

“Fasting & The Good Life.” Matthew 6:16-18 Shane Hatfield 6/26/22

Now, let's get into God's word. Turn in your Bible to Matthew 6, we're going to continue in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. This morning's sermon is called “Fasting & The Good Life.” As most of you know, we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount and we've been studying how Jesus gives us a view of the good life that is radically different from the view the world gives us. It's different from the view that the religious world gives us, and it's different from the view that the irreligious world gives us. One of the things that I haven't said but I want to bring out now, is that what Jesus is showing us is what it looks like to be truly human. He's not just a good teacher teaching us how to live better lives, He is God, Himself, who has broken into creation, to show us what it's like to be truly human, to live a life that we could have never imagined.

Maybe one of the other things I've forgotten to mention sometimes, is that that doesn't come through us and our own strength, it comes through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is reshaping us into the image of Jesus and is leading us to do all the things that we've been talking about. A few weeks ago we talked about giving, and it's the Holy Spirit that leads us to give generously as God has given to us. Last week we talked about prayer, and it's the Holy Spirit that leads us to pray to God as our Father. He leads us to Abba, Father, and to be intimate with Him. And this week we're going to look at fasting, and it is the Holy Spirit that leads us into a life of fasting so that we can draw near to the Lord and be satisfied in Him. So with that let's read from God's word. We're going to read Matthew 5:6, and then we'll skip down to Matthew 6:16-18.

“**6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“**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.”

As Charlie said earlier, the word of God is sweeter than the honey of the honeycomb, let's taste and see that the Lord is good from His word.

Whenever I was on staff at RiverOaks Presbyterian Church in south Tulsa, we would often fast during Lent in preparation for Easter. Sometimes we would choose different things, and one year we decided that we were going to fast from coffee. Yeah. You can probably guess where this story is going. So, it was myself, and Ricky, our senior pastor, and Jason, our administrator. We all gave up coffee. The first week we were just tired. We were just tired all the time, right? The second week we went from being tired to being, I would say, irritable. We were so irritable that staff meetings got tense, there was some conflict in the staff meetings, we were just not quite able to work through the relational things that we normally would have been able

to work through. So, after I think two weeks, Ricky said, "I quit." He showed up at the office one morning and said, "I quit. I get it. I need Jesus, and I need a cup of coffee." I was going to tough it out, and so, I went another week. Three weeks in, at the same time I was fasting from coffee I was studying Hebrew, and while I was drinking coffee I passed all my Hebrew quizzes, and while I was not drinking coffee I failed all of my Hebrew quizzes. For the sake of my Hebrew grade, I decided I would quit the fast and go back to coffee, and I did eventually pass Hebrew. So, I quit three weeks in. Jason, he stuck it out another week, but after four weeks he tapped as well and said, "I can't do it. I need Jesus, and I need coffee." So, none of us made it through Lent fasting from coffee. We all gave up.

Now, some of you coffee drinkers are like, "Of course you failed." Yes. And you non-coffee drinkers are judging us coffee drinkers. We'll get to you later in the sermon, okay? The question I want to pose to you is 'Did we fail in our fast? Did that fast fail?' Well, what was the purpose of our fast? What were we going for? The purpose of our fast, and the purpose of all fasting, is to hunger and thirst for righteousness. What that fast revealed was that we needed Jesus. We needed His righteousness. You see, the irritability that we felt in our staff meetings didn't come because we didn't have coffee, it came because we were sinners! Maybe coffee was masking our sinfulness during those times. That fatigue that we felt all the time was because we're weak and we're frail and we're finite and we need a God who is not weak, and frail, and finite. We need a God like Jesus. So, the fast, even though we failed and we didn't succeed in fasting the entire time, was actually successful because it increased our hunger and our thirst for righteousness. What I want you to see this morning as we study fasting and the good life, is that fasting teaches us to hunger and thirst for righteousness so that we might be satisfied with God, so that we would experience what Jesus said. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Fasting is one way in which we hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we're satisfied, and we're blessed. So, we're going to try to answer three questions this morning: when do we fast, how do we fast, and why do we fast.

