

Fasting to Hunger

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[0 : 00] If you have a copy of the Bible that you brought with you, open up to Matthew chapter 9. If you're using one of the Bibles that we supply that are in the chairs scattered around you, you just need to turn to page 814. We're going to be in Matthew chapter 9, page 814 in the Pew Bibles this morning.

We are continuing the series that we have been in since the beginning of June on spiritual disciplines. And we have defined the spiritual disciplines as the means of grace that God Himself uses to help us or to cause us to trust and treasure Christ more fully.

So spiritual disciplines, as we're understanding them throughout this sermon series, are the means of grace that God uses to cause us to trust and treasure Christ more fully.

And so far we have considered two spiritual disciplines, but we have devoted two weeks to each of those spiritual disciplines. We have considered the work of the Word of God to shape us and mold us and discipline us and reform our hearts so that we're capable of seeing Christ for all of who He is and therefore treasuring Him more.

[1 : 22] And then we have turned and spent a couple of weeks considering the issue of prayer. And we have related our time in the Word with our time in prayer. We have related them to one another as two sides of a conversation.

So that when we read God's Word, we are hearing God's voice. We are really interacting with what God says when we read the Bible, when we interact with the Bible. And then we ourselves speak back to God when we pray.

So that reading your Bible and praying are not two separate activities, but they ought to be joined together in our normal spiritual life. We ought to use the Bible as a guidebook for prayer, and we ought to ask God to give us understanding in the Word.

And those two things coupled together will make for a powerful devotional life, but they will also transform our hearts. Because to hear God's voice in the Word and to respond to that in prayer is nothing short of communion with God Himself.

And that's really what we're after. That's the thing that will transform us more than anything else, is to be in the presence of God, is to commune with God Himself, to commune with God through Christ, through the Word and through prayer.

[2 : 32] And now this morning, we step away in a sense from Bible study and prayer, and yet in another sense, we're not leaving those behind, because as we'll see, we're going to consider the spiritual discipline of fasting this morning.

And it's intimately connected to Bible study and prayer, because fasting is a spiritual discipline that God uses to drive us back to His Word and back toward prayer.

So if Bible study and prayer create communion with God, then fasting serves to drive us back toward those things that will help us to most commune with God.

And so I want your eyes to follow there upon the passage in Matthew chapter 9. We're going to begin in verse 14 and read down to verse 17. I invite you to stand with me as we read God's Word together. Matthew writes, Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

[3 : 41] No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed.

But the new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved. Let's pray. Father, we ask this morning as we consider this text that You would teach us what it means for us as new covenant followers of Christ.

Teach us what it means for us to fast and to hunger for more of Jesus. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen. You guys take a seat.

First thing I want you to notice as we look at this passage this morning is that fasting was a normal, regular part of the life of people living in Palestine in the ancient world.

In fact, it was not only a normal practice among the Jews, but you can look around the world today, or you can look around the ancient world, and you will see that most religious groups have some sort of fasting that they do.

[4 : 48] There's some sort of exercise of abstaining from food that almost every religion that surrounds us in the world today and in the ancient world would take on, would participate in at times.

So that when we see this question coming to Jesus from the disciples of John the Baptist, it should not strike us as odd that they would ask a question about fasting because fasting occupied an important place in the lives of the average Jew of the first century.

In fact, I think that if we were in the place of John's disciples and we lived the kinds of lives that they lived and had the kind of religious experiences and background that they had, we might ask a very similar question to the question that they ask.

The question is very simple. Take a look at verse 14. Why do we... So these are the disciples of John the Baptist. And I, by the way, have really no idea why the disciples of John the Baptist and John himself did not just stop their ministry of baptizing in the Jordan and begin immediately to follow Jesus when John proclaimed Him as the Lamb of God, but nevertheless, we still have John's disciples following John and John still teaching them and Jesus traveling about and teaching His disciples.

So they are two distinct groups. And so John the Baptist's disciples come with this question. We fast, Jesus. John has taught us to fast. John fasts.

