

 **Spiritual Disciplines: Fasting**

Lesson 17: Wednesday, January 19, 2021

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**TEACHING NOTES**

**INTRO:**

*The spiritual disciplines are practices we find in Holy Scripture that honor God in our doing and promote spiritual growth in the gospel of Jesus Christ among believers.*

*They are practices or habits that Christians prioritize because it aids us to cling more to Christ and grow in Christlikeness.*

**1 Timothy 4:7** …discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; (NASB)

**Disciplines are practices**. Spiritual disciplines are things you do.

Just as an athlete must train if they are going to perform on the field at any quality level, we who belong to Christ must train for the life and ministry He has saved us to and called us to.

The sad reality is that most of us all too often opt for the path of least resistance. Most of us struggle to go the extra mile without having to be asked or we struggle to do the hard work unless we have to. Our flesh likes to be coddled and it is very selfish and so most of us loath the idea of discipline all together.

It is not hard to see the evidence in this as most of us don’t eat like we should unless we are on a crash diet. We don’t exercise like we should unless we are threatened with illness or motivated by something else. Many don’t keep their homes, rooms, cars, clean and organized like they should unless someone else is going to see it. Let’s face it, our natural self really dislikes the idea of a disciplined life.

Before we jump into tonight’s discipline on Fasting, I just want to ask, **how are you doing at implementing the disciplines we have covered so far this year?** Because while most of us like the idea of growing in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, if left up to you all by yourself you are likely not very motivated to really pursue them with regular devotion. Or, maybe you have been very convicted or even motivated to get after some of them but the problem is, you go home and go to bed and wake up to a new day and week and life and not much changes.

This is because you must make time to plan, to evaluate, to implement if you are truly going to take on new disciplines and put away old ones. Brother/sister, the spiritual disciplines have to become more than just a good idea or a lofty ideal. They need to truly become new disciplines in your life.

If you are willing to make the changes and do the work you will see the sweet results of spiritual growth and breaking through barriers in your faith and life that you have been stuck in for a while.

I know you are busy with the house, the job, the kids, the cooking, the planning and attending of events but Christ is worth our first and best devotion. I am excited for this new year we find ourselves in and all that God has in store. I ask that you use this new beginning to really take some inventory and as Scott taught on last week, embrace good Christian accountability to grow in Christ and Christlikeness in 2022.

Tonight’s discipline is one that most of us know of but likely have not really studied and or practiced in our Christian lives. Hopefully as a result of our time together tonight you will have a new spiritual discipline to put to work in your life for the purpose of godliness.

To jump right in, **what is the spiritual discipline of “fasting”?**

***Fasting is a voluntarily going without food for a determined time for the sake of some spiritual purpose.***

If that sounds a little no descriptive it is meant to. That is because there are some variations of how, how long and for what exact purpose people decide to fast.

The general problem with a commitment to fasting is, we are a have-it-now culture and our sinful flesh is rarely patient or willing to go without. This means the discipline of going without food, something God designed to bless our body with energy and fuel, is something we can really struggle to embrace willingly and faithfully. The truth is, we love what we love, and we love lots of it. But this is not a lesson on moderation nor on regulation, instead it’s a lesson on intentional abstinence unto God exaltation.

While there is not a lot of didactic commands for us to fast, God has made it clear in His word that is a good and helpful spiritual discipline for our lives. Jesus doesn’t say “if,” but “when you fast” (**Matthew 6:16**). And He doesn’t say His followers *might* fast, but “they will” (**Matthew 9:15**).

With much of this discipline being mostly out of sight we really need to start at the basics tonight by looking at what the bible says fasting is, what it isn’t, and then some practical ways in which to make fasting a regular spiritual discipline in our life.

**EXAMPLES OF FASTING IN SCRIPTURE**

There are many examples in Holy Scripture where fasting is spoken of.

For example and probably most famous is Jesus fast as he begins His public ministry. Jesus went into the wilderness to fast and pray and we are told in **Matthew 4:2** that“…after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

In the OT, Daniel and three other Jewish young men patiently fasted “For ten days; only having vegetables to eat and water to drink” **Daniel 1:12.**

In Esther 4:16 we read that Ether requested that the Jews fast and pray on her behalf.