First, when you look at verse 16, Jesus says, "And when you fast." Jesus assumes that His disciples will fast, and that's because God's people fasted all throughout the Bible. They fasted in times of mourning and repentance. One of the great rituals in the Old Testament was the Day of Atonement, and it was symbolic of the sacrifice that was necessary to pay for our sins. God called Israel to fast before the Day of Atonement. When David's child was sick, he fasted. When Hannah was barren, she fasted. When the Ninevites heard the gospel from Jonah, they fasted. When Joel prophesied about God's judgment and he called the people to humble their hearts and return to the Lord, he called them to fast. Sin and suffering grieve God's heart, and when we fast, we're aligning our heart with God. When we fast, we mourn for what He mourns for and we repent for sin. Christians in the Old Testament, they fasted when they needed God's presence, when they needed His guidance. Moses fasted for forty days when He was up on the mountain, when God made the covenant with Israel. Before Esther met with the king to try to save the Israelites, she told Mordecai, she said, "Tell them to fast." When Ezra was leading God's people back to Jerusalem, he told them to fast and pray that God would guide them. The early church

fasted before they sent Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys, and then Paul and Barnabas prayed for the elders and fasted when they left them at the churches. In fact, praying and fasting is actually used more often together than repenting and fasting. It seems that fasting is a time in which we can pray and draw near to the Lord in a special way that we can't in other times. So, we fast in times of mourning and repentance, we fast for God's presence and for His guidance.

We fast because Jesus fasted! Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness before He started His earthly ministry, and He probably fasted at other times. There was this one time whenever a father brought a demon-possessed boy to Jesus and he said, 'I need you to heal this boy, your disciples couldn't do it.' And Jesus said, 'This kind of demon only comes out by prayer and fasting,' and Jesus drove out the demon. So, the implication is that Jesus had fasted! He also implied that His disciples would fast whenever He left them as they awaited His return. Once He was asked why His disciples didn't fast like the Pharisees, and He said, 'Well, the bride can't fast as long as the bridegroom is here, whenever the bridegroom leaves then the disciples will fast.' Jesus is the bridegroom and He's not here, so because He's not here, His disciples, who are the bride, fast! So, when do we fast? We fast any time hunger and thirst for righteousness, or we fast anytime that we know that we don't hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we want to hunger and thirst for righteousness! We fast when we want to mourn for something that's sad. We fast when we want to repent. We fast when we need God's presence. And we fast when we need God's guidance. We fast at regular intervals, and we fast in special seasons. We fast until Jesus returns! Because when Jesus returns, then we're going to feast. Sometimes we get to choose our fasts, and sometimes we don't.

Oddly enough, this is another fasting story about coffee. I don't know what God is trying to teach me or us, but a few years ago I started experiencing a sore throat, a lot, my voice was weak and then eventually I lost my voice completely. You can imagine that's bad for someone in my line of work, and it was! So, I went to the doctor and we tried to figure it out, and we traced it back to acid reflux, and he said, 'You really need to eliminate anything in your diet that's causing this acid reflux and it's causing you to lose your voice.' And I thought, 'Oh no. That means coffee.' I asked, 'What causes it?' He said, 'Hot stuff, chocolate, and coffee.' I was like, 'Oh no.' So, I spent an entire semester giving up coffee again, fasting from coffee, this time I actually *had* to do it, and I did. But I will tell you, as I went through that process of this forced fast, I went through the same fatigue, the same irritability, and then, something even crazier happened, I felt like I lost my identity. I couldn't work the same way I used to work, I could live the same way I used to live, and what I realized was that my whole identity as a person had been bound up in whatever coffee gave me. This idea that I could work and minister and live in such a way that I wanted to live. I thought, you know what, this is how I glorify God, this is how I live, this is how I work, and all that was taken away from me, and I had to ask myself, 'Do I really believe that God loves me for me, and not what I do while I'm drinking coffee? Do I really believe that God loves me the way that I am: a weak, broken, sinful man. Do I really believe that Jesus is my

righteousness, and not my work?’ That forced fast gave me a hunger and a thirst for righteousness, a righteousness that only Jesus could provide.