[6 : 10] We fast. Even the Pharisees fast. In other words, everybody religious in our world, in the Jewish world, we all fast at times. So why don't you and your disciples fast?

Now, of course, Jesus Himself did fast at times. We see Him fasting there for 40 days and 40 nights at the onset of His ministry. But it's clear that His disciples did not fast.

Why didn't they? Why didn't they participate in this well-known religious custom? Well, Jesus is going to spend His time answering that question.

Before I feel like we get to that answer, though, I think that there are at times some modern barriers in the way to us understanding this text and understanding what the Bible says as a whole on this issue. And that is at times because we are not as familiar as they were with the issue of fasting. It's clearly, it's just normal to them. When Jesus speaks of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, one of the things the Pharisee says is, I fast twice a week. That was normal.

[7 : 12] The most religious Jews of that day, they fasted twice a week, every Tuesday, every Thursday, which is a part of their normal pattern of life if you were a truly religious Jew at that time. And so they were much more familiar with it than we are.

And sometimes we will confuse other things with fasting. So when they speak of fasting here, they do not have in mind anything that aims at the improvement of their health or their nutrition.

That's not what they're aiming towards with fasting. So fasting is not a diet of any sort. It's not. It's not an attempt to change your eating habits so that you can become healthier. In fact, most of the time, fasting results in the exact opposite, as we'll see a little bit later on, that that's sort of the point of fasting.

It's not to improve your health. It's to break you down. It's to make you recognize your need. So fasting is not a diet. It's also not a cleanse. Okay, that's somewhat popular among some people today.

They'll go on these juice cleanses or all kinds of weird, weird things where they'll only drink one type of thing. That's not what a fast is. A fast is, in fact, stopping all consumption of food, not necessarily drink.

[8 : 17] You've got to have water. But stopping consumption of food for a religious purpose, not for nutritional purpose, not for health reasons, but for religious reasons. That goes without saying for them.

But sometimes we have to pause and be reminded so that we don't approach fasting with the wrong mindset. I'm going to fast for three days, and I bet I'll lose 12 pounds during those three days if I eat absolutely nothing.

We don't want to approach fasting like that at all. We want to keep those thoughts as far from our mind as possible because they have nothing to do with what fasting is. They have nothing to do with it. But, of course, these disciples of John would not have been aware of those things.

They know what fasting is. They understand its basic purpose. But they have a question. Why don't your disciples fast? Which brings us, I think, to the most important question that we need to answer as we think about this, and that is, should Christians fast?

Are we supposed to be a people who actually practice fasting? Because there are those who would say no, who would say that no, fasting is an old covenant thing.

[9 : 20] Fasting is for those who are under the law. And therefore, we as Christians, we as those who now live under the new covenant, should not be among those who fast. We should not be.

But I think that that runs counter to what Jesus says here, what he says elsewhere, and what we see later in the New Testament. So the Jesus does not indicate, well, my disciples don't fast because I don't want them to fast.

Because there is no more fasting. In fact, in his answer, he anticipates a time when, in fact, his disciples will fast. Look at Jesus' answer. He says in verse 15, Can the wedding guests, that's Jesus' disciples, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom, that's Jesus, is with them?

Can they do that? And the answer, obviously, is no. He says, but the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. So Jesus anticipates a time in which his disciples will, in fact, fast.

So we don't want to say that there's never a time when the followers of Jesus should fast. Jesus anticipates that. And if you turn back a page or two in your Bible to Matthew chapter 6, where we spent some time over the past couple of weeks, you will see that Jesus there.

[10 : 35] He anticipates his disciples fasting. In Matthew chapter 6, verse 16, he says to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, And when you fast, and he goes on to give them instructions about what not to do, but he clearly expects them to fast.

And he anticipates a time in chapter 9 when they will fast. So based upon the words of Jesus in just the Gospel of Matthew, I would say we should accept fasting as a Christian practice.

