

Reasons for Fasting

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0:00] Okay, well, morning folks. Lovely to see you. Please do have your Bibles open. I know that's only three verses today, but boy, this is going to pack a punch. So please have your Bibles open. Remember that this is not just routine. This is not just something we do on a Sunday morning. This is about encountering the living God who has made himself known in his word.

So please have that open in front of you as we get into this topic today, these verses today. To try and get us into this, can I tell you about my favourite dad joke?

Had it a few weeks ago, summer holiday, in the car, up and down, down to Bath, back up to Edinburgh. Inevitably, the call comes from the back. Do you know the one of you who are a parent? And I'm hungry. At which point, I know it's coming and I love to reply, hi, hungry. I'm dad. Which never goes down quite well.

But here's the thing you recognise, you realise along car journeys. One of the worst things imaginable for a child, where they cannot get their head around, is the thought of being hungry.

[1:12] Can I suggest though, if you're like me, adults aren't much better. Yeah, watching the World Cup just a few weeks ago, it felt like every second advert was for McDonald's or Uber Eats or Domino's Pizza.

Our meals, they come microwavable ready. We talk about people, maybe you're one of these people, people who are foodies. At work, I remember this in the office. We always look forward to our elevenses.

We've even invented a term that describes somebody who's both tired and hungry. What do we call them? Hangry. We don't do well as adults, do we, with the thought of being hungry.

Which is why what Jesus is going to say today in these verses, it might seem really odd. Because in these verses, if you've got it there, come with me, you get the distinct impression that this whole idea of denying yourself food for spiritual purposes, which is what fasting is at a functional level.

As you see Jesus here talking, he's saying, do you see it when you fast, not if you fast. He's talking about fasting like it's a really good thing. Problem is, it can be done for all the wrong reasons.

[2:47] Which I don't know about you, but that doubly intrigues me. And we're going to spend the rest of our time getting our teeth into why.

And before we get there, and because some of us will hear this, and this concept is totally alien to us. Others of us will hear this, and we're suspicious.

Others of us will hear this, and we'll maybe think our minds will go to some of the similar sounding alternatives, which are out there on the market. It's worth us clarifying what Jesus isn't talking about here.

So on the one hand, in our increasingly health conscious culture, we need to appreciate that this is not Jesus promoting some kind of bodily detox.

Right? It's our world that we live in today. It's true, isn't it, that we're growing more conscious of what we're putting into our bodies. Didn't surprise me this read to week that, get this, 8 million more pints of non-alcoholic beer were poured in the UK this year than at this point last year.

[4:00] But that's not what Jesus has in mind here. And on the other hand, in our increasingly multicultural culture, we need to appreciate that this is different from what our Muslim friends would do at Ramadan, and our Catholic friends would do when they fast, which, as I understand it, has as part of that practice, this idea of trying to make amends for our wrongs.

Again, this is not what Jesus has in mind here. And so, in the time that we have together, as we try and enter the atmosphere of these verses in Matthew chapter 6, I want to kind of frame this in terms of four distinct reasons why God's people fast, as we get into this.

You with me? Here's number one. First reason. This is all about feeling our need. If you're a note taker, four things.

Here's the first one. Feeling our need. So, fasting, depriving yourself of food for the sake of spiritual purposes, which we'll come on to see right at the top of that, what's Jesus talking about?

He's talking about seeking the face of the Father, right? Number one reason we do this, it acutely reminds us of the creature-creator distinction.

[5 : 22] And here's the thing. It does not matter whether you're at the beginning of life, or you're at the middle of life, or that you're at the end of your life.

We are still wholly dependent beings. We never stop being wholly dependent beings.

I think our problem, this is where the slide background has come from, our problem is that we run around every day acting as if it's not true. But on the other side to this than us, we've got to understand that while we are needy and dependent, our God is wholly other.

He is wholly other. He is dependent on no one. He is entirely self-sufficient. Our God has no equal. Him and the devil. It's not like God has his nemesis. Right? This is not Messi versus Ronaldo.

