

March 12, 2017

Don't Give Up!

*Don't Give Up Fasting!*

Matthew 6:16-18

**Opening words:** Did you know 24% of all Americans observe the season of Lent? Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means "spring." Excluding Sundays, because every Sunday is a little Easter, Lent is a forty-day period. Why forty days? Because, Jesus fasted forty days before being tempted by Satan. Lent began on Ash Wednesday and will end on Holy Saturday. What are you going to give up for Lent? Maybe this is a better question: What are you not going to give up for Lent? Never forget, Lent is not a season of self-deprivation, it is a season of spiritual renewal.

This is sermon number three in my six-part sermon series *Don't Give Up!* We are looking at five of the twelve spiritual disciplines. We began last week by looking at prayer. In the weeks to come, we will look at worship, meditation and the Bible. Today, we look at the most challenging topic in the series, fasting. Can I be honest with you? I have never fasted. However, after writing this message, I may begin. It is a discipline for those who are serious about their spiritual maturity. Let me call this message *Don't Give Up Fasting!*

Our Gospel reading for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Of the four Gospels, it is the most Jewish in nature. Consider two things. First, Matthew quotes more Old Testament, the sacred scriptures of the Jews, than Mark, Luke and John. Second, Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers to include Jesus's genealogy. That is vital to the Jewish world because it proved Jesus was 100% Jewish. Matthew himself, one of the disciples, was Jewish. The church has always debated the date of this Gospel. Written between AD 50 and AD 70, Matthew wrote this Gospel to the Jewish world to prove to them that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 6:16-18.

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

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Fasting is giving up something good to experience something better. If you think you can remember that, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the sixth chapter of Matthew. It is the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount. That great discourse covers the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters. In those chapters are some of the most loved pieces of scriptures in the Bible. We can

quote some of those teachings from heart. There is the Beatitudes and Jesus's words about salt and light. In those chapters are Jesus's teachings on murder, adultery and divorce. In those chapters are Jesus's teachings on love, prayer and judging. In those chapters Jesus teaches us to give to the needy. Those are great teachings, and for that reason we have all fallen in love with them. Yet, our scripture reading for today is not one of them. As a matter of fact, Jesus's teaching on fasting has gone ignored. Can I make a confession?

I have been preaching for approximately 32.5 years. My first church was outside of Danville, Kentucky. I was there three years. Then, I served three United Methodist congregations in the old St. Clairsville District for two years. Then, I served a church outside of Medina for a single year. Next, I was in Garfield Heights for five years. I have been here for nearly twenty-three years. That all adds up to approximately 32.5 years. Conservatively, I write about fifty sermons per year. You do the math. That means I have written approximately 1,625 sermons in my time in the ministry. Do you know how many sermons I have written on fasting? Including today's sermon, one! There is just something wrong with that imbalance. Jesus taught us about fasting, but we have ignored the whole topic. If you find that to be wrong, say, "**Amen!**" It is not just me. It must be true of other preachers too.

My favorite website for finding "canned" sermon illustrations is called [sermonillustrations.com](http://sermonillustrations.com). All the illustrations are arranged alphabetically in order of topic. If you want an illustration on grace, then you look up grace. If you want an illustration on pickles, then you look up pickles. I thought they had every illustration possible on every topic. I was wrong! I looked up an illustration for fasting and I got this response, "No illustrations yet". I went to the internet highway and "GOOGLED" the question, what percentage of Americans fast. My old friend the internet told me what percentage of Americans eat fast food.

Do you know of any Christians who fast for spiritual reasons? Through the years, I have met some amazing Christian people. I have known people who haven't missed worship in decades. They even go while on vacation. I have known people who value prayer. We have prayer warriors right here in this church. I have known people who have studied the Bible in detail and can quote it chapter and verse. Just give them a Bible verse and they will quote it. Can anyone quote Ezekiel 31:9 for me right now? I have known people who take Communion at home daily and people who won't take an infant outside until he or she is baptized. I have even known people who have served on all the church committees three times. I know many people, but I have never known a single Christian who fasts for spiritual reasons. Does anyone here fast? Does anyone here know of anyone who fasts? That leads me to another question.

Why don't people fast for spiritual reasons? Jesus assumed in our Gospel reading for today that people would fast. Why have we decided to ignore the spiritual discipline of fasting? I believe there are a couple of reasons.

Some don't fast for medical reasons and they shouldn't. If you are pregnant, then you should not fast. If you are a diabetic, then you should not fast. If you have a physical condition that depends on a regular diet, then you should not fast. I get it! Some don't fast for medical reasons.

