

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters
Sermon Series - Focus on Righteousness
Sermon Title - Fasting, A Gift From God
Sermon Text - Matthew 6:16-18
Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Introduction:

“For my waking breath, for my daily bread, I depend on You, I depend on You.”

Jesus not only provides us our daily bread physically, He is our daily bread spiritually! We talked about that two weeks ago. He’s the only bread that can satisfy the spiritual hunger in your heart, soul and life! And as Dr. Nave presented so beautifully last week, Jesus is the real treasure your heart should be seeking after! After all, when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all the other things we need will be added unto us! So today, we’re going to talk about something that not a lot of people love talking about, and many would rather never do! Fasting! Just the mention of that word makes people hungry. But before you get up to leave, please hear me out, fasting really is a gift from God. It’s not a punishment, or a misery thing, it really is designed to bless us while we are fasting as well as afterwards through the amazing benefits. Let’s pray and ask God to teach us the truth about fasting. Let’s pray.

In His sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us some spiritual gifts that are simply amazing. You may at first be confused when we read our passage. You may wonder how in the world I can view what Jesus was talking about as a gift from God, but just stay with me and I believe you will get it and I believe the principle will have a very positive impact on your life. Our text is Matthew 6:16-18. Let's read it together...

Matthew 6:16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.

Matthew 6:16 I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

Matthew 6:18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

So how can you consider fasting to be a gift? I've got an answer for you that may surprise you in a big way! As we try to answer that question, we need to first look at the concept behind fasting.

The Concept Behind Fasting

Most people think of fasting as just giving up food for a certain period of time. And most people focus on the giving up part! However, the concept of fasting is not just about food. It is about taking a break from certain things and it's not just about what you give up, but it's about what you gain! Fasting is giving up something good for something better! Fasting brings perspective! Sometimes we don’t realize the blessing of something until we have to go without that something! And fasting is a discipline, a spiritual discipline and in fact that in itself is one of the

benefits of fasting, discipline! And what other things besides food could even be considered for the practice of fasting? This may hurt a little bit, but maybe some in this room could benefit by fasting from social media. Some could stand a little fast from your news feed on your phone. Others, it might be the political talk shows! And for some of you it might be video games or screen time in general. And have you ever thought about the myriad of things in our world that are serious problems because of a lack of discipline? Think about it: our nation's out of hand debt load. We want what we want when we want it and it doesn't seem to matter the consequences to future generations. That's not only true of our nation, but of individuals. How many times do people get themselves into huge debt because they weren't willing to save for things, but had to have them right now. You know the old "buy now pay later" philosophy that drives much of our economy. Of course I realize there's some things we have to borrow for, like a place to live and sometimes a vehicle to drive. But we all know there are times we went into debt for things that weren't necessary. They were just wants! And there's other difficult and even evil things in our world that are caused by people not knowing how to control the appetites of our physical bodies. Fasting helps to teach us the concept of delayed gratification and being willing to let God fill us and fulfill us in Godly ways. Again, the concept of fasting in the Bible is not just food related. Let me give you an example.

Exodus 20:8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Exodus 20:9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

Exodus 20:10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

What does this have to do with fasting? It's about taking a break from work so you can have some time with God! Even God fasted from work when He created this world. Listen...

Genesis 2:2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.

Genesis 2:3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Some people today like to debate whether the Sabbath should still be on Saturday as it was with the Jews, or if it should be on Sunday as it has been for many years in the Christian Community, because Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning. I believe the concept is more important than the actual day. We are to fast from our labors and take time to rest and to worship God! Do you observe a Sabbath? Fasting from our labors for a day is a gift from God! And here's just one of the problems with a seven day week work schedule: It's as if you are depending totally on your own work to provide for your family. It's like you're saying you don't have time for God, or to rest. If that's the case, God can't bless you like He wants to and if it all depends on you then, then you'll never get a day of rest, because without the blessing of God you would need to work eight days a week or more to make up for the blessing of God! And of course there's not that many days in the week and so you see the impossibility of ever being able to provide all you need without the blessing of God. Oh, you may be able to make a bunch

of money, but money can't buy the real blessings we need from God and from a day of rest. Fasting from work is a once a week gift from God! You need it, and I need it! And by the way, if you feel I'm pointing my finger at you, remember there's at least three pointing back at me. I struggle with fasting from work! There's always a need, a person hurting, a family struggling, a sermon to be written, a world that needs Jesus and a church that needs to be led to reach that world!

