

The What, Why, and When of Fasting

Great to see everybody this morning. **Happy New Year** to you. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Luke 6**. We'll look at a few other passages en route to that one, but we'll get to that one in just a bit. If you've been around our church for more than a year or two, you know that at the beginning of each calendar year, we like to do a teaching series we call *Formation*. And as the slide from a second ago indicated, it's a series all about the "art and science of how we change" as human beings.

And part of **the reason we do this** series at the beginning of each year is that it tends to line-up with a focus many of us have at the beginning of the year anyway. Namely, that of New Year's resolutions. **Show of hands: how many of you are doing the resolution thing this year? Awesome. Okay, keep your hand up, and I realize this is risky, but...if you'd be willing to share one of your resolutions with us? Like out loud? [...]** So we've got several people doing New Year's Resolutions this year. Love that.

Now, here's **the thing about New Year's resolutions**. **Generally speaking, resolutions have to do with things about ourselves that we want to change.** They are all attempts at becoming at least a slightly *better version* of ourselves. **Maybe we want to become a more physically healthy version of ourselves. Maybe we want to become a more emotionally healthy version of ourselves. Maybe we want to become a less anxious, stressed out, angry version of ourselves.** Or you fill in the blank. But **resolutions generally work from the premise that all of us want to change. We all want to become a slightly different, slightly better version of ourselves.**

And believe it or not, in *some* ways, that's **a goal that we share** with the Scriptures. The bible *also* emphasizes the importance of change. Take a look with me, for instance, at a couple different passages on the screen.

First, this is **2 Corinthians 3:18**:

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being **transformed** (in other words, **changed**) into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* Then there's Romans...

Romans 12:2:

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be **transformed** (be changed) by the **renewing** of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

That word “*transformed*” in both passages is the Greek word *metamorphoó*. It’s where we get the English word “metamorphosis.” As in, the process of changing from *one* form of something to the next. So evidently, the bible is a *fan* of change. For starters, the change we experience when we go from someone who *doesn’t* know Jesus, to someone who *does*—that’s the first step. But **what *these verses refer to is actually the type of change that happens after all of that*: the *constant* transformation we experience as we grow to become more and more like Jesus. That’s the goal for every single follower of Jesus: to look more and more like *him*, with each passing day.**

In other words, the goal of becoming a Christian isn’t just to punch our ticket to heaven and wait around until we go there. It’s to become more *like Jesus* in every single facet of our lives. It’s to become, to use *Jesus’* language: *disciples*. Look at how Jesus puts it a little *later* in [Luke 6, up on the screen](#):

*A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is **fully trained** will be like his teacher.¹*

That’s our goal as disciples of Jesus: we want to become more and more *like* our teacher, Jesus. And I want you to see this: **us being changed is not just important for us individually; it’s important for the good of the world itself.** Dallas Willard, one of my personal favorite Christian authors, put it like this:

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as ‘Christians’ will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.²

That is what the world needs: not just a bunch of people who simply *identify* as *Christians*; but a bunch of people who *live* as *disciples*—who have been *changed* by Jesus in every facet of their life.

So, *all of that* leads us to the question: **how do we change?** If that’s what *God* wants, and assuming *we also* want what *he* wants...**how does that process actually happen?** What does *metamorphoó* actually look like, in practice? That’s what this series we do each January is all about. And if you’ve been around for previous *iterations* of the series, you know that we have *primarily* answered that question with one word: we change

¹ Luke 6:40

² Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*.

through our **habits**. To unpack that, let's take a look at our passage in **Luke 6**, starting in v. 47. This is Jesus speaking, and he says this:

*[47] As for everyone who comes to me and **hears my words and puts them into practice**, I will show you what **they** are like. [48] They are like a man building a **house**, who dug down **deep** and laid the **foundation on rock**. When a **flood** came, the torrent struck that house but **could not shake it**, because it was **well built**. [49] **But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice** is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. **The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.**"*

So in this passage, Jesus is using the **metaphor of a house**. And he's using it as a way of talking about the type of *lives* that people lead. So in the story, there are two types of houses: there is the *well-built* house, and the *poorly* built house. And in the passage, there is only one difference given between the two houses. Did you catch what it was? The person with the *poorly* built house is the person who only "hears" Jesus' words. While the person with the *well* built house hears Jesus' words "**...and puts them into practice.**" So it would seem that **to Jesus, the difference between health and unhealth, maturity and immaturity, lasting faith and evaporating faith—the difference between all of those things is just one idea: practice.**

