

Fasting | Part Four: To Stand with the Poor

Teaching:

Intro hook:

- Sarah...
 - ...is a new mother in LA; but the father just abandoned her and the baby; she makes barely enough to survive in the city. One week, she paid her utilities, but had no money left to buy groceries; her fridge was empty, and her cupboards bare. She is a new Christian, and in her faltering way, she prayed to God for help and felt a strange peace come over her. A few hours later, she opened the front door of her apartment, and there, on the stoop, were three bags of groceries and an envelope with \$200 in it. It was anonymous, but she strongly suspects it's from someone at her church just down the road.
- The Ngoy family...
 - ...are refugees from the Congo; they were forced to leave their homeland due to rising violence, and granted asylum in the United States. But when they landed at the Portland airport, all their possessions for a family of six were in one plastic garbage bag. They did not speak English, understand the culture, or know how to navigate the complex world of American social services. They were dropped off at a spartan apartment and left alone. But a few hours later, there was a knock at the door. A community group from a local church was there, carrying bags of groceries and home supplies, and offering long-term friendship.
- Rafeal...
 - ...is a young professional in Minneapolis. Every day he sees the growing inequality in the city, and the specter of homelessness. Not to mention the inequality around the world. But what can one person do in the face of so much pain and suffering?
 - Rafeal is an apprentice of Jesus, and every Friday he goes without food until sun-down. Each week, he takes the money he would have spent on breakfast and lunch, and donates it to his local food bank. It's not much. But it's something.
- I tell you about Sarah, the Ngoys and Rafeal, because stories move us, not statistics.
- But the statistics are still haunting:
 - Around 2 billion people in the world live in poverty;

- around 10% of the global population, or 700 million people, live in “extreme poverty,” on less than two dollars a day.
- Here in my country of America, the extreme poverty rate is even higher, at 11.6%, or nearly 40 million people.
- And most of them are children.
- Nearly 22,000 children die daily due to poverty.
- Poverty is directly tied to issues of racial injustice.
- In America, the highest poverty rate is among Native Americans, followed by the Black community. Undoubtedly tied to our nation’s tragic history.
- And yet: the average family of four in the U.S. spends \$1,500 a year on food they throw away.
- 40% of food in America is thrown out; estimates range from 80-160 billion pounds of food waste per year.
- So, millions of men, women, and children are hungry, and millions more have more food than they know what to do with.

Seam: *Is there a practice from the Way of Jesus to stand against all this disparity? Yes, it's the practice of fasting.*

- Over the last three sessions, we've explored the power of fasting for personal transformation; now we're ready to shift from the internal to the external - the power of fasting for social transformation.
- Throughout church history, it's one of main practices that followers of Jesus have adopted to move toward the hungry, and those on the margins.

Reason 04:

- Now we come to our fourth and final reason behind fasting:
- Over the last few Sessions, we said that fasting is a practice...
 1. To offer ourselves to Jesus
 2. To grow in holiness
 3. To amplify our prayers

- Up next: 4. To stand with the poor
- This is one aspect of fasting that may be new to you; you may not think of fasting as a vehicle for the biblical vision of justice, but in the imagination of the biblical writers, it is.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Isaiah 58... Isaiah 58 is one of the most essential passages on fasting in all of Scripture. Let's take a few minutes, and work through the text line-by-line... In context, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel, who were intended to be a "kingdom of priests," a channel of God's rule and reign to the wider world, but were falling woefully short.

Isaiah 58v3-12

- 'Why have we fasted,' they say,
 'and you have not seen it?
 Why have we humbled ourselves,
 and you have not noticed?'
- Meaning, the people are asking Isaiah, we are fasting, but it doesn't seem to be working.
 Why is God not hearing our prayer? Listen to God's reply... Verse 3...
 - Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
 and exploit all your workers.
 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
 and in striking each other with wicked fists.
 You cannot fast as you do today
 and expect your voice to be heard on high.
 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
 only a day for people to humble themselves?
 Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
 and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
 Is that what you call a fast,
 a day acceptable to the LORD?
- Meaning, fasting is not only to offer ourselves to God, and to grow in holiness, and to amplify our prayers, there's more to it. Keep reading... Verse 6...
 - Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
 to loose the chains of injustice
 and untie the cords of the yoke,
 to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

- Notice, the motivation for this type of fasting is:

1. To fight injustice
2. To free people from oppression
3. To share your food with the hungry
4. To provide shelter to refugees, immigrants, and those with no home
5. To clothe the naked
6. To meet the practical needs of people all around you.

