

Lent: Fighting the World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Week 1 - Fighting with Fasting

Morning! If you have a Bible turn to **Matthew 6**.

A quick update: If you remember back in January, we did a sermon called Following Jesus Together, where we mapped out part of our vision as a church. We said how we want to be people who strive to be with Him and become more like Him.

One note we got that was particularly encouraging I wanna read for you:

Hello Teaching Team,

Thank you for the new Following Jesus Together 3-week plans. I, along with 2 others in my LifeGroup, chose Discontentment for my first plunge...

The practice of Examen Prayer reconnected me with an exercise my late husband and I used to do. Before we went to sleep, he would remind us to recall the "wins" of the day before we prayed and closed out the day. I have missed that practice. It was a healthy one for me, especially. Thank you for helping me reconnect to this...

Thank you for your work to make this resource available to our church family. You lead us well.

This vision isn't anything new, this has been what the Church has been called to since the Church began 2,000 years ago. When you look in the New Testament The Church is supposed to be a reflection and embodiment of Jesus to the world, a counter-narrative to the culture filled with grace and truth and we do it through the spiritual practices.

One of those practices we're doing together as a church family is fasting together. That's what we're talking about today. Which depending on your church background, you might have never done before or you did but you didn't have a clear understanding of what it was for. So let me define it really quick:

Fasting: the practice of refraining from something to focus on something else.

Now biblically speaking, fasting was about refraining from food but in the modern sense, fasting can be refraining for other things too - social media, alcohol, or television or whatever.

Now a couple of disclaimers on fasting:

1 - Fasting can be misused. In the Bible and in church history people used fasting as a means to show off in front of others or to impress God as though God will love you more if you say no.

2 - Fasting can be misunderstood. In fact, during the medieval period of the church, fasting began to be warped because the assumption was that your body was bad, and your soul was good so you should deny

yourself of all physical pleasures because everything physical is evil. But that's not biblical. God created your body. Jesus lived in a body. Jesus ate and drank. Your body is a beautiful gift made by God to enjoy Him and enjoy His good gifts.

So with that, let's actually develop a biblical understanding of fasting and also why followers of Jesus fast. So let's look at **Matthew 6:**

Matthew 6:1

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

“Practicing your righteousness” was a way of saying doing the spiritual disciplines. It was very easy in an uber-religious community like that where there was such an emphasis on spiritual formation to lose the meaning behind it in the first place. And then Jesus lists out specific spiritual practices we need to be careful about:

2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do ... **3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites...**6** But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you...

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. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** 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.

Now, to be quite honest, when I read this text, I usually just stop here. “Welp, Jesus said don't be a hypocrite... I don't wanna just do things to look good, so that's why I'm not gonna fast. Problem solved.

But that's a bit misleading. He doesn't say don't do them, but rather, do them rightly.

- When you give to the needy
- When you pray
- When you fast

It's never “if.” Always “when.”

And that's an important insight when it comes to fasting - Jesus assumes those who follow Him will also fast. He puts it in the same convo as prayer and giving - essential practices for His people. He assumes fasting is a part of the way our spiritual lives will take shape.

However, if I can be honest without assuming too much of us... I kinda assume that it doesn't. And, primarily, I base that off of the audible groan you all expressed a few weeks ago when it was announced that we'd be fasting together for Lent.

Now, maybe I'm wrong. I would certainly trust Jesus' assumptions over my own. But I think, in general fasting - especially here in the west - is something of a forgotten practice by followers of Jesus.

So this morning I wanna help us see the goodness of fasting - and help us see why it's helpful and valuable.

Here are four reasons to fast:

1 - To spiritually power up

We see this with Jesus in Luke 4 -

Luke 4:1

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days.

