

WORSHIP GOD WITH YOUR BODY

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 6:16-18
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Let's imagine that I invited you over to my house for Thanksgiving. I tell you that we are going to have a grand celebration and talk about all the things in our lives that we're thankful for. You come excited for the festivities. But when you get there, I invite you to sit down in front of an empty table. There's a pitcher of water in the center. I pour you a glass, along with the other guests, and with a hearty gesture, I say, "Let the celebration begin!"

Something is wrong with that scene. You would probably feel tricked. I never explicitly told you that there would be food, but you assumed that a celebration on Thanksgiving would involve eating. When we celebrate, we like to eat. I'd have a really hard time thinking of anything I was thankful for drinking a glass of water instead of eating a Thanksgiving meal.

Celebrations involve food. At a birthday party, we eat cake. At a wedding, we dine on a meal. When we want to enjoy life and be happy and have great conversation, food is always involved. We don't just think happy thoughts or talk about fun. We engage our whole bodies in the act of celebration.

Why should we think worship would be any different?

Many of us have experienced a tendency in Christian circles to make worshipping God primarily an intellectual experience. Worship is thinking about God or saying things about God. Sometimes we're comfortable with the idea that worship involves feeling something about God. But we mostly shy away from worship as having anything to do with our bodies.

We're in the midst of a sermon series here at PBC on the Sermon on the Mount. This was a famous message given by Jesus to a group of Jewish peasants in the hills above the Sea of Galilee. His words paint a picture of how to live in what he calls the kingdom of the heavens. It's the life of blessing. That's why we've called this series "Blessed Are."

We didn't plan to talk about fasting on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. This is one those little jokes that God sometimes plays on us. But the topic fits really well. For many of us, fasting is a foreign idea, mostly because we don't understand what worship has to do with our bodies.

But today we're going to see that worship has everything to do with our physical bodies. Sometimes we worship through feasting. Other times we worship through fasting. But the fullest kind of worship always involves our bodies. Today we'll talk about how to worship God with your body.

We need a lot of help in this area. Our culture is very cerebral. Many of us like to stay in our heads. But the Bible is clear that worship involves our whole selves. When we learn to integrate our bodies into worship, that can start a journey of being more integrated as a person.

It's also no coincidence that today is the first day of Advent. Part of the mystery of the Christmas season is the absolutely unthinkable plot twist of history that God, the creator of the Universe, became human. He took on the form of his creation. Jesus lived as a man on this earth, with all of the complexity and frustration and beauty that being embodied involves.

God becoming human gives incredible dignity to our bodies. As complicated and unreliable as these physical bodies are, God saw fit to take it on. The beginning of Advent is a great time to learn about how to use our bodies well in worship.

There are actually many ways to worship with our bodies, and we'll talk about some of them. But Jesus' focus in this passage is on fasting, so we'll spend most of our time there. From the beginning, we see that Jesus assumes that his followers are fasting as part of their spiritual life. For many of us, that isn't the case. But maybe that can change.

Before we get much further, let me add a caveat. Our focus this morning will be on fasting. But there are a lot of people for whom fasting should not be a part of their

spiritual life. If you're ill; if you're pregnant; if you're young or elderly, this isn't a healthy way to worship.

Our culture also has warped the way some of us see food. Many of us either in the past or the present have issues with disordered eating; we've used food dangerously or struggle with how we view our bodies. Some of us have mental health concerns—depression or anxiety—that fasting could exacerbate. If that's you, I would advise you against fasting as well.

That doesn't mean you can't worship God with your body. In fact, if you've had disordered eating, you might find it very healing and restoring to find ways to involve your body in worship. But it probably shouldn't involve food. As we talk about fasting today, you can consider other ways to worship with your body.

We'll start by looking at what Jesus taught about how not to fast. That'll be the easy part for many of us. Then we'll see him tell us how and why we should fast. That'll be a bit more challenging. I'll wrap up by sharing some specific ways that you might try incorporating fasting into your life of worship.

How not to fast

For the past few weeks, we've seen Jesus address three essential elements of spiritual life. First was "when you give"—worshipping God faithfully always involves your resources. Time, energy, money. Real worship isn't just a spiritual exercise. Worship involves your wallet.

His second instruction was "when you pray." Jesus actually taught us how we ought to relate to God. He gave us a model for how to pray faithfully. Worship isn't just learning about God. It's not just attending a worship service. Worship is something you participate in. You relate to God. Worship involves your participation.