But then we do have evidence from the life of the early church in the book of Acts. I want you to see this for yourself. So I would like you to hold your place in Matthew and turn over to the book of Acts. We'll just look at two places in Acts, and they're right next to one another.

In chapter 13, we have Barnabas and Saul about to be sent off on their first major missionary endeavor.

And we read this in verse 2. It says, So here's the church of Antioch already engaged in fasting in the midst of their worship.

[11 : 53] And then they fast as they prepare to send Paul and Barnabas, or at this point Saul and Barnabas off into the mission field. So the early church fasted.

If you turn over one page in your Bible probably to chapter 14, just one chapter, we will see the practice of Paul himself as he was in the midst of his missionary endeavors.

Verse 23 of chapter 14, When they, that's Paul and Barnabas, had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. So it was Paul's regular practice, as he appointed elders in the churches, to do that in the midst of prayer and fasting. So fasting is, in fact, I believe, based upon the evidence of the New Testament, it is something that we ought to be engaged in.

It is something that ought to be a part of our spiritual lives as followers of Jesus. We should be. But of course, Jesus doesn't merely anticipate a time when they will fast.

[12 : 57] He acknowledges that the question of John's disciples is a good question, because it is true, he acknowledges that at present, during his earthly ministry, his disciples did not fast.

He acknowledges that. He doesn't deny that. He doesn't say, well, you just don't see us fast, because you see, a couple of chapters ago, I told them not to fast publicly, to, you know, not make a face.

They do fast, you just never see it. Jesus doesn't engage them in that sort of way at all. He didn't say, well, you missed my sermon on the side of the mountain there, you would have seen that, oh, they fast, they just don't do it in a public way.

That's not what Jesus does. He acknowledges the reality that, at this point in time, during his earthly ministry, his disciples, in fact, they don't engage in fasting. So the question is a good one, and the way that Jesus answers it doesn't just explain to us why they weren't fasting.

I think that it shows us how we ought to go about fasting today. Of course, for us to understand that, I need to remind you of something that I talked about a bit last week as we looked at the Lord's Prayer and we tried to understand the Lord's Prayer within its context.

[14:03] And that is, I told you about this idea that we labeled the already but not yet. It's not a term that you actually find in the New Testament, but it's a very helpful term that theologians have come up with to help us to understand our place.

We're talking about our place, not the disciples of Jesus necessarily in his ministry, but as people who live between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus. We are people who live knowing that Christ has already died for our sins and risen from the dead.

We are people who know that Jesus in his preaching said, the kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom of God is among you. It's here now. But we are also a people who know, both from our experience and from reading the rest of the New Testament, that the kingdom has not come in its fullness.

Had the kingdom of God come in its fullness, we wouldn't be dealing with the issues and watching the things that we are seeing on the news this week. There would be no need to ever wonder whether or not a law enforcement officer acted in a way that they should act or not.

There would be no need to try to investigate those things if the kingdom had come in its fullness. Racism would not exist if the kingdom had already arrived in its fullness. There would be no abortion clinics had the kingdom come in its fullness.

[15:18] Those things that perplex us and weigh on our hearts would not exist if the kingdom of God had fully arrived on the earth in the first coming of Jesus.

And yet we know it has come in some sense because Jesus says that it has come. And so we say with many theologians that the kingdom is already here but it's not yet here in its fullness.

And as we said last week we are among those who live in that tension because we are members of the heavenly kingdom. We are citizens of a greater kingdom and we are citizens still here in this fallen world.

We need to understand that. We need to understand that to understand how to know how any of these spiritual disciplines function. because the problem that we face is that we sense and know as followers of Jesus that we don't belong here.

That we do belong to another kingdom. That we have a king and yet we have kings, presidents, and others that surround us in this world. And we sense and we know that our ultimate allegiance is to another kingdom.

[16:24] We know that and we know that in that kingdom there is fullness of joy. that there are infinite pleasures to be had in the presence of our king. We know that and so we long to experience that more fully but we are still beset by the sins that, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, they entangle us so easily.

