

Good morning Cornerstone! It is good to be with you this fine New years Eve.

CONNECTION CARD

My name is Joe and I am the Pastor here at Cornerstone. If this is your first time with us this morning either in person or online we want to invite you to fill out our connection card. That lets us be able to connect with you and get to know you a little bit more. If this is home for you, you can use our app and check in let us know you're here. There you can also leave us a prayer request so that we know how we can be praying for you throughout the week.

[TITLE] We are starting our new sermon series called Spiritual Habits. We are starting off the new year talking about the things that we do as Christians to connect with God. Starting this year off by either starting new habits or breathing new life into these habits for us to continue in this year. Over the next 4 weeks we are going to be talking about Fasting, Reading our Bible, Prayer, and Christ centered community.

Today our scripture is going to be found in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. If you have your bibles and would like to follow along with us there, we will give you some time to turn there with us. If you do not have a paper bible and would like one, we have some available for you in the back. You can also follow along with us today on the app with the scripture and our sermon notes available to you there.

But before we dive in the teaching today, lets read a part of our passage this morning together which comes from the book of 1 Corinthians 9:26-27. So let us stand out of reverence for God's word as we boldly proclaim this truth that comes from this passage.

[1] SCRIPTURE 1 Corinthians 9:26-27

"So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

INTRO

[2] Today we are talking about the spiritual discipline of Fasting. At its core when we talk about spiritual disciplines, these are not practices that we do in order for us to become holier through suffering. Although that does happen. It is not the case here.

The motivation for doing these things is all about connection. When we talk about Fasting, Prayer, reading our bible, and community we are not intentionally doing something that is inconvenient or purposefully causing suffering in our life to receive blessing.

[3] This is not like the prophets of baal, that were in a demonstration of power with Elijah. In case you're not familiar with the story. These prophets were crying out to baal, a pagan diety, for him to consume this sacrifice to prove that he is god. They dance and sang yet they saw nothing. Elijah was waiting his turn and actually began to mock them saying well maybe he is asleep; you should wake him up. Or maybe he is in the bathroom, and he cannot hear you. Yes, that is in the bible (1 Kings 18:27).

Thinking that they needed to do more to get his attention these prophets began to cut themselves with swords until blood gushed out of them. When there time was up and they had no more blood left to

shed they still had no response. Elijah of course soaks his offering with water to make it even more miraculous, he prays and then God consumes the sacrifice, the water and even the alter that it was on with fire from heaven.

Fasting is not one of those kinds of things. Ultimately these are practices that we put in our everyday lives in order to connect with God. Not through suffering but through commitment and discipline.

Now some of you might be thinking, "Joe, you say that, but I don't think you realize how much I like food." That may be true and believe me I understand that. My affection for food is something I wear as a badge of honor both metaphorically and physically with this spare tire, I'm lugging around.

I intentionally wanted to start off this series with fasting for three reasons. The first is, well starting tomorrow we as a church are fasting together. The Second is it is often the one that is the least talked about and third this spiritual habit one is often the hardest.

It is hard because we are actively attempting to deny our body something we require, we enjoy, or we are distracted by.

At a best-case scenario, meaning peak physical condition and only having access to water, the human body can go about 2 to 3 months without food¹. We are going to look at several examples today where fasting is done in the bible and they are often a denial of food. This is a spiritual habit that removes something for a period of time, and if that period is too long, you will die. I don't say that for shock and awe but because our legal team encouraged me to do so in case...

I'm just kidding we don't have a legal team...yet. This practice has a physical effect on the body. They say that the first 4 days are always the hardest when you completely abstain from food entirely. You have things that are naturally a part of your body for the sake of your survival. Your body is wired to eat.

[4] Your body just functioning in a day requires energy to continue to function. With your brain firing to control every breath, digestive processes, producing body heat, etc. Your body gain this energy from food and fat storages. At a absolute bare minimum, on average your body needs 1,200 calories to function. When you fall below that during the day your body has a process to help you survive.

Your stomach will produce a hormone called 'ghrelin' in order to stimulate your appetite². It's your stomach telling your brain 'its time to eat'. The rumbling that you get in your stomach is gas being moved through your digestive tract when it is completely empty, again another sign that you are hungry.

