And the waiter comes and he says, are you going to eat? No, it's my fast day.

It's Thursday. You know, it's my fast day. And what would the groom say? The groom would say, you don't fast when the groom is seated next to you preparing for the wedding feast itself.

Right? In other words, what do we learn here? What is Jesus saying? He's saying that fasting exists because it's ordered unto feasting. Fasting exists to create hunger for the feast.

And so the reason that the disciples did not fast when Jesus was with them is because the groom himself was present. So you don't fast on the day of the feast. Right? But you fast in order to create hunger for the feast.

[18 : 37] And what feast do we fast for? What is Jesus talking about? In the feast that we fast for, to know about it, you've got to go all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, to Genesis chapter 3, when Adam and Eve were told to fast.

So at the very beginning, one of the first stories in Scripture is that Adam was told, fast from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do not take the pleasures.

Do not seek personal autonomy. Fast from this option in front of you in order that you would be hungry for the feast, the true feast. If you fast, Adam, you get the feast.

And what was the feast? The feast was to get the fullness of the presence of God himself. It was to get God all the way. It was to have everything that we were made for. Fast, Adam, and you will have the feast.

And we see in this passage, Matthew 6, he says the Pharisees, what are they doing? They're fasting in order to get their reward. They're fasting for their own feast. And what is their feast? Their feast is reputation.

[19 : 37] Their feast is to be seen by other people and to be thought, man, that's a swell guy. That's their feast. But he says don't fast for that. Fast in private. That's what's the real feast.

And what's the real feast? We learn about it in Genesis 2 and 3. It's the feast that you can fast unto today as a Christian. And it's the feast of the exact same thing. Emmanuel, God with us, getting the fullness of God's presence in your life.

Seeing the face of Jesus Christ one day. It's coming to the feast itself. The beatific vision, as the theologians say. The vision of God coming to sit down in person with Jesus Christ. We fast today to make us hungry for what we were made for.

The feast. To see God, the living God, one day. So that means that in the Bible, Christian believers fast ever since Jesus has come to say, we're still waiting for the full feast.

We're still hungry. And we all know how often we forget how we are ordered, made for that feast.

And so fasting is there to create spiritual hunger through physical hunger to enliven us, to light a fire, to say, remember the true feast that you were made for.

[20 : 48] In the Bible, the most common verb that's used alongside fasting in a number of places, especially the Old Testament, is the verb to afflict. So the verb that's often used is, I afflict myself in fasting.

So in fasting, you afflict your body with hunger to heighten your spiritual sense, your spiritual lack. You afflict yourself so that you'll have a hunger or an awareness of your deepest needs.

So there's a pain, there's a suffering that you can say, I fast because my soul is so often feasting on the wrong things.

So if you look up and you find, man, my soul is feasting on all the wrong pleasures in this life. You need the fast. It's a spiritual practice that can realign you, give you life, awaken you, bring you back to the knowledge, the longing, the deep desire for the true feast that stands in front of you. I mentioned earlier, the only prescribed fast in the whole Old Testament is Leviticus 16. So the Pharisees are fasting 104 times a year on average.

[22 : 00] And there's only one moment in the whole Old Testament that God requires a fast for God's people. And it was surrounding the Day of Atonement, preparing for the Day of Atonement. And you remember on the Day of Atonement, they would take two lambs, goats, and they would put their hands upon the two goats.

And one, they would sacrifice as an offering in the place of sin to cleanse the temple. The other, the high priest would place his hand upon the goat, and he would send the goat out into the wilderness. Why? Why? Because they were suggesting that we know the blood of bulls and goats is not covering what we need for the forgiveness of sins, right?

And so they send this goat out into the wilderness to say, we are still waiting. We're waiting. In other words, every single year, that fast would come back around, and they would say, we're fasting once again, because we know the true feast has yet to come.

And every single year, they would put their hands on that goat and say, send the goat representing my sins out into the wilderness to say, let that little thing wander until the true lamb of God would come to take away the sins of the world.

[23 : 10] They fast because they were waiting for the true feast. And when Jesus Christ came, he went to the cross. Boy, you can read Isaiah 53 in the light of fasting. You can read it in the light of Isaiah 58, the cross in the light of Isaiah 58, and realize that when Jesus Christ went to the cross,

he fasted, he starved, like no one else ever has.

He was starved. Another way to say it, maybe to heighten our spiritual hunger tonight, is to say that because we feast on all the wrong things in this life, the idols we chase, we starved him.

He went to the cross so hungry for God's presence, and he was forced to fast. He was forced to be starved to the uttermost, losing God's presence in that moment, his Father's presence, so that we could have the feast.

And so tonight, if you come tonight as a Christian, and you say, I'm going through a season where I know I am not hungry for God.

I don't long to be in God's presence. I don't have a hard turn toward the desire for the true feast.

Fasting is a wonderful practice for you to think about this very week.

[24 : 30] So let me finish with this. How to do it, when to do it, when should you do it? And I'll just be very brief here. First, when should you do it? You don't have to.

You don't have to. The beauty of the cross of Jesus Christ is that the only prescribed fast in the Old Testament is the Day of Atonement, but Jesus Christ has satisfied that he is the true lamb.

And so fasting, there's no prescription over fasting in the New Covenant era, in the New Testament.

So what do we learn here? Don't fast because you have to. Don't fast to be seen.

Don't fast to be accepted. Fast only if you desire to become hungry and homesick for the true feast, the true life, the life of Jesus Christ, life of God himself.

