

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Fasting*
SERIES: *Whoever Hears These Words*
SCRIPTURES: *Matthew 6:16-18*
SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*
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**Credit to Scot McKnight, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard for valuable insights regarding this message!*

Well good morning, it is so great to worship with you.

Just finished up 5 weeks walking through the Lord's Prayer. My hope is that through that series, we have gained a deeper understanding of those phrases that are so common to all of us.

We have two more weeks in the Sermon on the Mount series called, "whoever hears these words" (**series Title Slide**), this week and next week, and then during the month of August Pastor Bill will be taking 4 weeks, a series called "From Slavery to Intimacy"...looking at the story of Moses.

Have you ever fasted before? Fasting is choosing not eat for a certain amount of time. Long enough to experience hunger. So, I know some of you are thinking I fast twice a day. Between Breakfast and lunch and between lunch and dinner, but that does not count as a fast. Here's what Jesus says about fasting...

Matthew 6:16-18 - ¹⁶ "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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ 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.

Fasting has a long tradition in church history.

By the time of Jesus, fasting had become a fairly common practice, twice a week for many Jews.

Common fast in Judaism was from one evening meal to the next. So they would eat dinner. Sleep. Skip Breakfast and lunch and then eat dinner again.

Many examples throughout your Bible of individuals who fasted...

Moses fasted when he went up to receive the Law, the 10 Commandments (Deuteronomy 9).

King David after he killed and stole another man's wife. She had a baby, but the baby has health issues and it's life was in danger and David fasted for the life of his newborn son. (2 Samuel 12)

Queen Esther fasted regarding approaching the King to ask that he might spare the life of her people.

In Luke 2, **Anna a prophet**...worshipped night and day in the temple, fasting and praying...it's how she prepared herself to recognize the Messiah.

Elijah fasted, Ezra fasted, John the Baptist fasted.

Jesus himself, in preparation for his time of ministry...fasted for 40 days in the desert.

But fasting is not just common throughout Scripture, even looking back through church history, names that you will recognize for whom fasting was a part of their faith journey.

Martin Luther. John Calvin. John Wesley.

But I know, I know you don't need to fast. Fasting isn't really for you. It's confusing, what's the purpose anyway. I'm just telling where all we see fasting in Scripture and the life of the church.

I. Why do we not practice fasting?

Prayer. Yes.

Giving/Generosity. Yes.

But fasting, which Jesus talks about in the same section of his sermon. No. Why?

“fasting is largely irrelevant to most Protestants today...” (McKnight)

Why is that?

A. We don't know enough about it.

We don't understand its purpose or value. We don't talk about it. It seems unnecessary to most of us. In our already busy lives, we have kind of boiled our spirituality down to the “minimum entrance requirements for following Jesus.” Tell me what is absolutely necessary and I'll just kind of leave everything else out.

Remember when you were in school and your teacher said your research paper needs to be 3-5 pages long. Most of us are not thinking. I'll aim for the 5 pages. We're thinking I'll aim for 2 ¾ pages. And then I'll use a font size that's a little larger and make the margins on the paper a little larger. Just enough to squeak by. And we kind of live our lives this way and we live our faith the same way. Tell me the minimum I must do to get by.

Fasting kind of fits in the “not necessary” category and so we leave it out.

Similarly, we tend to think of fasting as something

B. Reserved for spiritual elites

or spiritual extremists. Serious Jesus freaks, who go overboard may fast, but most normal Christians don't fast.

Our familiarity with fasting come from monks, for example, who took the idea to the extreme. Monks who went days without eating. Tortured themselves.

Third, I was kind of thinking in our world today...

C. We just like food too much.

We don't like to "not eat" when we are hungry. Ours is world of golden arches, fast food, anything I want at my fingertips etc. We are in many ways, addicted to over-eating and self-indulgence. It is good and acceptable in our world and fasting is kind of like, the opposite. We are told if we do not get three large meals each day and a few snacks in between we are on the verge of starvation (Foster 47).