Now this is not sermon turned dietary plan or anatomy class. We have to keep in mind that the goal of overriding, ignoring or rebelling against these natural processes is for the purpose of connection not the intentionally engage in physical suffering.

[5] Fasting is about starving our flesh in order to further feed our spirit. We can become so bombarded by daily life and its pressures that we forget we are first and foremost people of God's kingdom. Fasting helps us focus our attention on God and away from the distractions around us.

¹ <https://www.healthline.com/health/food-nutrition/how-long-can-you-live-without-food#why-it-varies>

² <https://www.nyneurologists.com/blog/youre-hungry-says-who-your-stomach-or-your-brain#:~:text=Hormones%20control%20pretty%20much%20everything,it%20is%20time%20to%20eat.>

The main passage of our teaching today in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul is talking about discipline of our bodies in order to make us more effective for the gospel. Paul uses the example of an athlete disciplining his body in order to make it more effective in completion. We as Christians will do the same in order to make our flesh obedient to God's will and less consumed by its desire which is sin.

[6] Tony Evans explains it like this, "The things in your house work because of electricity. Electricity is an invisible power that gives you visible privileges. It turns the lights on, turns the TV on, turns the toaster on, and turns the oven on; all that stuff is working in your house because you've got one invisible power shooting through there called electricity. But none of those things work even though they have access to electricity until you flip on a switch. You've got to make a connection before the stuff that's there works."³

God is the invisible force that works in and through us in our world today. We as the body of Christ are in this world for the purpose of Building his kingdom and spreading his message. Often times our flesh or our sinful nature will distract us from it. Romans 6 says that our flesh will crave the things that are against God even when our hearts and our minds desire the things of God.

We engage in fasting for the closer connection to the source of the power of God to work in us and through us. Some of you maybe thinking, 'can we grow closer to God in ways that do not require me to remove things from my life, especially things like food which my body requires?' The answer is absolutely.

We can grow closer to God through prayer, through reading his word, through the Christ centered community, and even through giving like we talked about earlier. However, the things that we often hesitate or refuse to give up I could probably make a case are often the things that distract us most from growing closer to God.

[7] A.W. Tozer says, "We have as much God as we actually want."

I think that speaks volumes when it comes to our relationship with God. We do not need to engage in suffering to find more of God. He is not a deity that needs to be appeased or paid off so that he will reveal more of himself to us. If we look throughout scripture God is the electricity coursing through our world. It is power and relationship that is always, and will always be there. We however do not access that deeper relationship with God because we refuse to tap into it, or seek him out.

We often don't want to remove the distractions or deny ourselves something to engage in that deeper connection because we like the distractions too much. Its saying God I want you in my life but this part yeah that part is just for me, I don't want you to change this. I have just as much of you that I want right now, I don't need anymore. Or we want the reward of deeper connection without the communication and devotion needed to get there.

Fasting is that removal of something we need or want in order to fulfill the deeper spiritual need. Even though many of the examples that we are going to be talking about today are a fast from food for a certain period of time, it is not always the case.

³ Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009], ebook location 6617

[8] David Mathis says, “If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex ‘for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer’ (1 Corinthians 7:5)”⁴

There is also things like a Daniel fast. Which is abstaining from meat and sweets, eating only fruits vegetables and seeds⁵. Some say that this is a diet and not a fast, as long as the focus is removal of the physical in order to focus on the spiritual.

BODY

Through our examples that we are going to look at in fasting, it is done for one of three reasons, **Preparation, Focus, or Commitment.**

[9] Preparation

We engage in fasting to prepare for a season of life, hardship or major decision. This lets us be more sensitive to what the Lord is doing, so that in the things that are coming up ahead we can acts in a way that is in accordance to God’s will to the best of our abilities.

A great example of this is when Esther was preparing to go before the king on behalf of the Jewish people.

One distinguishing factor of the book of Esther, when compared to all other books of the bible is that it is the only book that does not mention God by name. Now this does not mean that God is absent or silent during this time. The major theme of the book is about how Go works behind the scenes through the actions of his people. We can see it through random coincidences and ironic reversals.

