We’re going to venture into dangerous and uncharted territory today. We’re continuing our study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and today we’re looking at Matthew 6:16-18. There are two reasons why I call this uncharted territory. First of all, these three verses probably get less attention than any other verses in the entire Sermon on the Mount. And secondly, in these three verses, Jesus talks about fasting, which is not a topic you hear a lot of sermons about in the church today. I mean, who really wants to talk about *not* *eating*? Well, Jesus talks about it, and we need to hear what He says, because Jesus’ teaching on fasting reveals some truths that we desperately need to hear in our world today. So read with me, Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus says, *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men 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.”*

Now, right off the bat, we need to notice three things that Jesus does in these verses. First, notice that Jesus assumes we will fast. Look at the first three words of verse 16. Jesus says, *“When you fast.”* Many biblical scholars point out that Jesus says, “*when* you fast,” not, “*if* you fast.” Jesus doesn’t even bother to command that we fast. He just assumes we will. He treats it like a foregone conclusion. Now, what’s so intriguing about that is the fact that so often today we treat fasting in almost the exact opposite way. Fasting rarely, if ever, crosses our minds, and it’s pretty much a foregone conclusion that we won’t fast. So two of the big questions that we’re going to try to answer this morning are, “Why does Jesus assume that we will fast? And why have we gotten to a place where our assumption about fasting is the exact opposite of Jesus’?”

And just in case you’re not yet fully convinced that Jesus assumes we *will* fast, I want you to remember that these three verses are actually part of a much larger section that we’ve been looking at for the past three weeks. This section started in verse 1 when Jesus said that if you do your acts of righteousness just to be seen by men, you’re a religious hypocrite. And then He gave us three examples of what He meant. The first example was giving to the needy in verse 2. The second example was praying in verse 5. And then the third example is fasting in our verses today. Now, just the fact that Jesus calls fasting an act of righteousness suggests that it’s probably something we should do. But that becomes even more clear when you notice that Jesus uses the exact same phrase to introduce all three of these acts. In verse 2, He says, “when you give to the needy.” In verse 5, “when you pray.” And then in verse 16, “when you fast.” Jesus treats all three examples the same, but for some reason we tend to treat the first two examples a lot differently than we do the third. Just like Jesus, we assume that we should give to the needy and that we should pray. But then, unlike Jesus, we don’t make the same assumption about fasting. And so once again, we have to ask, “Why does Jesus assume we will fast? And why is it that we view fasting so differently than Jesus does?” And we’re going to try to answer those questions in a few minutes. But first we need to notice the other two things Jesus does in these verses.

After Jesus assumes that we will fast, the second thing He does is that He warns us against fasting the wrong way. That’s why at the very beginning today, I didn’t just call this uncharted territory. I called it dangerous and uncharted territory. The New Testament offers a lot of warnings about the dangers of fasting the wrong way. Let me share three of them with you very quickly. The first is in our text today. Jesus warns against fasting in order to be seen by men. In other words, if the reason you fast is because you want people to notice and be impressed with how spiritual you are, there’s a great danger in that. The second New Testament warning about fasting is in Luke 18. Jesus tells a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go into the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays about how good and religious he is and even brags that he fasts twice a week. The tax collector, on the other hand, is overcome with grief for his sin and beats his chest and begs God, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus tells us that it’s the sinful but humble tax collector and not the religious and self-righteous Pharisee who is justified before God. So if your fasting is a source of pride and self-righteousness, it’s a very dangerous thing, because you will not be acceptable to God. The third New Testament warning about fasting is in Colossians 2. In verse 8, Paul says, *“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”* And then in verses 20-23, Paul explains, *“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”* In other words, if your fasting is only done as a harsh treatment of the body that draws attention to your self-control and self-reliance, it is a dangerous and worldly thing that is destined to perish.

And make sure you notice that there are two overarching themes that can be seen in every warning about the dangers of fasting. First, the warnings are all spiritual and not physical. The real dangers of fasting are not related to your stomach but to your soul. And secondly, every warning focuses on self-centeredness in one way or another. If you fast to draw attention to yourself, to get praise for yourself, as an expression of self-righteousness or self-control or self-reliance, then your fasting is a dangerous thing. So Jesus warns against fasting the wrong way, and the wrong way is self-centered, self-reliant, self-righteous fasting.

