



Date: November 16-17, 2019
Speaker: Trish Haq-Community Care Pastor
Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18—Fasting

Because I'm Canadian, and we Canadians love to talk about the weather, I can't resist saying that winter sure hit full force this week, didn't it? Some of you, like my children, were probably ecstatic to see the snow arrive so early this year. For my kids, the excitement was all about playing in the snow, and my lovely daughters, who often feel that it is an impossible task to get out of bed in the morning on a school day, popped awake and got ready like the wind so they could get outside to play in the snow before school. For those of you who love to ski, I have no doubt that you are already dreaming of hitting the slopes, and hoping for a nice long winter season. And some of you love the snow because it's starting to look like Christmas. But for others, and I count myself in this group, the cold temperatures and snowfall this week stirred a longing in our hearts for warmer days. As I was preparing to speak this week, I found myself thinking of summer, and my mind trailed back to a memory that I want to share with you today. It's a memory about watermelons.

There's something about eating watermelon that is quintessentially summer. As a kid, I remember the excitement I would feel when my mom would cut open a fresh watermelon and slice it up into triangles. I remember how refreshing it was on a hot day. And I remember the fun of eating the watermelon outside, it was the only time I was ever allowed to spit! This year, about half way through the summer, my kids pointed out that we really hadn't had any watermelon yet that summer. This was a state of affairs that needed to be remedied. So the next time I went grocery shopping, I picked one up. But when I cut it open, instead of the refreshing, juicy, pieces of watermelon that we were looking forward to, what we got instead was a mess of mushy, inedible fruit that needed to be thrown out. It looked good on the outside, but on the inside, it was rotten.

You might have noticed in the bulletin that the sermon topic for today is fasting. And because of that, right about now you might find yourself wondering why I'm talking about watermelons. The *passage* that we're going to sink our teeth into today is about fasting. But it also isn't about fasting, because it's about so much more. And in just a moment you'll see how our rotten summer watermelon connects.

This fall, we've been in a sermon series called "On the Way", looking at the teaching of Jesus. Our scripture passage today comes from one of Jesus' most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. Over the course of our fall series, many of our sermons have centred around the teaching that is found in this sermon, teaching about worry, lust, and anger to name a few. Today marks the end of this series, and I just love that we are finishing here,

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. ¹⁷ But when you fast, comb your hair^[a] and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

So, as we begin to look at this passage of scripture, it seems obvious that this is a passage about fasting. Your bible might even have one of those nice subheadings that says "Fasting" and that might lead us to think that these 3 verses of scripture can stand alone to tell us what Jesus had to say about fasting. What's interesting is that these subheadings aren't part of the original text. They're extra. They've

been added by the translators, or sometimes even by the publisher, to break up the text and help readers find what they are looking for. Sometimes this really is helpful to us, but other times, it can cause us to miss the opportunity to see the greater whole of a passage. This particular teaching on fasting is really meant to be part of a greater whole, the Sermon on the Mount, which starts in Chapter 5 when Jesus sits down on the mountainside to teach, and ends at the end of Chapter 7, where it says:

Matthew 7:28-29

“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law”

I have a bible that prints all of the words that Jesus spoke in Red, and from the beginning to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, it's nothing but red. It's a complete sermon, given in one sitting, meant to be heard from start to finish, and each teaching that is sectioned off was not meant to be heard in isolation. Taken out of context, we might risk missing the heart of what Jesus is saying. He was such a compelling preacher that people gathered by the thousands to hear him speak. So you can be sure that every word that is found in this sermon is purposeful and intricately connected.

If we zoom out just a bit, we can see that this part of the sermon is talking about 3 spiritual disciplines that were common in Jesus' time: giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. In all 3 cases, the underlying point that Jesus is making is the same. See if you can pick it out:

Matthew 6:1-4

“Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. ² When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. ³ But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. ⁴ Give your gifts in private, and your

Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

And here's what Jesus has to say about prayer:

Matthew 6:5-6

⁵ “When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. ⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

The message is clear:

You can do all sorts of religious things that look great from the outside; but if the motivation of your heart isn't right, your actions don't hold weight with God.

