

## Fasting | Part Two: To Grow in Holiness

# Teaching:

### Intro hook:

- The novelist **Nikos Kazantzakis**, in his autobiography, tells a story from his youth, of going to see an elderly monk, and how he was both drawn to and turned off by the monk's lifestyle of self-denial.
- He says to the monk:
  - *"Yours is a hard life, Father. I too want to be saved. Is there no other way?"*
  - *"More agreeable?"*
- ...the monk replies, with a loving smile on his face.
  - *"More human, Father."*
  - *"One, only one."*
- ...he says.
  - *"What is that?"*
  - *"Ascent. To climb a series of steps. From the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering. God sits at the summit of hunger, thirst, and suffering; the devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life. You choose."*
- In reply, Nikos says...
  - *"I am still young. The world is nice. I have time to choose."*
- But in the story, the old monk reaches out and touches Kazantzakis' knee and says:
  - *"Wake up, my child. Wake up before death wakes you up."*
- I'm like young Nikos; I want "a comfortable life."
- What about you?

- But what did Jesus say? “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (**Matthew 16v24**)
- And it is *only* by following Jesus’ example of a cross-shaped life of self-denial, that we can be formed into people who are pervaded by the love and joy and peace of Jesus himself.
- And fasting is one of the best practices we have to cultivate a heart of self-denial in our over-all life.

### **Recap:**

- In our Practice, we are covering four reasons for fasting:
  1. To offer ourselves to Jesus
  2. To grow in holiness
  3. To amplify our prayers
  4. And to stand with the poor.
- On the docket for Session 02 is: *To grow in holiness.*

**Seam:** *We left off last week with what a “theology of the body” — this idea in Scripture that your body is a part of who you are; and our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously our body, our whole person.*

### **The body:**

- Let me tell you a bit more about what is happening in your body as you fast.
- There are three distinct physiological stages your body goes through in fasting:
  1. In the first four hours after a meal, your body is feeding on energy from the food in your stomach.
  2. But around 16 hours in (so, if you eat dinner around 6 p.m., then 10 a.m. the following day), your body switches from burning glucose for energy to burning fat; what doctors call “ketosis,” which is incredibly good for you.
  3. Then around 24 hours in, your body shifts into a state called “autophagy.” A term from the Greek, which literally means “self-eating.” It begins to break down and cleanse your body of old, dead, or damaged cells, what doctors call “zombie cells”

— the type of cellular material that causes maladies like cancer, aging, and chronic disease. Some doctors call autophagy your body's way of "taking out the trash."

- As a result of the body's internal processes, there are all sorts of health benefits to fasting.
  - It can cleanse your body of toxins.
  - Increase your metabolism.
  - Reduce your weight.
  - It can lower your insulin levels, inflammation, and blood pressure.
  - Strengthen your immune system.
  - Reduce your heart rate.
  - Slow aging.
  - Protect against and possibly reverse many diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and a range of neurological disorders including Alzheimer's.
- It comes as no surprise that medical experts have been touting the benefits of fasting for a very long time.
- But. While fasting is very good for your overall health, when we as followers of Jesus engage fasting as a *spiritual discipline*, the ultimate aim is not to lose weight or clean out our gut microbiome.
- And while we want to be careful to avoid a dualism that sees fasting as a spiritual discipline vs. fasting as a healthy habit as an either/or, rather than a both/and, still, **Pope Benedict's** words ring true:
  - "In our own day, fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning and has taken on, in a culture characterized by the search for material well-being, a therapeutic value for the care of one's body. Fasting certainly brings benefits to physical well-being, but for believers, it is, in the first place, a "therapy" to heal all that prevents them from conformity to the will of God."

**Seam:** *Put another way, it's to grow in holiness.*

## Holiness:

- "Holiness" is a bit of a loaded word, but a shorthand way to understand a biblical theology of

holiness is as wholeness.

- What health is to the body, holiness is to the soul, by that I mean, your whole person.
- And in the same way that fasting is your body's way of purifying and purging your body of "zombie cells" that are killing you, so too, fasting is your soul's way of purifying and purging your whole person of self-defeating cycles of sin and shame.
- Fasting is a way to "sanctify" your soul, in the language of Scripture; to set it apart as holy, and dedicate it to God for his special purposes.