Which means—and I want you to see this—the difference between these two houses in the story **wasn't a matter of knowledge, or of information.** It wasn't that one of them *knew* things about Jesus, that the other one *didn't* know. Jesus says plainly in the passage that both people *heard* the same message. They both *ingested* the same information. **But apparently, information about God alone will not change you as a human being. Information doesn't automatically translate to transformation. If you want to be changed and transformed as a disciple of Jesus, you will need more than information. You will need practice.**³

And **that phrase** Jesus uses, "**puts them into practice,**" is pretty much *exactly* what it sounds like. It implies *intentional, proactive, and especially repetitive* action. **Becoming like Jesus is not just about what you know, and it's not even just about what you do once. It is about what you choose to do over and over again. That is what creates change in your life. That is what forms your character. That is what makes you more and more like Jesus. Not just what you know, but what you put into (regular) practice.**

³ I owe much of the language and thinking in this paragraph to John Mark Comer in one of his many "Practicing the Way" series.

To put it a slightly different way, a central piece of how we change as human beings is through our *habits*: the things we choose to do over and over again. A guy by the name of James K.A. Smith wrote a brilliant book about all of this quite a few years back called *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. And you could probably sum up the entire point of his book with this one quote: “the things we do, do things to us.” There is a direct relationship in our life between *repetition and formation*. We become the people we are largely based on the things we do over and over again.⁴

So, each year, beginning in January, we take a month or two to focus on one particular *habit* that has the ability to make us more like Jesus, by our participation in it. Historically, followers of Jesus have called these “spiritual disciplines” or sometimes, “spiritual practices.” But whatever you call them, they are things we do, repeatedly, that can transform us over time into the image of Jesus. And that, at its core, is why we do them. Not because we think we’re better than anybody else, not because we think God loves us more when we do them—not any of that. We do them simply because we want to become more like Jesus, and we know that a central piece of how that happens is through *practices* like these. Make sense?

So this is year five of our *Formation* series. In years past, we’ve looked at practices like *prayer*, *bible reading*, *rest*, and last year, *mission*. This year, we will be taking an extended look at the practice of (drumroll) *fasting*. ...And a hush fell over the room. That might be one of the only times in history that the word *fasting* has been met with a “woo.” I’m glad one or two of you are excited about it—that makes my job up here a little easier—but still, not a lot of people “woo” for something like *fasting*, do they?

And we can be honest about it: *fasting*, for most of us, probably isn’t on our top ten list of desired activities in life. It’s not something we just sit around going, “that might be fun to try in 2023: what if I just didn’t eat for a while?” Fasting occupies this weird space in our minds where we all know at least loosely what it is; and at the same time, most of us find ourselves somewhere between *disinterested in* and *opposed to* it. I think our gut response to the idea of fasting is “why? Why would I put myself through something like that?” Fasting is probably one of the least *understood*, and therefore least *practiced* spiritual disciplines among followers of Jesus.

So this morning I want to try and help with that. I want to speak to three questions we might have around fasting. First, *what is fasting?* Second, *why should we fast?* And

⁴ This is at least paraphrased from R.J. Snell in his book, *Acedia and Its Discontents*.

third, **when should we fast?** We'll spend a bit of time on each of those questions, and then we'll talk about *how* we plan to practice fasting together as a church family over the next month. Sound good? Cool. Let's start with...

What is fasting?

In order to answer that, it might be helpful to *first* mention **a couple things fasting isn't**, in order to narrow it down. For one, **fasting isn't dieting**. Now, I understand that could be a little confusing, since the term is sometimes *used to talk about forms of dieting*. For instance, *intermittent fasting* is all the rage right now. But at least as far as I can tell, it's not all the rage because people everywhere just really want to become more like Jesus and have been inspired to give fasting a shot. It's all the rage because nutritionists and medical professionals are saying that it *can* be one of the healthier methods of *dieting*. But while the *word used* there ("fasting") is the same, that's not really what the Scriptures mean when *they* use the word.

Secondly, **fasting isn't abstaining**. Over the years, *some* Christians have sort of *expanded* the word "fasting" to refer to anytime we *abstain* from certain enjoyable things. *A lot of people do this during the Lenten season. So they'll say they are "fasting" from things like Netflix, or TV, or social media—or even specific types of food, like sweets or soda or alcohol.* And just to be clear: *that* is also a *great* thing for followers of Jesus to do. But at least *historically*, Christians have called *that* practice *abstaining*. Not "fasting." **Fasting, biblically speaking, has to do specifically with food. And not just certain types of food, but food in general.**

So with those two things out of the way, let's talk about **what fasting is**. I'll give you a definition for us to use throughout the series.