He doesn't just care about the things that we do, He cares about why we do them. He cares about our hearts. Because it is possible for everything to look soooo good on the outside, when all the while, the inside is rotting away. Others might not be able to see it, but God can see it. How many of us are sometimes like that rotten watermelon I cut into this past summer? Appearing perfect on the outside, when what's happening on the inside isn't so great. We're going through the motions, maybe doing all the right things, but for all the wrong reasons. That's the big idea that Jesus was teaching to the crowd. And that's why I've said that this is a passage about fasting AND this isn't a passage about fasting. Of course, I don't think we can really dig into these verses without talking about fasting, there's a reason Jesus connected fasting to this particular lesson. So we are going to narrow our focus in on fasting today, but this big idea, that we shouldn't do things for show; that the motivation of our heart matters to God, is the lens we need to look through as we seek to understand what Jesus is saying. So, with that in mind, let's talk about fasting.

First off, it's interesting to consider how Jesus has grouped fasting together with these two other spiritual disciplines; giving, and praying. And it's interesting that in each example, Jesus says “when you pray....when you give....when you fast”. He

doesn't say if you fast. He also doesn't say, you must fast. He simply assumes that giving, and praying, and fasting are part of how we will live out our faith in relationship with God. I think most of us would agree that giving to those in need and spending time in prayer are an integral part of following Jesus. Maybe we don't always do the best job of keeping these a part of our regular rhythms of life, but we wouldn't disagree that they're an important part of how we should live out our faith. But when we get to the idea of fasting, it seems a little more...optional maybe? At the very least, many of us find ourselves in unfamiliar territory.

What comes to mind for you when you hear the word fast? As Jesus taught this particular crowd about fasting, I think they had an advantage over us because it was not a new concept for them at all. Fasting was a common practice for them, it was part of the fabric of their lives, and so it makes sense that Jesus said "when you fast", because they were already doing it. But for us, it is not so familiar.

When I think about fasting, what comes to mind is a story from my childhood. Growing up, part of my family's tradition was to observe Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter. During that time, we would all choose something to give up. But my mom, noticing that the individual choices my brothers and I were making about what to give up for Lent were somewhat lacking in depth and commitment, decided that we would give one thing up as a family instead. One year it was television. Another year, we gave up pop. One fateful February, mom decided that we were all going to give up sugar for Lent. This was especially painful for me because I have a giant sweet tooth.

It didn't take long for thought to pop into my head – just a simple awareness that on the top shelf of one of the cupboards in the kitchen, was a bottle of Flintstone Vitamins. If you've ever had Flintstone Vitamins, you know that they are basically like eating candy. They are loaded with sugar, so we weren't having them during Lent, but once I realize they were there...once I had the thought in my mind, the damage was done. I knew that I shouldn't, but my buy-in to this idea of no sugar for Lent was relatively low, my desire to taste something sweet was high, and my little self could not resist. Besides, I thought, what was the harm? After all, vitamins are good for you, right? Maybe I was

being EXTRA healthy by eating the vitamins. And who would notice if I just had a few? So I did. Sometimes one or two, other times more. I remember one day carefully picking out one of each colour. Every day until the bottle was almost empty. Thinking myself very smart, I left a few vitamins in the bottom of the bottle, believing this would keep my mom from realizing what I had done. Rookie mistake. Lent ended, and it was time to return to our normal routines, including our daily vitamin, and the inevitable moment arrived: my mom noticed that someone had gotten into the Flintstone Vitamins. It wasn't long before the truth came out. An emergency visit to our family doctor quickly followed. He gravely explained how serious the situation was...turns out that an overdose of vitamins is actually a thing, and it can cause serious or life-threatening side effects. Things like irregular heart rhythms, and liver damage. Thankfully, I was ok, partially because I had not eaten all the vitamins in one sitting, and partially because the vitamins my mom had purchased did not have iron in them. To this day I don't quite know if this is true, or if they were just trying to scare me into not doing something like that again, but apparently, had the vitamins had iron in them, I might not be here today to tell the tale of how I almost overdosed on Flintstone Vitamins at the tender age of 8.

So that is my early history with fasting, and I think there were a few fatal flaws to this early fasting experience. The first is that I didn't choose it, so I wasn't very committed. I didn't own the decision, and so I wasn't highly invested in seeing it through. The second flaw was that I lacked an understanding of why we were giving something up. I vaguely knew that it was for Lent, and that we were somehow preparing our hearts for Easter. But I didn't really get it. I didn't understand that I should leverage those moments of temptation and longing for sugar to turn my attention and longing towards God. In the end, I would say that it wasn't the greatest of experiences for me but it sure revealed my heart.