In this story Esther, she is a Jewish woman who is set to become the new queen of Persia. Haman was an advisor to the king, convinces the king to issue this decree to destroy all of the Jewish people because he does not like Esther’s Uncle Mordecai who revealed a plot to kill the king and saved his life.

After Esther and Mordecai learn of this decree, they come up with this plan for Esther to reveal her Jewish heritage, something that was previously hidden from the king, in order to try and reverse the decree of the king. Appearing before the king without a formal request would have been punishable by death.

Esther in order to prepare for this bold act, she has her uncle tell all of the Jews living in the area to fast for her for 3 days⁶. This was a way for her to prepare for what was coming. Fasting to prepare for this risky situation, was not only for her to be sensitive to God working, and for her to be in tune with God as she acted on behalf of the people, risking her life, but this was also the people interceding on her behalf to appeal to God to work through Esther to save the people.

⁴ (David Mathis, “Fasting for Beginners,” Desiring God, August 26, 2015, <<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fasting-for-beginners>>

⁵ Daniel 10:3

⁶ Esther 4:16

Her efforts and the efforts of the people were honored and Esther makes her request to the king. She is not punished, the people are spared and Haman is killed for his conspiracy to kill the Jewish people.

This fast was done to prepare for what was to come. Her and the people fasted from food and water in order to focus on the will of God. It was a demonstration that even though people were performing the action, the goal of the salvation of the people was only going to come in the act and power of God working through them. They fasted to prepare for God to fulfill their spiritual need, by removing the desires of the flesh.

For us learning from this example we engage in fasting in the things that we know are in our future in order to prepare to do what God is asking of us. This could be things like we have a major decision that we have to make that could be potentially life altering so we fast in preparation. This could be a job opportunity, deciding to go back to school, where to go to school or even preparing for marriage.

I know personally before I was going to marry crystal, I fasted the week before we went on the trip where I was going to propose to gain a sensitivity on what God was doing, in both my life and hers. So that I would be able to discern his will before the time came. Preparing to make sure that I only acted according to his will.

Fasting is always beneficial, but we don't always know how to prepare or if we need to prepare before decisions like this come up. That is why in Romans 8 it says the Spirit prays on our behalf because we do not know what to pray, because we do not know what the future holds. If we lived in a constant state of preparation we would never eat, because we technically are always preparing for something.

[10] When we cannot fast to prepare, we fast in the moment to remain **Focused**.

This is exemplified in the story of Jesus when he fasted in the wilderness before the start of his ministry on earth.

After Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in Matthew 4, Mark 1 and Luke 4, it says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. I'm not going to go into details about the temptations because that is a sermon all by itself, but all of the temptations that Jesus faced were ones that appealed to his flesh. For forty days in the wilderness Jesus fasted. Some translations say that Satan came at the end of his fast and other say that Satan was tempting him for the 40 days.

Satan during his temptations was appealing to the flesh of Christ. He marketed sin, because where Jesus was fully God he was also fully man and felt the same draw and desire of the flesh to sin as we do.

[11] Hebrews 4:15-16

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

During the time where Jesus was tempted, his first temptation being tempted with food, by him fasting the desires of his flesh, the need to satisfy his hunger certainly was greater, but the nature of Satan's temptations was for Jesus to place the needs of his body above his needs spiritually. Obviously Satan was unsuccessful. Jesus in this time of fasting did so in order to remain focused on the spiritual need over his physical.

[12] He fasted and remain focused on the fact that the human natures greatest need is through spiritual salvation and not physical fulfillment.

With this focus on the eternal he was able to withstand the schemes of the devil and deny his fleshly desires and remain focused on his relationship with his father just like we are to do today. When we are in the thick of trials in life we do not have time to always prepare for them. Sometimes they feel like they come out of no where. Jesus was still omniscient in his human state, so this temptation of Satan was not a surprise to him, but I believe Jesus was setting the example for us when we feel temptation or tribulations overwhelm us and seem to come out of no where.

This again relates to something that is a natural process that is a part of our DNA to help us survive. We have all heard of the fight, flight or flee response. It is the body's automatic built in system to protect us from danger. When we are faced with a situation where this response is triggered we will often feel this instant surge of adrenaline, a hormone that naturally occurs in the body.