But I'm not exempt from the command of God to take a Sabbath day of rest. I'm working on this and it all comes down to my willingness to trust God that He will help me do in six days what I could never do without His help even if I had ten days a week to work. So, the concept of fasting is not just about food, although food is the major focus in Scripture when you see the word fasting. Fasting is a very important spiritual discipline and yet probably one of the most neglected! I have to be honest with you and admit that I am not nearly as faithful to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting. A man by the name of Dallas Willard wrote a book on spiritual disciplines. His statement on spiritual discipline really helps explain the concept of fasting...

"Spiritual disciplines are exercises unto godliness. If I train rigorously I can bench press 300 pounds, otherwise not. Such ordinary activities are actually disciplines that aid our physical or 'natural' life. The same thing happens with disciplines for our spiritual life. When through spiritual disciplines I become able heartily to bless those who curse me, pray without ceasing, To be at peace when not given credit for good deeds I've done, or to master the evil that comes my way, it is because my disciplinary activities have inwardly poised me for more and more interaction with the powers of the living God and His Kingdom. Such is the potential we tap into when we use the disciplines."

Abstaining from food for a given time disciplines us to acknowledge our dependence upon God for our physical needs. It allows us to be thankful for what we've been given, helps us appreciate the gift of food and to understand hunger is not a totally negative thing. If we never got hungry we would not know the joy of eating a good meal. Hunger is only bad when it is never allowed to be satisfied and when some have plenty and others want for the basic nutrition needed for life to be sustained. When a person fasts, it helps them realize just how blessed they are and hopefully gives them a greater desire to help those who have so much less. So while the basic definition of fasting is abstaining from food, it is so much more! Why is fasting one of the least understood and least practiced of all spiritual disciplines? Because, as I said earlier, everyone automatically thinks of it as giving up something rather than understanding the benefits. We'll talk about those in a minute. But the other reason fasting is rarely practiced is because our culture does not lend itself to the practice of this spiritual discipline.

Our culture is one of gluttonous consumption. Bigger is better, and having more is the ultimate goal! Uncontrolled consumption fuels our economy, but also fuels our spiritual destruction. And once again, it's not just about food. Our culture pushes unlimited pursuit of success at any cost, sexual satisfaction without moral constraints, and unabated materialism. "I want that, and I want it now, but I'll settle for free second day shipping!" Black Friday and Cyber Monday have turned into Cyber week, and the twelve days of Christmas have turned into a month of Black Fridays!

And now there's a black Friday in July! Are you kidding me? Look, I'm not against a good deal, but sometimes it's just too much! You heard me say it many times before, "it's not wrong to own things, but it's wrong when things own you! Too many people are consumed with being consumers! Dr. Nave preached such a powerful message last week, and we must remember the words he quoted from Jesus...

Matthew 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I love what Dr. Nave said Jesus was doing here.

"It was his intention to contrast that which may seem to be of value now with that which has eternal value."

And here's something to think about, when we value the things of this world more than the things of God we will not only be disappointed by those misplaced priorities, we will be destroyed by them. Why? Because the things of this world will never satisfy and they are never satisfied. They always cry out for more! The world will demand more and more and take more and more! That's why spiritual discipline is such an important part of a believer's life. Paul described our culture pretty accurately way back in the day...

Philippians 3:18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Philippians 3:19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

When our minds are focused only on material or earthly things we are missing some of life's greatest gifts, some of God's greatest gifts, some of the most meaningful and helpful of all gifts. And how do we find these gifts? One way may be found in fasting. Taking a break from all of the madness to focus on what matters the most in life! The world gives a nod to this truth with what has become known as Giving Tuesday, but unlike Black Friday I don't think that'll ever turn into Giving Week, or Giving Tuesday in July! Why? Because we feel it is more blessed to receive than to give, but Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive! And sometimes, when we make a decision to give, we may have to wait for something we wanted. But watch this: if we give to meet someone's needs, and have to wait for something we didn't need, but wanted, the spiritual growth we will experience in putting others above ourselves will be amazing! Delayed gratification that results in good for someone else will also result in good for us, because God can bless that kind of attitude. But I think we would all admit we're not good at being patient and waiting on things. And we're not so good at giving up things. Sometimes we can't see the benefits of not having something we want right now and waiting for God's timing. But when we're willing to give up something for a greater purpose or a greater cause our eyes will be opened to see the real treasures in life. And while it's not always an easy thing to give up something, or to wait on something, the benefits we stand to gain are so rewarding. Next week's message, "Trading Worry for Peace" will focus on a major benefit of having our priorities in the

right place. Fasting really is a gift from God, and we'll realize that if we practice fasting with the right motives. So let's look at...

