



gracefellowship

Fasting is Feasting
January 3, 2021

Happy New Year! We made it out of 2020! Our world is still in rough shape, but we have reason to be cautiously optimistic heading into a new year. One of the reasons I am optimistic is because I can look back at this past year and see areas where God has been at work in my life to reveal areas that I need to let Him have control of and submit to His Lordship in my life. For disciples of Jesus it is imperative that we constantly let the Holy Spirit take evaluation of our lives and show us where we still need to be conformed to the image of Jesus. That's why I want to talk about a spiritual discipline today that has power to help us live in surrender to Jesus that many, if not most, American Christians completely neglect.

Before Christmas we were going through a study of the book of Daniel. We are going to pick that up next week and finish the final few chapters. But one of the last things we have seen in Daniel's life was his practice to fast and pray at various times for the purpose of spiritual obedience, growth and understanding.

So, today I want to look at some things the Bible teaches about fasting. I can hear you all cheering as you watch from home...probably with a plate of pancakes or a bowl of cereal in front of you! I read this week if you want to lose and audience or split up a life group talk about and encourage fasting! So, I chose the weekend after Christmas and New Years, when most of us probably overindulged in the food-eating category, to share with you about the discipline of fasting!

I'm not addressing this discipline today to make you feel guilty about all the pie and cookies you ate over the holidays! We are beginning our year looking at this discipline because our church leadership has a desire to put a greater focus on prayer and fasting as individuals and as a body so that we might more fully seek God's direction and blessing for our church.

Typically, I like to begin any message by looking at Scripture before we do anything else. The Word of God is what guides us and it needs to have the place of priority in our worship services. But today I want to set the table for us- if you'll pardon the pun while we are talking about fasting- and discuss briefly some ideas around the discipline of fasting before we get to Scripture.

To start let's define fasting and make sure we are all on the same page. The act of fasting is something that isn't unfamiliar to our culture, but it's not always done in a biblical sense. Some people fast as a dietary means of weight loss.

- Maybe you need to get into a dress for a wedding or special event. Or you hope to look good in your swimsuit at the beach this summer, so you fast to cut some pounds.
- People fast when they have to go to the doctor and have blood work done.
- But those things are not moving the needle of spiritual growth. Here is the definition of fasting I want us to use as a church:

Definition of Fasting:

Fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.

Two things I want you to see here:

1. Fasting is voluntary. No one is forcing you to do it. In Scripture we see how people would fast at different times and in different ways, but it was always of their own accord or as part of a community experience where they were invited to participate with others for a common reason.
2. Fasting is for spiritual purposes. Here's where a lot of people fail to understand that value of fasting. A person might choose to give up food for a day or a period of time and when they feel hungry they will pray. But many people fail to have a specific purpose in mind as to what they are praying for or seeking God's face about as they fast. The best way to go about a fast is to have a specific purpose for your fasting and praying. In Daniel 9 that I referenced earlier we saw Daniel fast and pray seeking God's wisdom to understand a vision he had been shown.

The greatest spiritual purpose we can have in fasting is seeking to know God and rely on His provision for us. We will grow in our discipline to fast and pray when we have a deeper longing for the presence and provision of God in our lives!

Yes, we give up food, but we gain something far greater! We gain intimacy with God. We learn to enjoy Him above everything else! Dave Clayton wrote a book on prayer, fasting and revival called *Revival Starts Here*. In his book he said this:

“Fasting is a physical declaration regarding a spiritual longing. Fasting is about spiritual feasting!” – Dave Clayton

Here's the perspective I think we need to take on if we are going to truly dedicate ourselves to the discipline of fasting: Fasting IS Feasting! We fast from food to feast on the goodness and glory of God! Fasting as a discipline reminds us that God alone meets our needs. That having more of Him is what we ultimately want and need in our lives. We deprive our physical body to nourish our soul.

The puritans called fasting a “soul fattening” exercise!

The question then becomes: Do we want more of God in our lives? Are we hungry for Him? Is there a longing for spiritual growth and experiencing the blessings and favor of God that would lead us to voluntarily give up food for a set period of time in order to get on our knees before God and feast on His goodness and glory?