Why would you choose to not have something, you could have? That is anti-American.

And yet, right here in Jesus' sermon, to his disciples... "When you fast..." Right alongside of giving alms and the Lord's Prayer...he teaches about fasting, he practices fasting himself. You find examples all over your Bible and all throughout church history.

So lets talk about it this morning. What is it, what is it's purpose/value for followers in Franklin County in the year 2019. And what it is NOT. In fact, let's start there, because a lot of misunderstanding.

II. What fasting is NOT:

1. Fasting is not done so that God will answer your prayers.

Fasting is not a secret formula for manipulating God into giving you what you want.

I was telling you about King David fasting for the life of his son.

2 Samuel 12 - ¹⁵ After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. ¹⁶ David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth^b on the ground. ¹⁷ The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

¹⁸ On the seventh day the child died.

Fasting is not manipulating God into giving you what you want.

2. Fasting does not make you spiritually superior

to other people.

This what they Pharisees were doing. They turned fasting into a form of spiritual elitism. They were doing it in order to be seen by others. Remember the story Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 Pharisee in prayer says, "Thank you I'm not like other people, I never mess up. I fast twice a week."

In fact, Pharisees had two specific days set aside for fasting. Monday and Thursday. Do you know why? Because in the Jewish world those were big market days and they wanted a big audience to see and notice them, know they were fasting and admire their piety!

Don't disfigure your face? In order to be noticed! Fasting turns into a public display for approval.

Instead...Put oil on your head and wash your face...go about your normal day and don't make a fuss over your fasting. (Take a shower, comb your hair and brush your teeth, go about your day as you normally would.)

Fasting doesn't prove you are spiritually superior.

3. Fasting is not a diet plan.

I want to be very clear. If you have medical reasons why you are not able to participate in food fasting...don't do it! You don't fast to lose weight. You don't fast if you have an eating disorder or body image disorder.

If you fast in order to lose weight, you are not fasting, you are starving yourself. It's not ok. Fasting does not make God love you anymore than he already does. And he will not punish you for not doing it.

Throughout this entire section of Jesus sermon, on prayer, giving and fasting, everything we've been talking about through June and July...Jesus is concerned with heart motivation and intent.

Jesus sermon is in the context of, what does a person who lives the Kingdom of Heaven life look like? How do you become a Kingdom of Heaven kind of person? Fasting is one of the things that can help you, train you, to be a Kingdom of Heaven kind of person in our world.

It's not about being spiritually elite or manipulating God or ancient diet plan. So what is the purpose/value of fasting?

III. Reasons for Fasting:

1. **Fasting** (throughout Scripture, is often done) **in relation to significant events**

A. Injustice: Death, war, sin.

David fasts for the life of his newborn son. Esther for the safety of her people, a nation about to be obliterated.

Fasting is often in response to events like this. In our lifetime we think of: violent mass shootings. I say words like Columbine, Nickel mines. When you become aware of human trafficking or refugee crises...in a way you weren't before.

One of the more significant events of injustice that I can recall is 9/11. I remember where I was in high school the day it happened. I remember the classroom I was sitting in and the young man who had been skipping school that day, and got caught and an administrator walked him into our classroom. And he's the one who shared with us the news about the planes crashing into the World Trade center, that was all over TV.

And in these situation the idea in fasting is to "experience" the significance of the injustice with God. It's not just a head knowledge that something wrong is happening in our world, in fasting we are invited into experiences that grueling, uncomfortable...something is not right...and it in relation to injustice we are then allowed, in some small degree to experience with God the devastation of injustice.

B. Major life decisions.

Judges 20:26-27 - ²⁶ Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the LORD. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD. ²⁷ And the Israelites inquired of the LORD.

You may fast as a form of discernment regarding major life decisions. So you probably don't fast over what color you're going to paint the living room. But you might consider fasting over a job change. A location change. Should you move your family from PA to Florida? You might fast over the decision to put your kids in Public school, private school or homeschool?