Now stop right there - many of us when we read the account of Jesus in the wilderness going without food for over a month assume that He is so weak on all accounts and the only way He's able to get through it is because He's God. But there's more going on under the surface. Jesus in that account, living in a human body, is actually modeling for us what it looks like to tap into the power of the Spirit. Because at the end of His fasting in the wilderness it concludes in v.14 saying:

Luke 4:14

...Jesus returned in the **power** of the Spirit

So in this narrative, Jesus is showing us something significant about fasting - it's that when done the right way, even when you are physically weak, you become spiritually powerful. When you undergo abstaining from things to focus on the things of God, you too are able to access the same power as Jesus did.

This is a silly example, bear with me, but back in my day we played Mario. Not Mario Party or Mario 3D. I'm talking NES Mario. And when you started out you were a little guy and the enemies that faced you starting out were twice your size and to be avoided. But then you'd hit the block, get your mushroom (cue sound effect) and you'd grow three times your size. Suddenly your enemies aren't as scary as they were before.

Now fasting isn't exactly like that, but it is a little bit. It's a process that's much slower but the end result is similar. It's result is an increase in spiritual power in your life. It powers us up through the Spirit to fight more than we ever could had we not fasted.

When we fast we strengthen what we call our "say no to self" muscles, so that when we refrain from things we can become people who are more and more empowered to say no to other things. Theologian Dallas Willard gets at the same thing that if a particular sin feels unbeatable, you can fast from something, and you become a person who is more and more able to say no to other areas of your life

- If you feel like you can't say no to sexual sin. First, say no to food for a season to strengthen your say no to self muscles.
- If you feel like you are addicted to alcohol and tobacco, and can't enjoy them in moderation or responsibility but you feel this neurological impulse, you can strengthen the neural pathways in your brain by abstaining from other things

2 - To increase your love for others

Isaiah 58:6

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

When we fast we forgo what we have in order to love and empathize with others - specifically with those who have less than. We see that we don't need food as often as we want it, we don't need to be in front of a TV screen all the time - but rather, we open our eyes to the brokenness of the world around us and step into the injustices of the world to be a light in the darkness.

I was reading somewhere this week that about 15% of the Bible is connected to caring for the poor and marginalized. Some 2,000 verses in the Bible deal directly with loving the outcast and caring for the vulnerable. Why? because God has created them as beautiful Image Bearers and when we fast we begin to take the focus off ourselves and are more able to see the things that God sees.

So if you're new to our church, we partner with different organizations in our city to serve and come alongside the most broken and marginalized people groups in our city. And it's a privilege to serve them and love them, AND at times it can feel like we have to move mountains to get people to sign up for things, to take the focus off of themselves and serve. And Scripture outlines for us one major way we can do that, even if we don't feel like it at the moment is through the power of fasting. We deny ourselves for a season, and we limit our intake of stuff so that we can stand in solidarity with those that don't have as much.

3 - To get more of God

Fasting becomes this reminder that your body gives you to teach you that you are not dependent on food but on God. That's why in the Bible, we see fasting almost always being accompanied with prayer because prayer is one of the major practices to demonstrate our dependence on Him. That's what Jesus is getting at in John 4 :

John 4:34

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work"

Matt 4:4

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus is saying more than you need sustenance and dependency on food, you need sustenance and dependency on God. As Dallas Willard puts it:

Dallas Willard

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in Him a source of sustenance beyond food.

Practically speaking, the hunger pains you experience when you fast become your prayer prompt. It reminds us that we are completely dependent on Him. And that’s why we couple it with prayer. Prayer acknowledges our dependence on Him.

- So if you have a friend or a spouse who you care for and you want to see Jesus move in their life more, you fast from food and when you experience the hunger pains that become your prompt to pray for them at that moment to ask the Spirit of God to work in them
- If you or someone you know is experiencing financial issues and it feels like things are crashing down around you, you fast from food or something else of significance and devote that to God as you ask Him to remind you that He is in control and that He will sustain you
- If your LifeGroup just feels apathetic to pursue one another, or pursue Jesus together, or pursue others to bring them into LifeGroup, you fast from food together to ask God to shake you from your apathy and wake you up

Fasting is a weapon to catalyze your prayers. Which leads me to the last reason why we fast...

