

February 8, 2026

Matthew 6:1-8,14-18
When You Fast

When comes to Christianity in these United States, no question that the spiritual discipline that gives us the most pause is fasting. Followed by fasting is forgiveness, which is very problematic, considering the grave consequence of unforgiveness. But I will have to save that for another message. Why does fasting give us pause? As Presbyterians, is it because of our reformed tradition and our cautiousness against any practice that we believe might lead us down the road of works righteousness. Maybe, but I do not think so. I believe it is solely due to the fact we, pastors, have not preached on it faithfully from the pulpit or taught on it in the classroom. And so, we are weak in practice because we lack understanding. Anything you do not fully understand you are unlikely to embrace or even embrace too quickly, usually, and almost certainly when it comes to the things of God. Rarely in our day do we take the time to fully understand a matter. So, today's message has as its aim clarity and deeper understudying regarding the important and necessary spiritual discipline of fasting. So, drawing from the text I have three things we need to know about fasting.

First thing we need to know is Jesus expects his followers to fast.

V16a "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do." Note that Jesus says not if you fast, but when you fast. The clear expectation of Jesus is that his followers would embrace this practice, so it was necessary that he instruct them on how to properly do it considering the poor example they had received from the hypocritical religious establishment of his day. Sisters and Brothers, Jesus sets the

stage for this practice to be embraced by his followers, and the blunt truth this morning is this fact alone should be enough for us to do so. **Luke 5:33-35** “³³ And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” ³⁴ And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? ³⁵ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” **ESV**

Second thing we need to know, our motive for fasting is extremely important to God. V16b “for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get.” Why were they making a scene? Well, fasting it is hard, if not the hardest of the spiritual disciplines because it involves mortifying your flesh. They and the people knew this from experience. And what better way to evaluate themselves above those they were called to serve than to put on a display when practicing this spiritual discipline. In doing this they failed to remember that fasting was between the person and God. For only God could bring about the desired outcome of fasting in that person’s life. Thus, they were guilty of hypocrisy because their motive was not pure. Why we fast is just as important as how we fast, if not more. Our motives matter. So why fast? I believe the only reason to fast is to empty ourselves of the world so that we might be filled more fully with the things of God. When we fast, individually or as a community, we are seeking God’s presence and direction. We are asking God, ultimately, to deal with our hearts.

Isaiah 58:5-8 “You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call

fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? ⁶ “No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. ⁷ Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. ⁸ “Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.” **NLT**

Joel 2:12 ““Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” **NKJV**

Final thing we need to know, when we fast sincerely God rewards us. V17-18 ¹⁷ But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” Notice again the expectation that the followers of Jesus will fast. Also notice that when we fast, we do so lowkey. Wash your face, brush your teeth and keep your normal schedule. But here me! Fasting is hard. If it isn't, then it probably doesn't constitute a biblical fast. **The moment you tell yourself you will abstain from anything you are accustomed to indulging in your flesh will rise up with all its might in attempt to make you recant. This is why many fail when first embracing this practice and why prayer and scripture reading is an essential part of fasting.** It is also why fasting moves God because fasting entails turning God/Jesus through self-denial; a kind of self-denial that is only accomplished by leaning heavily on the Holy Spirit, prayer and scripture reading. This is why persons see God move so powerfully when they fast and pray, because God is a God of His word. And fasting will put you in a frame of mind

spiritually where you are more readily to believe God at His word, acting upon it. So, when you read the promises of scripture you believe those promises. When read the commandments of our Lord you obey those commandments. And the only possible outcome for the person who fast like this is to experience the power of God/Christ unleashed in his/her circumstances. Deliverance, strengthening, healing, repentance, clarity, guidance all come by way of fasting.

Esther 4:13-16 ¹³“Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: “Don’t think for a moment that because you’re in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. ¹⁴If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?” ¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶“Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die.” **NLT**

Matt 17:19-21 ¹⁹Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. ²¹However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” **NKJV**

Jonah 3:5-9 ⁵The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds

or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” **NIV**

Acts 13:1-3 “Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. ² One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.” ³ So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.” **NLT**

In closing, as a disciple of Jesus if you have no need for any of the things you have heard today; that is, the reason for fasting and/or the results of fasting then do not fast. But if you do remember what you have heard today when you fast. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**