**Make Room – Week 2 – Fasting**

**Message Big Idea**: Fasting is not a magic bullet to get what you want, but a response to a sacred moment.

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:16-18, Matthew 4:1-4, Joel 2:12-15

NOTE: Everyone will receive a blank piece of paper for the Communion Moment.

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**New Year’s Traditions**

*(Series Graphic)* Happy New Year! Anybody have any family traditions for New Year’s? We have a few. My family is in Ohio so we always stayed up until midnight to see the ball drop in New York City. Of course, here in Illinois that happens at 11pm…which is even better! I can be in bed by 11:05!

Another tradition I started on my own about 10 years ago is to go to a coffee shop for a few hours on New Year’s Day to journal about my dreams and goals for the coming year. That time has become very special to me.

However, my favorite tradition is our family’s annual New Year’s Day skydiving experience. Here you can see me and my family skydiving… *(Picture)* Just kidding, that’s not us. Seriously, I can’t think of a more terrifying way to start the year!



Actually though, I came across several very interesting New Year’s traditions from around the world. For example…

* *(Grapes)* In Spain, with 12 seconds remaining until the New Year, people eat 12 green grapes. Supposedly, if you can eat them in the 12 seconds, then 12 months of good fortune will come your way.
* *(Fruit)* Filipino culture celebrates the New Year by serving 12 round fruits. The round produce symbolizes coins—which represent prosperity and wealth for each month of the upcoming year.
* *(Donuts)* Here’s my favorite though… the Danes eat a tower of marzipan doughnuts! A tower of donuts? That’s a New Year’s tradition I could get behind!

Most cultures and families have traditions surrounding this time of new beginnings. All of it points to this desire or longing we have for a fresh start – for something to change and improve.

As Christ-followers, I think we feel this longing. We long to see the world…and certainly our corner of it…made right.

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* As we begin this New Year, we want to make room for God to work in our lives. So many of us are asking him for breakthroughs. Breakthroughs in…

* Our relationships
* Our finances
* Our health
* Our church
* Our faith

I know I have some breakthroughs I’m longing for – both personally and in the life of our church. *(TP should share a personal breakthrough and a church breakthrough)* Personally*,* I am praying for breakthroughs in a few of my relationships. And for our church, I’m praying that every single one of us would be inseparably attached to Jesus.

Now, most of us have lived long enough to realize we need something more powerful than New Year’s resolutions to bring about the kind of transformation we long for. We need God and the power of his Holy Spirit! So, during this series we are learning to make room for God to do what only he can do.

Jesus taught his apprentices to engage in practices that help us make room. Practices such as repentance, prayer, Sabbath rest, and the practice we’re going to talk about today…fasting. In fact, at the end of this message, I’m going to invite you to join us in what is becoming a New Year’s tradition here at Community…21 Days of Prayer and Fasting.

**Fasting**

So what is the Biblical practice of fasting? The simplest definition I can give you is this:

**Fasting is abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose.**

The practice of fasting is not about dieting. It’s not a hunger strike. It is willfully setting aside all or some foods for a period of time for a spiritual purpose.

*(Matthew 4:1-4)* Jesus, himself, modeled this practice. At the very beginning of his public ministry, he engaged in a 40-day fast.

*(Matthew 6:16-18)* And Jesus also taught about fasting. He wanted his apprentices to fast not to impress other people, but to make room for God to work in their lives.

And yet, for so many of us who follow Jesus today, fasting isn’t something we practice with regularity if at all. Understand, it wasn’t always that way.

**History of Fasting**

For the first 1800 years following Jesus’ resurrection, fasting was a very common practice among Christ-followers. It was every bit as common as praying and more popular than Bible reading because the average person didn’t even have a Bible to read until the Gutenberg Bible was published in 1454. Fasting has historically been a part of the Christian life.

However, about 200 years ago something changed. And it changed dramatically! Author Richard Foster, who writes about spiritual practices, says:

**“I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861-1954.” -Richard Foster**

Almost 100 years!

So what changed? What happened that created such a huge departure from what had been a common practice for so long?

**Dualistic View of Personhood**

Well, out of the Industrial Revolution rose a new phenomenon in western culture where goods and services were now available to the masses. Consumerism was born and with it the idea of satisfying every human appetite became a *positive* virtue.

As a way to reconcile our faith with this drive to fulfill our physical appetites, we developed a dualistic view of personhood. **Dualism** is a belief that there are two kinds of reality – a physical reality and a spiritual reality – and doesn’t see a connection between the two. Maybe think of it this way…

*(Hold a clear glass with water) (Glass)* This is a glass filled with water. I am holding this as if it is one object, but everyone understands that there are actually two distinct things here: a glass container and some water that’s been poured into it. This represents dualism. In a dualistic view of personhood, I see myself as a physical body that is filled with a spirit. In this way, even though there is only one “me,” I think of myself as two parts. I see my physical self as distinct from my spiritual self.