And so let me give you three or four situations that the Bible, I think, does direct us as wisdom towards fasting. So number one, I think the Bible directs us to fast to strengthen or recover our prayer lives.

[25 : 29] So John Calvin writes this, whenever prayer concerning a great matter is before us, it would be expedient to fast. Donald Whitney writes, fasting sharpens the edge of our intercessions and deepens the passions of prayer.

A writer named Wallace says, fasting while praying gives heaven notice that you are truly in earnest. Fasting is one of the primary God-given means for intensifying your prayer life.

So one of the reasons you might feel prompted by the Holy Spirit right now to fast in your life is if you're really struggling with prayerlessness. So if you're in a place right now where you're not praying and you're a Christian and you say, boy, I want to be a person of prayer, but I'm not.

Fasting is an intensification of your prayer life. It's a recovery. So what you do is you fast from food or some other comfort in life and you replace that time with a season of prayer.

And that spiritual hunger that you experience, sorry, that physical hunger you experience is there to intensify your prayer life and heighten your spiritual hunger for God as you pray. Ezra in the Old Testament, he was about to embark on a big trip from Babylon to Jerusalem.

[26 : 45] And it was full of dangers and perils and toils and snares. And he took time before he left and embarked on that trip. And the Bible tells us that he fasted and he prayed for a season just to prepare.

So maybe to accompany your prayer life, you've got a big decision. Maybe you've got a big issue in your life right now. Maybe you are greatly burdened with something, a conversation that you're about to need to have with somebody.

To speak the truth in love, fasting and prayer go together. Fasting, one writer puts it, lets heaven know that you are serious about your prayers.

Secondly, fasting in the Bible is also there to act out repentance. So we see this Joel chapter 2 verse 12 makes this really clear. God says, return to me with all your heart and return to me in fasting and prayer.

Okay, so another reason you might think about fasting is if you are walking through a season where you're really struggling with a particular sin issue. And you've not been able to defeat it and beat it.

[27 : 53] And you want to say to God, I repent. And I want to intensify that repentance. Fasting is an accompaniment to repentance. It's an act of repentance.

It's an act where you say, Lord, I'm struggling. I'm far from you. And so in the act of self-deprivation, of hunger, you say, I have such a great need. I'm so hungry for recovery, for repentance, for you to teach me how to truly repent from the sin that I'm struggling with.

Number three, to grieve. So we see all across the Bible, one of the uses of fasting is to grieve and to express sorrow. So to express longing and waiting for hope to go before God with lament because of tragedy and calamity.

So 1 Samuel 31, 13, David hears of his dear friend Jonathan's death and he fasts. And you can think of all sorts of moments in the Old Testament where the response to great tragedy was to fast. And so one of the uses of fasting in the Bible and in the Christian life is in the midst of grief and tragedy and calamity. And so it's there, you feel the hunger pains, to sharpen your sense of the brokenness of this world.

[29 : 11] The hunger pain is there to tell you this world is not what it should be. And Lord, I long for a day when I can feast in a land with Christ where there is no death, disease, disaster, and turmoil any longer.

So fasting is ordered to grief. And then lastly, one that's not very often recognized. In Isaiah 58, God commands that the people of Israel fast, but first he condemns them for their fasting.

He says, you fast, but you turn around and you do injustice to your workers. You fast and you pray, but you turn around and break the backs of the poor.

You turn and fast and you have no regard for the fatherless or the widows. And then he turns and he says to them, fast instead so that you may meet the needs of others.

And so in Isaiah 58, God connects fasting, fasting from food, fasting from something maybe you want in life, in order to use that time and the money you saved to meet the needs of other people.

[30 : 16] So fasting can also be used to say, I'm going to withdraw from lunch. I'm going to withdraw from dinner in order to actually go and serve somebody. And those two things come together.

You heighten your spiritual senses in the midst of the hunger, and yet you use the work of your hands in love to grow in the spiritual life, to be the hands of Christ to somebody, the work of Christ to somebody in your life that has great needs.

So Donald Whitney says, we must use fasting at times as ministry opportunity. And so he advises you can replace your meals with acts of love, with acts of service. Let me finish with this.

This fasting is not for especially holy people. Fasting is not for the super Christian. Fasting is for the hurting Christian, the grieving Christian, the weary Christian, the Christian who cannot break a pattern of sin in their life, the Christian who's facing a tough decision.

Fasting is for somebody who says, I am right now not experiencing hunger for the living God. And so fasting is ordered to recovering longing for the great feast.

[31 : 25] It's for everybody. It's when you say, I need spiritual surgery. I need spiritual hunger in my life that is not there. I need honesty. Fasting is for honest Christians.

Honest Christians. So go and learn what this means. Go and, if wise, if you feel prompted by the Holy Spirit, take up the fast, and in the hunger pain say, Jesus Christ was starved for me so that I could be ordered to his great feast.

Let us pray. Father, we ask that you would teach us how to fast, and that in fasting we would see that it is no mere religious practice, no way of achieving your love, but only something we do to respond to your beautiful love for us.

And so I pray tonight that you would touch us with a hunger for God, that you would, Lord, teach us what it means to long for Emmanuel, God with us, that we would want to see you at the great feast.

And so that's our prayer tonight. Lord, give us the desires we do not have. Give us the desires to see your face, to feast with you, to live for you, to bear the name, as we read in the third commandment, Christian, to not be ashamed.

[32 : 35] So we're starved in all sorts of ways tonight. We need hunger for you, God. So fill us up with that. Fill us up with the food and the drink that only Jesus can give as we sing this closing hymn.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.