Fasting

Re: The Skinny on Fasting

This clip kept me laughing from the get goes! Now many of you have mentioned to me that I'd lost some weight and asked about how I manage to keep slim. Some of you might think that I'm like the first guy, the Dieter, who combines dieting with spirituality! Well … not really – I don't diet (except sometime during Lent) and I'm not that spiritual.

Now I can half identify with the Wired and half with the Liar in the clip we just watched; I am kind of attached to my phone and I'm a diabetic and it's given me a pretty legit excuse not to fast.

Now type in the Chat who you would identify with:

The Dieter who combines dieting with spirituality?

The Wired who considers skipping a meal or two once in awhile to hear God's voice is good enough?

The Liar who gives health or other excuses for not fasting at all?

The Martyr who wants to impress others how holy he is and how much he is suffering for the Lord?

The Legalist who is judgmental and chastises those who don't follow strict rules and regulations?

The Hunger Strike who … well … is dead?

Today we continue this new series, "Realign Your Life: Practices That Transform You." Last week Pastor Jeremy taught about prayer which is often mentioned together with fasting in the Bible, the spiritual discipline we are learning now.

Fasting is not a popular conversation topic and I can assure you, when I am holding a bowl of Ruffles, I think more about whether I should or shouldn't leave much for others – I hardly think about fasting.

Type Y into the chat, if you get my drift.

Nowadays fasting is usually associated with weight loss, pleasant feelings, or some sort of political protest someone is doing. As Richard Foster says that it's often about vanity or power.

Amongst Christians, many would think about the topic usually just before and during Lent; in general, many consider fasting as a mark of robust spirituality for clergy, monks, nuns, or super saints.

Fasting is thus often misunderstood, misused, or ignored.

This is a simple description we are working with today:

To abstain from food by an individual or a group/community in a designated period for spiritual purpose.

We read about various individuals or groups who engage in this spiritual discipline in the Bible as well as believers down through the ages, e.g., Moses, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther, Jesus, Paul, and the early church. They fasted at times of crisis, mourning, national repentance, seeking guidance and strength in doing God's work.

Scot McKnight in his excellent book, ***Fasting***, underscores the idea that ***fasting is the believer's response to a grievous sacred moment in life, such as death, sin, an impending disaster, tragedy, and threatening future***.

So when we read or hear about people engaging in this spiritual discipline, McKnight says, it is important to ask, "In response to what?" instead of "What do you hope you will get out of it?"

Now this is extremely relevant to us who are living in an unprecedented global pandemic, and those of us living in Ontario, Canada, we are now in a second state of emergency – this is a grievous sacred moment in life, indeed!

The main idea of today's message is this:

Fasting frees us to pursue the way of the Lord.

Now let's say it together. If you want freedom to pursue the way of the Lord, type Y in the chat.

This spiritual discipline begins and continues with ***a posture of humility that prepares us***

to be open to God,

to feel His heartbeat,

to think after His thoughts,

to understand His purpose,

to identify with how He views and responds to a given event or life circumstances,

with the aim to follow His will and instructions.

Freedom is the privilege and power to do what is God-honouring and must be exercised with discipline. So we can even say that fasting is not only an expression of personal piety but also has ***a mission focus***, i.e., ***to be on God's side and to join Him in working out His purposes***.

With the remaining time we will look at three ways how fasting frees us to pursue the way of the Lord.

Let me begin with the first one:

Fasting exposes what is controlling us.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan after a 40-day extreme fast in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13): "[Matt. 4:2] For forty days and forty nights ***he fasted and became very hungry***."

Satan, being crafty and strategic, came to tempt Jesus, "[3]If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

Let me ask you a question: Who are the first individuals who got into big trouble because of food and passed on their mess to their immediate offspring as well as future generations? ***Type your answer in the chat.*** If your answer is Adam & Eve, you are correct!

Now the first Adam fell into Satan's temptation and failed, but the second Adam succeeded: for Jesus, who's 100% human, though he was tempted in every way, He did not fall into any craving for physical pleasure, any craving for everything human eyes see, or pride, position, and power (cf. Heb. 2:14-18; 1 Jn. 2:14-17).

Richard Foster says, "More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us … We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things … If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately … Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear – if they are within us, they will surface during fasting." (***Celebration of Discipline***, Special Anniversary Edition, p. 55.)

And Adele Ahlberg Calhoun reminds us that fasting "brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts." (Cf. ***Spiritual Disciplines Handbook***, p. 376.)

Jesus is clear in His response to Satan: [Matt. 4:4] But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, '***People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God***.'" He acts under the authority, power, and promises of God the Father; His allegiance does not belong to anybody else!

Paul teaches that we must not become a slave to anything (1 Cor. 6:12); whatever is controlling us is our master. So fasting exposes our idolatry and begins the first step toward freedom in pursuing the way of the Lord.

Type Y into the Chat, if you want to realign your life and find freedom to pursue the way of the Lord, and if you are willing to begin practicing this spiritual discipline.

