

# Not If, But When We... Fast.

1.23.22

Matthew 6

## Opening:

A. I want to preface today by telling you the heart and purpose of this message.

1. I feel an intense longing building within me and within others.
2. A longing for a deeper walk with Jesus.
3. A longing for Jesus' return.

B. Part of our responsibility is to develop and foster that longing.

1. It isn't enough to feel an urge to do something.
2. We must, then, follow through.
3. "Don't be hearers of the word only, but be doers." James 1:22.

C. When Jesus calls His people to a deeper walk with Him, there are shared components of that call.

1. There will always be an increase in prayer.
2. There will always be repentance.
3. There will be an increased emphasis in fasting.

D. As I share today's message, I confess these are elements that I'm learning to implement within my own life.

1. I can preach this message to you today because I'm also preaching it to myself also.
2. 4 Expected behaviors that Jesus assumed every believer would practice:
  - a. Praying, Giving, Fasting, and Forgiving.

b. Today, we focus upon Fasting.

### **Matthew 6:16–18 (CSB)**

<sup>16</sup>“Whenever you fast, don’t be gloomy like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting isn’t obvious to others but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Matthew 9:14–17 (CSB)**

<sup>14</sup>Then John’s disciples came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

<sup>15</sup>Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them? The time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. <sup>16</sup>No one patches an old garment with unshrunk cloth, because the patch pulls away from the garment and makes the tear worse. <sup>17</sup>And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. No, they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”

## 1. Whenever you fast...

A. Jesus would not recognize a Christianity that does not practice fasting.

1. The Jews fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday.
2. The early Church, after Jesus’ ascension, fasted Wednesday and Friday:
  - a. According to the Didache, or the teachings of the Apostles, the Church fasted on Wednesday in remembrance of Jesus’ betrayal and on Friday to remember Jesus’ crucifixion.
  - b. Over the centuries, we have lost the practice of fasting.

**B. Starting around the 1500's, the Church radically moved away from a life that included fasting.**

1. The Reformation under Martin Luther led to Protestants "protesting" and abolishing everything that looked like Catholicism.
2. But a Swiss minister named Zwingli, whom most of you have never heard of, is considered to be to blame for the radical change away from fasting.<sup>1</sup>
3. The reformists made sure that their dislike for Catholicism was publicly known; and the Reformers tore down crosses, ate a pork roast on a Friday, ate a small piece of sausage during Lent.
  - a. Sometime after this event, the Government of Zurich abolished fasting.
  - b. And since then, fasting has been considered "optional" for Protestants like ourselves.

**C. Here is why this is important:**

**1. Most American believers either have a Catholic view of fasting or a Protestant view of fasting.**

- a. You either give up something for Lent and eat fish on Fridays,
  - b. Or you don't fast unless you have a doctor's visit the next day.
2. Neither view is biblical or what Jesus expected for His followers.
  3. The Catholics and the Protestants both misunderstood fasting.
    - a. Their "sin" was that of the Pharisees in Matt. 6.
    - b. They all saw fasting as a duty and not a delight.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/fastening-and-furious\\_how-a-couple-of-sausages-triggered-the-swiss-reformation/43049172](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/fastening-and-furious_how-a-couple-of-sausages-triggered-the-swiss-reformation/43049172)

c. The Catholics made fasting a religious exercise instead of spiritual.

d. Protestants saw fasting as an expression of Rome, not a command of Jesus.

4. The result is an American church that does not practice fasting.<sup>i</sup>

a. I say American on purpose because the Church in other parts of the world practices fasting very well and very meaningfully.<sup>ii</sup>

b. The greatest fasting and prayer takes place in countries like China, Iran, North Korea, and other persecuted areas.

c. Where there is great persecution, there is great fasting.

d. We don't fast because we don't "have" to.

## 2. Jesus said; When you fast.

### A. Not if...

1. Jesus did not assume that believers would stop fasting.

2. He expected them to fast, but to do so in a meaningful way and not a religious way.

### B. The "hypocrites" or Pharisees fasted as a display of piety.

1. They would intentionally make their bodies and lives miserable, so that people would praise them.

2. They wanted their "spiritual sacrifice" of fasting to be noticed, praised, and admired.

3. Jesus said that this is not the kind of fasting God wants.

4. I confess I have this strong urge to walk up to someone and ask, "Are you fasting today? Because your face looks very unattractive!"

C. The problem with fasting Jesus addressed is not the presence of fasting but the reason.

1. The hypocrites were not fasting for repentance.
2. They were not fasting to experience revival.
3. They were not fasting to draw closer to God.
4. They were fasting BECAUSE they wanted to be noticed.
  - a. They wanted everyone to know that they were better than everyone else spiritually.
  - b. Their fasts were performed in front of people, just like their prayers, and their giving.
  - c. The bigger the crowd, the greater they prayed, the bigger the gift, and the more agonizing the fast.
5. And they did this at least twice a week and more often during religious festivals.