This fast was intended to be spiritual, and although I didn't experience it that way, it has laid the groundwork for me to ponder what a fast should be like. It's given me a reference point. But I think for many people, their reference point when it comes to fasting doesn't have to do with spirituality and faith at all. Fasting is actually quite trendy these days, but

not for the purpose of spiritual growth. In fact, I think many people are more interested in shrinking than growing.

If you type the word fasting into a google search, one of the first search suggestions that comes up is “fasting diet”. There are all sorts of weight loss plans out there that involve fasting, one of the most popular one is intermittent fasting, and there are all sorts of claims about the health benefits of this kind of fasting, everything from weight loss to improved heart health to increased brain function, and even delayed aging. It’s hard to tell if these claims hold any merit. More studies will need to be done before we’ll know the answer to that. But for now, what we know for sure is that people’s interest in fasting is mostly centred around physical health, and no one’s talking much about the spiritual benefits of fasting. I don’t just mean in the secular world. Even here at North Park, I really don’t have a sense of how many of us have made fasting a regular part of our spiritual rhythms. Of course it could be that we are all just so good at fasting in secret like Jesus told us to, that we never talk about it. But I do wonder...have we given enough weight to the importance of fasting? Do we understand the value of it? Jesus did.

Before he began his public ministry, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted, and there he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. And that is not the only example of fasting that can be found in scripture. In the Old Testament, we have accounts of Moses, King David, Elijah the prophet, and Queen Esther engaging in fasts. There are also examples of entire groups of people, and even cities, being called to fast. A great example of this is when the entire city of Ninevah fasted in response to the preaching of Jonah, and there are examples of fasting in the New Testament too. The Apostle Paul fasted after his encounter with Christ on the Road to Damascus, and in Acts we find examples of disciples in the early church praying and fasting (Acts 13:1-3, Acts 14:23).

So, alongside prayer and giving, fasting clearly has a place in the lives of those who have chosen to follow Jesus. All three of these spiritual disciplines are meant to help us centre our lives around God. And maybe that sounds simple enough, but I think it is far from easy. It’s not easy, but it’s so worthwhile. And it’s so needed. I think that we live

in a society where fasting is actually desperately needed. It’s an antidote to the constant messages coming at us that tell us that we should have whatever we want, whenever we want it. We are being disciplined in consumerism by our society – with ads training our minds to want what we don’t have, and to believe that these wants are needs that hold the key to our happiness. There are Amazon Prime billboards up in the US that literally say: From zero to happy in one hour. What a terribly misleading and empty promise. Zero to happy until...the buyer’s remorse sets in. Or until the thrill of the purchase wears off. Or until the credit card statement arrives. Or until you see something else you want more. Or until that problem or feeling that you were trying to avoid by distracting yourself with shopping, comes back. This pattern of wanting and getting things doesn’t lead to lasting joy or contentment or peace. So why have we bought into this idea that we should satisfy every appetite? Have you ever wondered what this way of living is doing to our souls? Interestingly, fasting offers the opportunity to practice a different way of being. An opposite way of being, actually. Setting aside our wants rather than indulging them.

”Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them” (Richard Foster, in his book “A Celebration of Disciplines”)

This week, as I reflected on how our desires and craving and appetites can enslave us, another story came to mind. It’s a story about chocolate from when our kids were first born.

When you have a baby, they always tell you to sleep when the baby sleeps. That advice is all well and good when you only have one child to care for. But when number two arrives on the scene, it’s a whole new game.

Our first born slept through the night when she was 2 months old. We thought this meant we were the awesomest parents in the world. Then came baby number 2, who didn’t sleep through the night until she was almost 18 months old. Same parents. Same strategies. Different kid. We quickly realized we didn’t deserve as much credit as we originally thought. Unfortunately for me, when Kayla came on the scene, and I was so sleep deprived, this whole

“sleep when the baby sleeps” advice was no help to me because I had an energetic, extroverted little toddler at my heels. One of the deepest longings of my heart in this season of life was for a nap. Just a nap. This could only happen if both the kids settled for their afternoon nap at the same time. It was possible, and for a time, there were glorious days where those two little naps overlapped. It was wonderful. But, it didn’t last. My first born Aaliyah decided she was not so keen anymore on settling for an afternoon nap, or having any kind of quiet time for that matter, because she just wanted to be with me all the time. And thus began a battle of the wills, as I desperately tried to get her to rest during Kayla’s naptime, so I could have a bit of quiet time too. The frustration level was high, and even on the days where I eventually succeeded in getting both the kids to settle, I would come downstairs feeling worn out, frayed, stressed, and defeated. I can hardly believe that I’m admitting this to a massive room full of people, but I began stashing chocolate bars in the freezer. In those moments of exhausted frustration, I’d head into the kitchen, and reach for the chocolate to soothe my battered soul.