The third thing Jesus does in these verses is that He teaches the right way to fast. He says, *“When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men 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.”*

In other words, the right way to fast is to fast to God and for God. Fasting is supposed to be an intensely Godward act. You don’t care about people seeing you, because you’re not fasting for them. You don’t care about people praising you, because you’re not fasting for yourself. You’re fasting for God. So, while the great danger of fasting is that it will be self-centered, the great benefit of fasting is that it can be God-centered. And nowhere in the Bible is this clearer than in Zechariah 7:5. God condemns Israel by saying, *“When you fasted and mourned… was it really for me that you fasted?”* He says, “The problem isn’t that you didn’t fast. The problem is that you didn’t fast *for* *me*.” True fasting is an intensely God-centered, God-focused act.

And it’s at this point that we’re getting really close to answering the two big questions I asked a few minutes ago: “Why does Jesus assume that we will fast? And why have we gotten to a place where our assumption about fasting is the exact opposite of Jesus’?”

The fact that fasting is supposed to be an intensely God-centered, God-focused act is a helpful start to answering those questions. But in order to fully answer those questions, flip over three chapters to Matthew 9. In Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus gives us some additional insight into fasting. Listen to those verses. Matthew writes, *“Then John’s disciples came and asked (Jesus), ‘How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’*

*“Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is still with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’”*

Now, make sure you hear what’s going on in these verses, because this is at the very heart of Jesus’ teaching about fasting. Some of John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus, and they say,

“Hey, we’ve noticed that your disciples don’t fast. We fast. The Pharisees fast. All the good religious people fast. So why don’t your disciples fast?”

And Jesus answers by saying, *“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is still with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.”* In other words, “The reason my disciples don’t fast is because I’m with them. When I’m not with them, then they’ll have a reason to fast.”

Now, make sure you realize what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus is revealing the very heart and purpose of fasting. He’s telling us that fasting is an expression of longing. It’s an expression of desire. It’s an expression of hunger. But contrary to what you might think, it’s not a hunger for food… It’s a hunger for Jesus. Jesus says, “As long as I’m with my disciples, they don’t have to fast, because they’ve got me. They don’t have to long for me or hunger for me, because I’m here. But when I’m gone, then they’ll hunger for me, and then they’ll have a reason to fast.”

So Jesus teaches that fasting expresses our hunger for Him. And that’s why Jesus assumes we will fast. Because Jesus has gone back to heaven, and we’re still here. And if we love Jesus, we’re going to long for Him and desire to be with Him, and fasting expresses that desire. You go without food in your stomach to express the hunger of your heart. In a real sense, when you fast, what you’re saying is, “My hunger for Jesus is stronger than my hunger for food. I want the Bread of Life more than I want the bread of this earth. I want the Living Water more than I want bottled water. I’ve had a taste of Jesus, and nothing else can satisfy me now. Jesus is so good, that I’ll give up everything else, if I can just have a little more of Jesus!”

It reminds me of when Christy and I first started dating. We started dating the summer after our freshmen year of college, and I was on a summer mission team that traveled around the state of Kentucky. So for the first ten weeks we dated, we didn’t get to see each other hardly at all. And this was back before people were using cell phones all the time – I know it’s hard for some of you to believe I’m that old, but it’s true – so I had to buy calling cards. And my schedule was real busy during the day, so the only chance I had to call was during meals and at night when I was supposed to be asleep. So that’s what I did. I would skip meals to call Christy. I would skip sleep to call Christy. In fact, I remember one night, calling from a pay phone in a college dorm in Breathitt County, Kentucky, and using 400 minutes off my calling card. I gladly gave up food and sleep to talk to Christy, because my desire to talk to her was greater than my desire to eat or sleep.

That’s exactly what fasting says about our desire for Jesus. It says, “I desire Jesus more than I desire these things.” So when Jesus assumes we’ll fast, Jesus is assuming that we’re going to love Him and desire Him more than this world.