And we'll talk about this more in just a moment, you might be thinking, how does "not eating," help me make important life decisions?

It doesn't mean, in fasting God will give you some clear, right answer. There may be more than one right answer for your major decision.

But part of the value of fasting is that it makes room for or creates space for God in your life.

Jesus in the desert, under temptation says, "*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God...*" Fasting creates room for the voice, the influence of God in your life.

So it's making space for God's perspective in your decision process. He may not say, "You are supposed to put your kids in public school." He may be ok with public or private, but you may gain a deeper insight into how you could make the decision.

Fasting can be done in relation to significant events.

2. Fasting as a spiritual discipline intended for spiritual growth.

More than any other discipline fasting reveals the things that control us (Foster 55). Fasting shows us very quickly how much our peace of mind depends upon the pleasure of eating.

Alright so let's talk about the **power of food** for a minute. I'll just tell you I like food. I like all kinds of food. I love oreos with milk. I love cheeseburgers on the grill. I love chocolate cake with peanut butter icing. I love freshly baked bread. I love taco Tuesday, and cinnamon roll Saturday and TGI Friday's.

One of the most fulfilling feelings in the world, as silly as it sounds, is eating when your stomach is running on empty. Fasting doesn't mean it's wrong to love food.

The danger is that we can become dependent on that good feeling that food gives us. Sometimes this is called "instant gratification". There is satisfaction, a sense of enjoyment, a sense of security in filling yourself up. Getting what you want, when you want it. And it's dangerous, because instant gratification has an impact on my self-control. If I give in to that instant gratification over and over, it starts to have control over me. It starts to have an effect on the kind of person you are becoming.

1 Peter 2:11 – Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

Your love for food can war against your soul. I'll just show you how this happens to many people.

Things aren't going well at home. I can never seem to get caught up on household chores. Just had a fight with my spouse. Kids are struggling in school. A close friend is moving away.

Got bad news about my job. The car didn't pass inspection and you're already strapped for money. Just found out the dishwasher is gonna need replaced. You aren't sleeping well. Your blood pressures is going up, you're gonna need to start taking medication for it. Feeling overwhelmed about life.

You feel stressed out, it makes you feel uncomfortable. You don't like that feeling, what do you do? Do you know one of the primary answers for many of us...we eat. Fill the emptiness with food.

Food gives us a sense of security. It's immediate relief, it's instant gratification. And it starts to control us.

And it's not just food. We do the same thing with **entertainment** for example. Stress of a long day at work...so what do you do, sit down and zone out in front of the television. You pick up your cell phone or your Ipad and get lost in virtual world.

Some of us it's shopping, go buy something, because that makes me feel good and allows me to avoid the stress I am feeling. It's that thing that will fill me up.

How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. We crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them.

And part of our challenge is that these things are not usually bad things in themselves. There is nothing wrong with food, and enjoying good food. In fact you need it in order to live. Nothing wrong with a cell phone or your television or shopping. It's that when we're not careful we place our sense of security in them. They start to take a place in our lives, they were never intended to take.

In the kingdom of this world, we are controlled by our appetites.

So what do we do? How do we become Kingdom of heaven people when our world is filled with instant gratification?

Fasting. I intentionally choose not to give in to my appetites, my desire for food.

Fasting teaches you, you don't have to have what you want when you want it.

Fasting is training in self-control, which is a character of Kingdom of heaven people.

In fasting, you know that you are going to get hungry, and you will think, I cannot be ok, unless I get what I want...food in my stomach. Fasting means you will get hungry and when you do, you will not get what you want (food), but you discover that you are still ok.

Fasting teaches us that our stomachs and appetites, those urges do not control us. We are followers of a different kingdom. One where God becomes our sustenance and bread of life.

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from God.

Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. Learning reliance on God, peace and security are found in Him not in food.

Jesus says, **“I have food to eat of which you do not know...my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”** (John 4:32, 34).

The appetites of our stomach are our servant. Or any appetite for that matter.

It's also important to realize there is a difference between **fasting and abstaining**.

