

Matt two weeks ago (recap)
Close and faithful

Fasting is about going without food. There's a difference between abstaining and fasting. Fasting is something that Jesus assumes His followers will participate in, however much and to whatever degree they are capable.

Today we are going to continue that conversation. Maybe some of you have given this a shot, maybe some of you are really resistant. Matt spent a fair amount of time digging through why we are hesitant to step into this practice, and why we must step in. Today I want to take the next step and ask an important question that might be sitting in many of our brains.

"Ok, I get that I should do this, or at least I'm willing to give it a shot, but what happens? What does fasting do in my life? What can I expect to happen in my life if I step into this practice?"

That's a good question, an important question. We do not want to be people who live our lives just going through the motions because somebody stood on a stage and said we should. When we don't understand what happens when we fast, it's easy to fill in blanks and maybe come to some wrong understanding that undermines the whole reason Jesus calls us to this practice.

Example-college. I had this experience (people dating and future plans). It was like some super Christian practice that would all of a sudden offer special knowledge of what God wanted for your life.

It was like a cheat code to access "super God mode" or something.

So it's important for us to understand what we can expect when we choose to step into the practice of fasting. I believe that we can discover what the effects of fasting will be by having a good definition of what it is.

Here's one of the best definitions that I think is really helpful in what we are talking about today. Matt mentioned it last week, it's been used by a number of different voices when it comes to fasting and gives us a great context: **Fasting is starving the flesh and feeding the Spirit.**

Ok before we even get to the fasting part of this, we need to step back and do some defining of what in the world the flesh and the Spirit are according to the Scripture.

Biblical explanation of flesh vs. Spirit-two things mentioned a lot in Scripture that often stand in opposition to each other.

Galatians 5:13-24

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. Keep in step with the Spirit. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

What is Paul saying here? He isn't talking about our physical body, that all this needs to go. What he is saying is that before you knew Jesus, your passions, desires, wants, and ideas were in charge of your life, but now that you know Jesus, those things need to get out of here and be replaced by the things of the spirit.

What he is really saying when he talks about our flesh is our desires that are out of whack—it's our desires under our own best control. It's the reaching out and taking. It's us getting what we want, when we want it. Some call it sin nature. (John Mark Comer, *Disordered Desire*)

Paul puts that into contrast with what he calls the Spirit.

Your strongest desire isn't always your deepest desire (as a Christian).
Strongest: flesh. Deepest: Spirit.

So, Paul is using the examples of our physical body and connecting it to this spiritual reality. That's why the concept of fasting is so powerful.

What do we do when we fast? We go without, we starve our flesh, with a focus on emphasis on the things of the Kingdom, on something we might call spiritual.

The same thing is happening on an internal spiritual level, on a desire level.

Right now we are in this kind of limbo, this mixed bag of desires, both the flesh and the Spirit, at war inside of us.

And what we need to understand, in this life, what you feed, grows.

We know this to be true in our overweight pets, our overweight selves, our bank accounts, our relationships, our habits,

So what are we feeding? The flesh or the Spirit?

I have just found that definition so helpful to make clear what it is we are even doing here with this whole fasting thing.

So what does starving the flesh and feeding the Spirit look like in our lives?

Three things. Not exhaustive, but common. There are some things that will happen in our lives that are unique to our experience and wiring, but I think that if you choose to step into fasting, the vast majority of us can expect to see these few things happen.

1. We are made aware of what controls us, good or bad. We become aware how much my flesh (distorted desires) is still in charge, or how surrendered I am to the Spirit (ordered affection).

You know when you take away the toy from a brat kid and they throw a fit? You know when you take away something from someone, their initial reaction says a lot about what's controlling them. When we are willing to practice fasting, we can count on our flesh throwing a fit. And that's ok, because it's a necessary thing we're taking away.

Because most of us live our lives with enough comfort and control that most of the time we can keep people from seeing what actually lies beneath the surface of our life. We adjust people's perception of us (not to mention our own perception) all the time. I think that is especially easy the more we have available to us (power, resource, privilege, security, etc.)

What is in us, that we are really good at ignoring and justifying, sometimes needs to be drug to the surface to be dealt with. Fasting very often will do that.