This first step leads us to the second:

Fasting expresses our commitment to change in light of God's truth.

In 1 Kings 21 we read about how King Ahab of Israel, with the counsel of his wicked queen Jezebel, killed and robbed

Naboth, the owner of a vineyard which he refused to sell to the king.

God instructed the prophet Elijah to confront King Ahab's wicked deeds and prophesied his demise and the destruction of his dynasty.

"**1 Ki. 21:27** But when Ahab heard this message, ***he tore his clothing, dressed in burlap, and fasted***. He even slept in burlap and went about in deep mourning.

28 Then another message from the Lord came to Elijah: **29** "***Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before me***? Because he has done this, I will not do what I promised during his lifetime."

As we see in this story of Ahab, God responded to his genuine expression of contrition; his fasting signified his repentance – the willingness to turn around - and his commitment, to change his way in light of what had been revealed to him. Because Ahab took personal responsibility he received God's grace and mercy!

Commitment to change in light of God's truth is required in light of God's truth.

Truth without change is just information;

Change without truth is just deception.

Fasting leads us to a safe place to acknowledge our foibles and failures before the throne of grace; it indicates our commitment to live according with the light God has revealed in our hearts, by the work of the Spirit and in His Word.

So fasting nudges us to put aside what has been exposed, such as attitudes, affections, and actions that are not God-honouring and help us to discover "the next step, the right step, or the wisest step to take." (Scot McKnight, ***Fasting***, p. 154.)

The famous 4th century church leader and preacher, John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407), says:

"Do not let just your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast by being pure from theft and avarice [i.e, greed]. Let the feet fast by ceasing from running to the unlawful spectacles . . . Let the mouth fast as well from disgraceful speeches and railing."

From this angle it is wise to extend the scope of fasting from food to include fasting from anything that would hinder our walk with God, e.gs. gadgets, social media, consumer goods, hobbies, habits of comforts, sports and entertainments, etc.

Before I talk about the third way fasting frees us to pursue the way of the Lord, I want to repeat the important point

Scot McKnight has asserted: ***fasting is the believer's response to a grievous sacred moment in life.***

To be absolute clear: fasting is not manipulating or bargaining with God so we would get the favourable results we desire – that's more like practicing magic than pursuing the way of the Lord!

Fasting puts us humbly before God in response to a serious and critical situation, with the aim to live out "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." While we do the best to act in the most responsible and godliest way, we entrust our future in God's hands.

One great example is how King David pleaded to God – by fasting - to save the child conceived from his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba; but the child died. David cleaned himself up and got on with life – he didn't pout or complain because things didn't turn out the way he wanted (cf. 2 Sam 12:15-23).

Richard Foster writes these strong words, "To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want." (***Celebration of Discipline***, p, 54.)

Now the third way fasting frees us to pursue the way of the Lord is this:

Fasting embodies God's compassion, generosity, and justice.

In Isaiah 58 God has some hush words for the pious Israelites who are fasting but complaining that God is not answering their prayers. Now listen to God's response to the people's self-centered piety and warped spirituality:

Is. 58:3 "I will tell you why!" I respond. "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. **4** What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me … **6** ***No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. 7 Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help***."

The kind of fast that pleases God is one that reflects His desire to bring shalom, healing and wholesome living, to this broken and messy world:

To undo injustice.

To release the oppressed.

To feed the hungry.

To provide sanctuary for the homeless.

In essence, fasting is grounded upon God's compassion and generosity and aiming at establishing shalom in the land!

If you want to be a shalom-maker, type Y into the Chat.

God's is bleeding for every hurting and needy individual; fasting is done for the sake of doing good for the other. Being stingy with food to ourselves so we can be generous to others is not far from the sentiment God desires from people who fast. When we fast, we stand in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the needy, and the homeless.

In short, ***fasting embodies God's compassion and a generosity. And we fast for justice; and in the words of Micah 6:8, "to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."***

Let me quickly recap what we have learned about Fasting today:

Fasting frees us to pursue the way of the Lord.

Fasting exposes what is controlling us.

Fasting expresses our commitment to change in light of God's truth.

Fasting embodies God's compassion, generosity, and justice.

We are living in a grievous sacred moment; many of us are facing challenges of various kinds – spiritual, emotional, mental, financial, social-economical, relational, and health stress. This is the right time, the most opportune time, to fast. Practicing this spiritual discipline will lead you to a deeper love for God and others; you will discover new insights about God's purposes in this time of disruption and find your bearings in Jesus' story.

Many of us may not be familiar with fasting or haven't practiced this spiritual discipline before. We have prepared a Practical Guide Sheet for Fasting and you can download that on our website.

Remember: God is more interested in our attitude toward Him and our walk with Him, not how long you fast. Deliberately abstaining from food is one concrete, humble way to open ourselves to the work of God and to show our commitment and sincerity in seeking Him.