This is good to know just in how we talk.

Fasting is word specifically related to food/water. Abstaining is very similar idea means giving up something, one specific item, not necessarily food (though it can be), could be anything for a time. (Social Media, Facebook, television, soda, sugar, athletics...all of these things have a way of controlling us.) If the thought just crossed your mind. I couldn't give up: Facebook. Maybe that's the thing that has it's grip on you. Give it up and learn that Facebook will never be your sustenance, only God can ultimately fill that void.

Fasting and abstaining purposefully creates empty space in your life for God to show up. Kind of brings me to the last thing I want to say about fasting...

3. Fasting means filling the empty space with God.

It's not just that I remove food or abstain from other things. It's that I purposefully fill that space that I have created with attention on God.

We have to set aside our attachment to food and pleasure, so that we can receive something so much better.

Author of a book I was reading was talking about taking his son to the beach. And his son was walking along collecting shells (**PIC OF BROKEN SHELLS**). And pretty soon his hands were just full of shells.

All of a sudden is dad notice a beautiful starfish (**PIC OF STARFISH**) floating on the water. Much more incredible, unique, beautiful than the handfuls of broken shells. His son is mesmerized by the starfish. He tells his son to go pick up the starfish. His son begins following it, chasing it. Dad is saying, "Just pick it up, it'll get away, just pick it up." All of a sudden his son turns around, tears streaming down his face. "I can't" he says. "Why not?" his father asks? "Because my hands are already full."

And we would say, how foolish...just let go of the broken shells, pick up something so much better. But you see, you and me, we have the same problem. We filled our lives with so many broken shells, that we just aren't willing to let go of, they control us, even though there is something so much better offered to us.

Fasting means, you choose to remove or set aside those things, so that you can make space for God.

So I choose to fast for 24 hours. There are a couple of meal times that I will now be “skipping.” But I replace those meal times with focused attention on God. I may pray. I may read Scripture. I may take a walk and talk to God. I may journal. I ask myself? What am feeling? Why am feeling this? Can I be ok, feeling this way?

Beyond meal times, during this 24 hours, the pangs of hunger hit me. In my normal routine, I would immediately fill that hunger pang. I would reach for my snack drawer, I would pull over at sheetz or stop at starbuck and fill that void. But, in a fast, I know I can't. And so I pause in that moment and am reminded of God's presence with me and that He is my sustenance. I choose to trust him, rely on him, rest in him, in that moment instead of a “mocha-café-latte with cream and sugar” etc.

I am becoming a Kingdom of Heaven person.

In His Kingdom, I don't get all of the things I want, when I want them. Instead, I learn to be satisfied, even joyful, with less. I am patient and gentle in adversity, because I am content with God. (Paul says, I am learning to be content in all circumstances, whether well-fed or hungry.)

The official makes a bad call, even seems to be “against” my team. I want to lash out. (I have, I do). I'm afraid I'll be taken advantage of. But as a Kingdom person, I respond with grace and gentleness. Because the official does not get to control me and my attitude. God does, I'm in his Kingdom. I am secure through eternity.

That's what fasting is. It's spiritual training. It's a gift God has given you, so you don't end up controlled by your appetites. Those things will ruin your life. There may come a time when I am deprived of something much more significant than simply a meal or a bad official or my facebook account. It may be financial income. It may be a relationship. It leaves me with a void, hurt, suffering...what will I turn to

in those moments. You are training yourself to rely on Him. You are training to be a Kingdom of heaven person!

Fasting, abstaining... have become largely irrelevant to so many. Perhaps that is why so many of are controlled by our appetites, indulgence, self-gratification.

This week, how might you consider practicing? Perhaps you have become aware of a major injustice, you will fast in response this week and experience a taste of the injustice. Perhaps you have a major life decision...you will fast in response this week and make room for God's voice. Perhaps you have realized you are being controlled by soda, sugar, caffeine, Netflix, Facebook, Iphone...you will fast/abstain...and learn that you are ok without these things.