

Last week many of us were able to practice prayer together using a variety of different tools, or approaches.

I thought it was really nice to have a morning that was a little different, and that involved actually trying out a spiritual practice rather than simply talking about it.

This week, alas, it's a bit harder to engage in our practice together, since our topic for the morning is fasting.

I thought I could have picked up sweetwaters on the way to church and then suggested that perhaps we all decline - that seemed a little cruel.

So today we'll *talk* about fasting instead of practicing it, and my guess is none of you will be complaining about that.

We're talking about fasting this morning because we're in the midst of a series of talks about spiritual practices.

We've been looking at ways God has gifted us tools or resources that might help our spirits to thrive and flourish as we seek to connect deeply with God.

And fasting, for better or for worse, is one of the traditional spiritual practices that Christians have historically engaged in pursuit of God.

This morning we're going to take a somewhat critical look at the practice of fasting, and talk about certain unhelpful beliefs that tend to surround this practice. Then we'll consider whether there might be a kernel left of anything helpful for us as we seek to commune with the Spirit of God.

## **Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness**

**4** Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted <sup>v</sup> by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

[\*The New International Version\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 4:1-4.

## **Fasting**

### **6**

<sup>16</sup> “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others 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.

[\*The New International Version\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 6:16-18.

Most of the traditional Christian spiritual practices make intuitive sense to us.

**Prayer** makes sense: of course we would want to reach out to communicate and commune with the God who made us and loves us.

Practicing **Christian community** makes sense - we know that at some level we need connection with others who share our love for and commitment to Jesus.

The practice of **generosity** makes sense - if we've ever read Jesus' words, we know we are called to be a people who share what we have with joy and reliance upon God.

These things just make intuitive sense in the life of Jesus-oriented faith.

But fasting really is another matter.

It is much more difficult to sense exactly why we might want to practice it, and it is very easy to practice fasting in ways that are unhelpful or downright unhealthy, destructive, or dangerous.

So here's what I want to do this morning.

We're going to explore together **three reasons** why Christians through the ages have practiced fasting.

Then we'll explore a couple of really important **cautions** around the practice of fasting,,

and then we'll look at a few ways we might **reimagine** fasting in terms of some good-fit practices that might really help us to thrive in our ability to connect with and respond to God.

So, first.

Let's look at how the practice of fasting has been developed and utilized by followers of Jesus through the ages. In order to do that faithfully and well, though, I want us to go back even farther than Jesus. Because of course Jesus was a devout Jewish man, and the first followers of Jesus were Jewish people, both ethnically and in terms of religious heritage. And fasting held a significant place in that heritage, in that culture.

The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, has numerous examples of fasting, though it is important to note that the practice of fully fasting from all food is not commanded as a general practice anywhere in the Bible.

The first time any kind of abstinence from food comes up in Scripture is pretty near to the beginning.

In the story of Adam and Eve,

Genesis tells us of the paradise garden of Eden, and the beautiful orchard full of all kinds of delicious fruit our first ancestors were welcome to eat and enjoy.

Except for one, right?

God had commanded Adam and Eve to abstain from eating from just one tree,

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This is, in fact, the first command God ever gave human beings.

But Adam and Eve were sorely tempted, and they ate the forbidden fruit.

We know the rest of that devastating story.

Sin and death entered the world, and humankind was banished from paradise.

Right from the beginning,

it seemed important to God

that the people God had made in God's own image

might have the opportunity to deny themselves something they wanted as an act of devotion to and trust in God's care and love.

Fast forward from the Garden of Eden,

and we encounter Moses.

The book of Exodus shows us rugged Moses

up on Mt. Sinai, alone with God

as he receives God's law on behalf of God's people.

We read in Exodus 34:27-28

<sup>27</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." <sup>28</sup> Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights

without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

In addition to this unusually long fast of Moses, we see the people of God fasting throughout the Old Testament at times of grief, of war, or of intense hope and prayer.

King David fasted while his baby that Bathsheba bore was ill and dying.

Queen Esther fasted and prayed for three days before she took action on behalf of her people, the Jews.

In the book of Daniel, Daniel the seer foresaw a great war, and as a result went into mourning for three weeks, which included abstaining from all meat and wine and choice foods, eating only vegetables and drinking only water.

As we heard in the first word this morning, the people of Nineveh engaged in fasting as part of their repentance when they received the word of the Lord given to them through the reluctant prophet Jonah.

For the ancient Hebrew people, then, fasting was at least an occasional part of the spiritual or religious repertoire, so to speak.