Now, I want us to jump to Scripture today and make sure we ground all of this in God’s Word. Turn to Matthew 6; this is part of Jesus’ most famous sermon. If you’re taking notes this morning, I want you to see this truth as we look at this passage together:

Fasting is an expectation of Christian discipleship.

Wait a minute, I thought fasting was voluntary...

It is voluntary- you can fast whenever you want and for whatever length of time you want, but we are about to see that Jesus assumed and expected that His followers would spend time fasting and praying.

:: Matthew 6:1-18

1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

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. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Let’s stop here for just a second. Did you notice that twice in that section Jesus said, “when you give”? Jesus expected that part of the way we would practice our faith as His disciples would be by giving to those less fortunate than us or those who had specific needs in their lives we could help meet. Let’s keep reading...

5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Let's stop again. Did you see it? Three times Jesus said, "when you pray..." It was expected that those who follow Jesus would spend time in prayer. Jesus even goes on to teach us how to pray so that we have a good foundation for prayer in our personal lives. Look at verse 9.

**9 "This, then, is how you should pray: " "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'
14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

Now we get to verse 16 and Jesus talks with us about fasting. See if you notice any similarities here in these verses to what we've already seen.

**16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,
18 so that it will not be obvious to others 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.**

Two times in this section Jesus says, "when you fast..." As Jesus directs us in how to follow Him and stay spiritually healthy he says there is an expectation that fasting will be one of the pillars of our spiritual growth. It's interesting, when Jesus was on earth he was actually challenged about his teaching on fasting because the disciples were not fasting like other religious groups.

:: Mark 2:18-20

**18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"
19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.
20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.**

Jesus answer to why his disciples weren't fasting was that he compared His presence with them like being at a wedding- you don't fast at a wedding! You party...and you eat! But Jesus' expectation didn't change. He told the men who asked this question that a time was coming when He would no longer be with His disciples and on that day they would fast. That day is now! We are the disciples of Jesus and while we wait for Jesus to return and reignite the wedding feast, we are expected to fast and pray, seeking the will of God for our lives.

Now, I have to be honest with you, there were a lot of years that went by that in my Bible I had underlined the words "when you give" and "when you pray," but I did not give attention to the command "when you fast..." In fact, this is still a discipline I struggle with because I don't always see immediate benefit from it. But disciplines take time and results aren't always immediate.

Illustration: The discipline of fasting is like going to the gym and working out. You don't see immediate results when you go to the gym- that's why gyms are full the first 2 weeks of the new year and then people quit. They are sore and they don't see results!

Do you know what most health trainers will tell you? It takes 4 weeks for you to see results; 8 weeks for people close to you to see results; and 12 weeks for acquaintances to see results of you going to the gym. So if you will commit to the discipline of fasting as a means to seek God, stay with it even if you don't feel an immediate growth in your spiritual life. Learning to feast on the goodness and glory of God may take some time.

This year we are going to encourage growth in the discipline of fasting. I'll be teaching on it periodically during the year and we are going to provide resources for you to be able to better engage in this discipline. We believe that seeking God in a way the Bible instructs will result in individuals experiencing the blessing of God and our church as a whole experiencing His blessings.

I don't know if you noticed it or not when we were reading in Matthew 6, but Jesus told his followers that we are not to make a big show out of the discipline because our Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us. Aren't you more likely to do something if there is a payoff? Jesus doesn't outline the reward for us.

- I think the first reward is a deeper fellowship with God where we experience His presence and power in our life.
- Any other reward is unspecified, but it's promised!

Let me close by answering a final question: What if, for medical reasons, someone can't fast from food? Food is the most common form of fasting in the Bible, but fasting isn't limited to food. I have had times where I have fasted from social media, fasted from caffeine (and y'all know how much I love my Dr. Pepper!), fasted from sweets, etc... I encourage you to find something that either

seems essential to you or tends to be something that distracts you from putting God first and do away with that thing for a period of time with the purpose of seeking greater intimacy with God. When you crave that thing or would normally spend time doing the activity you fast from, be intentional to pray and seek God.

That's the name of the game- intimacy with God! My prayer is that in the year ahead we will know the presence and power of God like at no other time in our lives. Let's pursue Him together!

- Pray