- If you practice this kind of fasting, listen to what will happen... Verse 8...

- Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

Seam: *This is a whole other dimension to fasting than the previous three sessions; that has less to do with us, and more to do with others, in particular, the poor.*

Almsgiving:

- In his commentary on *Isaiah 58*, St. Augustine said:
- “Break your bread for those who are hungry, said Isaiah, do not believe that fasting suffices. Fasting chastises you, but it does not refresh the other... Do you wish your prayer to reach God? Give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving.”
- I love his word picture. Prayer is like a bird, if you want it to fly to heaven, give it two wings, fasting, and almsgiving, which is a word used by Jesus and the early Christians that can also be translated “works of mercy.” It’s a combination of what today we would call generosity, service, and justice.

- You see, in the biblical imagination, almsgiving is just as tied to fasting as prayer.
- In the same way that it's hard to imagine fasting without praying... it's theoretically possible, but it's kind of missing the whole point; to the biblical mind, it's just as illogical to practice fasting without generosity, service, and justice.

Seam: Followers of Jesus have been practicing this type of fasting for thousands of years...

Quotes:

- **The Shepherd of Hermas**, an early Christian writing dating to the early second century, that was seriously considered for canonization of the New Testament, has this instruction for the widespread practice of fasting on Wednesday and Fridays:
 - "...estimate the cost of the food you would have eaten on that day and give that amount to a widow or orphan or someone in need. Be humble in this way, that the one who receives something because of your humility may fill his soul and pray to the Lord for you."
- **St. Gregory of Nyssa**, a church father from the fourth century in Cappadocia in the East said of fasting:
 - "Give to the hungry what you deny your own appetite."
- **Caesarius of Arles** in France, in the sixth century said:
 - "Let us fast in such a way that we lavish our lunches upon the poor, so that we may not store up in our purses what we intended to eat, but rather in the stomachs of the poor."
 - What all these great ones of the Way are saying in chorus is: We can't separate our relationship with God from our relationship with our neighbor. And...

Sticky line: Fasting is a way to love God and love our neighbor at the same time.

Hinge: This type of fasting is a way to do three things:

- First...
- 1. To stand in solidarity with the hungry

- Regularly going without food by choice, can put us emotionally in touch with the millions of people around the world and in our own countries who regularly go without food *not* by choice.
- This denial of your stomach does something to your heart; you begin to feel the compassion of God; you begin to see the poor not as a stranger, but a brother or sister.
- I know several families who care deeply about raising kids whose hearts are not warped by the materialism of Western culture, who do a rice and beans night once a week, eating what most people around the world eat, as an act of intentional spiritual formation.
- Fasting, or even a restricted diet, can enable us to stand in solidarity with the hungry. But also...

2. To share what we have

- What we give up in money spent on food can be turned into generosity to the poor; and what we give up in *time* spent on food — shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning up — can be spent in service of the poor.
- **Dorothy Day**, the Bohemian intellectual from New York who became the founder the of the Catholic Worker Movement, said:
 - “How shall we have the means to help our brother who is in need? We can do without those unnecessary things which become habits, cigarettes, liquor, coffee, tea, candy, sodas, soft drinks, and those foods at meals which only titillate the palate. We all have these habits, the youngest and the oldest. And we have to die to ourselves in order to live, we have to put off the old man and put on Christ.”
 - There’s a long-standing tradition in the Catholic church of fasting on Fridays and serving that day in a food pantry or soup kitchen or local nonprofit.
 - This is one way to not just “talk” about justice, but to do justice.
 - There’s so much “slacktivism,” as it’s come to be called, in the digital age; much of what people call “justice” is just ranting on social media; but in a biblical theology of justice, talk is cheap; the call is to act in love.
 - Think of 1 John 3v16-18
 - This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

- Again, what can one person do in the face of all the evil and injustice in the world?
- Well, we can do this: we can fast and free up our resources to share with those in need.
- This could literally be as simple as giving the twenty dollars you would have spent on breakfast and lunch to your local food bank, or your church's food pantry, or buying groceries for someone in need in your community; or just Venmo-ing someone to help pay their medical bills...
- It's *that* simple. But it's powerful.
- Finally, it can enable us...