Not commanded, not constantly engaged, but at least sometimes practiced by those who were seeking God's help or forgiveness or presence.

The interesting thing is that the Bible tells us *that* people fasted, but it doesn't tell us *why*.

Unfortunately, many have been eager to fill in the blank with the "why" and try to insist that those ancient reasons are immediately accessible and applicable to us, as well.

Here's an example.

Men's Health Magazine published an article in 2019 titled, **Chris Pratt Is on the 'Daniel Fast,' an Extreme Diet Inspired by the Bible**

Here's what the article says:

Chris Pratt this week revealed that he's undertaking the "Daniel Fast"—an intense, possibly-dangerous crash diet that promises to help adherents lose weight and "draw closer to God."

"Hi, Chris Pratt here. Day Three of the Daniel Fast," a sweaty Pratt said in a since-expired Instagram video Friday. "Check it out. It's 21 days of prayer and fasting."

Then I hit the paywall and couldn't read any farther.

But you get the idea.

Not to pile up on Chris Pratt here,

but isn't it just really convenient

when you can find a diet right in the Bible that helps you

lose weight and draw closer to God in one fell swoop?

Hmm. Maybe things aren't quite that simple.

So Jesus comes on the scene,

and right after his baptism Matthew tells us

he goes into the wilderness where he is tempted by the accuser.

During this time in the wilderness, he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights.

In his weakened state after all that fasting,

Satan knows he's vulnerable and tries to get him to turn his back on God's will.

But Jesus tells Satan that "man doesn't live on bread alone."

Because of Jesus' deep connection with his Father

he is sustained by the words of God's mouth

in the absence of bread.

In fact, just as perhaps God's presence was so intense and think

up on the mountain with Moses back in Exodus,  
that the very words of God sustained him to a degree  
that he didn't need food and water,  
So perhaps Jesus was so drenched in the words of his Heavenly Father  
during his time in the wilderness  
that he also was nourished solely by God during that time.

And we should not miss the significance of the 40 days and 40 nights  
of Jesus' wilderness fast -  
one thing the Gospel of Matthew wants us to see  
is that Jesus is the new Moses,  
poised to lead God's people into a final and cosmic exodus  
out of the slavery of sin and death  
and into the new life that is to be found in Christ.

So Jesus is nourished by the sustaining hand of God,  
and is miraculously enabled to survive  
40 days and 40 nights without food or drink.

There are some resonances with this theme in the gospel of John,  
when in chapter 4 where Jesus' disciples are urging him to eat something  
and he tells them he has food that they know nothing about.  
They whisper to each other, "could someone have brought him lunch?"  
I love the disciples. So relatable.  
Like, I didn't see the Jimmy Johns delivery car, did you??  
But he says, no no - my food is to do the will of the One who sent me.

So we see glimmers here about what fasting means to Jesus.  
There is a significance to Jesus' fast that is not something we can imitate,  
with this harking back to Moses and the 40 days.  
But the way Jesus has so deeply connected with the sense  
that God and God's word and doing God's will  
are actually Jesus' deepest needs,  
his most nourishing of food,

well that is something we can certainly explore and engage with.

We'll look a bit more deeply at all of that in a moment,  
but first -  
let's get into these three reasons Christians through the ages  
have practiced fasting.

First, Christians have historically fasted from food  
for periods of time  
as a way to practice physical discipline -  
I don't mean discipline as in punishment,  
but self-discipline like the way an athlete  
religiously works out to strengthen their muscles -  
Christians practice fasting as a discipline, a practice,  
in order to grow in self-control  
and so to be better equipped to resist temptation.

Saint Basil in the 4th century,  
so one of the early leaders in the Church,  
wrote this:

“The more you deny the flesh, the more you render the soul radiant  
with spiritual health.”

A second reason Christians fast is that  
it can serve as a means of engaging intentional seriousness in devotion.  
Whether in times of great sorrow or need or uncertainty,  
fasting can serve as a way to set aside a period of time  
for special focus and intensity in prayer.  
The feelings of hunger can serve as a reminder  
to turn, again and again,  
to God who supplies our needs.  
Christians might point to the example of King David here,



who fasted as long as his ailing baby was alive,  
but ate after he died, explaining that while the child was still living  
he had been committed to fasting as part of his pleading with God to spare the  
baby's life.

And a third reason Christians have historically fasted  
is as a sort of act of humility before God,  
taking a period of time in which we purposely don't attend  
to certain of our felt needs,  
and instead attend only to God and God's presence.  
It can serve as a form of worship,  
a way of showing through actions that our deepest need  
is for God and for God's presence.