[6 : 32] This is not Luke versus Darth. God and this is not two equals playing it out. Our God is entirely other. He has no equal. He has no rival.

He is, to quote that TV show if you watch it, he is in a league of his own. And he is the provider. He's the sustainer of all things.

See that breath you just took? He gave you it. And that's baked into what we saw last week as Jesus taught his disciples how to pray.

Did you pick that up? Give us each day our daily bread. Here's the point. Fasting doesn't make us weak and dependent.

Fasting just reveals how weak and dependent we've been all along. I take it as good, friends, isn't it? To feel our need at times. Number one, it's about feeling our need.

[7 : 35] Number two, it's about focusing on truth. So according to the Bible, we're not just bodies. We're just matter.

We are body and soul beings. That really matters. Body and soul. So fasting is a way of reminding ourselves that there's so much more to life than just our physical needs.

Again, we've seen that already in Matthew's gospel with Jesus' temptation back at chapter four. Jesus is led, not by the devil, he is led by the spirit into the wilderness.

Huge is symbolic. But Jesus, what does he do there? Jesus fasted. So Jesus is there humbled by taking on human flesh.

And he, as it were, humbles himself further by entering that place of utter dependency, doing what Adam and Israel before him failed to do in terms of obedience to the word of the Father.

[8 : 49] And so his fasting is unique in a sense. But he still sets us that pattern as he responds to the devil by saying, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

So here's the thing. See, when we deprive our bodies of food, it is for the express purpose of allowing our souls to feast on the word of God.

Will I say that again? When we deprive ourselves of food, it is for the express purpose of feasting our souls on the word of God. And you'll find all sorts of different people through the Bible story choosing to fast for different reasons.

But what's really interesting with all this stuff is that there was one day in particular in the Old Testament that God told his people to fast.

This is great. You with me? One day in particular, he commanded his people to fast. This day that was central to the lives of God's people that we read about in Leviticus 16 called the Day of Atonement.

[10 : 02] A day that happened once a year featuring one man and two goats. There's your formation. Once a year, one man, two goats. The man, the high priest, he would go into, by himself, into the holy place.

He would take goat number one and he would kill the goat. The goat being sacrificed in the place of the people. And then he would come out and he would come out of the holy place where he would meet goat number two and he'd take his hands and he'd place his hands on this goat, symbolically confessing all of the sins of the people on this goat and he would set it to run as far away as possible into the wilderness.

And God was teaching his people in shadow form that the effect of blood being shed was that their sins were gone for good. And isn't it interesting that it's on this one day that God calls his people to fast.

It's almost as if God is saying, you've got to stop what you're doing. Have I got your attention? You need to get this. And a lot of friends down south who got that text this week, you know, everybody got the text about the weather warning, heat warning, right?

This is not advice. You've got to get this. And so here is God calling his people to fast. Put away your pots and pans for the day. Right?

[11:36] Pause your to-do list. Because you've got to lift your eyes, you've got to still your souls, you've got to focus your minds on this central thing that's right at the heart of what it means to be mine.

And what is God teaching his people as they fast? He's teaching them that their greatest need is forgiveness. And because their greatest need is forgiveness and he's provided a way, it opens up the possibility to their greatest privilege, which is fellowship.

And so the invitation is to come and receive it all by faith. And friends, everything that the day of atonement symbolized in these two goats, Jesus did through his work on the cross.

In other words, Jesus did both. Isn't that amazing? It's the gospel. Jesus did, through his work on the cross, he did both.

We've got to understand that on the cross, Jesus is not twisting the arm of a reluctant father. What is the cross but the display of the beating heart of the father to win a people for himself, to make a way for them to be his and to display his glory to the watching world?

[12:56] Because of what Jesus has done, the greatest privilege is ours, that we can be reconciled, our sins forgiven, united to him, we can be reconciled.

