



Fasting

Teaching Notes



Practicing the Way

Fasting | Part One: To Offer Ourselves to Jesus

Teaching:

Intro hook:

- I love to eat.
- At this stage in my life with three teenagers and a full-time job, I have very little free time (margin is mostly an aspirational ideal), but in the little I have, one of my favorite pastimes is cooking for our family and community — homemade sourdough pizza is my specialty.
- And I've spent most of my adult life in Portland, OR, one of the great food cities of the world, arguably where the term "foodie" was coined.
- So it comes as no surprise that I'm far more comfortable feasting than fasting.
- And yet: I am an apprentice of Jesus.
- An apprentice of Jesus is one whose entire life is organized around three basic goals:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus, and...
 3. To live as he did.
- To apprentice under Jesus is to adopt his overall lifestyle — to arrange our life around the practices and way of being that Jesus himself did — in order to open your whole life to God to transform you from the inside out.
- And Jesus feasted. It was said of Jesus that "he came eating and drinking." He left us with bread, wine, and a table to remember him by.
- But Jesus also fasted.
 - He began his ministry with forty days of fasting in the wilderness.
 - When the devil tempted him to eat, he said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."
 - And all through the biographies of Jesus we read stories of him fasting.

- And yet today: most Christians feast, but very few fast.
- We conducted a survey of our church recently, and about half of our community had never fasted a single day in their life; and less than 2% fasted on a weekly basis.
- If fasting is not a part of your discipleship to Jesus, you are not alone.
- Fasting has basically disappeared from modern Christian spirituality in the West.
 - You're more likely to hear about fasting from a fitness guru, wellness expert, or Muslim than from a Christian.
 - Not to mention, many Western people have a deeply unhealthy relationship to food and to their own body; just the idea of fasting is a trigger for many of body shame, or ongoing struggles with eating disorders.
 - Most people don't want anything to do with fasting.
 - And yet...

Lead: *What if we are missing out on one of the most important of all the practices of Jesus?*

Turn: *Turn in your Bibles to **Matthew 6** [PAUSE]; let's read an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of the most important teachings of Jesus.*

Matthew 6v16-18

“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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.”

- Notice two things:
 1. Jesus assumes that his disciples will practice fasting.
V16: “When you fast,” not “if you fast.”
 2. When you fast, the Father “will reward you.” Meaning, there’s a gift waiting for you on other side of fasting.

Point: *But as I said: most followers of Jesus in the West do not fast. But we used to.*

Seam: *Let me give you a brief history of fasting...*

History:

- Fasting is a part of every major religion in the world — including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and most indigenous spiritual practices.
- But the first mention in all of human history of fasting as a spiritual discipline is in the book of Exodus - with **Moses' forty day fast on Mount Sinai**, followed by the command for all Israel to fast on **the Day of Atonement** or Yom Kippur.
- There are stories of fasting all through the OT — all the major characters fast — **Moses, David, Samuel, Esther**, the prophets.
- By the time of Jesus, it was common practice for the Jewish people to fast **twice a week** until sundown.
- And the early Christians continued this practice.
- In **The Didache**, the first Christian writing we have outside the NT, fasting was commanded on **Wednesdays and Fridays** and for two full days before baptism.
- Almost all the **church fathers** teach on fasting.
- And the first Christians took it seriously.
- One book from 380AD called **Constitutions of the Holy Apostles** said this:
 - “If any one of the clergy be found to fast on the Lord’s Day, or on the Sabbath-day, excepting one only, let him be deprived; but if he be one of the laity, let him be suspended.”
 - Meaning, fasting was so widespread, they had to regulate it! No fasting on Saturdays or Sundays.
- The “one only” day the Constitutions is referring to is the one exception to fasting on the Sabbath: Holy Saturday. On the Sabbath between Good Friday and Easter, the entire church would fast for the forty hours between Jesus’ death and resurrection, to get in touch with Christ himself.
- And **Lent**, the six weeks prior to Easter, was originally a fast, where followers of Jesus would not eat until sundown each day. Later, Ramadan was based on the Christian practice of Lent.
- Most church traditions today have changed Lent to the practice of abstinence, where you give up something for Lent — TV or social media or wine. But originally, it was a fast from food.