Richard Foster

More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface.

If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Psalm 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting.

At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.

In essence, it's getting to the root of the problem instead of just treating a symptom. Instead of saying I'm hangry, I just need a meal, or I just need some comfort food and I'll feel right, or whatever.

Also how cool when we notice that what comes to the surface isn't on that flesh list we read, but it's a characteristic of the spirit. That when we fast, fear isn't what pops up but peace is.

2. Our dependence begins to change

We are all dependent in some way. I know we hate to hear that as red-blooded Americans, but you can't get around it. Every single person on the planet is dependent in some way, to a government, a person, a job, and for every single one of us, practically speaking, food. We gotta have it, every single one of us. So we can be as independent, do it ourselves, freedom loving as we want, but when it comes down to it, we will always have to come back to get what we need from some kind of food. And that's ok. We need to know the spiritual growth isn't about becoming independent, instead it's about changing our dependence.

GPS airport run.

The only way I would choose to depend on something other than Google Maps, at this point, would be if Google Maps were removed from the situation.

That is one of the things we are doing when we fast, we are making the choice to remove something we are dependent on, to shift our dependence to something else.

When we fast, we physically practice the shifting of our dependence from physical food to a spiritual filling from God. We are saying that for this set amount of time, I will not depend on this food that my body needs to survive, but instead will choose to depend on the power and presence of God. That's the practice. What we can count on seeing then, in our hearts and life, is a changing of dependence from what Paul would call the flesh (control, pleasure, excess, comfort, etc.) to a dependence on the Spirit. And isn't that what we are after? A life that can't move without reliance on the Spirit?

Big themes of Acts

3. **Our entitlement breaks**

Matt used this language way back when we first started thinking through these things we have been talking about, ways to get close to and stay faithful to Jesus.

Reality is, just like all of us are dependent on something, all of us are entitled to any number of things as well.

There is this connection between the practice of fasting and the laying down or breaking of what we are owed, what we feel entitled to. In the most practical sense, if we have food

that's for us, and we are choosing to go without it, that's something we are entitled to that we are laying down. The connection goes even deeper than that though, and we see it in Matthew 4. (Matthew 4:10-11 as an example of Jesus fasting and laying down the very things He was absolutely entitled to.)

4. Intimacy with Jesus.

Fasting is just a practice. Muslims fast, Hindus fast, Buddhists fast. Your crunchy neighbor who always wears Birkenstocks fasts. The practice is just a practice. For this to make a difference in your life, it needs to be in this overarching pursuit of intimacy with Jesus. Knowing Him, syncing up my heart with His. I think that's why Jesus, of all the things He could have said about fasting, decides to address motive first.

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 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. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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. (Matthew 6:16-18)

We always act like all this says is just don't let people know you are doing this.

But what He is actually saying is bigger than just that. He is telling us don't get your motivations screwed up with this. It's about connection with the Father, it's about feeding the Spirit, not what you look like or how you are perceived.

We have to recognize that the practice of fasting is more than just about willpower. Willpower will only get you so far.

Willpower eventually gets overpowered by our flesh. We see it all the time.
Examples

This isn't just about growing willpower or self-control or self-discipline, although all that happens and is helpful. We must not miss that what this is really about is Jesus. Let Sunday school answers abound. It's all about Jesus. As we starve the flesh, and feed the Spirit, we make it possible to REALLY know Jesus, His heart, His mind, His reactions, all of it.

So as you practice fasting this week—and I would challenge each of us to do it in some capacity—check your motivation and then be ready. Ready to see what controls us and quickly surrender it over to Jesus, be ready for our dependence to change, and to be ready for our entitlements to get obliterated.

Because isn't that what we want? Isn't that what we are after in this life? That what is in control of my life is the Spirit? That I am utterly dependent on the Spirit?