3. To stand against evil and injustice

- At a social level...
 - Gandhi made famous the hunger strike in his nonviolent resistance to the British Empire;
 - As did Oscar Romero — the Christian intellectual and martyr from El Salvador.
 - Fasting can be a loving, non-violent way to protest systemic injustice.
 - NT scholar **Scot McKnight** writes:
 - “Food joins humans to other humans because we share meals together. Whenever we give up food intentionally, we refrain from relationships. When a group protests by fasting, they both negate one relationship — with the haves — and they affirm another relationship — with the have-nots. And since the structures of power always have sufficient food, fasting is not only refusing relationship, but it is also protesting the power structures that exist.”
 - Fasting is a way for the powerful to voluntarily align with the powerless; as Jesus himself did for us.
 - To *fight this evil*, we must turn to prayer.
 - As **St. Gregory the Great** said:
 - “It is impossible to engage in spiritual conflict, without the previous subjugation of the appetite.”
 - He, like most of the saints, saw fasting as a prerequisite to any prayer for breakthrough.
 - There's a long-running history in the church of fasting to prepare for spiritual war.

- In deliverance ministry, or what Catholics call exorcism, fasting beforehand is pretty much mandatory. To purge and purify your soul of sin and grow in power and authority in the Spirit to “tear down strongholds,” in the language of the New Testament.
- The fast Isaiah has in mind is one where we stand in solidarity with the poor, we share our resources, and we stand against evil and injustice.

Seam: *This last type of fasting will have an effect not just on the poor, but on you and me the church as a whole. .*

The church:

- Remember Jesus’ vision of what the church is meant to be - a new kind of family of peace and justice and love.
- In the same way that, in a healthy family, there’s no way that anyone would ever go without food or shelter as long as there are resources in the family as a whole.
- So too, in a healthy church family, there’s no way that anyone would ever go without food or shelter or access to the basic necessities of life.
- This is the gospel; you have been adopted, not just into relationship with God the Father, but into his family.
- And while *all* families fall short of the ideal, fasting is one of the best practices we have to co-create a new family with Jesus where it can be said, as it was of the early church, “there is no needy person among them.” (Acts 4:34)

Pivot to end:

- Now we come to the end of our Practice.
- We’ve done our best over the last four sessions to lay out a vision of fasting as one of the most powerful and essential of all the practices of Jesus.
- It has the potential to transform our relationship:
 - To Jesus...
 - To awaken a hunger within, and draw us into a deeper union with Jesus...

- To our body
 - To heal our relationship to food, to pleasure, to starve our flesh and feed our spirit; to develop self-control and daily.
- To God in prayer
 - To sharpen our ability to hear God's voice, as well as give power to our prayers to break through walls. And...
- To the poor
 - To the hungry, to those in need, to form a new community of justice and righteousness.
- It can do all this and *more*.
- And our hope is not just that you practice fasting a few times, but that you integrate fasting into your Rule of Life, or your overall lifestyle, as most followers of Jesus have done until recent history.

Eat-Fast-Feast:

- If you were to study a community of disciples of Jesus in say 250 AD or 1,250 AD, and most anywhere in between, you would notice the same basic pattern:
 - They ate very modestly most days.
 - They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until sundown, as well as on holy days in the church calendar.
 - And they feasted every Sabbath and on special occasions.
- This pattern — eating, fasting, and feasting — is a long-standing way of life for followers of Jesus.
- But it's no secret we Americans prefer feasting to fasting, yet the two live in a reciprocal relationship.
- As Marva J. Dawn put it, in her writing on feasting on the Sabbath:
 - "Americans do not know how to feast because they do not know how to fast. Especially if we fast on behalf of those who don't have enough and share our plenty with them, our feasting will be much more meaningful."
- The invitation of the church of Jesus down through history is to join in this ancient rhythm -

to eat, to fast, and to feast.

Ending:

- But let us never forget: fasting is temporary, feasting is eternal.
- The story of Scripture begins with a fast — the church fathers all point out the first command in Scripture, in Genesis 3, is to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil... but Scripture ends with a feast, in Rev. 21-22, where all God's people, from every tribe, tongue, and nation, gather around the table with Jesus himself.
- No more fasting, no more hunger, no more solidarity with the poor because there are no more poor.
- When we feast, we act out an advance sign of our glorious future.
- And when we fast, we pray with our bodies for Jesus to drag his future into the present; we pray, in the words of the early church, “Maranatha; Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”
- So, may you feast, *and may you fast*, and may we together hasten Jesus' return to make all things new.