4. To reveal who you really are

Richard Foster

More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.

Adele Calhoun

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite – an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge – it’s just a meal or a trip to the mall – but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognise what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God. This truth is not meant to discourage us. It’s simply the first step in realising that we have to lay down our life in order to find it again in God.

In other words, try fasting for a day from food and just notice what happens to you when just a little hunger sets in. If you’re doing a busy-task or running errands or watching your three screaming children (hypothetically speaking), what goes on in your mind? What do you say out loud?

For many of us, I think a big excuse is, “Well I don’t want to fast because I’m too busy. And when I miss a meal I become hangry or impatient or overwhelmed. I am that Snickers commercial.” EXACTLY! That reveals that within you you are an angry or anxious person, fasting from food just brings to the surface what’s going on underneath you. Another way of saying it - Hangry is more than just a physical condition, it’s a spiritual condition.

Disclaimer - not the human body does need food to operate and at a certain point your body will shut down. But this isn’t what we’re talking about. This is you’ve missed a meal or two and you feel like you’ve lost your grip on control. And it doesn’t have to be just food that activates this in us - it can be about anything that grips your soul.

And it happens with more than just food. Take my kids for example. I have 3 kids 5 and under. If I get into the habit of putting them in front of the TV, so I can get some peace and quiet, that might be fine for a while, but you know what happens when that becomes the pattern and then 1 day I say, “today, we’re going to go without TV”?

World War 3... that’s what happens. Screaming and crying and a deep conviction that their father might just be the worst thing to happen to the world since Hitler. It’s hanger... but hanger for TV. There are things going on beneath the surface in their soul... that have been hiding - masked by the cover of TV intake. If not even nurtured by it. And the break from it... brings it out.

This is what fasting does. Fasting - in some respects - exposes us to the still crooked places that exist in our souls. The spots yet to be touched by Jesus’ sanctifying grace. The things that we believe we can’t live without.

So maybe when you feel overwhelmed or angry or anxious instead of running to food, you might say

- “I need a beer or a glass of wine to take the edge off”,
- “I need to smoke a cigarette to calm down” or
- “I need to watch my shows to decompress” or
- “I need to go hang out with people to forget about my day.”

Not knocking those things per se, but subconsciously for many of us - if you need something in order to stabilize your soul - that reveals **where you really are** in your relationship with Jesus.

If you’re like, “Well my spiritual life seems pretty fine, I don’t really struggle with anything.” What I would say is , “Cool. Try giving up things you do or use routinely and see what happens... try fasting from your phone, or your show, or your car, or your nightly “wind-down” routine... or whatever... and see what results.

See what bubbles to the surface - what sinful behaviors or ways of thinking, what alternative coping mechanisms, ways of handling stress and frustration... you’ll be shocked at what crooked places still exist in your heart. And recognize that is God’s gift to you. To lead you to repentance and faith and change.

Personally speaking, I thought I was a pretty good parent until I fasted. But I’ve noticed on those days when I’ve fasted from food and I’m with kids, I become so aware of my inner-dialogue, my fuse gets

shorter, and all this ugly stuff comes to the surface of my mind. And in those moments, they're little reminders to ask for God's intervention and by God's grace, I'm seeing slow progress with being patient with my kids and enjoying them more and being okay with their interruptions.

So that's what we're going after this season. We're going through the Lent Guide, reading and praying and fasting together.

And for the sake of training ourselves to say no we'll be abstaining from lots of things that we think actually have a bigger grip over our lives as modern 21st century Americans:

- So for one week, we're going to all go without social media
- For another week, we're going to fast from TV and movies
- For one week, we're going to fast from alcohol and caffeine

And it's not to say through any of this that what we're fasting from is inherently evil, we're fasting from these things because we recognize we can way too easily use these things as a means of chasing after control and comfort in our lives or just be a point of distraction.