This also helps us answer our second question, “Why have we gotten to a place where our assumption about fasting is the exact opposite of Jesus’?” Well, if fasting expresses longing, the most obvious answer is that a lack of fasting expresses a lack of longing. We’ve gotten so comfortable and content with this world that we’ve forgotten that this is not our home. We’ve forgotten that there’s something greater. We’ve forgotten how great Jesus is, and we’ve settled for the small things of this world.

John Piper has written a great book on fasting called *Hunger for God*, which very well may be the perfect description of fasting. And in that book, Piper says, “If you don’t feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God… It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great… The absence of fasting is indicative of our comfort with the way things are.”

So perhaps the reason we don’t give much thought to fasting is because we’re too comfortable with this world. And that is one of the greatest dangers that we face in our western lifestyle and culture. Our materialism, our creature comforts, our high standard of living, our addiction to entertainment and leisure and pleasure and thrills—all of that tends to make us more and more attached to this world and this life. And as we develop more and more of an appetite for the temporary things of this world, our hunger for the eternal things of God diminishes. The reason our hunger for God is so small is because we’ve stuffed ourselves with the junk food of this world.

And what you have to see is that this truth gets to the very heart of what the Bible teaches about your heart. The Bible teaches that there is a great war for your heart between the flesh and the Spirit, between the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven, between the things of this world and the things of God. And the great question is, “Which will you love? Which will you live for?” Will you love God and His kingdom and live for Him? Or will you love this world and its kingdom and live for it? Will the hunger of your heart be for God or for this world?

And I certainly don’t think it’s an accident that in the very next verses of Matthew chapter 6, right after Jesus talks about fasting, the very next thing He says is, “You will either store up treasures in heaven or treasures on earth. You will either love God or you will love money. But it can’t be both. You can’t have two Masters. Because wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

You have to choose: Jesus or the world. Will your heart be on Jesus in heaven or will your heart be on the things of this world? And over and over again the Bible tells us that the answer to that question is crucial to your very soul. In Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells us that the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things can choke out the gospel in your life and keep you from growing true faith in Jesus. On the other hand, Hebrews 11 tells us that if you have true faith in Jesus, you will look and long for a better country. You’ll be an alien and a stranger on earth, because you’re not content here. You’ll long for the heavenly country built by God, and your faith will only be satisfied in God.

In other words, if you truly trust Jesus and follow Jesus and love Jesus, your hunger for Him will keep growing and your hunger for the things of this world will decrease. But if you’re satisfied with the things of this world, if your life and your desires are about this world and not about Jesus, then the gospel has not taken root in your heart. And it doesn’t matter if you call yourself a Christian, you’re not truly following Jesus unless you desire Him more than you desire this world!

So, where will your treasure be? With Jesus in heaven or with the things of this world? Your very heart is at stake. Will your heart hunger for Jesus or for this world?

And fasting is one of the ways that you say, “Jesus is what I want. I’m not content unless I have Jesus. The things of this world aren’t enough to satisfy me. I’m an alien and stranger on earth. I’m looking and longing for a heavenly country built by God. I’m not content with the bread of this world. I want the Bread of Life. I’m not content with the water of this world. I want the Living Water. I’m not content with the imitation. I want the reality. I want Jesus. And nothing else will do! Jesus is better than everything in this world. Jesus is even better than life itself!”

Fasting expresses our desire for Jesus and our discontentment with the world. Fasting expresses our desire for Jesus and our discontentment with the world. And the reason Jesus assumes we will fast is because He wants us to desire Him more than we desire this world. And the reason we often overlook fasting is because we are in danger of being way too content with this world.

Now, in the rest of our time together, I want to briefly mention two things about what I’ve just said that I think could be misunderstood. The first thing that could be misunderstood is to think that this means fasting is the only way to please God, and you’re going to have to starve yourself to death in order to follow Jesus. That’s not at all what the Bible teaches. 1 Corinthians 10, Romans 14, Colossians 3, and 1 Timothy 4 – just to name a few – all celebrate our freedom in Christ to eat whatever we want as long as we do it to the glory of God and give Him thanks for providing for us. Food is intended to remind us of our dependence on God and of His goodness to us in giving us what we need. And as long as that is the case, eating has spiritual benefit just like fasting. The danger is that we will keep eating the food and start forgetting God. The danger is that we will start desiring the food more than we desire the One who gave the food to us. The danger is that we will act like food sustains us more than God does. And so from time to time, as an act of faith, as a means to shake ourselves up and jar ourselves out of the lethargy and apathy that settles over our soul, we give up the food as a reminder that there is Someone greater than the food. There is Someone greater than the world, and we want Him more than we want His gifts.

