



We have now come to the last sermon in the series on food and feasting. Whenever I come to an end of a series, I often feel a sense of sadness. This one is no different. I've enjoyed studying and preaching through this, and I've thoroughly enjoyed hearing from you on how God has been teaching you. But, we're not done quite yet. We have this one message left, and this one might seem a little odd because this sermon has to do with *not* eating food. It's the exact opposite of feasting. We close this series on the topic of fasting.

You might feel like this is a little bit of a downer. Why end on a discouraging note? As I studied some for this message, I actually was encouraged and strengthened in thinking about this sermon because whatever God ordains is good, right and best. And, I personally believe that the Lord calls his children to fast in this time period that we live in. Again, by way of reminder, we live in an already-not-yet time period. Jesus is coming again to deliver his kingdom over to the Father! But Jesus has ascended up to Heaven and reigns today. He already rules, but we don't experience the complete eradication of sin and brokenness in this world. Jesus has already given us reconciliation with God, but we don't see God yet. Those of us who have trusted in Jesus for our forgiveness and life with God are already adopted in God's family, but we await the fullness of adoption. We're already set apart unto God, but we're not yet fully sanctified. We live in an already-not-yet. So, last week, I related this truth to food and feasting. Eating and feasting has a purpose in Jesus' Kingdom. Feasting ought to communicate our trust in the victorious reign of Jesus. But since Jesus' reign hasn't come in completeness yet, feasting shouldn't happen all the time. There should be a rhythm to feasting, and this rhythm should match the beat of "already-not-yet." So, feasting focuses on the "already" – meaning, Jesus' victorious current reign that will culminate in the future. But what about the "not-yet?" That's where fasting comes in. The main idea of the sermon today is this: **Fasting ought to remind us of our present neediness for the Lord, and our anticipation for God's Kingdom to come.**

Now, at this point, I want to be forthright with you: I haven't studied the topic of fasting as much as feasting; however, I have done some listening and studying on the topic – and I think I know some things about fasting that I do hope will be helpful. I recall hearing someone say something like this once: **If you eat so much that you cannot enjoy the true nature of a feast, then you're eating too much. But if you're eating so little that you cannot ever fast, you're not eating enough.** I think this very practically helps us to understand the need for a rhythm of feasting and fasting. So, this morning, we're going to ask a few questions that come out of this main idea: What is fasting? How are we called to fast? When should we fast? Why should we fast?

1. What is fasting?

In our day, I've had conversations with people saying that they're fasting from Facebook or fasting from TV or fasting from _____. They use the term fasting as removing anything from your life that you would normally live with. As we enter into a season that many celebrate, called Lent, might hear more

people talking about this. Now, I'm ok with people choosing to give up things for a season. Usually for me, when I'm on my summer family vacation, I close out my emails and social media. It's nice for many reasons: focus on my family, enjoyment of other things, and it even serves as a kind of reset when I return to my "normal" life.

Having said this, restraining from items is *not* the biblical definition of fasting. Scripturally, the word "fast" always relates to **abstaining for a time from food**. We have examples of people who fasted for both short amounts of time to longer amounts of time, and it's always an abstinence from food. As we will see, God's intention for fasting is so that those of us who follow Jesus communicate and remember our present neediness for the Lord and grow in anticipating his return.

So, let's try to put the idea of fasting together with feasting. If feasting and fasting are part of the already-not-yet rhythm, how should this play out in our lives? Before we talk about *why* we fast, I want us to continue to get to the mindset behind fasting. Then, we'll get into the *why*.

2. How should we fast?

In Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus says the following words in Matthew 6: ¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹

Jesus emphasizes the attitude and mindset of fasting. This is the *how* of fasting. If you went through our series through Matthew 5, you may recall me saying that the Sermon on the Mount was a sermon primarily a sermon where Jesus is speaking to his disciples, but we also know a crowd was listening in. I'm bringing that up again because we need to know who the "you's" are in this text. Is Jesus talking to anyone who chooses to fast? No. He's speaking to people who are his disciples. Meaning, if you have turned to Jesus for forgiveness of sins and if he has rescued you to be his follower, Jesus is talking to you. You are one of his followers, and so, verse 16 starts off saying, "when you fast." Notice something important here. Jesus doesn't command fasting. He assumes fasting. And, it's almost as if his listeners assume they'll fast. I think this runs counter to many of us in our day. We don't assume fasting. Maybe some of you have thought fasting is an OT ritual that should be done away with, but if you believe Jesus means what he says elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, then I think we need to take it seriously here, too. There's not a question in Jesus' mind about whether or not fasting will take place in the lives of his disciples. Now, I do want to give one caveat. For those with health issues and it would be harmful for you to fast, I firmly believe you should not fast. I think it's because of reasons like these that fasting may not be commanded of all. So, don't feel lesser spiritually if you cannot fast. And, don't think you have to fast in order to be a Spirit-motivated Christian.

But if you're outside these kinds of categories, we can now ask, "How are we to fast?" The answer is simply this: **with focus on the Lord (and not focus on ourselves)**. We humans have a horrific tendency to make everything about ourselves, don't we? Years ago, I shared a latin word with many of you that speaks to this. The word is "Incurvitas." It means to be turned in on yourself. If you mispronounce it, it sounds like a disease: in-cur-VI-tas. Humanity is born with incurvitas. Sadly, the example of the spiritual leaders in the first century was one of incurvitas. And, many probably didn't realize it – even the

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 6:16–18.

disciples. So, Jesus makes explicit what the religious leaders are doing. When they're fasting, they make it obvious. Now, maybe they would say they did this in order to reveal they were serious about God and everyone else needs to be. But by disfiguring their faces and walking around a certain way, they really were making fasting all about them. Jesus says they did it to be seen by others! Is that the point of a spiritual discipline?

Let me ask you something: Is the point of you reading your Bible, serving others, praying, fasting to get the attention of others? You might immediately say "no," but is that always true? I know I've had many occasions where I've felt the desire for affirmation of others, and I've thought, "I wonder if anyone will see what I'm doing for them!" But am I really serving the Lord if I'm just wanting the approval of others? Jesus says that these people are hypocrites because their fasting says they're seeking the Lord, but their actions reveal that they're seeking people.

This is not how Jesus' disciples are to behave when it comes to fasting. Instead, when we fast, wake up in the morning, take care of yourself and go about your day. Jesus adds the anointing, which biblically speaking refers to you recognizing this is a set apart time and you're seeking to set apart yourself to God. So, focus of fasting is on God. God is the supreme joy and pleasure and delight and hope. Fasting is to help refocus our attention with greater intensity on the Lord.

One other thing to note: you read these words and you might then conclude that you can never tell people if you're fasting. That's not what Jesus says here. His point is to not make it about yourself. When you go into the book of Acts, you find believers fasting together. In Acts 13, we read of corporate fasting before setting apart Paul and Barnabas for ministry. In Acts 14, we read of corporate fasting and prayer while they appointed elders.

So, it's not only not sinful, but entirely appropriate at times for people to fast together when seeking the Lord's direction for his church. But again, the point is about focusing on the Lord. Now that we've answered the "how," we can move on to the next question:

3. When should we fast?

Did you know that the Old Testament Scriptures only commanded fasting one day a year for the Day of Atonement. Yet, by the first century, some Pharisees were fasting twice a week! Then you come to the New Testament, and there's no command to fast. It's simply assumed. And, I believe it's assumed specifically for all of us in this already-not-yet time period. Let me read to you a couple of other Bible passages:

In Matthew 9:15, Jesus says, "**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.**"² Jesus is referring to himself as the bridegroom. The "them" are his followers. When was Jesus taken away from his disciples? When he ascended to Heaven. Is Jesus still taken away? Now, you might say, "Well, that's just for the first disciples." Ok, let's look at how Mark records Jesus words in Mark 2:20: "**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.**"³ The days will come. . .and then they will fast in that day. Does the word "day" here only refer to a literal 24 hours? No. The "day" is referring to the already-not-yet time period

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 9:15.

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mk 2:20.

that we live in right now. This time between Jesus' ascension until his return! In this day, there will be fasting. Jesus' disciples *will* fast.

