

A repeat of our disclaimer before we launch into talking about fasting this week: take medical advice before you start fasting if you have any kind of health concern.

Monday

Read Leviticus 16:29-34

This passage concerns the fast for the Day of Atonement (all of Leviticus 16 talks about the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur as it may appear on your modern calendar). You might notice that the word “fast” does not appear in the passage. You might have a word like afflict in v. 31. To afflict yourself in the way this passage is talking about means to be fasting, praying, not laboring, abstaining from sex, etc. It is God’s commanded way to the Hebrews to prepare themselves for being forgiven of their sins on the Day of Atonement. This type of fast is a way of depriving oneself of the normal routine of life to be open to the work God is doing.

As you continue to consider (I hope you started yesterday) what a fast devoted to God does or could look like, take some time to think about what is worthy of fasting from to devote yourself to God. Food is certainly a major one. If you don’t feel it is wise for you to give up food for health or safety reasons, how about your caffeine habit? Or television? Or shopping? I’m sure you can generate more options. The point is that your fast would be an actual sacrifice that is not simple to endure. It’s not worth fasting from ice cream if you don’t eat ice cream, anyways. That’s not a fast. What would a fast look like for you that would cause your mind, heart, and spirit to take notice and use that notice to pay greater attention to God?

Tuesday

Read Matthew 6:16-18

I like this passage from Marjorie Thompson's book, *Soul Food*, that I offer it to you again for your reflection:

"In a more tangible, visceral way than any other spiritual discipline, fasting reveals our excessive attachments and the assumptions that lie behind them. Food is necessary to life, but we have made it more necessary than God. How often have we neglected to remember God's presence when we would never consider neglecting to eat! Fasting brings us face to face with how we put the material world ahead of its spiritual source.

"Perhaps we can see, then, that the discipline of fasting has to do with the critical dynamic of accepting those limits which are life-restoring. Our culture would seduce us into believing that we can have it all, do it all, and (even more preposterous!) that we deserve it all. Yet in refusing to accept limits on our consumption or activity, we perpetuate a death-dealing dynamic in the world. That is why the discipline of fasting is so profoundly important today."

Exhibiting self-control and abiding by self-imposed limits are notions antithetical to our consumer-driven culture but essential in developing a deeper relationship with God in Jesus Christ. A relationship with our Triune God is not just another option at the buffet of religion or life. It is not another option to consume. A relationship with God that grows and is meaningful requires self-control (a central theme in the Apostle Paul's letters) and living intentionally within limits, not just doing what you want when you want.

How could you benefit from fasting?

Wednesday

Read Isaiah 58:1-12

Fasting is not easy and it's not meant to be. I can tell you, and many others can tell you, that the first day of a fast (I've typically only done a sunrise to sunset fast, but did it this past week for a few days) is difficult. You think about food a lot because food has a physical and psychological hold on us and, well, you're hungry. We organize our day around our meals and it's surprising how much we think about food – fasting or not. But, at some point during the fast (when fasting out of devotion to God), you turn a corner.

You become more spiritually at peace and often have an insight about God or yourself. And the first meal after a fast is glorious, no matter how simple – a strong reminder of the blessedness of daily bread.

If you fast out of devotion to Christ, you will have more time and more head, heart, and spirit-space for the things of God. You will have more time to engage with Christ and in practices that are life-giving. Fasting allows you not only to withdraw from a practice but to engage in others: prayer, bible study, and ministry with your neighbors. This is part of what Isaiah is getting at in 58:1-12 – that fasting isn't just about abstaining but about engaging in God's plan for God's glory. So as you prepare (or continue!!!) to fast, what could you do that would reflect God's will as we have it in Isaiah?

Thursday

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4

From Tony Jones in *A Sacred Way*:

Fasting is a spiritual remedy to what is, really, a spiritual problem. To fast show our reliance upon God for all things... it confirms that "man does not live bread alone;" "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty;" "This is my body which is for you;" and "I am the bread of life."

Fasting can open us up to the wonders of God and the truth of the words of Jesus above that can't be lived in other ways. When you aren't eating bread, the bread of life becomes a deeper reality.

A warning: a fast isn't a transaction. Don't fast expecting God to do your will - that's a fast that's doomed to fail. Those thoughts will cross your mind. But can you take a step to open yourself up to the wonder of fasting knowing that you can rely on God for everything you will need? And also dedicate yourself to the ways of God?

The ancient church father Abba John the Dwarf said, "If a king wanted to take possession of his enemies' city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a person goes about fasting and hungry, the enemies of his soul grow weak."

Friday

In preparation for Sunday worship, please read and reflect upon Matthew 6:19-21.