So, that’s when we fast. So now, how do we fast? Well, Jesus gives us some clues here in verses 16-18. He says, “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.” As we’ve seen the last few weeks when we looked at prayer and generosity, Jesus is contrasting His teaching with the teaching of the hypocrites. He’s contrasting fasting with hypocritical fasting. So, the hypocrites, they gave and they prayed in public, why? So that they could be seen by others! And apparently they were doing the same thing here with fasting. When they fasted, they made sure that everybody knew that they were fasting because they looked disfigured, they looked disheveled, they made themselves look sad, pained, mourning, all those things. They wanted everybody to know that they were fasting.

So, Jesus says, I want you to maintain your regular appearance while you’re fasting so that people don’t know you’re fasting! Why? Because your fasting is between you and your heavenly Father. He knows you’re fasting. You don’t need to broadcast it to everybody else, because He knows. What He’s driving at, is that fasting is an intimate experience between us and God, so when we fast we need to try to keep it that way. Does that mean that we cannot tell anyone ever about our fasting? I don’t think so. As we saw earlier, there are corporate fasts. We know that Jesus fasted, we know that the disciples were supposed to fast, we know that the nation of Israel fasted, so there is a time for corporate fasting. If you’re fasting at home, you may need to tell your family, you may need to tell your spouse, but the point is that you’re not doing that so you can be seen. That’s not the reason you’re doing it. I would say that it’s good to keep your fasting between you and God, and don’t tell anyone else unless they need to know or for purposes like telling your spouse or telling your kids or something like that, or maybe you’re uniting with your church in fasting. But in general, you want to keep it between you and God because it’s intimate.

What do we fast from? Well, the typical fast was 24 hours from sundown to sundown, from food and water. When Jesus talks about fasting, that’s probably what He was talking about, and I think that’s a good place to start. I think it is good to start with fasting from food and drink. The reason why is that there is something tangible about food and drink that really creates that hunger and that thirst for God. Maybe 24 hours is a long time to fast, and you start with one meal, maybe two, you work up to trying to go for a whole day. Typically, Christians throughout history have fasted twice a week on different days. So, that’s something that you can try as well. Fasting from a meal is also an easier way to keep it private, if that’s what you’re trying to do. That’s a little bit easier to keep private than some of the other things. You don’t have to only fast from a meal, you could fast from something else. Ask yourself: is there anything that’s keeping me from hungering and thirsting for God? Is there anything that’s hurting my intimacy with the Father that needs to be removed? It could be sports, television, streaming, movies, cell phone, it could be alcohol, it could be shopping, it could be chocolate, you could go on and on and on with

things you could fast from. Paul said it's even good for a husband and a wife to maybe fast and pray and abstain from sexual intimacy for a time. I would ask you to ask yourself, where do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, and what's blocking that? Or maybe I should ask you this practical question, what could I not live without? What's the thing that I think, 'Man, I can't go without that, I have to have this thing.' That may be the very area that God is calling you to fast from so you can see that the only thing you need, ultimately, is God and what He provides for you.

What do you do when you fast? You pray, repent, mourn, read Scripture, and then you go throughout your day. And as you feel the hunger, the urge, the need for that thing you normally have, that's the time when you pray instead of reaching for that thing. If you're giving up your cell phone, about every three minutes you're probably going to be reminded, 'Oh, I want to pick up my cell phone during this activity.' That's a reminder for you to pray. It's almost like you've got this automatic notification that's popping up in your heart that says, pray, pray, pray. It's there where I think our heavenly Father meets us in secret. I love how Jesus says, "Your Father who is in secret." That secret place is the place of prayer where you and your Father can go to talk to each other, to be intimate with each other.

I read a story this week that I feel like pulls together all of these things about fasting. There was a book called, "The Cross and the Switchblade." It was written by David Wilkerson. He tells of a time in his life when he was a minister and he had a thriving, successful ministry, but he was restless and he felt like God wanted him to do something more impactful, more different in his ministry, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. One night he was up watching The Late Show, that dates it somewhat, right? He probably had a dial on his television that he was turning. But he was watching The Late Show, and it occurred to him that every night he would watch The Late Show, and he could be praying during that time. So, he thought to himself, I'm going to sell my television and instead of watching The Late Show, I'm going to pray. So, he thought about that, but he couldn't muster up the strength to do it, and days went on, and finally he said, 'Okay Lord, I'm going to challenge you. I'm going to see if this is really what you want me to do. I'm going to put an ad in the paper to sell this television, and if somebody calls me in an hour, no within thirty minutes, to buy it, then I'll sell it and I'll know this is from You.' His wife did not like this idea. But he went ahead and did it anyway. So, he puts the ad in the paper, the ad goes out, and during that thirty minute span he's literally sitting in the living room with his wife and kids, and they're all wondering, 'Okay, is anybody going to call?' Twenty-five minutes went by and then the phone rang. He picks up the phone, and it's somebody that wants to buy the television. He said, 'Okay Lord, this must be from you.' So, he sold this television, he began praying at night and that prayer time led into a ministry that ministered to gang members in the streets of New York City, and they saw tons of conversions through that ministry. God used his time of fasting to increase his hunger and his thirst for righteousness, and to actually bring righteousness on earth.