We are reconciled from the moment we put our faith in him. We are reconciled to our creator. And the greatest privilege known to man is opened up.

The privilege of calling our creator God, calling him and knowing him as our father. Which when you think about it, is that not the ultimate name drop?

To say that the creator of all things, I know him. Personally, I know him. Do you know what? He knows me.

It's the ultimate name drop. Which takes us to the third reason, friends, that we fast. And I recognize we're going through this quickly, but we'll get into the text with this one. Third reason that we fast is simply to seek the face of the father.

[14:06] You know, there was a recent survey done in the UK that revealed that 30% of men and women in this country feel like they lack purpose. And 25% of young adults feel that they lack security and love.

not quite alarming, actually. Maybe that is exactly where you're at today. But see, for the Christian believer, the bedrock of our identity is entirely caught up in that word father.

United to Christ, it is the birthright of every single believer to call him that. You know, last week, friends, my soul, see if you just skim your eyes back to verse 8.

And at the end of the day, honestly, I'm just one sheep telling you how I fed on green grass. Telling another sheep, right. My soul was so encouraged by verse 8.

I needed to be reminded of this, of my father's complete knowledge and love for me. Do you see that when we pray? Notice verse 8. Because my mind so often goes like my phone into predictive text mode.

[15:26] Right? I read that and I thought it should say my father knows what I'm going to say before I say it. Right? But see, it's so much deeper than that. Right?

He's not in the business of finishing my sentences. It's what old couples do. Isn't it? Remember that song in Frozen? It's crazy how we finish each other's sandwiches.

That's not what this is saying. Do you see it? So comprehensive is his commitment to his children. He knows what I need before I even ask. Do you see that?

And it's amazing to think when I call on him at any time of the day like Derek read earlier, in Christ drawn by the Spirit to the throne of the Father. When I cry out to him because he loves me I'll never get voicemail.

He loves us. I always loved that old Puritan saying to live often in the smiles of God. In fact, see if we did a kind of heat map for the word Father in the Sermon of the Mount it would go really red at

this point.

[16:36] Right? See when you take in the first 18 verses of chapter 6 heat map the word Father it comes up all the time here. Jesus is talking about giving and praying.

Craig did such a good job of taking us through that last few weeks. Today we're thinking about fasting. What connects to these three things is that they are the three great Jewish religious identifiers. You want to know somebody's really into God?

Look for these three things. And Jesus has deliberately used that term Father six times already. See if you're counting. And he's about to use it twice more in our verses here.

And here's why. Because if we aren't secure in his love for us and if we're not living from his love for us if we think it's about us living for his love do you know what's going to happen?

Our hearts will go looking for praise in all sorts of places. Yeah? Looking for praise in all sorts of places. And that's what's going on in chapter six these verses 16 17 18 do you see?

[17:45] Jesus knows that his disciples are living in a world that's full of fake fasting. Do you see it? Because what's happened is that the Pharisees who at the end of the day aren't lovers of God.

Jesus would say they are lovers of self. They've taken this command. They've taken this instruction to fast. They've taken something that's meant to be God honoring and they've twisted it and they've made it something completely self-serving.

That's what's going on in these verses. I mean think about it right? If you want to convince people that you're a really religious person and deadly serious about it let them see you give.

That's not difficult. Let them see you pray. Hear you pray. That's not difficult. Quite easy actually. But see if that's the game that you're in.

Here's the problem. Think about it that you've got with fasting. Very definition. By very very definition. You can't see it. Yeah?

[18:52] So what do you do in verse 16? Well you screw up your face. You hold your tummy. You groan. You put a little bit of dirt under your eyes.

I don't know what you do. But do you know what this is? This is tell me you're fasting without telling me you're fasting. Isn't it? Tell me you're fasting without telling me you're fasting. This is what you do.

And Jesus is unmasking this whole facade. And he's helping his disciples see that although the world might sit up and admire that God's not sitting in heaven applauding that.