However, author and theologian Scot McKnight notes:

**“The Bible does not say the body contains a spirit, like a beaker into which we pour a liquid, but that each person is a spirit and is body. In other words, Christian tradition teaches that there is a duality about humans, but there is not a dualism. We are one person with an inner and outer dimension, but we are not comprised of two parts–an inner part and an outer part).” -Scot McKnight, *Fasting: The Ancient Practices***

I know this is heady stuff, but it is important. Most of us still operate with a dualistic mindset and therefore we don’t connect our physical bodies with our spiritual selves. We see them as two separate parts of our being. Many times, we see our physical dimension as less important, disconnected from our spiritual dimension. And as a result, a practice like fasting seems unnatural and even irrelevant to our spiritual journey.

I (Tammy) will admit that even though I’ve been a Christ-follower for decades, I have always struggled with the practice of fasting. To this day, it isn’t something I’ve practiced consistently. Sure, part of that struggle is about denying myself my physical appetites.

* After all, I’m a big fan of breakfast…
* And lunch…
* And dinner! *(pause)*
* And of course, dessert!

But the truth is when I *have* set aside a day to fast, it really hasn’t been that hard for me to go 24 hours without eating. Sure, my stomach may growl. Sometimes I get a slight headache. But all in all, not that difficult.

The truth is my *real* struggle with fasting is that I have always had a hard time connecting what I am doing physically with something spiritual that I think is supposed to be happening in me. I find myself wondering...

* What is the point?
* What is this supposed to accomplish?
* What kind of result should I be expecting?

I mean, the other spiritual practices I get.

* When I read and reflect on Scripture, it gives me a chance to understand more about God.
* When I pray, it gives me a chance to communicate with God.

But fasting? Usually when I fast, I just end up feeling grumpy!

If you’ve ever fasting, have you experienced this?

I find it hard to understand how something I am doing to my body is supposed to connect to my spirit. Sometimes I feel like if I could just understand what is being *accomplished* by denying myself food, I’d be a lot more motivated to engage in the practice of fasting.

However, lately I’m starting to realize that this focus on “results” is part of the problem. Maybe fasting isn’t as much about a result as it is a way to respond to God with my whole person…inner and outer dimensions combined.

**The Purpose of Fasting**

You see, most of the time when I have fasted, I’ve thought of it this way…

**Longing 🡪 Fasting 🡪 Result**

I’ve felt a longing or desire for something to change and improve – so I’ve fasted because I want some kind of result from God. I want an answer to prayer or a situation to get resolved or a miracle to happen.

Yet, Scot McKnight argues that the men and women in the Bible didn’t fast in order to get a result, they fasted because when they felt a longing, it was natural for them to join their outer physical dimension to their inner spiritual dimension as they reached out to God.

McKnight writes:

**“Fasting is a response to a sacred moment,** (or as we’re calling it, a longing) **not an instrument designed to get desired results. The focus in the Christian tradition is not ‘if you fast you will get,’ but ‘when this happens, God’s people fast.” -Scot McKnight**

Fasting is a response to a longing we feel that joins our inner and outer dimensions in coming before God. You experience a longing, and the response is to fast.

As we read through the pages of the Bible, we find that people fasted in response to various kinds of longings. Let’s quickly take a look at four of them.

One of the first reasons to fast is a longing to **Return** to the Lord.

In Joel 2, the prophet writes: *(add)*

**“That is why the Lord says,
    ‘Turn to me now, while there is time.
Give me your hearts.
    Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.
Don’t tear your clothing in your grief,
    but tear your hearts instead.’
Return to the Lord your God,
    for he is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.**

**-Joel 2:12-13 NLT**

*(highlight)* ***“Return to the Lord your God,”*** the prophet declares. Have you ever been in a season where you are faced with the consequences of your decisions gone wrong?

* Maybe you’ve done something that you know was wrong.
* Maybe you’re stuck in a pattern or a relationship that you know is not good.

Fasting is a way that we are able to channel our focus on turning away from those things and turning back to God. This is the repentance that we talked about last week. Turning around and starting out in a new, better direction. It can actually feel strangely healthy to deny yourself after you have been wrongfully indulging yourself. Maybe right now you know there is something in your life that could use some fasting, to help you return your heart to the Lord. Fasting joined with repentance is powerful!

A second reason to fast is a longing to **React** to the work of God in our lives. *(add Matthew 4:1-2)* Matthew writes that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days. This happened right after Jesus’ baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Jesus was **reacting** to the movement of the Holy Spirit’s lead.

Sometimes we just sense God is at work in our lives, and a good reaction to his activity is to fast. Perhaps God wants to prepare us for something that we might not be able to see.

* Maybe we sense God is calling us to take a next step in our spiritual journey.
* Maybe we know God is leading us to make an important decision.
* Maybe we leave a Celebration Service with a sense that God was at work through what we heard and experienced.

A good way to react to what God is doing is to fast. To make room for God to continue his work.