So, that's when we fast, and that's how we fast, but ultimately, what I think Jesus is driving at, is why we fast. There are lots of good reasons to fast. Fasting develops self-control.

Fasting gives us the opportunity to share with the poor. The assumption is that if you're fasting from something, you have more to give to others. God actually uses prayer and fasting to do things. I believe He does use our prayer and our fasting to actually change the world, to bring His kingdom, to bring His will here on earth. But the main reason Jesus seems to be emphasizing here is intimacy with God. It's out of intimacy with God that all of those things flow. Look back at verses 17-18. He says: "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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." Now, the hypocrites, when they fasted, they looked like they were developing intimacy with God. Remember, the hypocrites were actors. So, they were acting like they were developing this intimacy with God, but really, they were just doing it for someone else and they were making it look mournful and sad and depressing because they were probably influenced by a movement called aestheticism.

Aestheticism is something the church has always struggled with. It's this idea that the spiritual world is good and the physical world is bad. Aestheticism tends to downplay the physical world and elevate the spiritual world. There was a movement during the Biblical times called gnosticism, and gnosticism was built on this idea that salvation was liberation from the physical world into the spiritual world. Religious people, even Christians throughout history, have been influenced by aestheticism and by gnosticism. The early Christians struggled with this, and you'll see it through some of the letters, Paul will be addressing this idea in his letters and correcting it. The desert fathers was an early monastic movement. They moved out into the desert away from all worldly things and denied themselves the pleasures of this world and sought to repress their desires. Even to this day, people still do the same thing. They see the physical world as bad. Aestheticism doesn't lead to the Good Life and it actually denies the goodness of God's creation.

But, there's an opposite error that we probably fall into. There's probably not a lot of us that fall into the error of aestheticism. We probably pendulum-swing into hedonism. Hedonism is the idea that the highest good is to be happy, and to fulfill our pleasures through physical things. It's the idea that the physical world is maybe all there is, or it's the highest good. So, it tends to elevate the physical world, and downplay the spiritual world. It tends to create in us this desire for more, this desire for more food, more clothing, more money, more sex, cars, houses, whatever it is in the physical world that we think is going to make us happy, hedonism teaches us to go do it, to give into it, to enjoy it. On July 4th, there will be one of the most famous sporting events in the history of the world. It's called the Nathan's World Famous Hot Dog Eating Competition. In ten minutes, they will try to eat as many hot dogs and buns as they can, and Joey Chestnut will win! He holds the record with 73 hot dogs and buns in ten minutes! Now, if that's not an illustration of hedonism, I don't know what is! But we can't judge Joey Chestnut, because we're all kind of like him. It's like we're all in this giant hot dog eating competition and we're all trying to shove as much stuff into our souls as we can. Hedonism, ultimately, does not work, because we're not just physical things in a physical world, we're spiritual beings in a spiritual world. Those things will never satisfy us.