**Seam:** *The saints have long attested to the power of fasting to grow in holiness...*

### The saints:

- **St. Augustine of Hippo**, when asked, Why fast? Said:
  - "Because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys."
- Or here's **St. Leo the Great** from the fifth century, the bishop of Rome:
  - "Fasting gives strength against sin, represses evil desires, repels temptation, humbles pride, cools anger, and fosters all the inclinations of a good will even unto the practice of every virtue."
- **Thomas à Kempis**, the towering intellectual of the medieval period, said of fasting:
  - "Restrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh."
- When you read the great ones of church history, you quickly realize that most all of them believed that without fasting it was almost impossible to reach a high level of holiness...
- Pretty much all of them practiced fasting with regularity and intensity.
- But they saw the stomach as both an enemy and a potential ally in the fight against sin.
- For example, gluttony is the first of the "seven deadly sins" on purpose. Because Christian thinkers have long said that an undisciplined appetite has a domino effect across all the areas of our life. **[On Screen: Saint Leo the Great (A.D. 400-461)]**
- They especially noted the connection between gluttony and sexual immorality. That the

capacity to steward our body's natural drives for food and sex in a healthy way, rise, or fall, together.

**Turn:** *To make sense of this, let's suss out a little more of a theology of the body. Please turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter seven...*

## **Romans 7:15-24**

- In the last session, I quoted Paul's line to the Corinthians: "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." Your body is a home for God.
- But listen to what Paul writes to the Romans [on screen Romans 7:15-24]...
- "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

## **The spirit and the flesh:**

- This is a famous passage because Paul seems to be naming the existential angst many of us feel around sin: what we *want* to do, we don't do, and what we *don't* want to do, we do!
- Do you ever feel this way? You are not alone.
- And this self-defeating cycle that a lot of us get stuck in has to do with our *body*; Paul calls it "a body of death."
- So, which is it, Paul? Is the body a "temple of the Holy Spirit"? Or a "body of death"?
- The answer: *both*.
- In Paul's theology, in your body, and your person as a whole, you have a "spirit," meaning a part of you that is a home for God; where your spirit is one with God's Spirit.

- And you have a part of you that is infected by a fatal disease called sin.
- The word Paul uses for this warped part of our person is the “flesh,” or **sarx in Greek**.
- And it does *not* mean matter, as in the English phrase “flesh and bone.”
- To repeat: you are a whole person; you cannot separate the material from the immaterial.
- Your “flesh” has to do with your *whole* person.
- Some translations render it as our “sinful nature,” others as “self-indulgence.”
- It’s the instinctual drives in our body for things like food, sleep, sex, self-preservation and instant gratification that have overpowered our will and bent our heart away from love, and turned it in on itself. But it’s also more immaterial drives too - our desires for security and safety and affection and esteem and power and control.
- Not all bad, but often disordered.
- Augustine called the flesh our “disordered desires.”
- My point is: our fight is not *against* the body; it’s *for* the body. Our fight is against the *flesh*.

**Seam:** *The call upon us as followers of Jesus is to...*

### **The cross:**

- “Take up your cross,” in the language of Jesus. **(Matthew 16v24)** And put to death your flesh.
- Paul calls it “crucifying the flesh” and it’s a theme all through Paul’s letters.
- He writes to the Galatians: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” **(Galatians 5v24)**
- He writes to the Colossians: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed.” **(Colossians 3v5)**
- The Reformed tradition calls this “mortification,” from the root word “mortal.” As in, we are to *kill* the flesh. Not coddle it, not make excuses for it, or justify it, but nail it to the cross.

### **The question is, how?**

- Ever tried to do this? Stop sinning? “I think I will just stop lusting from now on...”
- How’s that working for you?
- Later in Romans,, Paul goes on to write:
  - “If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” **(Romans 8v13)**
- Translation: we can’t use the flesh to defeat the flesh; willpower is not enough; we need the power of the Spirit.
- Willpower is great, but it only works on very small changes. Willpower vs. a plate of cookies is one thing; but willpower vs. a pornography addiction? Or drugs or alcohol? Or outbursts of anger based on a childhood trauma? Willpower doesn’t stand a chance.
- As apprentices of Jesus, we need to find a way to draw on the same power that Jesus did, the power of the Spirit, in order to live out his teachings.
- How do we do that?
- Well, *one* of the ways is through the Practices of Jesus, or the spiritual disciplines.
- *Especially* fasting. It’s one of the best disciplines we have to draw on the power of God to transform our whole person.

**Sticky line:** *Fasting is a way to feed your spirit and starve your flesh.*

**You see, at least four things are happening in us as we fast:**

1. It’s weaning us off the pleasure principle.
  - Underneath our desire for food, is an even deeper desire — what psychologists call “the pleasure principle.” Which is the driving motivation of the immature, who only want to do what feels good in the moment. Once reserved for children and middle schoolers, the pleasure principle is fast-becoming the new normal for all ages.
  - So much of our culture is built around the mantra: “if it feels good, do it.”
  - But as we all know, many things that feel good in the short term, reap damage in the long term. And on the flip side, many things that are no fun at all in the short term, yield dividends for years to come.
  - Through fasting, we mature beyond the pleasure principle; *and* we learn how to do

the right thing, even when it's hard, and, how to be happy and content even when we don't get what we want.