And Jesus says see when you watch somebody do that know that the praise of man is what they're doing it for and also know that that's all they're going to get.

You however because you're secure in the Father's love seek him in secret. You know the big invitation about fasting here is that no one should know that you're fasting.

[20:06] You see it? Seek him in secret. He might be unseen to you but make no mistake that what you're doing and seeking him is not unseen to him. Why do you do it?

You don't do it because you want the praise of man. Why do you do it? Because I want him. Which takes us to the fourth reason that we fast.

Why do we fast? Because friends we are longing for home. Because fast forward a few chapters into chapter 9 of verse 14.

Turn there if you want. I'll put some verses on the screen. the Pharisees in this scene they come to Jesus and they say why don't your disciples fast?

And it's almost as if they never quite get over this. John's disciples come to why don't your disciples fast? And again my mind in predictive text mode.

[21:09] Jesus could have said they're not fasting because they're doing exactly what I told them to do a few chapters ago. Why can't you see them fasting? Because I told them that they shouldn't let anyone see that they're fasting.

He could have said that. But that's not what Jesus says. His disciples aren't fasting. Why? Because the groom is here.

and he's picked his metaphor splendidly. The Bible is, friends, one great story about God and his pursuing love for his people.

So much so that the only way I take it, that the metaphor that God gives us and runs right through scripture is that of a groom and a bride. And here is Jesus saying, I am that great groom.

I've come on a mission. I've come to save my bride. And I'm with them now. Do you know what? One day my disciples will fast. And it will be the day that I go.

[22:22] And then they'll fast because they are waiting for my return. But not now. I'll come on to see this in a few weeks. Not now. I've never been to a wedding celebration where we're going there and the master's ceremony stands up and says, this is a very solemn occasion.

Yeah? No, it's party time. And that's what Jesus is saying. I am here. The groom is here. But one day they will fast. And this is what is particularly, friends, if I can put it like this, this is particularly what is New Testament about fasting.

We're not Old Testament Israel, right? God doesn't command us to fast. No, here is Jesus here encouraging us to fast as a way of reorientating ourselves to the goodness of the gospel.

Now, we always, every night in our house we find it at dinner time. Kids, tea's ready. And there they come, right? And no, no, no, we need to wait because one of the six of us isn't at this table yet.

Wait, wait, wait, right? And you feel like William Wallace in that brave part of him, hold, hold.

Waiting doesn't come naturally. Did you know that feeling when maybe you did it as a kid, you got to wait?

[23:39] There's something of that in what Jesus is saying here about fasting. Because in holding ourselves, in that moment of salivating for what's about to come, we're reminded that we long not for the dinner that we'll eat in a few hours.

That's way too short-sighted. Friends, we are longing when we fast for the wedding feast of the Lamb and the fellowship we'll enjoy with him forever when our groom returns.

If you're looking for something good to read, one of the best books I've read over the last year was all about this book by a guy called Chris Davis in America and it's called Bright Hope for Tomorrow. Clearly taken it from that hymn. But I love this, how anticipating Jesus' return gives strength for today. Wonderful book. Let me just give you one line from it.

He puts it like this. We fast because Jesus, our bridegroom, is not here. And no matter how tasty the wedding reception spread may be, life is not complete until we are in the presence of the one who loves us.

[24:49] And so since we begin to wrap this up today, our time is marching on, here's two quick bits of advice as we seek to perhaps put what Jesus is saying here into practice.