Now Jesus gets to the third element and begins with "when you fast." Notice that Jesus sees these three elements as basic to a functioning spiritual life. Worship affects your wallet. Worship involves your participation. And finally, worship involves your body.

Jesus begins by telling people how not to fast.

Matthew 6:16:

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.

This fits well with what Jesus said about giving and fasting. He began this instruction with the general warning, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." So now he's applying this to the practice of fasting.

It may help to understand that fasting was a critical part of life for a faithful Jew. Religious Jews in the first century would fast two days per week, usually Mondays and Thursdays. This would be a 24-hour fast: from sundown on Sunday to sundown on Monday and again from Wednesday evening to Thursday evening.

Some of you may remember the passage from Luke 18:12, in which a Pharisee prays, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." The Monday and Thursday fasting is what that Pharisee is referring to.

Jesus' warning makes sense. If fasting is about worshipping God with your body, then fasting so that other people think well of you violates the basic purpose. Fasting is about your relationship with God, not about looking good in front of other people.

As Jesus has been doing throughout this sermon, he's dealing with an issue of the heart. He's not saying you can't ever talk about fasting or you shouldn't learn about it, or share your experience about it with anyone. He's not saying you can't fast as a group—there's a lot of precedent in Old and New Testaments for people fasting together. Jesus is saying don't fast as a show for the people around you.

I think this is an easy command for us to follow. Of all the things Jesus has said in the sermon on the mount, I think most of us follow this teaching.. It's rare that I see someone here with a disfigured face because they've been fasting and they want others to notice.

So we're doing fine on not fasting for the wrong reasons, but most of us rarely fast at all. So we might ask a different question. Why don't we fast? Why don't we fast?

As I studied this passage, I was repeatedly struck by Jesus saying "when you fast." He assumes fasting is a part of your spiritual life. When I started studying this passage several months ago, I thought "Uh oh. If I'm going to preach on fasting, I should probably start doing it." But I'll say more about that later.

If Jesus assumes that his followers fast, why don't we?

Fasting is mentioned between 60 to 70 times in the Bible. Twenty of those are in the New Testament. For thousands of years, fasting has been part of church practice. The early church fasted. The medieval church fasted. The Reformation church also fasted. However, one author I read said he couldn't find a single book written about fasting between 1861 and 1954. For almost one hundred years, it seemed like the church forgot about fasting.

What happened? I think we forgot that worship involves our bodies. In reality, we forgot a lot of things about bodies. In general, culture became what philosophers would call "neo-Gnostic."

The Gnostics were an ancient group of people who only thought the mind mattered. For them, enlightenment and understanding were the ultimate goals. Heaven was a disembodied spiritual existence, free from the constraints of our physical bodies.

Today, technologists like Ray Kurzweil predict that by 2045 we'll be able to upload our minds to the cloud. But why would you want to? Why does this appeal to anyone? Because a lot of our culture is neo-Gnostic. You can be yourself forever and ditch that inconvenient body that gets sick and injured and looks funny and gets worse over time.

The problem is that I can't totally control my body. I wish it looked different. I wish it didn't hurt in weird places. Sometimes there are noises which come from my body, which are a bit embarrassing.

But as much as our bodies are difficult and frustrating, they are also amazing. I love the feeling of stretching as I stand up in the morning. I love driving up into the hills around us and smelling the trees. I'm so grateful for the feel of a great workout and the relief of resting. And food! Don't get me started on the joys of taste. Smoked brisket. Steaming ramen. Cold ice cream. I'm so thankful for food!

Our bodies are amazing, unbelievable, and frustrating all at once. Just like most of life. Have we lost some kind of connection between our bodies and our souls? Is there a way to regain it? What if we can't fully and completely worship God unless we learn how to engage our bodies with God? Let's see how Jesus' words apply.

How and why to fast

After Jesus says "when you fast don't do this," he tells his followers how they should fast.

Matthew 6:17-18:

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Again, Jesus assumes that you're going to fast, and he wants to give instruction on how to do it. The main point is identical to his instructions about giving and praying. All of these things that we do are for the sake of God. Fast for the sake of your spiritual life, not your social life.

Fasting, like giving and praying, is an act of worship. It's about your orientation toward God. We are constantly tempted to be oriented toward each other, but these acts re-orient us toward God. They face us in the right direction.

But how does fasting accomplish this? If fasting is worship, how does not eating food orient us toward God? Or in other words, why should we fast?