We are told to pray in the Lord's prayer, lead us not into temptation. Why? Because it's a world filled with testing and temptation. That's the kind of world that we live in. So we ourselves feel and sense and know that tension.

If you know Jesus, if you love Jesus, then you want more of him. But if you know Jesus and you love Jesus and you live in this world, you know there are times when you choose things that seem to run counter to that desire.

So this entire series that we're going through on the spiritual disciplines assumes the already but not yet. It assumes that great tension and the point of the spiritual disciplines is to help us in the here and now to learn to taste and to enjoy what awaits us more fully later on.

That's why I define these spiritual disciplines as the means of grace that God uses not only to cause us to trust in Christ more fully but to treasure him more fully.

[17:45] That's what we're after. That's what we want because we live in the already but not yet. We live with this great tension and Jesus in his answer to the disciples of John's question and his answer to their question he assumes that reality as well.

But he assumes that even within the already but not yet his disciples occupy an even more unique location. So let's take a look at exactly what he says and ask ourselves what does he mean by all of this?

Because he doesn't just use two really three separate analogies. He uses the example of a wedding feast piece of unshrunk cloth put on new cloth and then he uses the example of new wine and old wineskins and they're all tied together these are not separate things that he's dealing with all this is in reply to the question about fasting.

So I want us to take them one by one and try to understand them. So here's the first one which we've already read once but I'd like us to read it again. Jesus said to them can the wedding guests that's literally the sons of the wedding hall in other words these would be not just guests at the wedding who happen to kind of have some relationship with the groom no these these are people close these in today's parlance in today's we would say these are the bridesmaids and the grooms but these are the people that are really close and a part of and personally know the groom that's who they are.

can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them can they mourn can they be in sadness when the one that they've come to celebrate is standing right with them the answer all this is no that doesn't make any sense why would you be sad why would you be mourned when the person that you've come to celebrate is standing right there with you you wouldn't you wouldn't mourn at all but then Jesus acknowledges another reality he says the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast in other words this this little short interim where the bridegroom is present with the wedding guests it's got a limited run it's not going to last forever now there are two ways that this this period has been understood there are two ways that people have thought about this some have conceived of of the then they will fast as only taking place between the time of Jesus' death and his resurrection because in the resurrection he does return to them right and so some have said read this passage and said well

[20 : 14] Jesus is anticipating only only a few days only a couple of days there where the disciples will fast they will huddle up they will mourn the loss of him but then when he rises from the dead and he returns and he gathers them back together it's time for feasting again it's time for the party again no more fasting and so some have said this period of fasting is limited it's not for Christians in general but I think that's mistaken I think it's mistaken for all the reasons that I've already shown you as to why Christians should fast throughout the new covenant period but I think it's mistaken because when Jesus rises from the dead it's a temporary relief from his physical absence is it not?

in Acts chapter 1 he ascends into heaven and he's and he's no longer physically present with them yes we have the presence of the Holy Spirit who mediates Christ to us after the day of Pentecost yes the Spirit is in fact Christ's Spirit and so Christ is in some way present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit but don't we all even acknowledging that don't we all still long for the day when he's physically present with us haven't you at some point in time read through the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus and at least some part of you thought man I wish I could have been there for that man I wish I could have I wish I could have been there when he fed that crowd or when he gave that blind man sight if all if I could have just been there to see Jesus interact with people and to see him at work now sometimes that's behind that lies negative motives sometimes behind that lies the thinking that the word of God is not enough for us and we need what the disciples need we need we need to see