- My point is: early on in the history of the church, there were both regular one day fasts — every Wednesday and Friday — and periodic longer fasts — like Lent.
- This lasted for well over a millenia and a half before it started to die out.
- In the 18th century, **John Wesley** lamented:
 - “I fear there are now thousands of Methodists, so called, both in England and Ireland, who, following the same bad example, have entirely left off fasting; who are so far from fasting twice a week... that they do not fast twice in the month!”
 - You know who you are!
- Wesley fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays like the early Christians, and refused to ordain any pastor to the ministry who did not do the same.
- Now, I’m not saying I agree; I’m saying, followers of Jesus used to fast, a lot. It was considered just as central to the Way of Jesus as reading your Bible or going to church.
- And it still is outside the West!
- Fasting is vigorously practiced by the Eastern streams of the church, such as the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic Christians in Egypt, the Dalit in India, in Iran, and especially in Africa, where entire churches often fast to begin the new year - a practice you actually continue to see in many African American churches and immigrant communities here in the US, one of the few examples of fasting in the West.
- My point is:

Sticky line: Fasting is one of the most essential and powerful of all the practices of Jesus, and, arguably, the single most neglected in the modern, Western church.
- So many of the saints testify to the power of fasting.
- Listen to one example from **St. Basil the Great (A.D. 330-379):**
 - “Fasting gives birth to prophets, she strengthens the powerful; fasting makes law-givers wise. She is a safeguard for the soul, a steadfast companion for the body, a weapon for the brave, and a discipline for champions. Fasting repels temptations, anoints for godliness. She is a companion for sobriety, the crafter of a sound mind. In wars she fights bravely, in peace she teaches tranquility.”
- The life of Jesus, the writings of Scripture, the voice of the global church and the teachings of the saints down through church history all say in chorus: fasting is essential and powerful.

Hinge: So, let's cover the basics of fasting.

The Basics:

1. First off, what is fasting, exactly?
 - Well, let's start with what it's not.
 - It's not abstinence.
 - I regularly hear people say they are fasting from shopping or social media. All great things to do. But that's not *fasting*; that's abstinence, which has a long and rich history in the church.
 - It's also not a restricted diet. I regularly hear about the "Daniel fast," where you eat a vegan diet, but in the Daniel story, the word "fast" is never used. That's not a fast, it's a restricted diet, which also has a long and rich history in the church.
 - Fasting is — at its most basic — not eating food.
 - In a normal fast you continue to drink water, but there are a few examples in Scripture of a fast from both food and water.
2. How long is a fast?
 - There's no set time.
 - The most common fast is from waking until sundown, but there are examples in Scripture of two day fasts, three day, seven day, twenty one day, and forty day fasts.
3. When do you fast?
 - Again, because fasting is not a command, that's up to you.
 - In both Scripture and in church history, we do see two different types of fasting: fasting as rhythm and as response.
 - *Rhythm*: this would be fasting twice a week for most of church history, Fasting on Fridays in the Catholic tradition today; the only example in Scripture is in the OT, where Israel is commanded to fast on Yom Kippur.
 - But then *response*: most of the examples of fasting in Scripture are in response to a national crisis, like an invasion, or sin, or to grief and loss.
 - In **1 Samuel 31**, when king Saul dies, the entire nation fasts for seven days.
 - In **Jonah 3**, when Nineveh is warned of their coming destruction, the king calls for a city-wide fast, and they are spared.
 - In **Esther 4**, when the Hebrew people are threatened with genocide, Queen Esther calls for three day fast, and they are saved.

- My point is, fasting is both a rhythm and a response.

4. Do we fast in community or alone?

- Both.
- A lot of people misread Jesus' warning in Matthew 6 about fasting; he's not saying that fasting in community is wrong, but that fasting as virtue signaling is wrong.
- Scripture is full of examples of the people of God fasting together.
- In fact, in the OT, fasts were commanded for the entire community, including children and even animals!

Finally, we come to the most important question of all:

5. Why do we fast?

- To offer ourselves to Jesus:
- There are *all sorts* of reasons we fast, but to group them into four basic categories, we fast:
 1. To offer ourselves to Jesus
 2. To grow in holiness
 3. To amplify our prayers
 4. To stand with the poor
- Over the course of this Practice, we want to talk about all four reasons.
- But on the docket for week one is the *heart* of it, the most central reason of all: to offer ourselves Jesus.
- As I said, the early Christians continued the Jewish practice of fasting twice a week until sundown, but what I did *not* say was, they *changed* the days, from Monday and Thursday, to Wednesday and Friday.
- Why? Because Wednesday was the day Jesus was betrayed and Friday was the day he was crucified.
- The early disciples were getting in touch, at a *bodily*, primal level, with what the New Testament writers called "participating in the sufferings of Christ."
- They were intentionally adopting the pattern laid down by Jesus of dying and rising — death to self followed by life in God.
- Not out of hate of the body or pleasure, but out of a burning desire for Jesus; to be with him

and to become like him.