Let's take a couple of minutes to talk about what fasting is and isn't and then look at Matthew 9

### 3. What Christian fasting is and isn't.

#### #1. **Christian fasting is not a diet.**

- a. Fasting must include increased prayer and the abstaining of something good.
- b. Fasting without prayer and other spiritual disciplines is a diet.
- c. The world is talking about the physical value of fasting and championing its value.
  1. Yet, they miss the spiritual benefits when not connected with a relationship with Jesus.
  2. I remind us that almost every religion of the world fasts.

3. The difference between a Muslim fasting every year at Ramadan and the fasts you and I are called to is that we turn our attention to the One, True God.

a. The world's religions fast in hope of being saved.

b. We fast because we ARE saved.

## #2. Fasting is not giving up bad or evil things.

a. People say they are giving up smoking, or alcohol, or tv for lent but that isn't fasting.

b. "Fasting is not the forfeit of evil but of good."<sup>2</sup>

c. **You don't fast bad things; you fast good things that are getting in the way.**

1. It is a good thing to eat.

2. It is also good to give up eating for a time to submit our flesh to greater things.

a. The pains of hunger remind us that man does not live by bread alone but why every word that comes from God.

b. Fasting also reminds us of how easily we are mastered by desires.

c. How do we think we are going to survive the attacks of the enemy if we can't resist the allure of cookies, McDonalds, or snack cakes for 24 hours?

3. Fasting has, HISTORICALLY, always referred to food and drink.

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<sup>2</sup> Piper, John. 1997. [\*A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer\*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

a. The Apostle Paul talks about giving up marital sex for a while, but he calls that abstaining and not fasting.

b. I do admit that in our culture, there is something very meaningful to fast media, phone, and other delights.

4. But there is something very raw and real about not eating food for a period of time, whether that time is measured in hours or days.

d. **BTW:** The Daniel Fast is not a fast...because that was Daniel's normal, everyday diet.

1. Use the Daniel plan to help you get healthier.

2. Use the Daniel plan to help ween you off junk food and processed foods so you can fast later on.

3. But it isn't a true fast.

4. *Can you imagine, sometime in the eternal future, a group of modern Christians meeting the old saints, rejoicing about what they endured for the cause of Christ:*

a. The Apostle Paul talks about the time he was stoned with rocks, beaten, and the moments leading up to his beheading.

b. The Apostle John would tell about the times they tried to kill him by boiling him in oil, but God wouldn't let him die.

c. In 288, Sebastian who was a Praetorian Guard was sentenced to death by Diocletian for being a Christian and converting his fellow soldiers.

1. He was sentenced to death by being killed with arrows from a group of archers.

2. Later, it was found out he wasn't dead and a woman nursed him back to health.

3. Sebastian then shows himself to Diocletian again, who orders him clubbed to death.<sup>iii</sup>

d. It is said that Saint Lawrence, in 258, was grilled alive: He is reported to have declared "Turn me over; I'm cooked on that side."

**e. Can you imagine hearing the testimonies of the martyrs, the very ones that in Revelation are pictured in the presence of God, then them turning to listen to a modern-American Christian.**

1. And we brag about our "suffering" by doing a Daniel fast!

2. We complaining that someone said something mean on Facebook!

3. Or that we only could eat fish on Fridays, or we didn't eat for a 24 hour period once a year!

### **#3. Christian fasting is not suffering.**

A. What we have in mind when we say fasting is not 40 days.

1. Fasting is not starvation.

2. Fasting involves willingly giving up somethings that are good and necessary, for a short time to devote yourself to prayer and the pursuit of Jesus.

B. Fasting can be measured in meals or hours.

1. You may fast breakfast and lunch.

2. You may fast during the day and break your fast the next morning at the meal we call...break fast.

C. What I'm stressing is not legalistic fasting.

1. The Pharisees had that and it meant nothing.



2. But just because it became ritual for others, it does not give us an excuse to not fast.

a. We haven't given up the Lord's Supper just because others don't appreciate it.

b. We don't stop praying simply because some people don't find the value in it.

3. We cannot throw fasting out just because we don't like it.

There is much more that can be said, but here is why we MUST fast today:

4. To rediscover fasting is to rediscover power and intimacy.

**Matthew 9:14–17** (CSB)

<sup>14</sup>Then John's disciples came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

<sup>15</sup>Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them? The time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. <sup>16</sup>No one patches an old garment with unshrunk cloth, because the patch pulls away from the garment and makes the tear worse. <sup>17</sup>And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. No, they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

A. The Apostles didn't fast while Jesus was with them in the flesh.

1. But Jesus declares that once He was gone, then they would fast.

2. It wasn't appropriate for the disciples to fast because the one that John and the Pharisees fasted to (for) was standing in their midst.

a. Fasting is a sacrifice to God.

b. A sacrifice of our basic desire and need for food.

c. The emptiness of the stomach is a declaration to God of our recognition of how empty and powerless we are and our desire to be filled with God's presence.

d. Fasting declares our desire for His presence and His return.