INVITE FOR PRAYER

Prayer team up front or text "cpprayer" to 209-521-0181

EASTER

We're looking forward to gathering with you on Good Friday and Easter Sunday in just a few weeks. Be sure to pick a few Easter flyers in the Lobby and be praying about who you can invite to celebrate with us.

cmodesto.org/easter

CLOSE +
FAITHFUL

FASTING: STARVE THE FLESH & FEED THE SPIRIT

MATTHEW 6:16-18 & MATTHEW 4:1-11

FEBRUARY 13, 2022 | PASTOR KYLE BELDEN



PLEASE LOOK AT THE "LIVE IT OUT" SECTION BELOW FOR DETAILS ABOUT NEXT WEEK'S PLAN FOR HOME GROUPS WHO USE THE SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

FOLLOW UP FROM LAST WEEK'S LIVE IT OUT QUESTIONS

If your group met last week, was there anything you committed to doing after reflecting on Scripture during your group? Did you follow through with that commitment, what steps did you take (or not take), and is there any way we can help?

GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER (USE JUST ONE OR ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS TO CONNECT AS YOU START YOUR CONVERSATION)

1 Why do you believe we tend to struggle with the idea of giving something up that we are used to having?

QUICK REVIEW (OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE WHAT MOST STOOD OUT FROM SUNDAY'S MESSAGE)

Looking back at your notes from this week's message, was there anything you heard that caught your attention, encouraged, challenged, or confused you?

DIG DEEPER (OBSERVATIONS FROM THE SCRIPTURE OR COMPLEMENTARY SCRIPTURES FROM SUNDAY'S MESSAGE)

1 Someone read **MATTHEW 6:16-18**.

¹⁶ "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.

How can it be easy to get our motivations mixed up with why and how we fast?

Why is fasting an opportunity for confession of sin?

2 Someone read **MATTHEW 4:1-11** in their Bible.

What do we learn about fasting from the example of Jesus? Why do you think the devil came to tempt Jesus during this time?

What does Jesus' response to these temptations teach us about how we should fill ourselves when we are emptied during a fast?

As He was getting ready to begin His ministry, Jesus took an opportunity to bring focus to His life through engaging in this fast. But as He was depriving Himself of food, He was feasting on the Word of God. Because He was full of the Word, that's what came out when He was pressured by the devil.

Why is it important for you to fill yourself with God's Word during your fast?

Though Jesus' stomach might have been empty, His soul was full. This is the reward He told us about in Matthew 6; when we fast, we can have a greater experience of and focus on God's grace in our lives as we are reminded of where our true strength and true sustenance lies.

LIVE IT OUT (DISCUSS HOW YOU CAN LIVE OUT THE TRUTHS YOU JUST OBSERVED IN SCRIPTURE)

1 Why is it important to consider our motivation in practicing spiritual disciplines? How might considering our motives drive us back to the Gospel?

2 Kyle shared that fasting, when done biblically, does four things: we are made aware of what controls us (both good and bad), our dependence begins to change, our entitlement breaks, and intimacy with Jesus grows. **If you have fasted recently, have you experienced any or all of these happening as a result of the fast? If not, why might that be?**

3 If what we looked at tonight in God's Word is true, what needs to change in your life right now?

IMPORTANT INFO AND A WAY TO FAST AS A HOME GROUP NEXT WEEK:

- **There will not be a sermon discussion guide next week, as there will not be a sermon. It will be a panel discussion on fasting. Consider fasting for the whole day or for part of the day that your home group meets next week and break the fast together as a home group with communion and a simple meal. As you eat, consider sharing what God has been doing in you these past few months as we have been talking about growing in intimacy with Jesus.**
- Discuss if you want to make fasting as a home group something you do on a regular basis going forward. If so, choose a rhythm together, maybe each week you meet or once a month.
- ****IMPORTANT**** Fasting from food may not be the best (healthiest) idea for everyone, depending on their circumstances. Give space for people to instead abstain from something that is a sacrifice to give up when the group fasts.

CLOSING PRAYER

If you have not already done so, take some time to share needs and praises to your group so that you can pray for one another, both during your group and throughout the week.

NEXT WEEK: PANEL DISCUSSION ON FASTING

Take some time before Sunday to pray that God would use the upcoming worship service to transform those who will be there and watching online. Pray also for your time together as a home group, that you would be open to the Holy Spirit as you fast and that your conversation together as a group would be led by the Spirit.