Whether as a practice of self-discipline,  
or as a way to devote oneself intensely to prayer for a period of time,  
or as an act of humility in worship before God,  
fasting has been seen as valuable and fruitful to many Christians through the  
ages.

But as spiritual practices go,  
fasting seems to harbor more than the usual number of dangers and pitfalls,  
and it's really important to address those.  
Jesus addressed one of those pitfalls in the Matthew 6 passage,  
where he tells people to avoid using a fast as a way to garner approval from  
people.

In our day, I think a few other pitfalls are more prominent, so I want to address  
those.

First and I think most obvious  
is that many, many people - especially in our 21st century context -

have a really difficult relationship with food.

Many people suffer from eating disorders, and others have experienced years of frustrating weight gain and attempts at weight loss.

This often involves different diets and self-denial for the sake of being thin or being healthy.

In this kind of a societal environment, it can be quite difficult, then, to clearly differentiate between a Spiritual fast and a cleanse or a diet or a disordered compulsion around eating.

It is so important here that folks hear - if food or eating is complicated for you, whether because of a history with an eating disorder or because of a yo-yo weight loss journey,

I would strongly caution you against fasting from food as a spiritual practice..

I think you'll hear this pretty clearly throughout the next few minutes, but just to be really clear -

there is absolutely no need or requirement for followers of Jesus to fast from food.

If you don't do it, it absolutely doesn't make you some kind of lesser, second-class citizen in the church. Ok?

So the first caution is about food itself.

The second caution we need to hear about fasting is that it is often connected with a kind of **gnostic dualism** that has often gotten tangled up with Christianity, right from the earliest days of the church.

To put it very simply,

gnosticism or gnostic dualism is a framework of ancient thought that lives on in many ways today

which says "the physical world and everything in it is far inferior to the world of pure spirit."

So the more detached a person is from the physical realm,

the more they can commune with the higher and better spiritual realm.

Can you see how this kind of thinking might make fasting really attractive?  
In this framework, as our spirits reach out for the Spirit of God,  
our need for the physical world diminishes.  
“The things of earth grow strangely dim”  
in the words of the old hymn.  
There really is a danger there.  
Here is where we have to remember  
that God took on human flesh,  
entered fully into earthy reality of humanness,  
and as a man God Godself  
drank good wine and feasted with his friends  
to such a degree that he got himself accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.

Food is good! Jesus ate it and liked it and shared it and blessed it.  
Wine is good! Jesus turned water into fine wine,  
and felt it warm his body and spirit in the convivial company of his friends.  
Jesus loved the fruit of the vine, the produce of the earth,  
and we can too, with no guilt or sense that we’re somehow too earthly.  
Fasting isn’t worth engaging if it pulls us toward a sense  
that our bodies and the needs of our bodies  
and the things of earth  
are somehow shameful or lesser or ungodly.

And then a final pitfall has to do with the way  
fasting can often become a very **transactional** practice if we’re not careful.  
If I want something from God just a little bit I can pray.  
But if I want something from God with all my heart,  
*then* I’ll fast and pray.  
Right?  
I won’t ask you to raise your hands,  
but I’m sure a lot of us here have been exposed to this kind of thinking.  
Often we might hear a desperate plea to please pray and fast  
on behalf of someone who is very ill,

or to engage in a season of prayer and fasting  
so that God will work and move in our nation.

I want to be careful here, because I recognize the complexity around all of this.

As I said earlier, Christians often do fast as a sort of commitment of  
seriousness and special devotion in prayer.

There is nothing inherently wrong with that.

But we have to really guard our hearts here,  
because I think we're vulnerable to imagining God  
as this kind of stingy, withholding being  
who demands that we jump through difficult hoops  
in order to really catch the divine attention.

That is a lie.

We are not more likely to get what we want from God  
if we engage in fasting.

God does not deal with us in a transactional way like that.

So, to recap -

we need to avoid the pitfall of **fasting as a diet**  
and avoid the danger of fasting from food  
if we have any kind of disordered eating patterns.

And we need to avoid any kind of **gnostic dualism**  
that tells us we should abandon all earthly things  
and ignore all physical needs  
if we're going to be truly spiritual.

That's a lie.

And finally, we need to watch out  
that we don't treat fasting as a kind of **spiritual currency**  
that we can spend when we're really desperate  
and really want to get God's attention.

