

WEEK FIVE: "THE PRACTICE OF FASTING"

MONDAY**READ MATTHEW 6:31-34**

Dallas Willard was a Pastor/Theologian and Seminary Professor. Willard spent his life making "eternal living" a concrete reality for other Christians. He encouraged fellow believers to use their own lives to demonstrate Jesus' message: We must be transformed people living out a life reflective of Jesus Himself, a life of love, humility, and gentleness. He leaves behind a legacy as a friend, philosopher and reformer of the church. Here are some words of his about the priority of the Lord being foremost in our actions and the thoughts of our day, and how making that our priority, will provide us all we need:

*"The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to **keep God before our minds...** This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus **practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him.** In the early time of our 'practicing' we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits - not the law of gravity - and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we **take intentional steps toward keeping God before us.** Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings."* (Dallas Willard)

In what ways can you see the practice of "fasting" as helpful to you in keeping God the most important thing in your life? Could it be a habit that is essential to refocusing your mind on following Jesus and not worrying about other things? We do worry about so many things. We chase after things to satisfy our wants and perceived needs. Most times, what we find leaves us empty, and chasing over and over again every day. Consider making "fasting" a part of your life this week. Talk to God about this idea.

TUESDAY**READ EXODUS 20:3, ISAIAH 58, MATTHEW 4:1-11**

Why do we fast? What is fasting in the Bible? Fasting is a willing abstinence from food for a period of time. It is one of the most abused and least used of all the practices of Jesus. Yet for millennia, it was a core practice of apprenticeship. All the great heroes of the Old Testament fasted. By the time fasting appears in the biblical record, it was already a well-established feature of life in the Ancient Near Eastern context. When the Scriptures address fasting, it is often to criticize, modify, sanction, or appropriate behavior that is common to the human experience. But the Hebrew Bible also introduces particular theological emphases on dependence on God that manifest in messianic (*the coming of Jesus Christ*), corporate (*the church together*), and individual ascetic (*denial with the goal of spiritual growth*) themes. The concept of fasting in the Bible should ultimately be seen and appreciated under these larger, theological ideas.

By its very nature, fasting seems to suggest that something is wrong. Eating is a normal part of human existence, so abstaining from eating implies a disruption in the very rhythm of life. But it will be seen that the **Old Testament uses fasting and abstinence from food to point to something even more necessary for life - communion with and dependence on God.** The people of God in Isaiah 58 struggled to live out God's ways. They were oppressive to people, didn't take care of the poor, etc....yet they fasted and wondered why God did not bless them. Their sin went on, and fasting was just a ritual to try to appease God and earn His favor.

You can see here and in other portions of the Old Testament, that fasting behaviors were sometimes commanded, sometimes voluntary, and sometimes even ritualized, but the Hebrew Bible (O.T.) rather consistently portrays fasting in conjunction **with themes of disruption and restoration.** In the midst of disruption, **fasting comes to symbolize hope.** Through repentance and prayer, **fasting can signify the centering of the self in humility,** the renewal of the relationship to God's sustaining force. That was the

goal. As such, fasting takes on a dual significance of mourning and hope. Yet, the people were often times a mess when it came to true repentance and real "mourning and hope". They needed a Savior! The hope evidenced in the proper kinds of fasting in the OT is ultimately a hope in the fulfillment of the coming Christ. These Old Testament themes especially anticipate the New Testament theology of **fasting as a symbol of life eternal, a messianic fulfillment**, within the overall context of the nature and purposes of fasting in the Old Testament and ancient Judaism.

The first story we read about **Jesus'** adult life is of Him fasting for forty days and nights, like Moses and Elijah before him. The central characters of the New Testament continued this practice, as did the early church, which fasted twice a week - every Wednesday and Friday - for over a millennia. It's not until quite recently that fasting fell out of favor.

Now that you see a little of the Biblical history of fasting...what questions come to mind for you and the value and practice of fasting in your life? Does any of it's symbolism, themes, and significance in the Bible make sense to our lives today? If you are willing, **set a day and time span** for you to fast this week. Make plans now and schedule it into your life deliberately. If you are not sure yet. Pray and consider it seriously. (If you have health concerns, you can modify the fast to take that into account.)

WEDNESDAY

READ MATTHEW 16:24, 22:34-40, 1 PETER 2:10-11, ROMANS 8

We live in a culture not only of food, but of excess, luxury, and addiction. For so many of us, the desires of our body have come to hold power over us. In the battle with our "flesh," we have become its slave, not its master. Psychologists call it "*the pleasure principle*." For so many of us, the desires of our bodies have come to hold great power over us. In the battle with our "flesh," we have become its slave, *not* its master. You can see that lived out in many ways in our world. Obesity, Eating Disorders, Fitness obsession, addictions of all kinds (Alcohol, sexual, medication...you name it!)