So, absolutely, you can eat to the glory of God. And that will probably be the norm. But there’s always a danger that you’ll just eat… with no thought to the glory of God. And fasting is a way to break out of that rut and be reminded of the spiritual reality that is greater than this world.

The second thing that I think could easily be misunderstood is that you may think fasting is just about food. And it’s not. Fasting is about desiring God more than *everything* in this world… not just food. Fasting is about giving up anything that could be a substitute for God in your life. You may fast from 30 minutes of TV every night so you can spend time in prayer. You may fast from 15 minutes on your cell phone or on Facebook so you can spend time reading your Bible. You may fast from the sports section or a crossword puzzle or Sudoku in the morning so you can spend time in worship. You may fast from Starbucks once a week so you can give that money to missions. You may fast from eating out once a month so you can give that money to our building project. Fasting is about taking a legitimate, non-sinful pleasure in this world, and saying, “I desire God even more than I desire this thing, so I’m going to redirect my focus to God by voluntarily abstaining from this thing.”

Because of that, I want to close today by applying Jesus’ teaching to our lives in a very relevant way. As I mentioned earlier, the very next thing Jesus mentions in the Sermon on the Mount is treasure in heaven verse treasure on earth. You can’t love both God and money. We’re going to look at that text next week, but I don’t want us to miss the connection today. If there is anything that threatens to steal our heart from God more than our appetite for food, it’s our appetite for money. We live in a materialistic world that worships money, and money poses a constant threat to your soul. Money has a way of wrapping its tentacles around your heart and strangling out the love that you would have for God.

And as your pastor, I want you to be free from that. I don’t want you to be a slave to money. Jesus tells us that it’s either money or God, and I want you to choose God. So based on Jesus’ teaching about fasting, I think it’s helpful for us to see giving as a type of fast. Giving is a way of taking a legitimate blessing from God – the money He blesses us with – and saying, “I am voluntarily fasting from this. I don’t want to love this more than I love you. Jesus, I desire you more than I desire my money, so here’s my money. You’re worth more, and I want to invest my money in your kingdom.”

And I want you to know that is my greatest desire for you when we ask you to give. Listen, I promise you, when I ask you to give, I don’t care about your money. I don’t even primarily care about meeting budget. I care about your heart, and I care about you being set free to invest your money in the cause of Jesus Christ… Because Jesus matters more than your money, and I don’t want you to miss out on what’s most valuable. I don’t want you to be a slave to this world. I don’t want you to settle for this world and sell your soul for the tiny, temporary, meaningless things that the world offers. God has something so much greater for you in Jesus Christ! And I want your heart to be set free so that you can live for Jesus and give to Jesus and experience the eternal blessing of investing your life and your money in the kingdom of God.

And in the next few months, we’re going to have a major opportunity to live out Jesus’ teaching in this church. We’re looking to build a new children’s wing, and this fall we’re going to begin the process of funding that ministry project. We’re going to give, and we’re going to make commitments for what we will give over the next three years. And right now I want you to do two things: I want you to start praying that God will prepare your heart and all of our hearts to give in a way that honors Him and shows that we value His work more than we value the things of this world. And second, I want you to start thinking about some very practical ways that you can fast in order to free up resources for this ministry. What are things in your life that you are willing to voluntarily give up because Jesus and His gospel are more valuable to you? Pray that God will bring those things to mind and give you the grace to be set free from them.

Church, my prayer for us is that we will want Jesus more than anything in this world. I pray that we will desire Jesus and long for Jesus and hunger for Jesus and be starved for Jesus! I pray that we will have such a clear vision of how great and beautiful Jesus Christ is that nothing else will satisfy us. I pray you won’t be content with the imitations of this world, but that you will pursue the real thing… that you will pursue Jesus Himself. And I pray that fasting will become a helpful tool for you as you express that the hunger of your heart is for Jesus above all else.