**Esther 4:16** Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do….

After the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus we read in **Acts 9:9** …for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

When Moses met with God on Mount Sinai it says that he fasted.

**Deuteronomy 9:9** When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water.

See with me how Fasting is often practiced in scripture at important moments or crossroads as a way to strip back the noise in one’s life so that they can focus on and seek the Lord.

With some examples of fasting throughout scripture under our belt let’s consider in more detail what Fasting is and what it isn’t.

First see that.

**1. Fasting is a mode of surrender during a time of request to the Lord**

In Old Testament passages like **Isaiah 58** and **Ezra 8:21-23**, we see the people of God fasting as a way of focusing on bringing their request to the Lord in prayer. When the people of God were serious about a need that they wanted to put before the Lord, they would often clear the deck by stripping back normal things of life, like food, for the sake helping them be all the more devoted to prayer and God’s word.

So, one could ask, **why does abstaining from eating assist our time of seeking the Lord?**It is because you are upsetting your normal routines and flow to bring about needed focus and attention to the matter at hand. It is a type of devotion and surrender that creates more attention and focus on the Lord. It is so easy to get busy with our days and since we are such creatures of habit we can often just get caught up doing what needs to be done and then neglect the time and attention we need to have on the matter before the Lord.

When you fast from food and then you feel the hunger pains, you are reminded of your dependence on God and you are reminded that there is a matter at hand that desire to seek the Lord in. In this, You are reminded to pray and pray hard.

In general this really has become an all too rare practice on any level compared to times of old or other cultures. In olden simpler days, the idea of unplugging from life and life routines and business to strip back and really focus on the Lord was not that uncommon. But you think about your own life or just about anyone you know in a modern setting and how often do you hear about people saying I am going to unplug and or retreat to the mountains to just be alone with the Lord. No, we are just too good as staying busy and plugged in. The idea of being away from our phone or other modern advancements just sounds crazy. But we must strip back and seek the Lord more than we do.

I am excited about Justin’s upcoming lesson on ***Silence and Solitude*** as he will help us dive into this needed practice of stripping back all the more.

But to get back to fasting specifically, **Have you ever had a big decision to make at a big crossroads in life and just needed to clear the deck to focus on making that decision?** This is what fasting is to intended to help us do. It is a purposeful stripping back, clearing the deck, upsetting the norm so that you can be reminded to give the time and attention that the topic at hand deserves or needs. To do nothing different is to be in jeopardy of letting the need to stop and pray to pass you by. It is often the enemies greatest win in our life to just keep us busy and moving and convinced we couldn’t afford the time or work it would take to fast and pray!

The discipline of giving up the food, something that is so central to daily living, is our way of setting ourselves us to do the business with God that we need to do.

**2. Fasting is a hunger for God.**

The unique aspect of fasting from food that proves to be so spiritual helpful is that fact that physical hunger makes a way for you to better hunger after God. It exposes our need and our dependance on the Lord.

So many days we can be guilty of lacking the gratitude and or dependence for God that we should have because we are so blessed with the things we need. By purposefully removing the sustenance that food is intended to give us, heightens our hunger for God!

Our hunger for God needs to be a fundamental thing that we never move beyond which is why Jesus doesn’t wait days, months or years into his ministry to practice fasting. Instead, he starts his time of ministry by committing 40 days to look to God the father in fasting and prayer.

In this, fasting is a way to say, **“God is better than …”.**

***“As good and God-honoring as good food might be, God is better”.***

We see this most famously in Jesus repones to Satan’s temptations following his fast.

**Matthew 4:1-4** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

*Christian, there* are a lot of days when we seem to be satisfied with the basic provisions and happenings of this life. There are a lot of days were we think physical bread is more important that spiritual bread. Fasting is a way to disrupt that flow and routine in order to remind your mind and soul that God is better. He is always better!!

The Psalmist says it this way in **Psalm 63:1–5**:

O God, you are my God; *earnestly* I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.

My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,

**Do you hear the holistic desperation David has for God above all else?**

The problem is: **Many days we don’t feel this way about God but we should.**

Fasting is a way to reconnect ourselves to this reality as it allows us to better hunger for God over any other thing.