I've been helped by several authors in exploring this question, most notably Dallas Willard, Scot McKnight, and Richard Foster. They don't completely agree with other, but they offer helpful perspectives.

I particularly appreciated the view of McKnight in a small book simply called *Fasting*. Here are some of his suggestions with a few of my own ideas thrown in.

Some people fast with a goal in mind. They are trying to accomplish something by fasting. But McKnight suggests that whenever you hear of people fasting in the Bible, they are usually doing it as a response to something that has happened—a situation, usually death or sadness or confusion or injustice. And in response to that situation, people fast.¹

McKnight defines fasting as the "response of a person to a grievous sacred moment in life."²

Think about fasting, like laughing. You don't laugh to accomplish something. Laughing gives expression

to something deep within you. It translates something inside of you to something outside. It's a physical enactment of surprise and joy.

Fasting is like that. What do you do when something terrible happens? How do you respond to the sudden death of a loved one? What can we do in the face of horrific injustice in the world? What action can I take when I'm confused about the right path to take?

I can fast. We can fast.

A few weeks ago, I met with our new church representative for International Justice Mission. This organization exists to stop modern-day slavery. There are such terrible things happening in the world. The representative shared that our response as a congregation is similar to most of the churches he works with. People always ask, "what can I do?"

Maybe we should fast. You might say, "But what good would that do? How would that change anything?" And that's the point. It doesn't have a goal. We're not trying to do anything when we fast. We're simply responding to great injustice.

Fasting is our way of physically enacting grief and sadness and injustice and confusion.

There are times in our lives, seasons in our nation, and spaces, where it feels like the best response to what's going on around us, is to fast. When we hear about pain and confusion and sin and suffering, we fast. Our bodies join with our minds and our hearts to express the grief of that moment.

That doesn't mean you have to be sad in order to fast. You can schedule a time to fast as a way of planning to engage with your grief. That may sound strange at first, but we do that with other emotions. We plan a party to celebrate and have fun. We plan a meeting to engage with the confusion of a decision. We can plan to fast as a response in McKnight's words to a "sacred grievous moment."

Jesus' instruction is to go about normal life when you fast. The hypocrites stop everything, call attention to themselves, make themselves look gloomy. When you're living in the kingdoms, fasting connects you to God's kingdom—it doesn't make you stand out in the kingdom of man. So you shower, get dressed and go to work.

You don't make a big deal of fasting with dramatic attempts for attention. Fasting doesn't change that much about your day because your body is doing the grieving. You are physically connected to what is happening in your spiritual life. You don't have to express it or flaunt it because it's true. You are constantly reminded of your dependence on God.

Jesus ends his words by saying, "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you." It's like you and God have this little secret. And something does happen. Your relationship with God flourishes as you depend on him. When you're able to use your body in worship, God makes sense to you—not just in your head, but in your body as well.

There are a lot of things going on right now that you could fast about. For some, the holidays can be a time of grief. Our nation is in the midst of a political drama with far-reaching implications. Around the world, there is unrest, injustice, and poverty. There is plenty of grief that we could fast for.

We're also in the midst of a unique season of transition as a church. We have several pastoral positions open, we've had a few positions recently filled, we're anticipating more transition in the next few years, and hoping to complete a remodel of our most significant gathering space. That's a lot of change. I'm not sure we've ever faced that much change at once.

Incidentally, the remodel plan itself is an example of some of what we've been talking about this morning. We've mostly worshipped in a very utilitarian space. We're not looking to drastically change that, but we are convinced that our space could use refreshing. And a touch more aesthetic treatment.

It's not that the physical space is the important thing. The building isn't the focus. That's what Jesus was warning about—making the fasting obvious and elaborate. But the physical is connected to our spiritual lives. We are people with bodies, and because our bodies matter in worship, the space where we worship makes a difference. We want to take that seriously and design a space that can reflect our values for community and engagement in order to facilitate worship as best we can.

How to start

We've talked about how not to fast. We've talked about how Jesus instructs us to fast. Now, let's get specific about what that might look like. Where do you start?

In the Old Testament, there is a word usually translated as worship. It's the Hebrew word "*chadah*." The word literally means to "bow down." So if someone said "I'm going to go over there and worship", what they meant was "I'm going to go over there and bow on the ground."

One author I read this week pointed out seven different Hebrew words for "praise." And all of them have something to with our bodies—kneeling, shouting, extending your hand, and others.³

But if we've never fasted before, how do we start?