A third reason for fasting is the longing for God to answer a **Request**. In the stories we find in the Bible, pleas for God to intervene were regularly accompanied by the practice of fasting. Whether the request involved a health crisis, a need for God’s protection, or a desire for God’s direction; the response was to seek God’s intervention through fasting.

This year a very dear friend of mine (Tammy) was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. It has spread to her bones. Apart from a miracle for God, her prognosis is not good. But I believe God is a God of miracles, and we are asking him for a miracle. And for the first time in my life, I have begun to understand how fasting helps me bring my whole self, not just my mind and spirit, but also my body before God in prayer.

When we fast in response to our requests, it can remind us of Jesus’ words:

**“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” -Matthew 4:4**

Fasting helps me express my whole life dependency on God.

Lastly, a fourth reason to fast is a longing to **Release** God’s power. One time the disciples had a difficult time casting a demon out of a little boy. I know… so many of you are saying to yourself, “This happens to me all the time! I’m so glad you are finally talking about this!” But seriously, Jesus’ disciples ran into demon possession regularly, and after casting demons out, people would experience immediate improvement and healing. *(Mark 9:28-29 include the footnote “…and fasting.”)* However in this case, healing didn’t immediately come, and when they asked Jesus why he replied: ***“This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.”***

Maybe there is some stubborn hang-up area in your life where you really need a breakthrough. Maybe it’s a struggle with pornography or some addiction of some kind. Of course, seeking the help of a counselor is important in these things, but fasting and prayer can be one of the ways that can help bring a breakthrough.

**The Result**

**Longing 🡪 Fasting 🡪 Result**

Fasting is a response that joins our inner and outer dimensions in coming before God.

And, there will be a result. When we make room for God to work in our lives through the practice of fasting, we will in some way experience God, which is really what we most need. We need to sense his presence. We need to know his nearness. We need to be close to him.

But all the other results we long for? We put those in God’s hands.

Maybe think of it like this… I experience a longing so I respond by fasting. This practice makes room for God in my life and helps me draw closer to him, but all the other results I long for?

**Longing 🡪 Fasting ( 🡪 Result )**

I put them in God’s hands. Sometimes I might experience an obvious result… like God answering my prayer or directing me to a verse of Scripture or filling me with a sense of peace. But honestly sometimes nothing recognizable happens. And that’s OK. I put the result in God’s hands.

Ultimately, fasting puts us in a position of surrender. We are giving up the very thing that we tend to rely on to give us life, and realigning our mind, body, and soul – our whole person – to God.

**Challenge: 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting**

*(21 Days graphic)* So as we begin this New Year, we want to invite you to join us for 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting.

*(Hold up card)* This card that you received when you came in explains more about this challenge. From January 6, tomorrow, through January 26, we are going to make room for God to do what he wants to do in our lives as we respond to him with prayer and fasting.

To take part in this challenge, use this card as a guide to decide how you want to participate in the fast. There are different kinds of fasts, different ways to fast. This card explains more about fasting and gives you some options for how you can participate. Personally, I am committing to do a complete fast several days a week and a sun up to sun down fast on other days. You decide how you want to engage in this challenge. If you’ve never fasted, you can start small with one meal or one day. Or if for some reason you are not able to fast from food, there are suggestions on the card for a Soul Fast. Whatever you decide, I’m excited for us to do this together.

During these 21 Days, we’re also planning to read through the book of John to immerse ourselves in the life of Jesus. Sign up for our Community Bible Reading plan to receive the daily readings. We also have a church-wide Facebook group where each day you can hear reflections on the daily readings from a COMMUNITY staff member and participate by sharing what God reveals to you. Make sure you join the group and invite others to join as well!

Our kids and students are also participating in these 21 days with their own Prayer and Fasting experience. Parents, you can pick up more info on this in Kids’ City and StuCo.

We’d love for everyone to join us in this community-wide time of prayer and fasting.

**Conclusion**

We all enter this New Year with a longing for newness – for something to change and improve. Sometimes we hide those longings under a thin veil of cynicism, but they’re still there.

We long to see God break through in our lives. We long for transformation.

So as we enter this New Year, let’s make room for God. Let’s bring our longings to him through prayer and fasting, and surrender to the work of his Holy Spirit.

Let’s let God do what only he can do.

**Communion Idea**

When you came in today, you received this blank sheet of paper. I’d love for you to write your name on that piece of paper right now. *(Give a few moments for people to write their name.)*

In just a moment, we’re going to celebrate Communion together, and if you’re ready to commit to joining us for the 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, I’d like to ask you to bring this piece of paper forward and turn it in. We’re going to collect these and over the weeks ahead, our staff and prayer team is going to be praying for you by name as you fast and pray.

But for right now, as we get ready to receive the bread that represents Christ’s body and the cup that represents his blood, look again at your name on this piece of paper. Understand in this moment, that what Christ did on the cross, he did for you. He knows your name. He understands your longings. He is always near.