It provided temporary relief, a little boost of serotonin and dopamine in my brain, but no lasting change, except to establish an unhealthy pattern...the pattern of reaching for chocolate instead of reaching for God, in moments of difficulty and stress. I’ll admit, it’s a bit embarrassing for me to stand up here in front of you today and share this. In my very human desire to make things look good on the outside, I wish the ending of the story was different. I wish I could have said:

I would come downstairs feeling worn out, frayed, stressed, and defeated, and would sit myself down in my favourite spot, open my bible, and spend some time in prayer, drinking deeply of the living water that I know can only come with a deep and abiding relationship with Christ. And when those first wake up cries drifted down the stairs, I’d get up refreshed and renewed, and would go and be the awesomest mom ever.

That sounds so much better, doesn’t it? But I know my job today is not to present my life to you in a way that looks good on the outside, when all the while, under the surface, things are messy and complicated. And this alternate ending, where I

reach for my bible instead of reaching for chocolate, and then become the perfect mom, is not realistic either.

So I hope you know that I’m not saying that all you need to do is reach for God and everything in your life will be perfect. We’ve all heard variations on this theme—just trust in Jesus and everything will work out exactly how you want it to. Of course, it is a good thing to reach for God. To lean on Him. To learn to rely on Him. As we do this, it can have a powerful impact on our lives. So I don’t want to take away from that truth in any way. But if I ended the sermon right here, if that’s all I left you with today, I don’t think that would be fair. It’s incomplete. It’s too simplistic. The reasons that we struggle and the hardships that we face in this life are complicated. God hasn’t promised us a pain free life. We’re not immune to the challenges of this world, and in fact, sometimes it is the challenges that we face that God will use to shape and refine us. It’s complicated. So the goal that we are reaching for when we reach for God is not a perfect, pain free life. The goal that we are reaching for is an ever deepening connection with our heavenly father that will last into eternity. This pattern that we have of wanting and getting, and distracting ourselves, and reaching for things that won’t satisfy, holds us back from God’s best for our lives.

I think it’s a pattern that most of us, if not all of us, have been stuck in at one time or another. What starts out as something that feels so ordinary, no big deal, what’s the harm?, can become a habit, that at best holds us back from experiencing the fullness of God’s grace and love, and at its worst, can leave us enslaved and even addicted. Addicted to the very things that we looked to for comfort and relief. It all starts with that little lie that our society feeds us so masterfully—that you can and should satisfy every appetite. That because you had a hard day, or are going through a painful time, indulging a little will make it better. You deserve it. Have whatever you want. Don’t deny yourself. Just have one more dessert...one more drink...one more Netflix episode...one more bet...one more hour at the office...one more website...Just one more chocolate bar from the freezer. Then you’ll feel better. But it doesn’t last. It only leaves us in a posture of always wanting more. Of never being fully satisfied. Because the heart of the problem hasn’t changed.

We've only succeeded in covering it over for a little while.

I think it's important to say here that I'm not talking about all of this so that you will feel guilty about the appetites that you struggle with. So if you're sitting here today, and shame and guilt are creeping in because of the ways that you sometimes reach for the wrong things, pause those thoughts for a moment. Pause them, and then throw them away, and remember that you are following a God who loves you immensely and who is not in the business of condemnation. He's in the business of redemption. Let me say that again so you can hear it: **God is not in the business of condemnation, He's in the business of redemption.**

When someone tries to condemn you, they want to nail you to the wall. They want you to suffer and pay for what you've done. But Jesus...but Jesus, he walked the road to Calvary and allowed them to nail **him** to the cross, and He paid the price, so that when we, in our humanness, inevitably struggle and fail, all that's left for us to do is to turn to God and receive his mercy and grace.