Jesus do these things in order for us to believe them that's the Thomas approach to wanting the physical presence of Jesus you guys remember Thomas he said he wouldn't believe that Jesus was raised from the dead until he could actually touch and see the scars himself and Jesus allows that and his mercy allows Thomas to touch and see and feel and Thomas then gives a great confession my Lord and my God but Jesus indicates that those who do not see and yet believe are more blessed than Thomas himself so we can have a Thomas attitude when we think those things and read through the gospel which is not good but we can also have what I think is a good longing just a longing for more of Christ oh if I could have been there but it's a misplaced longing we think if I could have been there because the Bible tells us there's a time when he will once again be physically present among us so when we read the gospels and we see these great things we should not think oh if I could have been there we should think oh there will be a time when I am with him physically but in those times it's not going to be the healing of a blind man no it's the restoration of the entire created order it's Jesus not with his glory veiled it's all his glory and we've got new eyes

to appreciate and to be able to actually see and take in all of that glory so it's so much better and yet what we're longing for when we long for that is the physical presence of Jesus there is a there's a great feast that's going to happen when Christ returns great party a great great feast it's recorded for us in Revelation 19 it's called the wedding supper of the lamb and we ought to anticipate that we ought to look forward to that we ought to long for that and I think that when Jesus speaks of the bridegroom being taken away it's not that period between death and resurrection it's the period between ascension and coming back that's what he's talking about and we live in that time period and oh how we ought to long for the wedding supper of the lamb but in the meantime in the meantime we lack in the meantime our communion with Christ is something that we have to fight for our treasuring of Christ is something we must battle to increase and fasting

I believe has an important role to play in that battle and in that fight because if our experience of the presence of Christ now happens as we have seen through the word and prayer then we have to ask ourselves what's it going to take for me to be more devoted to the word and prayer so that I might experience more of Jesus now and one of the answers to that question not the only answer but one of the answers to that question is it's going to take fasting it's what it's going to take it's what you it's what you need you're going to have to fast why because fasting draws a parallel between the hunger that we experience physically and the hunger that we ought to have for more of Christ when you fast you have a twofold goal I believe one is to be reminded of the hunger that you ought to experience on a daily basis for the presence of Christ in your life that's why that's why

I encourage people when you fast don't fast like so many people do I think so often people label things a fast that are not really a fast they will say I'm going to fast from red meat for the next month ok but you're going to gorge yourself on chicken and fish for that month that's not fasting giving up sodas for a while that's not fasting all these things that we call fasting if they don't result in actual real sometimes agonizing physical hunger in us then they're not fasting fasting is designed to create physical hunger that can be overwhelming at times so that you go oh this is this is the desire that I now have for food the need that I have feel for food I ought to feel that kind of desire and need for Christ so it's a teaching lesson it teaches us how we ought to hunger for Christ but there's something else that fasting does for us and that is that fasting actually drives us to satisfy our spiritual hunger it's practical in the way that it works it's very practical when you fast and I don't mean just for a day if you fast for a day you'll feel a little bit of hunger but if you fast for more than a day usually by day two you wake up and you're expecting breakfast and you can't have breakfast and you're really hungry right and when every time the hunger pangs arise whether it's every 30 minutes or every hour how often it happens for you as you fast and the longer you go the more frequent it becomes every one of those moments is a moment where you go

[27 : 06] I feel hungry I need to pray I feel hungry let me set aside some time to open the word of God so that fasting when it drives you to prayer and to time in the word of God actually drives you to the only place where your hunger for the presence of Christ can be met now why am I connecting those things why am I connecting fasting with prayer like that why am I connecting fasting with communion with God I'm making that connection because that's the connection that we see so frequently in the scriptures we've already seen it we saw it in Acts do you remember what it said that they were doing it says that they were fasting and praying and then laying their hands on the apostles it says that Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed for the elders so fasting and prayer are connected because fasting drives us to pray but if we return to Matthew chapter 9 we will see that the praying and the communion that we seek are all together new for those of us who live in the already but not yet it's different it's new and we'll see that if we pay attention to the two other illustrations that Jesus gives we won't spend a lot of time but let's look at those really briefly he gives the illustration of the bridegroom who's absent but now he's going to give two more verse 16 no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment for the patch tears away from the garment and a worse tear is made and then paralleling that making the same basic point neither is new wine put into old wine skins if it is the skins burst the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed but new wine is put into fresh wine skins and so both are preserved now I feel like this illustration is actually a little bit more distant from us these two than the first illustration most of us have been to weddings and we understand the joy of having somebody present versus the sadness of having them no longer present with us so sometimes we don't understand these illustrations because honestly

