

Who's In Charge Here? (Sermon on the Mount #11)  
Matthew 6:16-18; I Corinthians 9:24-27  
January 24, 2016  
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Do you remember the weather forecasters during the middle of the week? The snow is coming! Snow!



When you heard that, what did you do? Well, if you're like the stereotypical Western Pennsylvanian, you heard the forecast for snow and you hightailed it down the Giant Eagle to make sure you had milk, bread, and eggs.

Because that's what we do, right? One flake, and we're there. Oh, we may have some difficulty due to the snow, but we're not going to experience French toast-related emergencies in this household, thank you very much.

It's what we do.



In the first century, if you were a religious Jew, you gave alms, you prayed, and you fasted. Maybe you spent a lot of time thinking about it. Maybe you didn't. But you did those things, because that's what religious people did.

Jesus' disciples were not an exception, apparently. Here in the Sermon on the Mount, he addresses those practices, and three times he says, "When..." When you give to the needy, when you pray, and when you fast.

Most of the religious leaders of Jesus' day fasted twice a week – they went without food on Mondays and Thursdays. There were a lot of reasons for this practice, including repentance for sin and a desire to be connected with the things that were important to the Lord. There was also, evidently, something important about being seen as a person who fasted. When Jesus speaks to his followers about fasting, he specifically instructs them NOT to make a

big production out of it. In fact, he says, try not to let anyone suspect that you are fasting.



My hunch is that of the three practices that Jesus lifts up here in the beginning of Matthew 6, this is the one that seems the most remote to us.

For the last two weeks, we've talked about prayer. We like prayer. We pray for each other, we ask other people to pray for us. We're pretty good at prayer, in some respects. We *get* prayer. In fact, a few of you asked me to preach a whole *series* of messages on the various aspects of the Lord's Prayer.

And while not everybody *likes* to give money or time or energy away, we've all done it. In fact, here in the USA our own government gives us an incentive for charitable giving in the form of tax deductions. So when Jesus talks about *when* we give, that makes sense to us.

But fasting? Not so much. What *good* does it do, we wonder? I can kind of see how my praying for your grandma might make a difference. And I know that if I give Carly here \$25, she'll help feed a family for a month. But how in the world does my skipping out on lunch have anything to do with my faithfulness as a disciple?

The Bible is full of people who fast: Moses, Hannah, David, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Anna, John, Jesus, Paul... all kinds of people are mentioned as going without food as a spiritual practice. People fasted as a means of expressing repentance for their sin, or so that they could really concentrate on serving God well. Some people fasted as a kind of enacted prayer, where they sought to learn more about depending fully on God, rather than their own efforts.

But what about us? Does this apply to us at all? Does Jesus want his followers in 2016 to be people who fast? Or

is that one of those bible things, like frankincense or getting fed to lions, that used to happen but doesn't anymore?

Well, he's talking about it right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. That ought to be a clue – I mean, so far, there's nothing very optional about the other things that are in the Sermon.

So far, we've experienced the Sermon on the Mount as a catalogue of Jesus' ethical reality. That is to say, we see the Sermon as the way to follow Jesus most closely. And as we hear the Sermon, we are struck by how difficult it is. I know that we covered chapter 5 all the way back in November and December, but there is some important stuff in there. Do you remember? Don't fall prey to the dangers of anger, or lust, or revenge. Be a person of integrity. Be generous in all your thoughts and deeds. And be a person of love – love for your enemy, love for your brother.



Those are some hard practices in which to engage, aren't they? If we are going to be people who do those kinds of things, we're going to have to be in shape, spiritually speaking. We just don't fall into those kinds of behaviors.

For millennia, people have found that fasting is a way of aligning our inner spirit with our outward behavior. As we fast, we allow our bodies to feel the weight of spiritual truth. We say we are hungry for God's reign, but when we are actually feeling our bellies rumble, we can identify that longing in a different way.

When the Apostle Paul talked about spiritual discipline to his friends who lived in Corinth, he referred to a set of athletic contests known as the Isthmian Games. These were modeled after the Olympics, and took place in Corinth every two years. Paul talks about the fact that the prize for these contests was often a wreath made out of celery, but the prize

for spiritual faithfulness was eternal. For Paul, the physical body was helpful in teaching the mind and the spirit some things that were true. There were some religions at that time that taught that anything physical – including our own bodies - was evil. Paul counteracts that heresy by saying, essentially, that rather than being the enemy of faithfulness, the human body is a tool for right living.

Back to 2016. Allow me to suggest that there are at least three reasons why occasional or even regular fasting can be important to you as you seek to live like Jesus would have you live.