So now you might think, "Ok, I get it. We should fast. When should we fast then?" For people who are black and white and love a lot of rules or regulations, what I'm about to say might sound annoying. The answer seems to be **Less than feasting, but not never**. How specific and helpful is this? 😊 The Scriptures seem to emphasize fasting when making important decisions for the church or when seeking to be reminded of our dependence on the Lord. But the Scriptures emphasize feasting and eating way more than it speaks of fasting. Eating and feasting should be the normative pattern.

So, let's go back to the rhythm illustration I gave last week. Feasting has a certain beat, reminding us continually that Jesus reigns today! Fasting has its place in the rhythm, but think of fasting like the fermata above the note. It changes the movement of the music, but it's purposeful. This idea of feasting taking place more often than fasting is common in both the Old and New Testaments.

All this said, I cannot say *when* you ought to fast or when *we* as a church ought to fast together. But there are times when we see it's appropriate, right, and good that we do. Jesus expects we will because we are gloriously dependent on him. Now, we can move to the final, and even main question:

4. Why should we fast?

Answer: because Jesus assumes it. But, let's get more specific. God doesn't call us to things for no reason. He always has his glory and good intentions for his children. So, let's be reminded of the main point. The reason we should fast is because: **Christ-focused fasting reminds us of our present neediness for the Lord, and our anticipation for God's Kingdom to come**

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 9:14-17: ¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵ 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. 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. ¹⁷ 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 new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." ⁴

At the point when Jesus stated these words, the disciples of Jesus didn't fast. Their lack of fasting was a noticeable and stark contrast to other Jews, including the disciples of John. So, John's disciples ask the question. I think they ask Jesus because John was the one who taught that Jesus was greater than John. So, why do they fast, but Jesus' disciples don't? Jesus gives a couple reasons, but he starts with an illustration: "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?"

Right here we have the mental imagery of a wedding feast. Wedding feasts are different from culture to culture. And so, our wedding feasts aren't the same as they were in the first century. But eating is a similarity across the ages. So, I want you to imagine that you go to a nice wedding. Everyone is celebrating. The Bride and Groom are all decked out, and after the ceremony, there's a reception. Given that it seems the family spared no expense for this celebration, you're really looking forward to the reception because you can only imagine what kind of food is going to be there! You're one of the first to

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 9:14–17.

arrive. You get your seat, and you wait and wait for the bride and groom to arrive from having had more pictures. Finally, the Bride and Groom make their grand entrance, along with their wedding party. And then the Father of the Bride welcomes everyone. And he says, “We are so happy to celebrate their wedding. And, as a sign of our celebration, we aren’t eating any food. We will sit at our tables and talk to one another. You will be dismissed when the Bride and Groom leave.” In that moment, you might think this is a cruel form of punishment. Food and celebration goes hand-in-hand. The food at the wedding is a symbol of rejoicing in what’s taken place. Without food, you might even think to yourself, “Why am I even here? Do they even think their wedding is worth celebrating?”

Ok, so think of Jesus’ illustration. It makes sense to not have food before the Bride and Groom arrive. It makes sense there’s no food after the Bride and Groom leave. But while they’re there? That’s when we eat! That’s when we celebrate together! So, when Jesus answers the disciples, he says that when the bridegroom is with them, the disciples aren’t going to fast because the groom is here! No fasting when Jesus is on the earth because the disciples are with the Messiah. To fast would mean that the Messiah is gone.

This illustration answers a couple of other questions that Jesus answers in this text. First, why did people fast in the Old Testament time period? Why would John’s disciples fast? Well, John is the last prophet in the Old Testament era. And, fasting was intended to be a physical discipline to cause your heart to look upward to God as your satisfaction, sustenance, and salvation. In other words, fasting was to remind people of their need for God and his restoration of all things. Here, Jesus affirms this. Fasting is intended to cause our eyes to gaze on the Messiah. The Messiah is the One God promised to send to bring forgiveness to sinners, restoration for the world, and perfect judgment to those who would refuse God. Jesus, the Messiah, removes all sin and brokenness. So, it makes sense that in the Old Testament, they would fast. The Messiah had not come in the flesh. But then Jesus indicates that the Messiah is going to leave. When the bridegroom leaves, then they *will* fast. Again, the “they” here is all of Jesus’ disciples. We live in the day of his ascension.