The Motives Behind Fasting

Jesus said...

Matthew 6:16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.

Matthew 6:16 I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Wrong Motives

If you fast for *selfish* motives then the only benefit you will receive is the perceived goodness others will see in you. The gift God intended for you to find in fasting will be lost! Those wanting to have an *appearance of spirituality* fall victim to pride. Pride flies in the face of what should be the motive. It's not wrong if someone knows your fasting. Sometimes you may need to humbly let someone know your fasting, especially if they are the one preparing food for you or they invite you out to eat while you're on a fast. Don't just say, "I'm not hungry," or "it's not a good time for me." Don't lie, just let them know you're spending a little time on a fast, and you'll take a rain check. But if you advertise it and make a big deal of it, like the Pharisees would do, then you're not seeking God, you're seeking *self-aggrandizement!* And what is that?

AGGRANDIZEMENT - to enhance the reputation of (someone) beyond what is justified by the facts

It is the opposite of all that spiritual discipline stands for. Paul talked about these folks again in 2 Timothy...

2 Timothy 3:1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

2 Timothy 3:2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,

2 Timothy 3:3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good,

2 Timothy 3:4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—

2 Timothy 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

All of the things Paul mentioned are the very things fasting is designed to fight against. The reason fasting fights against these things is that it causes us to fight our dependence on self, and helps us to teach self to not to become selfish! Self has to be disciplined. Self has to be controlled. Before I share with you the greatest motive for fasting, let me get very practical. There are three kinds of fasting.

1. Normal Fast - No food
2. Absolute Fast - No food or water
3. Partial Fast - Restriction of Diet

Some should only do the restriction of diet: Those with diabetes, those with heart or other severe health issues (talk to your Doctor if this is the case). Fasting is not commanded by Jesus, but is assumed by Jesus. He didn't say, "Thou shalt fast!" He did say, "When you fast!" He also omitted instructions on how often. Ask God to reveal to your heart how often and how long. Take small steps at first. One thing we can say: It seems that Jesus felt those who seek God would from time to time take extraordinary steps to hear from the Almighty. Jesus certainly did. Once again I quote Richard Foster, who wrote the book "Celebration of Discipline."

"Where are the people today who will respond to the call of Christ? Have we become so accustomed to "cheap grace" that we instinctively shy away from more demanding calls to obedience?"

In other words, we seem to shy away from the spiritual disciplines that are costly to us personally. Richard Foster may have been referencing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who described "cheap grace" in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He said this...

"Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross."

Remember grace wasn't cheap for God. It cost Him His Son's life on a Cross! When we refuse to exercise spiritual discipline we treat God's grace cheaply. With this in mind, I ask the question: What are the...

Right Motives

Our primary motive for fasting should be threefold...

"An insatiable desire *to love God deeply, know God intimately, and live in God's will* every moment of one's life!" Itm

Fasting is one of the ways we train our spirit, mind and body to keep a desire for God as our priority, our number one, and to keep Jesus The Lord of our life on a daily basis!! Richard Foster said...

"Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained."

If we do this we can experience fasting as the gift of God it truly is! That may mean we couple fasting with a time of confession. Daniel certainly did. Listen...

Daniel 9:3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

Daniel 9:4 I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, Daniel 9:5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.

The reason for this combination is that when we are seeking God we must first realize that sin destroys the intimacy between us and God. Fasting is wasted effort if we are harboring unconfessed sin in our life. And we must remember, the primary motivation for fasting should be

"An insatiable desire to love God deeply, know God intimately, and live in God's will every moment of one's life!"

Giving up food but holding on to our wickedness, our selfishness, our idols, defeats the purpose for fasting in the first place! Remember, I said fasting is a gift from God and I'm here to tell you that any gift from God has benefits the world simply cannot give you!

The Benefits of Fasting

Matthew 6:17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,
Matthew 6:18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

In other words, when you fast for the right reasons there will be great rewards and you won't be down and out while you're fasting, but rather excited about the gifts God is giving to you through the exercise of fasting. And what are some of those gifts? Well, the first one is extremely practical.