- This, *this* is the ultimate reason for fasting: hunger for Jesus, and for his transformation.
- The Baptist preacher **John Piper** calls fasting “whole body hungering for God.”
- What is hunger? Hunger is the feeling of wanting or needing something you do not have.
- NT scholar **Scot McKnight** calls fasting “body talk,” a way of praying with your body — God, I hunger for you, I want you, I need you.
- Now, we may not *feel* hungry for God. If we’re honest, we may feel apathetic about God. All the more reason to fast, as fasting has the potential to awaken the latent hunger within all souls for God.

Seam: Fasting is a practice to offer our whole life to God.

Theo of body:

- I think of Paul’s line in **Romans 12:**
 - “In view of God’s mercy ... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship.”
- Note Paul’s word choice: offer your **bodies**, not just your heart. **[On Screen Note: Romans 12:1]**
- The word in **Greek** is **soma**, where we get the word somatic. It means, your whole person, including your body.
 - I grew up in a church tradition where much was said about giving your heart to Jesus, and that’s beautiful, but he doesn’t just call for our heart, but for all that we are.
- Part of the reason we emphasized the “heart” over the whole person in my church was because, in the Western church overall, we’ve lost what **Pope John Paul II** called a “theology of the body,” which, put simply, is the truth all through Scripture that you don’t have a body, you are a body. Or to be more precise, your body is a part of who you are.
- Jesus came *in* a body — a doctrine we call the incarnation — to save all of our body — a doctrine we call the resurrection!
- One day in the future, at Jesus’ return, what happened to Jesus’ body will happen to the bodies of all his followers - we will be raised from death to life.

- In the meantime: *our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously the body.*
- The Apostle Paul famously said to the Corinthians: “Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you... Therefore honor God with your bodies.” (**1 Corinthians 6v19-20**)
- Your body is a temple, a dwelling place for God. Therefore what we do with the body matters.
- The body is the sphere where our discipleship to Jesus becomes real. Where it’s not just an idea or even a feeling, but a practice. Or what Jesus called a *Way of life*.
- One way to think about discipleship is as a disciplined attempt to get the teachings of Jesus into your body itself, into your neurobiology, or what we call “muscle memory,” so that when confronted with various situations, his teachings just come out of you without you even thinking about it.
- And fasting is one of the best possible ways to get the teachings of Jesus into your body.

Romans 12:

- And — back to **Romans 12** — we offer our whole persons, including our bodies, to Jesus “in view of God’s mercy” — Meaning, we do this for him, because of all he’s done for us. We give up food, because he gave up *everything*; we offer our body in devotion because he already gave his for our salvation.
- We fast for all sorts of reasons. But this is the primary reason we fast, not to *get* something from Jesus, but to *give* something to Jesus — what Paul calls “worship” — our love, affection, and devotion.

Ending:

- To end, Jesus assumed his disciples would fast.
- But he never commanded fasting. Neither did the Apostles in the NT. They all fasted, but they never laid down a regimen to follow.
- You don’t have to fast. It is *not* required.
- But Jesus *fasted*. And then said, “Come, and follow me.”
- Practices, like fasting, and prayer and sabbath and more, are *how* we follow Jesus — how we open our whole person to his grace to be transformed.

- I was in my mid twenties when I first started to experiment with fasting...
 - I remember, I was 24, I was in line at a coffee shop, we were getting ready to plant a church, and I had this thought out of the blue: I should do a three day fast. I would love to tell you it was heaven on earth, but honestly, the church went very well, but I was just hangry! But that started me down the road to fasting on a regular basis.
- And as I gave myself to this practice, or to be more precise, to Jesus through this practice, I discovered what millions of followers of Jesus outside the West and in church history have long said is true: *this is one of the most powerful disciplines for the spiritual life*. Now, I look forward to it. Because through fasting, I experience the Father's reward, which ultimately is Jesus himself.
- So. If you want to offer your body and *all* that you are to Jesus in love...
- Practice fasting.