Some don't fast because they don't completely understand the concept of fasting. A fast is not a diet. The goal is not weight loss so you can look good in your swimsuit this summer. A fast is not a hunger strike where you refuse to eat to get attention for your cause.

Did you know there three kinds of fasting?

**A Regular fast** is when you eliminate all foods from your diet but can drink something. For example, you can drink fruit juice.

**A Partial Fast** is when only certain foods are eliminated from your diet. For example, you are going to eat only meats.

**A Full Fast** is when you consume nothing.

Then, there are these questions: How long do you fast? Do you fast for a single meal? Do you fast for a single day? Do you fast, like Jesus, for forty days? I get it! Some don't fast because they don't understand the concept of fasting. This is my opinion and my opinion only - it comes from my years of working in the church:

Most don't fast because we are preoccupied with food. This is it in a nutshell: Most are more infatuated with food than they are with God. I don't want that to sound harsh or judgmental. I want it to sound observant. Within our own congregation, we are always talking about food. How many examples do you need?

It has become the tradition of this church to hold Wednesday night Lenten dinners. Every week a different group prepares the meal. Every week the menu changes, but one thing remains the same, the whole family eats for five dollars. After the meal, we pray and I preach a little meditation before Communion. The first week, we had fried chicken and cheesy potatoes. It was excellent. Last week, we had lasagna and salad. It was excellent. This coming Wednesday there will be a million kinds of soup. It will be excellent. Every week the meal is excellent. I am for anyone who cooks for me. I really enjoy those dinners, but one thing about them drives me crazy: the number of people who dine and dash. Some leave after the dinner and don't stay for Communion. They try to leave without me seeing them. I think they leave fast because they don't want to be late for Wheel of Fortune ☺. Do you know what those people tell me? All behavior means something. There is no other way to say it. They are more infatuated with the food than they are with God. Do you know of anyone who is more infatuated with food than God? Do you know who my favorite people are at those dinners? The people who only come for Communion. Can I ask you one more question? Are you more infatuated with food or God? It is safe to say, my dog Macy, the world's best dog, is infatuated with food. I don't think I am wrong.

Those who fast for spiritual reasons tell us there are spiritual benefits. This is the list:

- Fasting will strengthen your prayer life
- Fasting will help you find God's guidance
- Fasting will help you grieve
- Fasting will help you find divine deliverance or protection
- Fasting will help you truly repent
- Fasting will humble you before God
- Fasting will enhance your sincerity
- Fasting will help you overcome temptation

Let me be honest with you. Fasting is not for those who are just curious about God. Fasting is for those who are infatuated with God. Are you just curious about God, or are you infatuated with God? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

It must be over ten years ago; I wanted to try something new. I know it doesn't look it, but I spend a great deal of time thinking about and working on my sermons. That is what God has called me to do, so I am always trying to maximize them. During that season of Lent, I decided to form a group called "Lunch with the pastor". The idea was simple. We would meet at noon in the fellowship hall and discuss the message for that day. I thought it was a good idea. I wrote a list of powerful questions to discuss and ordered a sandwich ring. On the first Sunday of Lent the little group gathered. On paper plates, we ate our sandwiches and chips. We drank out of paper cups. I couldn't have cared less about the food. I wanted to dig into my hard-hitting questions. Before I could ask my first question, someone asked me a question. It torpedoed the whole group. This was their question: "Russ, what did you pay for the sandwich ring?" I didn't remember. It was somewhere between a dollar and a million dollars. She said, "I'll cook lunch next week. I can serve this group for a fraction of the cost." That grabbed everyone's attention because everyone knows the purpose of the church is to save money and eat. She went on to tell us in detail everything she could cook for us and save money. I don't think we covered a single question that day. We spent the whole time talking about food. The next week, I thought, "This week will be better". I was wrong! The next week, she did cook and the food was cheaper and better. Someone else in the group announced they would cook the next week and then we had another fascinating discussion about cooking. On the third week, I gave up. My sermon discussion group with my outstanding questions turned into a recipe exchange club. We never met again and no one ever missed it. I will never try such a group again. Can I state the obvious? Food is a good thing! However, there is something better: God! It's a fair question: Are you more infatuated with food, or with God?

In the Bible, Moses, King David, Elijah, Queen Esther, Daniel, Anna the prophetess, the Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ all fasted for one reason. They knew there was something better than food, God! Each one was infatuated with God. Are you infatuated with God? Or, are you more interested in food? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Fasting is giving up something good to experience something better. There is nothing better than God.