When we hear things like "look out" or we are attacked or body will respond without us thinking about it. We can even have responses that will be beyond our known capabilities. Like if a car is headed in your direction as a pedestrian we will be surprised how fast we will be able to move to get out of the way.

[13] Or in 2019 there was a man in Colorado that was jogging through the mountains and was attacked by a mountain lion. He was able to get the upper hand and strangle the animal and killed it with his bare hands. Or a mom who receives this response when her child is trapped under a car is able to lift a car for them to escape.

[14] Where this natural process is beneficial and it is set to help us survive in a dangerous situations it has its downsides. Because our brain will focus on the danger that they will have to get away from, fight against or will freeze in the face of, our focus narrows on the situation and we loose sight of everything else happening around us.

The man running to get out of the way of a car that is about to hit them might run into oncoming traffic, avoiding the first danger but places themselves in another. The mother lifting the car off of her child does not see that she is crushing another individual on the other side.

[15] The fight, flight or freeze response is acute meaning it is momentary and isolated. When we are faced with enduring stressful situations we have a similar response but over a longer period of time. In the acute our body is fueled by adrenaline. In the enduring our body is fueled with cortisol. Adrenaline wears off fairly quickly but when cortisol comes from the hypothalamus it allows the body to remain in this high alert state.

Short term effects of cortisol in the blood stream increases your blood pressure and heart rate, to bring greater amounts of glucose to the brain in this state of high alert. Long term effects is hypertension or a constant high blood pressure, diabetes, because your body is over producing glucose to meet the needs of the brain and excessive weight gain and muscle weakness.⁷

⁷<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK538239/#:~:text=Common%20signs%20and%20symptoms%20of,is%20dependent%20on%20the%20cause.>

This is not a way to remind you to see your doctor when you are facing trials and tribulations, but a reminder that when we are in stressful situations to not lose sight of the spiritual need among the physical ones. Adrenaline and cortisol have the same effect when it comes to focus. With adrenaline we will have a narrowed focus on the imminent danger, in cortisol we have a focus to find a solution to the source of stress. Both responses though will create a narrowed vision to the point where we lose sight of the world around us.

For parents the work a stressful job, do you ever feel like you missed out on time with your children? Not because you weren't there but because you feel like you were so focused on other things? It's the same with our spiritual lives as well. The enemy will often use hardship stress or trying circumstances to keep us distracted from our spiritual need and our relationship with God.

These circumstances create a narrowed focus on the source of our stress that we can see nothing else. While we are putting out the fires, we put our relationship with God on the back burner, until we are so used to the stress or so used to not engaging in our spiritual relationship to where the habit is gone.

When we face those situation and circumstances we fast in order to maintain that focus. We deny our flesh what it craves, so that in the chaos we maintain the spiritual need is always the highest priority.

This is the example that Christ set in his temptation. When the world or our circumstances are demanding our attention we are able to maintain the focus on God so we are not distracted away from him.

[16] When we fast we do it to prepare and we practice it to focus but we also do it out of **commitment to the gospel**.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 is talking about being effective for the purpose of sharing the gospel. He addresses that he works in order to live in the way that allows him to thrive as well as work as an apostle. He compares this working like an athlete competing in a race.

[17] 1 Corinthians 9:24-25

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

This would have drawn heavily on the image of the Greek Olympics that would have been going on at the time and date back to 776 BC. Corinth was deeply entrenched in the Greek culture and this would have been an illustration that they would not only understand but would have deeply impacted their perspective. The Olympics were an athletic competition much like today that happens every 4 years. Unlike today in ancient Greece it was an athletic competition to honor the Greek god Zeus.

[18] The athletes would compete often times politically to a demonstration of dominance through the champions that represented a city or region within the nation. The athletes would compete for reputation which was only results of their victory and they was no political power won or granted through the games, it was simply a response of the people in the results.

The champions would compete and be rewarded with a crown or wreath made from olive tree branches. This is what Paul is referring to when he says that they compete for a perishable wreath. Paul is pointing

out that these athletes are training so hard and making so much effort in order to receive a reward that will not last and will pass away. Yet they will receive such great prestige and honor in their discipline of training, when they can only potentially receive such a meaningless reward.