**3. Fasting is a great way to focus on the leadership of God.**

The reality of life is that we all too often are content being at the helm of our own lives and calling the shots and making our way. But as Christians we need to be always and fully dependent on God and seeking His will and not our own. Fasting is a way to help us submit ourselves before the Lord as we seek His holy will and way!!!

In **Acts 14:19-23**, we see the early church leadership committing themselves to fasting as a part of the very important appointing and ordaining of church elders. Look at it with me..

**Acts 14:19-23** But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

In this, we see that fasting is a good practice when faced with big decisions in life.

Stripping back our dependance on food so that we can better put attention on prayer and study of God’s word allows us to more intentionally focus ourselves and submit ourselves on Him.

By clearing the deck in this way, we seek God to sustain us, and lead us.

It is a practical way whereby we live out **Psalm 46:10**. Be still, and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

Fasting helps us truly prepare ourselves for his holy will even when that might not be what our flesh wants. The truth is for those who belong to Christ is that we don’t want it to go our way.

We want it to go God’s way but if we are going to be in tune with God’s way then we must be still and know that He is God. When we remain busy, and full in the belly then it is much harder to really be dependent and desperate for God. Fasting allows us to intentionally make a way to put God at the helm and to set ourselves back.

One way I have thought about this is in how we discipline our children when they have lost their way.

Sometimes we will send them to their room or we will take away the things that are distracting them from doing what is good and right. It’s not that they don’t know what is right but they have become so busy and consumed with doing and going that they need to be reminded. The removal of the eating is our way of sending ourselves to our room or removing something central in such a way that he helps us be still and know that He is God. If we never do this we miss out on the extra quality of time with God that fasting often provides.

Now, there are a few key things scripture helps us identify that Fasting is not or should be not!!

**1. Fasting is not something we do for prideful gain or glory.**

Jesus speaks directly to this in **Matthew 6:16-18**.

**Matthew 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. 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.

Here we see their sinful and selfish motives of those that fast for personal advancement instead of growing in Christ or glorifying God.

Like other spiritual disciplines where our flesh can make it all too much about us and what others think of us. Their aim is to be recognized and respected by others.

But, this is a self-seeking aim for practicing this spiritual discipline and therefore misses out on what the very discipline is trying to do which is to draw our humble dependance on God and not on self.

He has the answers, His will is better than ours, it is for His glory we live and not our own.

Jesus says that ***the recognition they seek is their reward***.

Meaning it is all they will receive and it is a cheap counterfeit of what God has in store for those who seek him rightly.

For those who fast humbly and truly to honor and grow in the Lord will receive a reward of far greater value—God Himself, God who is the prize.

Our sin causes us to say, **“Look at me. Look at how spiritual I am,”** but this pride and showmanship is the opposite result of what fasting is intended to produce.

Fasting instead says, “I want to look at God, to focus on Him and enjoy Him.”

Fasting is a humble action by which we seek God to reign in our lives. It is a setting aside of self rather than a puffing up of self. David said, “I humbled my soul with fasting” [**Psalm 35:13**].

If what you think you are to gain from fasting is found on the horizontal than you are missing the blessing of the spiritual discipline all together. It is God we want to glorify, and God we want to direct our path. It is God we want to depend on and serve. There needs to be a humble demeanor that reveals read dependance on God for whatever it is that you face. If you are all to consumed in looking left and right then you miss drawing on the very one who can help guide you into Christlikeness. No, instead all you want is to look more like yourself.

I have heard of people struggling with this in that they will not be eating for other life or dietary reasons and then they will say, “look at me, I am fasting”. But the problem is while you might not be eating, you are not doing any of the very prayer and seeking God that fasting is intended to help you do. Therefore, you don’t need to advertise that you are fasting to get some kind of badge for your religious awards vest. This is to miss the point entirely. Fasting is to help us vertically grow and become more dependent and God minded, it is not to be used to advance our horizontal standing or perspective.

Along these lines…

**2. Fasting is not a way to power-pack your prayers in order to convince God to do something.**

I have heard people over the years turn fasting into an effort to turbo charge their prayers in order to put God in their debt. The thought is, by my willingness to fast I am showing spiritual fervor and commitment to God that he will take notice of and then be more likely to give me what I am seeking.