There are three different kinds of fasts. A "normal" fast is when you don't eat any food—nothing caloric—but you do drink water. That's the majority of the fasting in the Bible. This is what Jesus did for 40 days in the wilderness. Incidentally, 40 days is about the physical limit of how long you can do this before your body starts to shut down.

An "absolute" fast is when you don't eat any food, and you don't drink any water. This is what Esther does when she's trying to figure out how to talk to the king. She also invites others to do this with her for three days. Incidentally, that's about how long you can go without water before the body starts to shut down.

Finally, there is a "partial" fast. This is when you abstain from certain foods. Daniel did this when he only ate vegetables. Elijah did this by only eating locusts and honey. Many of you have probably tried some version of this. Maybe you've given up chocolate for Lent or something like that. I'm not sure how long it takes for the body to shut down without chocolate. I've never tested it beyond a few days.

Let's go back to the "normal" fast. This is what Jews would do for two days per week. The early church did the same thing, but they wanted to distinguish themselves from the Jews, so they typically fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays instead of Mondays and Thursdays. They did what would be called a 24-hour fast. This is skipping two meals. You eat dinner before the sun goes down. Then you skip breakfast and lunch. Then you wait for the sun to go down and eat dinner.

But there's also the 12 hour fast. This amounts to skipping one meal. You eat breakfast in the morning, skip lunch, then eat dinner at night. That's roughly a 12 hour fast.

Here's my suggestion: try fasting for the right reasons.

That doesn't mean that you should fast because you ate a lot for Thanksgiving and want to trim back down. It means you should fast as a response to some grief in your life or in the world. There's plenty of grief to choose from.

Today is the first week of Advent. You could fast once a week for the four weeks of Advent. Pick a day and skip lunch that day. Go for a walk and pray instead. Here's what I can promise: you won't feel incredibly spiritual that day. The heavens won't open, and angelic trumpets come out with the praise of your heavenly father. You won't even wake up the next morning saying "Wow, I feel so integrated! Paul Taylor was right. My body and soul are back in sync with each other."

Most likely, you won't feel much. But over time and as you practice this, you might notice small changes in your perspective. You might come to appreciate the ritual of fasting, not for what it accomplishes in you, but for the fast itself as an authentic expression of what is true around you.

This is what I've been doing to prepare for this sermon—several 12-hour fasts over the past few weeks. Mostly it's been unremarkable. But that's kind of the point. Fasting isn't a magic bullet or a secret ritual. It's the training of our bodies and souls over time.

Finally, worshipping God with your body can be applied in a number of different ways. Fasting is only one ways. Try raising your hands when we sing a song. When you pray, try kneeling or lying down. Or dance. Or sing. Or get creative with something else.

All of these ways of worshipping God with your body might take time to learn. That's okay. Try something and see what you think. Then try something else. Don't worry about getting it wrong. Be willing to go through some trial and error.

Conclusion

I would never invite you to my house for a Thanksgiving celebration that didn't involve food. In fact, I'd probably never invite you to my house for anything that didn't involve food. I love to feast. I love to cook for people. It's an incredible way to engage our bodies, and feasting is a powerful way to worship God. During all the major holidays of the Old Testament —

when everyone gathered to worship—there were massive community feasts.

Most of us feast pretty well, but we could learn something about fasting. When we're happy, we eat because it expresses our happiness. And when we're sad, we eat so that we can feel better.

When we fast, there's a reciprocal relationship; we actually feel worse. I feel sorrow or loss or grief or confusion, so I abstain from food. That makes me hungry, and I actually feel worse. But fasting is a way to embrace that pain, to express it, to invite our whole self to experience the grievous moment we're facing.

Try fasting or some other way to worship God with your body. Schedule it in your life. Or try it spontaneously the next time you face a time of grief or confusion.

We seem to have lost the connection between our bodies and our souls, but that doesn't have to be forever. We can take steps to invite our body into worship. We continue in song now, expressing some of our pain to God with our voices. That's a way to worship God with our bodies. I'll invite you to try to engage your body with these words. Close your eyes, lift your hands, hold your hand open to receive from God—or just focus your awareness on your body as you sing.

Worshipping God involves our whole selves. Let's focus on worshipping God with our bodies.

Endnotes

1 Scot McKnight, *Fasting: The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010)

2 McKnight, *Fasting*, xviii.

3 Nic Payne, "The Heart of Worship - Part 1 - A Journey to Intimacy," Nic Payne, (<https://nicpayne.org/thoughts/><https://nicpayne.org/blog-page-url/2018/12/26/new-post-title-5>), 2017.

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