Romans 8:1

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

So when the Spirit convicts our hearts—revealing some piece of brokenness in our lives that is holding us back from the life God is calling us to lead, it's not meant to make us feel like horrible human beings, it's not meant to make us feel like garbage. It's an invitation. An invitation to allow God to change us. An invitation to stop settling for lesser things. So my hope for you today is not that you would walk out of here feeling the heaviness of guilt and shame hanging over you for the ways you've fallen short. **My hope is that you would walk out of here today feeling inspired and encouraged to simply find a moment this week where you can reach for God when you might have settled for something less.**

Sometimes the idea of completely overhauling an unhealthy pattern in your life can feel overwhelming, and even impossible. We're so stuck in our ways, it's not so easy to *"throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles"* Hebrews 12:1. But if you can do it just

once, you know you can do it again. And again. Reaching for God is a bit like weight lifting. You have to train for it. If you can do it with the small things, you can work your way up from there. Each time you turn towards God instead of covering over your hurts and disappointments and frustrations with something less, you're strengthening those spiritual muscles. So the more you do it, the stronger they become. The best part is that you aren't doing it alone.

I don't know a tonne about weight lifting, but I do know that when weight lifters bench press, they always have a spotter. Someone who stands right with them as they lift, ready to help carry the load when it becomes too much. When we face our temptations head on, God is our spotter, helping us carry the weight when it's too much to handle on our own. As we reach for Him, He strengthens us to do it.

James 4:8

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to You.

If this is something that you really want to commit to in the season ahead, **the best** training program I can recommend to you is regular fasting. Intentionally practicing the spiritual discipline of saying no to your earthly appetites so you can reach for God.

There's one final section of the Sermon on the Mount that we're going to look at today to round out our understanding of fasting but first, I want to say that I have loved studying these verses this week, and it's inspired me to want to make fasting a regular part of my spiritual rhythms of life. In case you are also feeling inspired, I want to make sure you have some practical information and resources available to you. I'm going to post a video this week on our website with some of the info you need to know to give fasting a try. I'll also include this information in the sermon notes that will be posted online and printed off in the lobby next weekend. I've also included an example of a simple fast that you can try on our points to ponder page in the bulletin. So I hope those things will help you to take your next steps with this.

There are just a few things I do want to mention now. These won't apply to everyone but they're so

important to say: The first is that fasting is not a complete or adequate way to deal with addiction. More support is needed. So if you're dealing with a full blown addiction--something that you can't stop, that has harmful consequences, and that's doing damage to your relationships and taking over your life--reaching for God is a vital part of your recovery. But it's also incredibly important to also seek professional help. If this applies to you, our pastoral team would love to help connect you to that support if that is what you need.

It's also important to say that fasting from food isn't for everyone. If you are diabetic, pregnant, or have dealt with an eating disorder at one time or another, you should fast from something other than food.

Fasting can take many forms, it doesn't have to be food. The most important thing is that you use this time of fasting to focus your mind and heart on God. Remember that **fasting is about setting aside your wants, not getting them**. So don't use fasting as a way to manipulate God; to attempt to get what you want from Him. He does promise us a rich reward, but it is not an earthly reward. It's an eternal one. To help us understand this more clearly, we're going to look at the Sermon on the Mount one last time. Notice the verses that follow on the heels of Jesus' teaching on fasting. The subheading says "Treasures in Heaven".

Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁹ "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

I love these verses, but have you ever wondered, what exactly are these eternal treasures that Jesus is talking about? Is it like gold and rubies and diamonds that will be waiting for us in heaven? Or maybe there's some kind of heavenly reward program, like getting a bigger mansion, or a backyard pool in your heavenly home. As a kid, those are definitely the kinds of things that I imagined. But as I've reflected this week on these words, a very different perspective has come into view. I think Jesus is saying: don't invest your heart

and soul in things that won't last. Don't seek after wealth. Don't worry about what others think. Don't try to prove yourself. All of these things won't last. Instead, live your life for an audience of One. Seek after God. Invest in *His Kingdom*.

It's the Kingdom of God that is really at the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He teaches us to pray: *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

And what's incredible about the Kingdom of God is that it's not just something that we'll experience some day, when our time on earth comes to a finish. The Kingdom of God exists wherever God reigns. And so, although we won't see the fullness of God's Kingdom realized until we step into eternity, we do get glimpses now. We get a taste of what's to come. As we set our eyes on God and live our lives for Him, the Kingdom of God becomes more and more a reality here and now.

"Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be"

What has your heart these days? What's the focus of your longings and desires? Is it Jesus? Or have you been settling for lesser things? You can see how these verses were not meant to be read in isolation. They belong together, connected to the greater whole. Incredible teaching, from an incredible teacher, that I think can be summarized something like this:

Check your motives. Don't pray or give or fast to make yourself look good, so that people can see how spiritual you are and think well of you. So it can all look great on the outside. So you can get what you want. You'll have your reward, and it won't last. Instead, make prayer and giving and fasting part of your worship to God, focusing on Him only, investing in the Kingdom of God, and building your life on what will last into eternity.

I want to leave you with this verse,

Philippians 3:8

Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.

Knowing Jesus. Would that be the eternal treasure that we seek after with all our hearts!

Benediction:

Well, we've been "On The Way" this fall, and I guess today we have arrived! We've come to the end of our fall series. At the very start of it, in September, Paul spoke about the grand finale of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus talks about the wise and foolish builders, and as we finish up today, I want to come full circle back to that passage:

Jesus says:

²⁴ "Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵ Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶ But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. ²⁷ When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash."

As Paul shared back in September, we need to build our lives on the firm foundation of Christ and the wisdom of his teachings, so that when the storms of life come, we don't easily topple over. But there is another layer to this teaching. When Jesus says that we should build our houses on solid rock, He is inviting us to build our lives on what will last into eternity. Everything we reach for here on earth will pass away. Everything we hunger for, except for God. So don't anchor into the sand. Don't anchor into things that won't last. Don't set your hope on whatever picture you have of that perfect life that you're longing for, where every appetite is satisfied. Anchor into Christ. That is where our treasure lies.

Colossians 2:7

Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

Amen!

Points to Ponder

On The Way ~ Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever tried to fast? Was the purpose related to your health or to your spiritual walk? What kind of fast was it? What was the experience like?
2. Is there something that you feel would be very difficult for you to give up for a period of time? (food, Netflix, sugar, coffee, social media, your cell phone...). Is there something in your life that has an unhealthy grip on your time, resources, or attention? Could you give it up for a day? For a week?
3. Jesus teaches in Matthew 6 that we need to be careful not to engage in spiritual practices like prayer, giving to others, and fasting to make things look good on the outside. Have you ever encountered this kind of false religion? What can you do to ensure that your heart motivation remains focused on God?
4. Can you relate to the idea that we often seek comfort, relief, or distraction in worldly things when we should be reaching for God? How has this played out in your own life? What change can you make to start building your capacity to turn to God for help, comfort, and encouragement?
5. As you think back over our fall series, *On The Way*, is there something that stands out in your mind? A particular message, scripture passage, or point that has stayed with you or impacted you in some way? (Salt & Light, Worry, Zacchaeus, Jesus Heals a Paralyzed Man, Anger, The Women who Touches Jesus' Cloak, Lust, The Actions of Jesus, Fasting)

Challenge - Commit to trying a fast. Choose something to give up, or try a simple 24 hours fast. Don't tell anyone you are fasting, unless it is necessary. If you are fasting completely from all food for the first time, you can try a 24 hour partial fast (see below). As you go through this time of fasting, use moments where you are tempted to break your fast to turn to God in prayer, and set aside some extra time for prayer, scripture reading, and listening for God.

24 Hour Partial Fast - Eat a simple lunch on day 1, and break your fast with a light meal of fruit and veggies on day 2. This means you will skip 2 meals, dinner, and breakfast). Drink plenty of water. For this type of fast, you can also drink 130g of fruit juice during this time. Consider repeating this fast weekly for a few months. The experience will deepen as you practice this regular rhythm of fasting. (from *A Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster).

Fasting 101

This past weekend our sermon at North Park was about fasting: intentionally denying our earthly appetites in order to reach for God. For many of us, fasting is unfamiliar, and so I promised you I'd provide some additional information to take your next steps and give fasting a try. So here it is, fasting 101!

First off, fasting traditionally involves going for a period of time without eating, or giving up a specific type of food for a time, like sugar or meat, but in a broad sense, it is possible to fast from other things too, things like tv, alcohol, video games, pretty much anything that you would find sufficiently difficult to do without, or something you feel has an unhealthy grip on you.