I don't make my own clothes I don't know if you do but I certainly don't make my own clothes and in fact if you do make your own clothes chances are that the fabrics that you buy to make those

clothes have been through processes already so that what Jesus is talking about is still foreign to you Jesus is talking about a very common process in which truly new fabric not fabric produced in a factory that's already been through all the processes but truly new fabric when it's washed it shrinks a lot now some of you have not done the right settings on your washer and dryer and even for the things that have been through the process you take it out and it's like a dog sweater now okay that was even more of a reality everything every piece of cloth that they had was going to be expected to shrink after it had been made so that if you had a cloak if you had an old cloak that you'd been wearing for years maybe it was getting tattered a bit and you think ah I need to put a patch on that if you put a new patch on an old cloak then the first time that new patch gets wet it's going to shrink well it's new and so it's not worn and thin like your cloak and so you had one hole but now you have holes on every side because it's pulled away and ripped the garment so Jesus it's not appropriate to apply old methods new methods to something old you don't do that and then he brings in the third illustration which is very similar you don't put new wine into old wineskins the wineskins would have worked like the cloth the old wineskins they're old they've held wine they've been stretched to their limit so let's suppose you take old wineskins and you pour your new wine in it it's not yet fully fermented you put your new wine in there cap it off what's going to happen the wine inside is going to ferment produce gases as that happens and it's going to expand except an old wineskin can't expand can it it's already expanded as far as it can and if you filled it up there's no room and it's just going to simply burst and Jesus says now you lost your wine and your wineskin you don't do nobody does that this was common sense in Jesus' day they probably would have laughed at these illustrations who would who would do that you know only someone who's who's new and who's never done anything for themselves would ever do something like that who would do that and Jesus is though saying all these things to apply them to the issue of fasting so what's his point what's he saying here he anticipates that fasting will be around so he's not saying there's no fasting in the new covenant that's not his point

I think his point is fasting will exist there will come a time when my disciples fast but their fasting will be different from your fasting it will not be like the fasting of the Pharisees neither will it even be like the fasting of the old covenant saints it will be new and it will be different how will it be new and different in all the ways that I've already described our fasting is is not a fasting longing for the fulfillment of types and shadows no our fasting is a fasting rooted in the fact that our sins have been paid for not that we have a sacrificial system that teaches us that someday they will be paid for but our sins have been paid for we know that that's a reality that's the already of the already but not yet they are paid for if we have trusted in Christ and what do we await not the payment for our sins what do we await we await the full coming of the kingdom of God and the full revelation of the glory of God in Christ

Paul goes so far as to label that in Romans 8 the glorification of the sons of God in other words our experience of the glory of Christ and the new bodies that we receive in order for us to fully appreciate that glory is so great that it can be called the glory of the sons of God what we await and what we anticipate and what we want to increase our hunger for as we fast is not the fulfillment of types and shadows in the Old Testament no we await the full manifested glory of our King so that our fasting is better than the fasting of the disciples of John and the Pharisees and the Old Covenant saints our fasting is a stirring up within us of hunger for Jesus so that we ought to fast we don't have to be like the Pharisee we don't have to fast two days a week and have a regular schedule of fasting you don't have to be like that and of course in Matthew 6

Jesus makes it plain we're not to fast in ways where we make it obvious to everybody else it's not about being recognized for our spiritual maturity that we fast all the time whether you fast occasionally or frequently whether you've never fasted before and yet now you think that's something I should do all those things those are not the important matters what is important is that we understand we are called to treasure Christ with all that we are and all that we have and if you struggle like that with that and you do then you need fasting to help you to help you hunger rightly and to drive you to the word and prayer for communion with Christ himself let's pray