

Seeking God through Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18



This is one of my favorite tools: a drawknife. It's one of the two tools from my dad's workshop that I own and use. A drawknife is basically a blade between two handles. You use it to slice off thin strips of wood. As you may know, I make Windsor chairs. You use a drawknife to shape various parts of the chair (spindles, bows, seat).

If you asked to borrow my drawknife, I probably wouldn't loan it to you. But if I did, I would give you a lecture about not misusing my drawknife; I'd explain when to use a drawknife and when NOT to use a drawknife (especially my drawknife). You **don't use a drawknife** if you want to scrape paint off of a metal pole; you use a paint scraper for that. You don't use a drawknife to pry up nails; you use a nail puller for that.

You **do use a drawknife** if it will accomplish something better than any other tool. I use a drawknife to turn a piece of wood like the piece of wood on the left into a spindle like the piece of wood on the right. If it's surgically sharp and you're sufficiently skilled, you can use a drawknife to slice between the growth rings on a piece of wood. That's what you need for spindles (the grain runs the entire length of the spindle).



And I make spindles to make chairs like this:



To clarify, I'm not passionate about using a drawknife. But since I am somewhat passionate about making chairs, this drawknife is very **valuable** to me.

Today I'd like to suggest that fasting is also a tool. Like a drawknife, fasting can either be misused or can be used skillfully. We shouldn't fast in order to impress people or out of obligation. Rather, we should fast when it helps us seek God better than any other practice/discipline available. When the Scriptures speak of fasting, it is referring to voluntarily abstaining from food for a period of time for spiritual reasons.

We're in many different places when it comes to fasting. Some of you are experienced and skilled at fasting, Others of you may have never really fasted as a spiritual practice for seeking God. Whatever your experience with fasting (and wherever you are in your spiritual journey) I'd like you to consider the possibility that **fasting can become an effective and satisfying way of seeking and finding God.**

The key is being passionate about God - knowing him, experiencing him, and pleasing him. If we're passionate about God, fasting can be a valuable tool in seeking him. If we're not passionate about seeking and finding God, fasting will merely be annoying and irrelevant.

A couple weeks ago we saw from 2 Chronicles 7 where God said, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land." If you are desperate for God to hear some prayer of yours, if you need God to cleanse you from some sin, or if you need healing in some area of your life, fasting can help you humble yourself and pray and seek his face and turn from your wicked ways. It's a tool that helps you seek God more fervently.

This year we are designating the six weeks leading up to Easter as "A Season of Seeking." Between now and then (which is 3 weeks) we are asking you to do three things:

Decide **THAT** you will seek God.

Decide **HOW** you will seek God.

Discern **WHY** you will seek God.

Today we're going to talk about HOW we can seek God through fasting.

Before we dig into today's passage, I want to acknowledge up front that it's not advisable for some people to fast from food. You might have a medical condition such as diabetes that makes fasting inadvisable. Or you might be pregnant. Or you might have an unhealthy relationship with food. I talked with someone recently who actually **wants** to seek God through fasting but decided they shouldn't fast because of their history with an eating disorder. That decision is wise and discerning. Do not fast if doing so would be harmful to you medically or mentally. Instead of fasting from food you might instead abstain from something else - something good/permisible - in your seeking of

God. It needs to be something you'll notice, something that disrupts your normal routine to remind you that you're seeking God.

- * If you watch television at night, you might decide to abstain from watching television at night four days a week. Seeking God is more important to you than television.
- * If you listen to music or news or podcasts when you drive, you might decide to abstain in order to focus your heart and mind on God.

Just as fasting is abstaining from something good (food) for a period of time, you might abstain from something else that's good/permmissible for a period of time.

Avoid fasting for the wrong reasons. (Matthew 6:16) Jesus has already taught about not trying to impress people with our giving and praying. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus says this:

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.

As with giving to the poor and with praying, Jesus says "***Whenever*** you fast. . ." not ***if*** you fast. . ." Fasting was woven into the fabric of the Jewish culture in the first century. All Jews fasted annually on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27 - "humble your souls") as well as when circumstances demanded seeking God fervently and corporately. In Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted twice a week (see Luke 18:12), probably on Monday and Thursday (Carson, p. 175). Fasting was a normal, common practice for Jesus' audience.

Jesus' caution was to avoid fasting in such a way that others would notice and be impressed. Don't look sad and somber; don't look all haggard and disheveled. Don't try to get people to notice you so they'll be impressed that you're fasting. Jesus says that if the thing you really want from fasting is the admiration of others, that will be your full reward. You will have no reward from your Father in heaven. Your fasting will be spiritually worthless.

Neglecting your appearance in order to impress others with your fasting may not be a particular temptation for you. But there are other wrong motives for fasting are mentioned in Scripture. For example, in Luke 18 Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who both went up into the temple to pray.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

He didn't fast as a way to humble himself and seek God. His fasting and tithing were a source of pride and self-righteousness. He was so impressed with himself, especially in relation to others, that he was sure that God was equally impressed. Jesus made clear that that was not the case. [You can find another example or misguided fasting in Isaiah 58.]

In your life in general and during our Season of Seeking in particular, we need to be careful not to fast for the wrong reasons. Don't fast to make yourself feel good about your self-discipline or to make yourself feel superior to others. Don't fast out of obligation. Honestly, most of the fasting that I have done as a Christian has been out of obligation. I've fasted because I was supposed to. Consequently, I received very little benefit (that I could sense).