We have established a powerful relationship to our food, our bodies, and body image. **Fasting is an ancient Christian discipline to break the power of the flesh in our life – our desires, sins, and cravings – and to feed on the Holy Spirit.** Like all the spiritual disciplines, it's *really* easy to lose sight of the "**why**" behind fasting. Let's focus less on tips and techniques, and more on the right motivation. Ask God to be in the midst of your decision to (or not to) fast. If you have medical reasons for not fasting, can you think of a way you can encourage the benefits of fasting in your life? If you have decided to fast, and have set a day and time span, remember to do the following: As you fast on the day you decide, each time you feel a hunger pain or think about food or take a lunch break (*with no lunch!*), use it as a **Prompt for prayer**. Turn your heart to God and ask him to starve your flesh and feed your Spirit. Use your imagination to "see" yourself drawing strength from God himself.

If you want a "value added" experience, here are three other things you can do:

1. Break a Habit – Identify a specify sin or habit or pattern in your "flesh" that you want to break. Spend the day in prayer for freedom in that area.

2. Journal – Take a little time for self-reflection. Get your journal out or go for a walk and think about what this Practice is revealing about you. Richard Foster said, "*Fasting reveals the things that control us.*" If you just feel "hangry" all day, or if you can't make it more than a few hours, ask yourself, "*Why do I feel this way?*" Treat yourself compassionately, as God does, yet honestly as well. Remember: the point isn't a guilt trip but freedom.

3. Read Scripture – "Feed" on the word of God, like Jesus did in the wilderness.

If you are not participating in this Fasting practice, can you see a way for something else in your life to prompt you to prayer, breaking bad habits, reflecting on self and God, and reading scripture? That's really the "**why**" of any spiritual discipline: **to connect with God in a deeper, more meaningful and regular way.**

THURSDAY

READ LUKE 5:31-32, ACTS 3:19-20, PSALM 10, PROVERBS 3:1-12

In which area do you want to hear God or be heard by God right now? Perhaps it's one of the five categories:

- **To repent:** Is there something from which you need to repent? Is there a sin in your life in need of contemplation and forgiveness?
 - **To grieve:** Is there something you need to grieve? Have you experienced a loss that you need to hold before the Lord in prayer and fasting, grieving with God's Spirit? This can be something in your immediate life – such as a loved one, a job, a relationship, or a failed plan you once held close – or something outside of your own situation – such as a natural disaster, a school shooting, war, racism, global violence against women, or some other current event.
 - **To cry out in crisis:** Are you in or on the brink of a crisis and need God's intervention?
 - **To change God's mind in a situation:** Is there an area of your life in which you want to see reality change? Do you need to wrestle with God about something in your life?
 - **To know God's mind in a decision:** Is there an area of confusion in your life about which you'd like to hear God's thoughts? Are you in the midst of making a big decision and desperately need to hear what God's wants to happen?
- As you fast, allow the hunger you feel to prompt you towards prayer. Use the time you would normally eat in communion with God, engaging one of the above conversations with him.
 - Sometimes God speaks to us in the midst of our fast. Make sure that, whether you were certain it was God or not, you write down what you hear. Spend time reflecting on these things:
 - Is what I heard something I find in the Bible? Does it contradict something in the Bible? (Note: God will never say something to you that contradicts what he has already spoken in the Bible.)
 - Invite someone(s) from your HCC Community to pray with you about what you've heard and to help you discern its source.
 - If I feel that God has or has not spoken, how will I respond? What are my next steps? Do I need to make fasting more of a habit in my life? Or is there another direction in which I'm being led to take action?
 - Thank God for hearing your prayers. Ask Him how you can be an encouragement to others in their walk with Him.

FRIDAY

READ MATTHEW 6:10 & PSALM 63

How do you feel today about this new Practice of Fasting? **Did you try to implement it into your life?** Why or why not? Did you find that it helped you with regularly praying - talking to God? Did you have more time to read the scriptures? What other ways was it helpful?

When we pray, following Jesus's example, it is for God's will to be done here on earth as it is in Heaven. But why does it seem to be so difficult to know God's will in the specific sense? All throughout the Scriptures, a great myriad of characters - both admirable and decidedly less so - ask God for things, and God answers. Jesus himself pleaded with his disciples to understand God not as uncaring or aloof, but as a loving father eager to provide for his kids. Complicated though it may be, we can wrap our heads around the idea of asking God for things.

Fasting on the other hand, we understand a bit less. In one sense, fasting is a means by which the disciple of Jesus prays with their entire body. After all, you are not simply a spirit *in* a body; you *are* a spirit *and* a body. The discipline of fasting draws our attention to both our spiritual *and* our physical being. In fasting, the great hunger of the heart and mind for answered prayer permeates the body itself. We believe that God is responsive - that He actually acts differently than He would based on the actions and prayers of his people. Certainly, **fasting is not a manipulative device** by which the fasting person assumes he or she can pressure God into doing something he or she wants. **Fasting is not a way we jump ahead in the journey of prayer, but the way we pray and how we do it matters.** Fasting is one important method of engaging your entire person (not just your mind) in prayer. Fasting fosters an internal intimacy, a quiet space, in which God's voice has more room. God is relational. Like any other intimate relationship, we hear one another better when we focus our entire person on the other.

Fasting is not a hunger strike, but it *is* a way of expressing to God our hunger for Him to move in our life! Spend some time right now thanking the Lord for the opportunity to know Him and love Him better through this practice of Fasting. Seriously think about how you can continue to make fasting part of your ongoing walk with the Lord.