Physical Benefits

It is not true that fasting is unhealthy. as long as it is done correctly it can actually improve your physical well being. Most of us never give our digestive system a break! Most of us could stand to use up some of our reserves. All of us need to discipline our bodies to "Just say No!" Listen to this quote I found in an old Christianity Today article...

"The gluttonous impulse is a sign of disharmony with God's provision and creation, and it can disrupt the spiritual lives of people of every size...Previous generations of Christians knew this: Overindulgence in food did not just lead to thickened waistlines and arteries; it led to spiritual disaster."

I do a video devotion for our fire department every week. A few weeks ago it included some thoughts on fasting. I want to share that with you right now, because it applies to the physical benefits of fasting as well as the spiritual benefits of fasting which will be my last point. So here's the Fire Department devotion...

Today I would like to share with you something you may not have ever thought about: Jesus is our peer. That's right! Jesus understands us because He's faced similar things that we face. While Jesus was on the earth, around 33 ½ years, while He was fully God, He was also fully human! And of course that's something you and I will never fully understand, or comprehend. Scripture tells us that as a man, Jesus endured suffering, pain, grief, hunger, and thirst. And believe it or not, Jesus also faced temptation. We read in Matthew's gospel these words...

Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Matthew 4:3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Matthew 4:4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

I can't even imagine how tempting food would be if I had not eaten in forty days! I recently watched a National Geographic show on how the actor Chris Hemsworth, who plays Thor in the Marvel movies went on a four day fast because science is discovering the health benefits of fasting. But Chris talked about how difficult it was to resist food for that length of time. While on the fast and filming he said...

"I feel pretty weak trying to walk up the stairs, trying to walk down the hall, I feel like it's tough to catch my breath. [...] I can't even think... I'm losing it."

So can you imagine 40 days and nights? I can't. But here's my point: Jesus endured some extreme things in His life here on earth and a big part of the reason was so He could be a peer to us and truly understand from a human perspective what it's like to be hungry, to thirst, to be tempted and even to be down and discouraged. God's Word tells us in the book of Hebrews that Jesus was...

Hebrews 4:15 ... tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say this...

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

So don't be afraid to talk to Jesus about your struggles, your questions, even your temptations. He understands that it's not easy because He's been there and He knows how to get through it! He got through it, and He's willing to help you through it, if you'll let Him!

That was the end of the devotion and then I prayed for the men and women of our department. So remember, some of the gifts God gives us in fasting are physical benefits. But even as the devotion alluded to, there are spiritual benefits which are off the charts! First, there's...

The Spiritual Benefit of Freedom

Richard Foster said..

“More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them.”

So fasting helps us find freedom from being controlled by our worldly appetites! But there's more...

The Spiritual Benefit of Time and Resources

When you fast you can take the time you would have spent purchasing, preparing and eating to spend time with God. And you might take the resources you would have spent on yourself and save that up to spend on causes for God's Kingdom. I know someone who had a good job and decided to take their extra income for two years and spend it building a home for someone in a third world country. Now you've got to remember, I'm not saying never go out and eat, or fast every week. Jesus didn't tell us how often. But I will say this: We need to get to a place where we are as excited about spending time with God as we are about going to our favorite restaurant! And some people would say I'm crazy to think spending time with God would be better than a trip out for our favorite food. Well, I'm in good company...Listen to what the Psalmist said...

Psalm 63:1 You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

Psalm 63:3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Psalm 63:4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

Psalm 63:5 I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

The Spiritual Benefits of Seeing God, Finding True Satisfaction, and Bursting Forth with Song

So many benefits..

Fasting helps focus your prayers and brings spiritual insights. Why is this so? Because when a person has made the decision to give up something so important and pleasurable as eating for the purpose of pursuing God, God will reward them! The concept of fasting is a gift from God that will transform you from self-centered, and self-absorbed, to a man or woman who seeks God and who seeks God's will to be done in their life and in this world! And that's one of the

most practical benefits of God's gift of fasting to us, we become a difference maker in a world of hurts!!

The Spiritual Benefit of becoming a World Changer

We find the most awesome description of the kind of World Changer fasting could cause us to become in Isaiah 58:6-11 where God said...

Isaiah 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"

Isaiah 58:7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Isaiah 58:8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 58:9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

Isaiah 58:10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Isaiah 58:11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Let's pray!