3. Every parent has said “don’t ruin your supper.”

a. Too often we do not have margin for God in our life because we are so full of the world.

b. Fasting disciplines the flesh so that we are positioned to hear and receive from God.

c. Fasting does not change God, it does change us.

B. Fasting increases our appetite for heaven.

1. Lately, I’ve been watching what I eat.

a. The reality is, I’ve been complaining about what I don’t eat.

b. It’s amazing how, when I can have whatever I want, I don’t crave.

c. But the moment I put things off-limits, that becomes my obsession.

d. Now, I crave stuff that before I didn’t even want.

1. I’ve started putting cream in my coffee.

2. The other day, in a moment of despair, I might have even considered putting mustard on hotdog

e. **When we are so full of the world, we have no appetite left for heaven.**

2. Here is a great quote:

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18–20). The greatest adversary of love to God

is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.<sup>3</sup>

C. Jesus said in Matthew 5: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... for they shall be filled.

1. This is fasting language.
2. God wants to fill us with His Presence.
  - a. He wants to fill us with His gifts.
  - b. He wants to speak to us.
  - c. But we often are not hungry for God.
3. We have been nibbling at the table of the world and have no appetite for the Table of Jesus.

D. Fasting is an expression of love sickness.

1. Do you remember when you were first in love?
  - a. People would say "they are living on love".
  - b. Do you know why?
  - c. Because most of us had NOTHING.
    1. When I got married, I owned a car with no break-lights and a marriage license.
    2. The amazing thing is, I was happy.
2. I remember dating Julie and being "love-sick".
  - a. When we were apart, food had no meaning.
  - b. I wanted to be with her more than anything else.

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<sup>3</sup> Piper, John. 1997. [\*A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer\*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

3. When we fast, we fast because we long for the presence of Jesus to be clearer than ever before.

4. Fasting is an expression of our desire to be with Jesus.

The more deeply you walk with Christ, the hungrier you get *for* Christ ... the more homesick you get for heaven ... the more you want “all the fullness of God” ... the more you want to be done with sin ... the more you want the Bridegroom to come again ... the more you want the Church revived and purified with the beauty of Jesus ... the more you want a great awakening to God’s reality in the cities ... the more you want to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ penetrate the darkness of all the unreached peoples of the world ... the more you want to see false worldviews yield to the force of Truth ... the more you want to see pain relieved and tears wiped away and death destroyed ... the more you long for every wrong to be made right and the justice and grace of God to fill the earth like the waters cover the sea.<sup>4</sup>

Apply: Fasting reminds me that there is more for today and Jesus is Returning soon.

**A. My dog understands fasting better than the typical American Christian.**

1. Illustration; Everyday when Julie and I leave, we put our dog in the bathroom.

a. She has her bed, her water, and her food.

b. Yet, whether we are gone for 30 minutes, 3 hours, or 12 hours, she does not eat until we return home.

c. As soon as we get home, then she eats.

2. While we are away, she mourns our leaving and anticipates our returning.

a. When believers fast, we mourn the realities of a world damaged by sin.

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<sup>4</sup> Piper, John. 1997. [\*A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer\*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

b. When believers fast, we mourn the presence of sickness and pain.

c. When believers fast, we declare our need and our world's need for Jesus' manifest presence.

B. However, When we fast, we also anticipate his return.

1. When we fast, we proudly declare the expectation that Jesus is coming again.

2. And when Jesus returns, then we will feast.

a. We will break the "fast", so to speak, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

b. At that time, we will not mourn the presence of death for death will be dispelled.

c. At that time, we will not mourn the reality of sickness for sickness will be cast out and gone.

d. At that time, tears that were shed will be wiped away at Christ's hand.

3. In that DAY we will celebrate, feast, and enjoy the fullest expression of Jesus' presence.

4. UNTIL THAT DAY, we will fast.

C. There will be no fasting in eternity, for we will be in the presence of Jesus.

1. But until then, fasting reminds us that there is more.

a. Sin and fleshly desires keep me from pursuing all that Jesus has for me today.

b. Fasting reminds me that there is more.

2. We fast because we grieve over the power and impact of sin.

a. We fast because there are people sick, hurting, and dying around us who do not yet know Jesus.

3. We fast because we desire God's Kingdom to break in and break forth.

4. We fast because we are love sick, desiring to experience Jesus' return.

5. in this age there is an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be. We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is Coming. And until then, we will fast.

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<sup>i</sup> A Fast called by Adams: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-23-1798-proclamation-day-fasting-humiliation-and-prayer>

<sup>ii</sup> A fast called by Lincoln. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/list/murder-most-horrid-the-grisliest-deaths-of-roman-catholic-saints>

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<sup>5</sup> Piper, John. 1997