But you may still think, “Why Fast?” Because the bridegroom has left. But then Jesus quickly states that the fasting that the disciples *will* engage in is different than the kind in the Old Testament time period. Verses 16-17 say, ¹⁶No 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. ¹⁷Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” ⁵

What does this have to do with anything? Is Jesus simply talking about how to store wine? Or how to sew the right cloths together? No. The context seems to be between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. To put unshrunk cloth on a worn-out garment, the garment won’t last. It’s going to make it worse. Same thing with new wine in old wineskins. The point is that Jesus’ entrance brought in the new covenant. The Old and New Covenant relate, but they cannot be treated as the same things. The New Covenant of God promises new hearts through the Messiah who would save us. Have you experienced this promise? Maybe you don’t even know what I mean when I say “new covenant,” but I want to state clearly that the Bible says that God has made a promise to rescue sinners. How? Through Jesus. Jesus lived the perfect live you and I could never live. Jesus took the punishment on the cross that sinners deserved. You and I both know that if justice came after us, we would be sentenced as guilty. But Jesus has taken the guilty sentence on the cross, and he suffered death. But he rose from the dead and

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 9:14–17.

conquered death, while also affirming that God accepted his sacrifice in the place of sinners. Through Jesus, if you turn from your sins and turn to God for forgiveness and eternal life – freedom to obey and honor the Lord – you will be accepted by the Lord!

If you have turned to Jesus, you are a part of this new covenant. The promise is sealed over you. Now, what does this have to do with Jesus' illustration of wineskins and clothing (and how does this relate to fasting)? Well, Jesus is saying that fasting would make *no* sense in this new covenant if Jesus stayed physically present with us. But God's plan all along was to NOT bring everything to completion in the 1st century. He designed for an already-not-yet. So, in this time period between Jesus' ascension and return, fasting is to be included. But it's different than the Old Testament fasting because now we know the Messiah. Now, we experience many more blessings of salvation than even Old Testament saints experienced. And, we have confident expectation of Jesus' return. We fast for these kinds of reasons.

So, fast because this world is still broken. Fast to remind yourself of our Lord and His Kingdom. Fast to remind yourself of your utter dependence on him. When struggles and trials are so exceeding our mental and spiritual abilities, fast to remind yourself that you're not in control. Our reigning Lord is in control. Then fast, knowing that the glorious return is to come.

As I say all of this, I do want to correct some faulty thinking about fasting. When I hear some people talk about fasting, they give other reasons for fasting that I think are actually **sinful reasons for fasting**:

Purely for health benefits. Whether people are talking about a Daniel diet or fasting, some seem to simply emphasize the bodily benefits of fasting. They speak as though that's the main reason why we would fast, but that's not at all the emphasis in the Scriptures. Daniel didn't fast in order to provide us today with a good diet regime. God didn't tell us to fast because we needed to be healthier. Maybe there are benefits, but physical fasting is to get our minds and hearts focused on our Lord. To hear people simply boil it down to health benefits almost sounds like someone say, "And, if you really don't like to fast, just remember, it's good for your health!" Then why are you fasting? Do you really want God or just yourself?

To Strongarm God. Some people think if they fast, they'll get God's attention and they'll get what they ask for. So, imagine you're going through a very difficult time. God isn't giving you what you want, so you fast. That sounds like an Islamic view of God. You have to do something radical to get him to listen? Is that our loving Heavenly Father? If God is not impressed by our many words, I doubt he's impressed by how long we can go without food. I think of the story of the religious man and the tax collector. The religious individual states his perceived righteousness by saying he fasted twice a week. But was he justified in the sight of God? No! Fasting isn't to be a tool to get our way. Fasting is to remind us of our weakness, our Messiah's rule, and our anticipation for the future day. And, in the midst of understanding our weakness and his strength, we pray our souls align with his will. Fasting is an act of utter dependence – open hands before the Lord, resting in his sovereign care and trusting him to answer our dependent prayers in his good ways.

In all of this, I hope we see that **fasting reminds us of our present neediness for the Lord, and our anticipation for God's Kingdom to come. I hope that in the rhythm of feasting, rejoicing in the Lord's reign, we'll remember to put in the rhythm (or, fermatas) of fasting. We live in the already-not-yet. We have a glorious Lord and a glorious Savior who reigns and is coming again. Let's glorify God in our eating and drinking until he comes again!**