The God who loved the world to the point  
of becoming a human and dwelling among us  
and dying for us

is not a God who makes us jump through hoops.  
Got it?

So we've looked at some of the reasons Christians have found fasting to be helpful,  
and we've looked at some danger or pitfalls around it.  
Let's take our last couple of minutes here  
to imagine together how we might engage this practice,  
while leaving behind what doesn't fit culturally or personally.

When engaged carefully and creatively,  
fasting can help us wake up spiritually.

We human beings tend get in a rut.  
We develop habits around our needs.  
We cushion or insulate ourselves from the pain of the world and of our lives  
by creating rituals or habits or routines  
that we soon begin to see as needs.  
Think about your morning cup of coffee and tell me that's not true.

*Nicole - pentecost ...*

Is it wrong or bad to enjoy creature comforts  
or to engage in reassuring rituals?  
Absolutely not.

But sometimes, when we get into patterns of doing what we do,  
especially when we form habits around satisfying our hungers,  
when we begin to do these things thoughtlessly and as a matter of routine,  
we can become sort of lulled to sleep.  
Whether it's our mid-morning donut  
or our after-dinner glass of wine;  
whether it's our bedtime netflix watching  
or scrolling social media on our phones after a long day at work -  
things that are not at all bad in and of themselves  
can become sort of a sedative;  
a sleep aid for the soul.

Another way to put this is that we can use these things to numb us to the pain in our own hearts and the pain of the world. Fasting can help us begin to emerge from a numb state.

As I suggest that fasting is a means of waking up, spiritually, I want to be clear that this does NOT have to be fasting from food. Let's broaden our definition of fasting to include all kinds of things we can abstain from or change in order to disrupt the patterns and routines we have stopped thinking about that might be keeping us a bit numb, a bit spiritually sleepy.

I am intentionally going to use non-food examples here.

My family will tell you am a very fast walker. I always walk faster than anyone else around, and I'll admit I'm impatient about it.

*Story about Bronson...*

For me, walking very slowly, or driving no higher than the speed limit on purpose, or engaging other forms of intentional slowing down, can be an effective kind of fasting. I become aware of God's gentleness in the face of my impatience, I become aware of the shallowness of my constant sense of hurry, my eyes open to the people around me that I tend to miss and dismiss when I'm in a rush. I find myself able to sort of chuckle about myself with my God who loves me.

Now, slowing down is one thing, but actually denying myself a significant comfort or a felt need for a period of time,

like abstaining from desserts for a week  
or giving up alcohol for the season of lent, for example;  
that can be much more difficult.

When we are tired and stretched thin,  
as most people are in this helter skelter world we live in,  
it can feel really demoralizing to think about removing creature comforts  
for the sake of a fast.

But if we feel nudged by the Spirit to try a practice like this,  
we might experience an awakening,  
a new awareness of GOD's presence,  
a new awareness about ourselves  
and ways we're being called to live more and more totally  
into the full stature of Christ, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4.

If we come to these practices humbly and expectantly,  
we also might experience some of the best of what fasting has historically  
been associated with.

As we are awakened to what drives us,  
to the appetites that have perhaps come to rule us,  
we might be enabled by the Spirit to attend more deeply  
to our longing for God,  
and we might experience God filling our needs  
in a new and meaningful way.

Another function of fasting is that it serve as  
a sort of spiritual act of solidarity,  
perhaps in identifying with Jesus in his sufferings,  
and at the same time in being reminded of all the many people  
across the world and in our own communities  
who lack the basic comforts we can so easily take for granted.  
When we engage fasting as a sort of prayerful, spiritual solidarity,  
it is an opportunity for God to open our hearts

and soften our hearts to those around us  
and their needs.

And finally,  
when we enter a season of intense prayer,  
and sense the need to pour our whole selves into staying in a prayerful state  
for an extended period of time -  
Fasting can help us to stay spiritually awake,  
as we turn again and again to God..  
Our longing for creature comforts we've denied ourselves  
can nudge us toward feeling more deeply  
our longing for God and for God's work in the world,  
for the renewal of all things  
to whatever degree we can see that come here and now,  
and for the full and total healing of the world  
when Christ returns and makes all things new.

Fasting, whether from food  
as through abstaining from some other habit or comfort  
can awaken us to God's love for us,  
can alert us to the needs of our neighbors and grow our ability to care for  
them as God does,  
and it can stoke our hunger for the day  
when we will feast at that great banquet table  
in the kingdom of heaven,  
in full and unbroken communion with the lover of our souls.



