

Throughout history, people in pursuit of God have experienced fasting as a way to intensify prayer and heighten our sensitivity to the Spirit of God. By denying our body comfort (and in many cases, distraction), we are forced to sit with our thoughts and feelings in different ways.

In today's reading, Jesus simply *assumes* his followers fast. He says, "And when you fast, do not look gloomy..."

If you're interested in learning more about fasting, [here's a teaching series with a set of practical tools](#) to get started from John Mark Comer at Bridgetown Church in Portland.

Also, [here's the manuscript from a sermon preached by John Wesley](#) in the early 1800s. Wesley fasted from sundown Thursday to sundown Friday and believed it was a necessary spiritual discipline.

Questions:

- Do you fast? Or do you abstain from anything physical in order to focus on the spiritual?
- When you do deny yourself something physical for spiritual reasons, do you make a show of it so people will think well of you?

Read verses 19-24. There are passages in Scripture that we often qualify or soften, thinking, "Surely he didn't mean that." This might be one of them. At least for today, let's try to take Jesus at face value.

What if he really meant what he said?

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Remember, Jesus is announcing that the kingdom of heaven is here. God's *economy*, value system, or way of living is a reality now. Trade in your currency for what matters in God's economy. All of Matthew 5 and 6 have been concerned with the condition of our hearts. This passage is no exception: Look at where you direct your money to see what you love most.

There's a very practical element to what he's saying: your stuff won't last. It'll end up at Goodwill, in a dump, or in the closet of your great-great-granddaughter who no longer values sterling silver or modern art. So why are you spending your physical and emotional energy collecting more of it when you could be investing in something that matters to God. I actually wonder if he's trying to prevent us from heartbreak.

But what does it mean to lay up treasures in heaven? It helps me to think of this in toddler terms. Kids frequently fight over toys. It's a common saying, "What is more important: people or things?" At this point, kids may hang their heads, reluctantly hand over the dump truck, and admit, "People." And then they hug it out.

Now, what does this look like on an adult scale? What does it look like to filter our money through the same question: "What is more important: people or things?"

He goes on... *The eye is the lamp of the whole body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*

This line is puzzling. Perhaps he's saying: Do you see clearly? Are your eyes drawn to what is good and lasting? Or are your eyes drawn to things that fizzle out, dry up, and don't matter to God? If that's the case, to satisfy the desires of your eye will only lead to a wider web of emptiness. Unless you learn to see as God sees.

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. *You cannot serve God and money.*

Let's try taking this part at face value as well: Accumulating wealth and loving God cannot be in a tie for first place in your life. They will inherently come into conflict with each other, and one will come out on top. Which one will it be?

Jesus isn't condemning money or even possessions. He's just naming reality: Loving God will lead you to make different decisions about your money, decisions that might not make sense if your bottom line is to earn and keep more money.

On the flip side, if your bottom line is to earn and keep more money, you may miss out on a *grand* adventure to partner with God in bringing his kingdom here on earth. ([Check out this story](#) about two Harvard Business School Graduates who are confronted with a biblical view of money that changes their lives.)

Recognizing our inherent desire to earn and keep more money, one of the practices we might adopt to keep our desires in check is to give a certain percentage away. As we do, we might ask God: How can this money be an answer to someone else's prayer?

Questions:

- What do your spending habits reveal about what or who you love most?
- What practices do you have to guide your spending, saving, and giving?
- What kind of conversations do you have with God about your money?
- Take a moment to pray: *God, the money I have earned is yours, not mine.
I want to hold it with open hands.
Teach me to see as you see,
To want what you want,
And to love what you love.*

*Let this money be a tool to bring your kingdom here, as it is in heaven.
You are in first place.
Amen.*

Read verses 25-34. Here's a little Bible study trick: "Whenever you see a *therefore*, ask what the *therefore's* there for."

Today's reading begins: *Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...*

Jesus is building on what he's just taught about money. It's like he knows that our attachment to our stuff actually makes us *more anxious* and less free. (He predates Marie Kondo by like...2,000 years. This guy is brilliant!)

Jesus continues: *Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, not about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*

Here's how Eugene Peterson translates the end of Matthew 6: *If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with **getting**, so you can respond to God's **giving**. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.*

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

What is your life about? What are you steeped in? Does it hold you captive or set you free?

Questions:

- What is causing you anxiety?

- Spend a moment in prayer, naming your anxiety before God. Ask him to remind you how much he delights in you and that he will provide for you. And let him have your worry.

10

Matthew 7

Read verses 1-6. Today's reading is perfect material for a comic strip. It's such a clever word picture. Consider what Jesus is saying:

- ❖ Don't expect to see others clearly if you are not in the regular habit of reflecting on and confessing your own mess.