So, the Bible doesn't teach aestheticism, it doesn't teach hedonism, what the Bible teaches is that God created our bodies and our souls as good, that the physical world is good, that the spiritual world is good, but that when sin came in it broke our bodies and our souls, so that now we either worship the physical world and downplay the spiritual world, or we downplay the physical world and we elevate the spiritual world. What Jesus wants to do is unite those things together so that our body and soul, sacred and secular, spiritual and physical, are all unified into one that glorifies God in everything. So, what does that have to do with fasting? Fasting unites our bodies and our souls in a holy moment with God. Fasting unites our bodies and our souls in a holy moment with God. You see, what hedonism and aestheticism do is they divide us. They divide our body and soul. What the Father, Son, and Spirit want to do is unite our body and soul so that we glorify God and we enjoy Him in everything that we do, so that we find deep satisfaction that God can offer us. One of the ways He offers us deep satisfaction is through the good things that He gives us in this world. This is good news for people who struggle with hedonism. It's good news. Because what the Bible offers us is something that can actually satisfy us.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis describes an interaction between Aslan and Lucy, and Lucy comes to Aslan and he's by a stream of water and Lucy is thirsty and she wants to drink out of that water but she's scared of Aslan, and so, they're talking back and forth and finally Lucy says, "I will go drink from another stream." She wants to drink from the stream, but she's scared, and she says, 'You know what, Aslan, I'm just going to go to another stream and I'm going to drink there.' And Aslan looks at her and says, "There is no other stream." Your hunger and thirst for righteousness cannot be satisfied by anything else in this world. It can only be satisfied in and through God, and fasting teaches our soul to find our satisfaction in Him. This is also good news for the aesthetic. Fasting teaches us to enjoy the good things of this world, not to despise them. One of the classic verses that our church loves to talk about is in 1 Corinthians when Paul says that you can eat or drink, but whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. God's primary purpose is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Paul can only say that if the things of this world in some way *do* glorify God, and in some way point us to Him. What fasting teaches us is not to hate the physical world, but to see the physical world as a good gift from the Father, so that when we fast, we draw near to Him, so that when our fast is over we can experience Him and know more of Him in everything we do. The purpose of fasting is to draw near to God and be intimate with Him.

Let me close with this, a few years ago, well let me back up. I started campus ministry in 2014 and we had Francis in 2014, so the first couple years of campus ministry for me were really, really busy. There was a lot going on and I kind of threw myself into my work and didn't spend as much time at home. Well, that was Francis' first couple years growing up, so I didn't get to spend a lot of time around Francis. I didn't feel like I really connected with her that much. Well then, the spring of my second year, Francis had an accident in the back yard and she broke her femur. Don't worry, she's okay. But she broke her femur and they had to put her in a spica cast, and a spica cast starts at your waist like this and it went all the way down one leg and part

way down the other leg. So, she was a two year old that literally couldn't do anything. Again, this was a fast that she did not choose, it was kind of forced upon her, right? She fasted from moving. She would literally lay in bed at night, she couldn't sleep, and go: "I can't move!" It was so sad. But for me to spend time with Francis literally meant that I had to sit in the living room with Francis on my lap and we would just sit there together, because that's all she could do. So, Francis and I would sit there together in the living room together for long periods of time and I would just hold her. I would talk to her, and she would be with me, and I would be with her. In those moments, I felt like for the first time, Francis and I really connected. We really enjoyed each other.

That's what happens when we fast! When we fast, we're intentionally, deliberately taking something away from ourselves so that we can spend time with our heavenly Father, so we can grow in intimacy with Him, so that we can be satisfied and happy in Him. I think that's what Jesus is teaching us here and I think that's what Jesus is teaching us when we come to the Lord's Supper. The reason why we can fast and enjoy God is because Jesus fasted for us! Not only in the desert, but before His crucifixion, when Jesus was with His disciples. He said, "I will not taste of the fruit of the vine again until glory." When He was on the cross, what did He cry out? "I thirst." He hungered and thirsted for us so that we could have His righteousness, so that we could experience the righteousness of God. And when we come to the Lord's Supper, we come because we hunger and thirst for righteousness and because we know that Jesus is the only place where we can come for satisfaction of our souls. This table is not the table of the PCA or Grace & Peace or Acts 29, this is a table for all those who hunger and thirst in righteousness and believe they can only find it through the person and work of Jesus. If you haven't put your faith in Christ, if you've not said, 'I'm a sinner and I need God's grace and Jesus is the only place where I can find it,' then we'd ask that you sit and wait and pray and ask God to show you the righteousness of Christ, ask God to give you the righteousness of Christ. Ask God to give you a desire for Him and for His things. Sit and pray. Pray that prayer and hold Jesus to His word. He says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Pray that prayer. Hold Him to it. Let's pray.