These will be real, real quick and we can talk about these afterwards if you want. Here's number one, friends, know your body. I'm just so conscious that as your pastor I know that that for many of us medically speaking this might not be something for all sorts of reasons that we're able to do and I don't want you feeling like you are missing out or in other words maybe or maybe other people you're a shift doctor at work or you're in something where concentration is something you really need to have because of the level of responsibility that's on you and again the name of the game is wisdom or maybe honestly just eating is a big struggle so so conscious of that maybe eating is a big struggle whoever you are here's my bit of advice just practically speaking speak to a doctor before you do anything speak to a friend but if that's practically speaking maybe spiritually speaking remember god knows how you are framed and he loves you unconditionally in christ never doubt that but otherwise there may be here thinking where would I even start with something like this again what I would say to you friends is don't try and go from zero to hero start small could you maybe miss a meal could you go for a few hours without food whatever it is friends know your body again we do this together don't we so we help one another with this stuff know your body which takes me really quickly to the second bit of advice which is really simply have a plan if we don't eat food if we go without food and all we can think about is how hungry we are then can I perhaps suggest that we've missed the point of what Jesus is talking about here our focus should be less on what we're saying no to and more on the better yes that we're saying yes to so when we feel that pang when we feel that hunger what truth are we going to take our souls to in God's words could you have a psalm for the morning and you just read a verse every half an hour or something like that what are you going to pray about what are you going to lay and spread out before your father there's something really specific that's in your mind that this is a way of just concentrating and focusing on the Lord and laying it before him are you at the start of a new season of life is there a big decision that you're facing in your life you think I just want to

I just want to throw this before the father who loves me friends fasting is all about seeking the face of the father if you take one thing from this would it be that that's what it's about you know just as we close I want to bring us back to the heart of that question that we've seen over the last few weeks remember we said these three things are connected and Craig did a wonderful job at bringing out the big question that's right at the heart of this not so much in what you do it's in why you do it what

was that big question remember he put it last week whose praise are we living for whose praise are we living for whose smile drives us and who at the end of the day are the only eyes in the room that we're seeking you know just as we close let me just leave you with this you know I'm just finished reading the autobiography of one of my favorite ever actors I was born in 85 look at my age so that makes me a kind of 90s kid you know my favorite actor and this is why I loved it when his autobiography came out and it was 99p on kindle um Will Smith still love Will Smith Independence Day I think one of the first films that I really like whoa what a film and then Men in Black and then Any of the State I Am Legend and then getting into Fresh Prince and the guy sings as well this guy wasn't just at the height of his career when I was growing up he was in everything and I'm watching it I'm loving this guy so I'm reading this book and I'm really interested to see what why he did it all here is what is fascinating about what he writes about why he did what he did right he was in everything here's what he writes I didn't want to leave space between my tv show the next movie and my next record because I didn't want to give people an opportunity to fall in love with The Rock during my absence right so The Rock Dwayne Johnson the another actor who's trying to make his way as well big deal I didn't want to miss a thing because I did not want people's praise to go to him I wanted it for myself is that not really interesting about what drives people why did he keep doing it because he didn't want people to fall in love with someone else and is that not exactly the heart of the human condition is that not exactly what the Pharisees are doing here whose praise do we want we want people's praise and see the minute it goes off of us we will do anything to get it back and his book Will Smith is essentially his story of him saying it exhausted me friends what an exhausting way to live and yet how different the Christian here is the invitation from Jesus to live for the audience of one and to bask in his fatherly care and his fatherly love for us see right at the end when Jesus says the father will reward you puzzling myself all week as to what that means can I give you my best shot friends see knowing him better in his love for me that's reward enough let's pray oh our father we thank you so much that we have the privilege to call you father lord we are so aware of how our hearts go searching for praise in all the wrong places and it's our prayer lord that whatever's going on in our lives today that your spirit would draw us back to your knowledge of and care of and affection for us because we are united to your son father simply there is no one we'd rather seek and but father I pray pastorally that wherever this is landed in our lives father thank you that your spirit is so much more of a better pastor than I can ever be and I pray that he would be moving amongst us this morning bringing that sense of challenge and comfort and encouragement to our souls lord we thank you that we do not have to perform to get your love father thank you that we just place our faith in Jesus the one as Derek read at the start who loved us and gave himself for us so father be with us as we finish our time together we pray all of these things and Jesus is worthy and in his wonderful name Amen