**Christian, We never put God in our debt, nor do we put Him to the test by our works.**

Any study of the Old Testament that seems to point to this being the motivation for their fasting must be read in light of the Old Covenant God made with His people that was unique to them and that time. The Old Covenant is now fulfilled in Christ, and we who are now in Christ live under the New Covenant. We don’t fast to convince God of our faith or fervor. We fast full of faith in God himself to do what He declares is best. We fast to get out of the way in humility and not to bow up our chest at God and say, ***“see how serious I am about this, you better pay attention”.***

The bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. No, fasting is far less about God’s hearing and far more about our praying and submitting to Him.

It is putting us in a proper place of humility and thankfulness and dependence unto the Lord.

I always like to say that prayer is much more about getting ready to join God in what He is going to do than it is about getting God to do what we want him to do. Fasting is an aid to our joining the Lord. It is another way we surrender ourselves to him.

Remember that fasting itself is not humility before God but should be an expression of humility.

There was no humility in the Pharisee of Luke 18:12 who bragged to God tin prayer that he fasted twice a week. ***David Smith*** wrote a book titled **Fasting: a neglected discipline**. In it he wrote, “by this we must not conclude that the act of fasting has some virtuous power, and that we have made ourselves more humble; there is no virtue in fallen man by such he can make himself more godly; there is, however, virtue in the divinely appointed means of grace, If we by the power of the Holy Spirit, mortify the deeds of the body (through fasting) we shall grow in grace but the glory of such change will be God’s alone”

**Practicing Fasting**

Now, let’s talk for a moment about what we do if we are going to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting. The first thing is to simply commit to what we will do and for how long. As we saw in the scripture examples at the top of the lesson, some fasting was for many weeks and others was just for hours or days. Some fasting was from all food and beverages and others from just from some food.

Most fast are from all food and people only drink water for basic daily sustaining. We can go a lot farther and or longer without food but water is a key part of how God fuels the body and mind that is needed on a daily basis.

When you are hungry or during times of your day when you would normally eat you go to prayer. You let the hunger draw you to the Lord!!

If you, for certain health reasons can’t or don’t want to fast from certain foods then don’t. Know that scripture is not super specific for how this has to happen. The practice of fasting is much more about your devoted time with God than it is about what you are deciding to not eat for that duration.

That said, it is also good to recognize that the discipline is intended to cause some pain and hardship. That is some of the very purpose of the abstaining, the very purpose of the hunger, is the need it stirs in you towards the Lord. You go to prayer when your stomach growls at you instead of just giving into the struggle.

Fasting is something you can start slowly and take on in smaller amounts of time. If you haven’t really fasted before then don’t start by committing yourself to a week. No, just fast for one day or one half day even. Put on the discipline of refraining from eating so that you can be devoted to prayer and seeking the Lord. Use that time to make time to be with the Lord, in His word, and in prayer. If you just stay busy to avoid the fact that you are hungry, you are missing out on the core of the exercise.

Next, **fasting is something you can do alone or in a group**. While we don’t want to pridefully be advertising that you are fasting it doesn’t mean it is not something you can do in a group or that we can do as a church family. The elders have asked you in the past when in a season of vetting a prospective elder, to join us in a time of prayer and fasting as we seek the Lord to affirm and confirm a particular brother’s readiness to serve the Lord and His church in this important office.

To rally together with other believers for a time of prayer and fasting is a way to be blessed together at the help that comes with not eating to help ones attentiveness and or devotion to praying time in God’s word. Maybe a beloved brother or sister’s life is in jeopardy or we are at a critical crossroads in life. Maybe the church or the community is in need of really breaking into its norms to seek the Lord and to ask the Lord to lead them unto what would glorify Him!

In conclusion, Fasting doesn’t have to be complicated or fancy. It is simply a way to strip back a central part of life to seek the Lord in prayer and His word. It is meant to be a help to our journey in this life as we look to grow in the Lord and our dependance on Him.

My hope and prayer is that if this is not something you have done much of that you would make it a point to start. Look for a time to commit to a time of fasting. Seek your group leader or others who can pray for you, counsel you and or walk with you in it. May this be a true spiritual discipline that blesses the people of Disciples Church not just today but for generations to come.

Let’s pray.