PRAISE/PRAYER REQUESTS (TRY TO HAVE ONE OR A FEW PEOPLE PRAY FOR ONE TOPIC AT A TIME)

Use this space or the back of this paper to write the requests and find a way to share those with the group so you can be praying for each other during the week.

TIPS ON GROUP PRAYER

PRAY FOR ONE TOPIC AT A TIME: Anyone in the group is free to introduce a prayer request or praise during the prayer time. Once a topic is introduced, the group focuses on that request alone. Once it's covered, the group moves on to the next request or praise.

PRAY MORE THAN ONCE: If your group is focusing on one topic at a time, each person is encouraged to pray several times during the prayer time for those topics they feel most led to pray about. No one should be required to pray.

KEEP PRAYERS SHORT AND SIMPLE: Group prayer goes better when members keep their prayers short and to the point. When someone prays for a long time, it's hard for the other members to stay focused and long prayers tend to intimidate those who are just learning to pray out loud in a group.

How to Use this Discussion Guide

This guide is meant to serve you and your group as you intentionally create a healthy environment for Gospel community, growing in friendship, and becoming like Jesus together. Use the guide as a tool to help your unique group.

With that in mind, please review the guide before your group meets to see if some content or questions might resonate more or less with your group. Don't feel the need to ask every question during your group discussion. This guide is not meant to be something you power through for the sake of completing. Pick the content from the guide you feel will help your group grow in Gospel community. In addition, spend some time praying for your group each week, preparing your heart, and asking God for wisdom and guidance as you lead. We are praying for you too!

Visit cpmodesto.org/groupleaders to download the sermon discussion guide every week. Not in a Home Group, but want to be in one? Visit cpmodesto.org/homegroups and use the Home Group Finder!

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 6:16-18

Fasting is the spiritual discipline of refraining from normal routines of eating and drinking in order to focus on repentance or prayer. The Bible mentions fasting in the Old and New Testaments, but only on the Day of Atonement were the Israelites required in the law to fast (Lev. 16:29). Jesus anticipated His followers would fast (Matt. 9:15). However, the only specific New Testament references to later Christian fasting occur in Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.

Just as Jesus assumed His followers would give to the poor (Matt. 6:2) and pray (v. 5), He also assumed they would fast. He began each of these discourses in the same way: "when you give to the needy" (v. 2); "when you pray" (v. 5); "when you fast" (v. 16).

Why fast? For some, it is an antidote to the influence of materialism in our culture. For others, it is a means to demonstrate to the Father their earnestness concerning special needs. The approach of the hypocrites in fasting, however, was again to draw attention to themselves. By looking sad-faced and unattractive they insured others noticed they were fasting. Jesus ridiculed such theatrics as achieving the attention the hypocrites craved but missing the purpose of fasting. Don't fast for the wrong reason, He cautioned.

Jesus instructed His hearers to hide their fasting by grooming their hair with oil and washing the face. Keep your fast a secret, He advised. The spiritual discipline of fasting is essentially a private experience between the worshiper and God. The obvious way to safeguard fasting from hypocrisy is to keep it a secret. Then God will reward you.

Self-denial of any sort is countercultural in our day. Choosing to give up pleasure of any kind certainly gains notice. Our motives to live a life of purity and sobriety and simplicity may be genuine at the start, but we all are vulnerable to enjoying the praise of others for these motives. Remembering Jesus' teaching in this passage will help us avoid our own temptation to do good things merely for others' approval.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

4:1. These verses describe the moral testing of the King. Jesus' testing here is more of a powerful demonstration of His capacity than an "I-wonder-if-He-will-pass" kind of test. God Himself has recognized such testing as a necessary part of Messiah's ministry. Jesus' preparation for ministry involved a combination of pleasant experiences (the affirmation at His baptism) and unpleasant experiences (His fasting and temptation). God uses the same pattern in our lives, and we should be surprised at neither great outward blessing nor great trials in our lives. Jesus faced 40 days of direct confrontation with the archenemy whom His messianic ministry would destroy. Satan, the adversary, is always seeking to usurp God's place and oppose God's will. One practical implication we may draw from this passage is that temptation itself is not a sin. Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15; see also 2 Cor. 5:21). A misunderstanding of this defeats many people before they begin resisting temptation. A false (devilish) guilt grips them, and they begin to lose the battle before they begin to fight it. Jesus' temptation was a test not so much to see if He would fail (He could not!) but a "test" to demonstrate just how powerful the Son of God was, even in the face of the devil himself.