But recently, God has been giving me a desire to fast and a vision for fasting. That's what I want us to see in verse 17 and 18. Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Fasting is a tool that helps us express ourselves to God with our whole body.

Fast for the notice and reward of your Father. (Matthew 6:17-18)

17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Don't be paranoid about people knowing that you're fasting; if you live with people or eat regularly with other people, they will likely know that you're fasting. Jesus is warning against the wrong motives in fasting, namely to be noticed by other people. Rather, Jesus says in verse 18, fast to be noticed by your Father who is in secret. Jesus' instruction here suggests that we need to fast believing two specific things. First, we need to believe that ***God sees what is done in secret***. We find this taught throughout Scripture (see Hebrews 4:13, for example). The fact that God sees everything and that nothing escapes His notice should be a great motivation for prayer and fasting. God actually notices when we intentionally humble ourselves through fasting; He sees our efforts at seeking Him.

Second, we fast believing that ***our Father who sees in secret will reward us***. Some people resist the idea of rewards because it sounds so transactional and because it sounds as if we've earned something that God is obligated to give. But in Scripture, people don't earn rewards the way you would earn a paycheck. Rather, God gives rewards as a free gift, as an expression of His grace. God rewards us because He is gracious.

Hebrews 11:6 is instructive in this regard:

6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

We come to God believing that He is/exists. God isn't a fairy tale or a figment of our imagination. We come to God believing that ***He is*** and that He is ***a rewarder of those who seek Him***. Our Father who sees in secret rewards those who seek Him (through prayer and fasting and the Word). Interestingly, the context of Hebrews 11 makes clear that some of the rewards God gives come in this life and some come in the next. And some come in both.

Back in Matthew 6. . .

17 “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Jesus doesn't indicate how God will reward us when we seek Him through prayer and fasting. Sometimes we do receive exactly what we're asking because we are praying for things that are 100% compatible with His will. God gives us the wisdom we need for decisions and circumstances. God gives us freedom from strongholds that keep us in bondage. But other times God doesn't reward us by giving us exactly what we've asked (2 Samuel 12 is an example).

Sometimes instead of removing a hardship, the reward God gives is the grace to endure that hardship (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). We fast in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By giving His one and only Son to die for our sins, we fast knowing that He loves us and that He has our best interests in mind. We may not understand why He doesn't give us what we've asked, but we trust Him anyway.

Application. We are going to provide a guide for you during our Season of Seeking which will include more teaching on fasting and more ideas about fasting. But this morning I want you to think with me about WHY you might seek God using fasting. Going without food is a way to fuel your hunger for God. It's a tangible way to express to God the deepest desires of your heart. Let me give you a couple ideas of how this might work.

To me the most fascinating example of fasting in Scripture is found in Psalm 35. King David is praying that God would deliver him from his many enemies and would vindicate him from false charges. In the middle of the psalm David prays this (in verses 11-14):

11 Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know.
12 They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft.
13 But I, when they were sick— I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting;
I prayed with head bowed on my chest.
14 I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother;
as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning.

David “afflicted/humbled himself with fasting” when his enemies (people who slandered him) were physically sick. He fasted and cried out to God on behalf of his enemies. Why would David do that? Why might you and I do that? Honestly, until I went back and read the context of Psalm 35, it never would have occurred to me to fast and pray for people I might perceive to be my enemies. Why would anybody do that?

One reason is because of what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:9. “Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but give a blessing instead.” Expending spiritual energy praying and fasting for you enemies is an extravagant way of not returning evil for evil.

Here's an idea. . . If you are caught in the grip of bitterness or revenge or simply unforgiveness because of what someone has done to you. . . or if your enemies are living inside your head and you hear their voices day and night. . . praying and fasting on their behalf might be the very thing that gives you freedom from that bondage. Do you have to pray with fasting for your enemies? Of course not. But fasting is a tool you can use if it's useful in that situation. David apparently reached for that tool - David fasted - because it allowed him to pray for his enemies more fervently from the heart.

You might be experiencing bondage in some other area of your life; perhaps you need freedom from anger or sensuality or jealousy or fear or anxiety. Fasting might help give fervency to your seeking of God in that area of your life.

One more example. Acts 9 records how Saul (later known by his Greek name Paul) was on his way to Damascus to arrest any Christians he found there to bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. On the way God knocked him to the ground with a blinding light (it literally blinded him). Jesus spoke to him from heaven saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul actually thought he was serving God by persecuting Christians. Now his entire world was turned upside down; everything he thought he knew was wrong. Jesus told him to go to Damascus where he would receive further instructions. God waited three days to send a man named Ananias to speak to Saul. During those three days we are told that Saul "neither ate nor drank." He fasted while he waited for God.

Maybe your world has been turned upside down in some way. God himself has made it clear that you need to radically reorient your life. If you are desperate to hear from God, fasting could be a great tool to use as you seeking him through prayer and the Word.

Over the next three weeks, try to discern WHY you will seek God this Easter season and whether or not fasting is one of the tools you will employ.

I talked with someone a while back who was telling me how much they worked out and how many ways they worked out. My comment was, "Wow, you sure are passionate about working out. . ." They corrected me, "No, actually I'm passionate about being healthy. . ." That was a great clarification. In the same way, I'm not advocating being passionate about fasting; I'm advocating being passionate about God.