The reason fasting from food is most common is because our hunger for food is our most fundamental appetite. It's what sustains us physically, literally keeping us alive. So when we fast from food, it helps us to remember that our lives, the very breath that we breathe, is from God, and ultimately, it is God who sustains us. We remember this when we pray, *Give us this day our daily bread*.

If you're going to fast from food, there are few important things for you to keep in mind:

Number 1: You need to know your limits.

Technically, humans can survive without food for up to 40 days, and without water for up to 3 days. We know that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights; and it was a supernatural fast because the bible says he didn't drink water during this time. So although we are all about seeing people become more like Jesus, if you've never fasted before, you might want to consider scaling it down a bit. Try a very simple fast to start. You need to learn to walk before you can run!

See the example on our Points to Ponder page of a simple fast that you can start with: it's from *A Celebration of Disciplines* by Richard Foster. He's got a great chapter on Fasting that I highly recommend. I'll just quickly mention that if you want to learn even more about fasting, one of our foundational courses at North Park is called *Habits of Grace*, and it includes teaching about the spiritual discipline of fasting so watch for our next offering of this in the New Year.

The fast that was in the bulletin is a 24 hour fast. You fast from all food, skipping dinner on day one, and breakfast on day two, so you start after having a simple lunch on day one, and you break the fast with a simple lunch on day two. During the fast, you do drink water, and you also drink a bit of fruit juice. I know for some of you, that might sound like it would be cheating, but last week I spoke with a friend who is a registered dietician, and she made a similar suggestion, noting that a small bit of fruit juice, about 130g a day, won't satisfy your hunger, but is beneficial to keep you healthy as you engage in fasting, and it actually also reduces the risk that you'll binge eat at the end of your fast.

Number 2: fasting from food is not for everyone!

I covered this on the weekend but it's worth repeating: If you are diabetic, if you are pregnant, or if you have struggled at one time or another with an eating disorder, you should fast from something other than food. If you've struggled with disordered eating, your habits around food have been the thing that you turn to, to cover over your pain and struggles, so adding more rules and restrictions to your food intake, and not eating, might not help you draw nearer to God, but might instead draw you back into unhealthy patterns. So in all of these cases, fasting should take a different form, give up something other than food.

Whether you are planning to fast from food, or are planning to give up something else, like TV, or alcohol, or social media, whatever it is, remember that first and foremost, **the point of fasting is to focus your mind and heart on God.** During your time of fasting, you can leverage moments where you experience a sense of hunger or craving, turning them into moments of prayer. Let it be a prompt to turn your mind and heart back to God. A moment to pray something like this: *God, as much as I'm hungering and thirsting for this thing that I'm fasting from, my hunger and thirst for YOU is greater.*

When you're fasting, **set aside some intentional time for scripture reading, prayer, and solitude.** If you're fasting from food, using the time you would have had dinner to do this is a great idea. If you're fasting from TV, setting aside some time when you would have sat down to watch something works well. Use this time to pray and especially to listen for what God might be wanting to impress on your heart. Times of fasting are times when you may be more attuned to the voice of God in your life. Notice how he speaks through scripture, through your circumstances, through nature, through the words of others around you, in the quiet of your heart.

You may also notice that God will use this time to show you what things inside you He wants to change and flush out. In Psalm 69:10, David writes: "I humbled my soul with fasting". It's normal for things to come to the surface during a time of fasting – pride, anger, bitterness, jealousy, unforgiveness, and fear. Be attentive, and humbly allow God to work within you.

Finally, and this brings us back to the heart of what Jesus said about fasting in his Sermon on the Mount, remember that when you fast, it is so easy to get off track. To engage in this spiritual practice for the wrong reasons. Ulterior motives can sneak their way in so easily, and steal away the eternal rewards that fasting has to offer. So be careful not to fast for the wrong reasons. Keep in mind that fasting is about setting aside your wants, not getting them. So it's especially important to remember that fasting isn't meant to be a way to manipulate God into giving you what you want. Sometimes people choose to fast during a particular challenge or difficulty, and that's ok to do, but the motivation

should be to seek God in the midst of it, not to seek a specific outcome.

So as you engage in a time of fasting, check your heart. Make sure your fasting is centred on God, simply seeking him. Make sure He is the only audience you care about. And remember, fasting is an opportunity to practice the countercultural discipline of denying your earthly appetites, in order to focus on deepening and strengthening your relationship with God.

I hope this has given you some helpful ideas as you consider making fasting a part of your spiritual rhythms!