4:2. It is possible to fast 40 days without food, but not without water, especially in an arid, hot climate like the Judean wilderness. The understatement about Jesus' hunger is intended to show that Jesus fought His battle with a serious handicap but still came out victorious.

4:3-4. Satan's words in Jesus' first temptation indicate that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and Satan acknowledged the fact. This might be better translated, "Since you are the Son of God." See exactly the same wording used with sarcasm in 27:40. Satan was not questioning the fact of Jesus' Son-ship, but he was tempting Him to misuse it. In this first temptation Satan was tempting Jesus to rely on His own self-provision, rather than on the provision of God. Jesus often insisted He would do nothing of His own will. He came to do the Father's will only. This would have been a departure from the mission on which the Father had sent Him. Jesus would have been exercising improper independence. Satan's temptations follow the familiar pattern he used in Eden and which he has used ever since—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:6). "Try this good food (flesh)." "It looks good (lust of the eyes)." "It will make you wise and in charge like God (pride of life)." In a similar manner, Israel was tempted by their hunger in the desert to seek ways to provide for themselves. When they found they had no resources, they grumbled. God demonstrated their need to depend on Him by providing manna. Even then they were tempted to take care of themselves by hoarding the food. But the extra manna was always spoiled the next day, so they were once again dependent on God's provision for that day. Through this concrete demonstration, God taught Israel to be dependent on Him, in hopes that they would apply the same lesson concerning their dependence on God for truth, wisdom, and instruction.

4:5-7. The highest point in Satan's second temptation refers to the high southeast corner of the temple platform that overlooked the great depth of the Kidron Valley. This was a temptation to be "showy," to do miraculous works to draw attention. Again Satan used a conditional statement, "If you are the Son of God" (see 4:3). Again, he was not challenging Jesus' Sonship, but he was using it as a basis to argue to a false conclusion—that it is appropriate to "force" God into supernatural demonstrations of His faithfulness to intervene for our good. In this temptation Jesus was tempted to exercise improper dependence to "force" divine intervention. That is sin. Satan, in quoting Psalm 91:11-12, misused Scripture in his attempt to deceive and mislead. It was a subtle challenge to Jesus to prove His deity. In response to Satan's second challenge, Jesus took the matter back to Scripture and quoted Moses from Deuteronomy 6:16, which prohibited testing God in this way. Jesus refused improper dependence.

4:8-10. The third temptation may have been the most appealing of the three to Jesus, not because of the anticipation of ruling the Earth—that was already part of God's plan—but because Satan's offer would allow Him to rule the Earth without going through the sacrifice of the cross. God the Father had a plan for the certainty of the restored Kingdom and great glory for Jesus. Satan offered an "even better" plan (both deceptive and impossible)—a kingdom and all its glory, minus the suffering. Satan tempted Jesus to believe that someone else could provide for Him in a better way than God could. That is always the satanic appeal, whether it involves work, power, money, success, or some personal interest. Again Jesus reached into Scripture, interpreted it accurately, and sent Satan on his way. We see a personal lesson here. The Bible is our only authority for right living. Old Testament Israel had bought the lie that God had competition. Jesus did not. He would be mastered by nothing and no one except the true God.

4:11. Satan's departure from Jesus followed the King's authoritative command, "Away from me, Satan!" (4:10). It is ironic that Satan had just offered to be the benevolent master to Jesus, but Jesus' authoritative response and Satan's cowering obedience demonstrated who was the real Master. Thus the battle has begun. The rest of Matthew demonstrates its further development. Never again in this book do we see Satan openly engaging the King in warfare. But he has not gone away. From time to time Satan will try to turn Christ from the Father's will and the route to the cross. But we will also see the wisdom and moral courage of the King as He dodges every blow, even taking the offensive at times, and ultimately finishing with the decisive victory.