- As a result, when we *can't* get what we want — due to life circumstances, or other people's decisions, or even God's sovereign appointment over our lives — we are increasingly free of anger or anxiety; and instead are joyful and at peace, no matter our circumstances.
- Secondly...

2. It's revealing what's in our heart.

- **Richard Foster** in his book *Celebration of Discipline* writes:
  - “Fasting reveals the things that control us.”
- Fasting teaches us so *much* about ourselves! Our unhealthy relationship to food, how weak we are, how much we need pleasure to be happy, how far we are from God — it's very humbling.
- But as all this stuff comes up from the substrata to the surface of our heart — and it's exposed in all its ugliness — we have the chance to offer it to God, and in doing so, be set free. Third...

3. It's re-ordering our desires.

- One of my *favorite* things about fasting is, when I fast, I notice my desires *change*.
- I find myself wanting to sin less, and wanting to be holy more.
- My desires for lust, or greed, or to hold onto bitterness, go *down*, as my desires for purity, kindness, and compassion go *up*.
- Especially, in my struggle against lust, I feel a profound change in my sexual desires; I notice a purifying of my whole person, and it's like sexual desire is transformed into a yearning for God himself.
- God is at work deep in my person, to do by *his* power what my willpower cannot possibly do; transform me. On that note, finally...

4. It's drawing on the power of God to overcome sin.

- Fasting is a discipline, and like any good habit, it's a way to increase our willpower muscle.
- It's a way to grow in both self-control and self-discipline.
- Self-control is the ability to say *no* to something. To *not* do something you *want* to do, but is *bad* for you in the long term.
- Self-discipline is the ability to say yes to something. To *do* something you *don't* want



to do, but is *good* for you in the long term!

- Together they make for self-mastery.
- Disciplines like fasting are a way to bring your whole person back under the mastery or control of your will.
- But again, willpower alone is not strong enough to break the chains of the flesh.
- Fasting is (ultimately) about drawing your energy from the Holy Spirit's power, from a relational connection to God himself.
- As we come to God and give him our weakness; he comes to us and gives us his strength.

**Summary:** If you wanted to summarize *all* that, you could just say fasting is a way to turn your body from an enemy into an ally in your fight against the flesh.

### **Fasting is hard:**

- That's why fasting is hard! Especially at first (it really does get easier, I promise! When I first started fasting, I was in a bad mood for most of it. But now that I practice regularly, my fasting days are the most joyful, peaceful, grounded days of my week. Really.)
- But, at first, it's hard, because you are essentially picking a fight with your flesh!
- But the more you do it, and the more your flesh is weakened through self-denial and your spirit strengthened by connection to God, the more free you become.
- The discipline of fasting is a pathway to freedom.
- As a pastor, whenever I talk to someone who is trapped in ongoing sin, and *especially* if the sin is sexual in nature, I pretty much *always* recommend they start fasting — in *addition* to the work of therapy and community and more. Because fasting is one of the most powerful weapons we have to break the chains of sin and set our heart free.
  - Remember: the practices are how we do what we can do, open our mind and body to God, so that the Spirit of God can do what we *cannot* do, break the chains of sin.
  - When you can't overcome a sin — pornography or gossip or yelling at your kids — because it's outside the range of your willpower — here's what you can do: fast, and offer your body to God, and let his Spirit break the hold of sin over your body and set you free.
- I think one of the reasons the church in the West is so weak in power and diluted by worldliness is we have left off this core practice.

- It's time to take it up again.

### **Remember:**

- But before we end, remember last week's main point: the ultimate aim of fasting is Jesus himself.
- Yes, it's to grow in holiness, or wholeness; to open your whole person to the Spirit of God and let him form you into a person of love and goodness; but even *more* so, it's what the ancients called "union" with God.
- As Jesus himself said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." **[on screen Matthew 5:]**
- To see God, this, *this* is the soul's true ache; to see, to look at, to behold the beauty of God himself.
- Holiness is not a formula, because God is a person, not an equation. And he is compassionate in his very being. But. Like it or not, there is a reciprocal relationship between our level of holiness and our vision of God.
- How badly do you want to see God?

### **Ending:**

- Again, you don't have to fast! It's not commanded by Jesus or any of the writers of the New Testament.
  - But pretty much all the saints have long said, not only is it powerful, it's essential.
  - In the same way that there is no substitute for healthy eating and regular exercise for a flourishing body, there is no substitute for fasting and a life of self-denial for a flourishing soul.
  - And remember: the Way of Jesus is the way of the cross; *but* the cross is always followed by the resurrection; death by life; Friday by Sunday.
  - So, if you want to grow in holiness, if you want to "see God" in a greater way than ever before, practice fasting.