We as believers in Christ do not run this race called life without a significant reward. The world pursues a reward that is only in this life. Those that believe in Christ chase after a reward that is eternal and everlasting.

[19] 1 Corinthians 9:26

“So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.”

In the efforts that Paul makes, in everything that Paul is doing it is not without purpose. It is not foolish or insignificant.

[20] 1 Corinthians 9:27

“But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

He like an Olympic athlete, practices discipline over his flesh so that it will not be a hindrance to that imperishable, eternal and everlasting reward. The efforts that he makes allow him to gain control of his body so that it will not distract him or that it might stay out of his way as he works for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul knows that the fleshly desires have the potential and opportunity to cause him to be disqualified from the work he is doing by spreading the message of the gospel. Since he knows this he works to discipline his body to not be that hindrance. Like an athlete that disciplines his body to jump higher and farther, run longer and fight harder, he does the same with it so that he can reach more people, be more convincing in his defense of the gospel and preach as often in times of stress and times of peace.

[21] Paul disciplines his body to remain committed to the work that he is doing for the sake of the gospel and the fulfillment of God’s work in his life.

APPLICATION

This is the same thing that we do through fasting. We discipline our bodies, our lifestyles or our habits so that they create in us not just effectiveness but connection to the source of our salvation. We beat our breast to remain committed knowing that it is not our flesh or our circumstances that takes priority but our spiritual walk with Christ.

We do not do this for our own sake. It is not for the honor or to receive any glory for our efforts. That would mean that we are performing these things for the immediate reward from people in this life. Which is why Jesus said...

[22] Matthew 6:16-18

“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.”

We fast and we make the effort to make our bodies our slaves for the imperishable, eternal and everlasting reward, because we are committed to God.

But remember we already have as much of God that we actually want. The distractions we allow limit the depth of our spiritual relationship because we do not prepare spiritually for the things ahead. We do not see Jesus as the only one that is capable of achieving the good that is required.

[23] If Esther viewed this situation for the immediate reward the perishable crown she would have went before the king on her own fruition confident in her own abilities to be honored and praised by the people as their savior.

If Jesus did not set the example for how to remain focus in the midst of trials, we would face chaos in circumstances distracted by the immediate to achieve peace. We would forget, forgo or dismiss any and all interactions with God and our spiritual need would starve while we fight to provide for ourselves.

If Paul saw the glory and honor of the athletes he would work all these things and say look at me! Look at all the things that I have been able to accomplish through my successful career as a tent maker. Or look at my ability to captivate a crowd. I did all of this it was me, give me praise for my efforts.

That is not so. That is not the example that has been set before us. Esther knew what needed to be done, but also knew that she could not go in this alone and needed God to go before her and prepare the way. Because God is the only one capable of saving her life, the life of the people and eradicate evil from around her.

Jesus knew that when we face chaos when we are distracted by the temptations that come from the enemy and from our flesh that we cannot loose sight of the God we serve. Even when we are hungry and the world is screaming with the answer to all our problems, God is the source of life. When we focus on our need in him we will always be cared for. When we are not distracted by the world we follow after the will of God in our lives, and he provides the life that is abundant.

Finally with Paul, he shows that that commitment and effort that is made is not done for the gain of his flesh but a submission of it. Not for his own success or even his own benefit, but for the benefit of all those that God has for him to preach to. He flesh submits to the will of God and his heart and mentality match that submission.

We fast in this life to achieve the same purposes. We prepare for what is ahead even if we know what is coming and what needs to be done, we know that we need God to go before us so that his will is achieved. We fast to remain focus on God. When the world and our circumstances are overwhelming, we remain focus on our top priority, the spiritual need for our connection to the father.

So, if you are participating in this fast that we are going to be doing as a church, or if you're considering it I will ask you, are you content with your relationship with God that you have now?

If not do something about it. He is the electricity that is all around us. Prepare for what is to come, remove the distractions that narrow your focus away from him, commit yourself to beating your breast for that your flesh submits to the all-powerful God. Through it we will be effective in our growth in connection to him and our ministry as a church to build his kingdom and share the good news of the salvation in his son Jesus Christ.

PRAYER AND REFLECTION

COMMUNION