This week if you follow along in the guide, we're going to fast from background noise. So rather than having the TV on in the background, or having music playing so you can zone out, instead we're going to invite the silence and ask God into those moments, to focus our attention on Him.

I do want to also add one word on the final week. For the final week of Lent, we'll be fasting from food for one day. And I know for many of us you have complications when it comes to food - whether that's low blood sugar, dietary restrictions, or you've been diagnosed with an eating disorder or have previously struggled with an eating disorder. We understand that - and that's in part why we're only going to do it for one day on the final week. So if that's you, we'd encourage you to discuss with your LifeGroup the right way to approach that week and either way, there's freedom and flexibility with it. Maybe you do it and you ask Jesus to sanctify your motives while you do it, or maybe you don't. Whatever you decide is between you, the Lord, and your LifeGroup.

Here's our hope - that as we fast together, we'll be made more like Jesus in the long-run. Not just for these 40 days, but for the next 40 years.

- If one of these weeks fasting from something was particularly hard, the hope is at the end of this season, you might step back and say, "Hm, I didn't realize how attached I am to this particular thing. I felt weird and uncomfortable." Ok, press into that, how do you need to reorient your life now?
- Or, you might think during this season, "I kinda lost my mind when we fasted from TV for a week. Like, I realized I didn't know how to interact with my spouse or another human being if we didn't have a TV screen in front of us to stare at. Maybe I don't need to watch so much TV."
 - True story, last time we fasted from TV together as a church family a couple of years ago, one of the members in our church was so distraught that week and at one point asked his wife, "Uh honey, where do we keep the books in the house?"

- Or maybe you realize you're a horrible human being without caffeine in our life. OK! It's not that you're just going to do it after the week is over but if it has that big of a grip on your life, where do you need to step back and reevaluate your posture with it.

And we build these practices into our lives. And as we fight back by saying no, the more we fight back the more we become people that look like Jesus.

Conclusion

To end this morning, I know for many of us you still have so many reservations and objections against the whole practice but let me just say, I think the biggest reason why we don't like fasting is not because of church history or because of theological issues but because of living in our Western, American culture - where we assume the best life is found in saying Yes to everything. That the good life is found in pursuing comfort and happiness at all costs.

If you don't believe me? Go to Target. I guarantee you will walk out of there with something you did not intend to purchase when you went in.

And that's small and silly, but the evidence for this is everywhere. Amazon made their living off of this... "Why wait for what? Get Prime and it can be there the same day." We even use words like "consume" and "binge" to describe how we watch TV.

We are all about maximizing the moment and immediate gratification. And, the truth is, if this is my perspective on life, then fasting makes no sense whatsoever. It just feels like an odd exercise in masochism.

And when this becomes the story you ground yourself in, of course you have no category in your life for saying No - or if you do it's only in the most extreme cases like addiction. Rather than seeing that discipline and denial ongoingly - even in the tiniest things might actually benefit your soul in significant ways.

And the reality is that this mode of living just isn't working for any of us. Living in a culture of Yes over time seems to only produce in us anxiety, and discontentment, malaise, and apathy. It leads us to feel despair when we don't get what we want and spiritually hollow inside when we do get what we want. It gives us no resources on how to navigate the difficult seasons of life. It gives us no hope for how to understand suffering. And it gives us no spiritual power whatsoever when we operate only through the lens of Yes.

But Jesus shows us a better way. That by saying No to the right things, so that we can Yes to the best things, so that the invitation to fasting is an invitation to something so much greater than our in the moment happiness. God is not about squashing your desires but realigning your desires to be grounded in Him.

And hear me, fasting - like any spiritual practice is not about mastering the right technique - it's about getting into a posture to see God move in and through you. It is an opportunity to deny ourselves, to say become a person who like Paul can say:

Phil 3:8, 10

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...**10**
that I may know him and the power of his resurrection

That's what we want. That's what we're going after. To count everything as loss - be it TV, social media, food, caffeine - for the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus and to unleash the spiritual power of Jesus in our lives and in our city.