The physical sensation of hunger or desire can serve as a reminder of our spiritual need. I have often found that if I want to be mindful to a particular situation or need, fasting helps me to be focused. Let's say that a friend in another state calls to tell me that he's about to enter into a particularly difficult situation – he's facing surgery, or anticipating some big test, or applying for job. If I say to him, "OK, I will hold you in prayer" and I engage in a period of fasting at the same time, then every time I feel hungry, I can stop what I'm doing and hold this friend before the Lord in prayer. I can take the time I might usually spend on eating lunch and use that time to be focused on my friend's need.

With each time I am reminded of my body's hunger for food, I have the occasion to direct my thoughts and prayers in a specific way. That's what we mean when we say, "I'm fasting for Bill today", or something of that nature. On the one hand, my friend receives no direct benefit from the fact that I'm going without food, but on the other hand, I am clearly more focused and attentive as both a friend and a child of God because I'm engaging in this discipline.

Another benefit to fasting in 2016 is that it allows me to get better at being able to do stuff that I don't want to do. That may sound odd, but think it through with me: many of

the core realities of being a faithful adult disciple in the world are rooted in being willing and able to things that we would rather not. Whether we're talking about doing the dishes, going to school, forgiving your mother, or showing up at a friend's funeral, our lives are filled with things we don't like doing. Part of being an effective human being, though, is being able to do them anyway.

When I fast, I am specifically choosing to do something (be hungry) that normally I'd just as soon avoid. Going without food for a designated period of time is uncomfortable. I have a friend who speaks about fasting in almost mystic terms: she talks about having heightened clarity and deepened response... Not me. I'm cold and if I'm not careful I'm irritable and there's just nothing magical about it...

...Until I am faced with something else that I need to do, but I don't feel like it, and I find that I'm better at that because I've fasted. I'll think about how much I really *don't* want to show up for that meeting, or show kindness to my neighbor, or act in someone else's best interest...and then I'll remember, "Hey, Carver, last month you went four days straight without eating anything. *That* was hard. You can do this, and do it well. You are more capable than you thought you were." And I'm right – fasting helps me to get better at doing what I don't want to do.

A final means in which fasting has been a blessing in my own life is that it is an opportunity to share God's love and provision with those who need it. Of course, the Youth Group Famine, of which Carly will speak in a few moments, is a great example of this. There are times when I go without food and I directly give some of that time, energy, and money to someone who needs it more than I do. When the Youth Group pauses next month to fast for a day and a half, we'll take some of the time we've been given and use it to learn about starvation and nutrition and justice in the world.

We'll take some of our energy and offer it to our neighbors in service. And we'll use some of the money we might otherwise spend on ourselves to purchase food for the hungry.

I knew a man whose name was Egonn. When he was a child, he fled the Nazis and came to the USA. He told me of hiding out nights in frozen barns, afraid of who might find him and what they'd do to him. One day I overheard him say to his wife that he wanted to give \$30 per month to help alleviate suffering in a certain refugee camp. His wife, who was herself kind and generous to a fault, said, "I understand what you're saying, but we just don't have that money. You know the budget. We can't find another dollar a day." He was silent for a moment, and then said, "Well, then, let's get rid of the coffee maker. I don't need to drink coffee at home."

I have no idea how much coffee Egonn drank, but I remember being struck by his willingness to voluntarily abstain from something he enjoyed because he thought those resources could be better used elsewhere. When we choose to fast, we can make significant amounts of money, energy, or time available to those for whom those resources could make a huge difference.

This week, let me invite you to consider planning a fast of your own. Think about a day or so that you can skip your regular meals, or engage in some other kind of fast. Maybe you get off social media for a while, or you turn your back on trashy television, or give up something in particular like coffee for a season. We're coming into Lent, and that might be a good time for you to consider engaging in a practice like this. But think this week about how you can undertake a fast that is meaningful to you, helpful to the world, and likely to prompt you in greater discipleship. You're not doing it because it's going to get you a better parking spot in heaven, or because you want me to be so impressed with what a

great Christian you are. You can do it so that you are more likely to be shaped in the ways that God is calling you to live.

Way back on Tuesday, when Treva asked me for a title to this message, I said “Let’s call it ‘Who’s in Charge Here?’,” because I thought it was a clever way to indicate that you – your mind, your spirit, your will – you are in charge of your own body, your own calendar, and your own wallet.

I think it’s a good title, but not for those reasons. When we engage in spiritual practices like giving alms, praying, or fasting, it’s because that’s the number one way that we make our lives reflect the truth that we speak all the time: God is in charge. We do these things because we want to be where God is, doing what God does. If we’re really disciples, that’s what we do, right? So let’s talk about a fast that points us to our dependence on God and heightens our ability to be a blessing to our neighbors, because, really, who is in charge here?