Fasting:

The practice of abstaining from all food and non-water beverages, during a determined length of time, for spiritual purposes.

So **there we have it**. Fasting is when you go without food and any drink besides water, for a *predetermined* length of time. *Most frequently in the bible, it's for somewhere between twelve and twenty-four hours.* And it's done for *spiritual* purposes (in other words, something more Godward in orientation than just dieting or losing weight). **In the Scriptures, that is most often what the word "fasting" refers to.** Now, there's a *little* variation to it. *Occasionally*, it's abstaining from food *and* even *water*. And occasionally, it's for *longer* than 24 hours. But best we can tell, those types of fasting are extremely

rare. The *majority* of the time, it's consuming nothing except water, and it's for approximately that length of time.

That's what fasting *is*. So with that established, let's answer the question...

Why should we fast?

Here's **the main reason** I'd give you: **because the bible assumes that we will**. Now I've chosen that language very *strategically*. I've heard some people say "well, the bible never *commands* fasting for followers of Jesus." And while that's *technically* true, it's also a bit *deceiving*. Because **while the bible never tells us to fast; it very much seems to assume that we will**. I'll give you **two examples** to demonstrate what I mean. You can turn with me to them, or just follow along with me on the screen.

First, let's look at **Matthew 6**. This is **Jesus speaking** to his disciples, and he says *this* beginning in v. 16:

*"When you fast (notice, not "if," but "when"), do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full (already). But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*⁵

So **the purpose** of this passage is obviously to caution the disciples about wrong *motives* for fasting. But notice that **despite the inherent dangers** of fasting *hypocritically*, Jesus at no point chooses to *reject* the practice of fasting *altogether*. He could've just said "okay guys...here's the deal. Fasting is a totally *optional* practice, and since the temptation is to be self-righteous about it, let's just not do it." He *could've* said that, but didn't. *Instead*, he gives the disciples instructions on *how* to fast. **Jesus assumes that his followers will fast, and because of that, they will need instruction on how to do it well**. The *assumption* is that his followers *will indeed* fast.⁶

But even **if that passage doesn't do it** for you, take a look with me at this next one. This is **Matthew 9:14-15**:

⁵ Matthew 6:16-18

⁶ It's also worth noting that this passage mirrors the language from the instructions in v. 1-15 about prayer and generosity, both of which are still binding for followers of Jesus.

Then John's disciples came and asked him (Jesus), "How is it that we and the Pharisees **fast often**, but your disciples **do not fast**?" So if you stop there, it seems like that might *contradict* the point we're making. But keep reading... **Jesus answered**, "How can the **guests of the bridegroom** (i.e. the *disciples*) **mourn while he** (within the metaphor, *Jesus*) **is with them**? **The time will come** (i.e. in the future) **when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast**.

So Jesus responds by saying that his **disciples aren't currently fasting because** *he* (Jesus) is currently *with* them, in the flesh. 'But,' he says, 'the time *will come*' when he will no longer be physically *present with* his disciples. And once *that* happens, Jesus says, his disciples (and I *quote*) **will fast**. So let me ask: what era are *you and I* in? Do you and I currently live in the time where Jesus *is* physically present with us? Or do we live *after* Jesus was taken away? *After*, right? So according to Jesus, does that mean we *shouldn't* be fasting? Or that we *should*? According to this passage, it means that we *should*. **Jesus assumes that after he departs to go and be with the father, his disciples will fast.**

So here's **my point**: while there may not be a *command*, at least *strictly speaking*, that followers of Jesus should fast, it sure does sound like Jesus just *assumes* that we will. So unless there's a good reason to say we *shouldn't* do the thing Jesus evidently expects his followers to do, that sounds to me like we should, at least *periodically, fast*. So all of that leads us to the final question...

When should we fast?

If you're tracking with all of this so far, I think the natural next question to ask is "when?" Do I just wake up tomorrow and go "this feels like a good day to fast," and start doing it? Is that how it works? And then there's the question of *frequency*: *how often* should I fast? Is it like a once a *week* thing? Once a *month*? Once a *quarter*? Once a *year*? How often should a follower of Jesus *participate* in fasting?

And here's where I'm going to give you **what may feel like an unhelpful answer**. You ready for it? *It depends*. It really depends. Best I can tell, there's not anywhere in the Scriptures that prescribe a certain *frequency* for fasting. Rather, here's how the bible seems to answer the question *when should we fast*: **when a situation in life is deserving of it**. We should fast when a situation in life is *deserving* of fasting. Fasting is not so much something we choose to do out of the blue, as it is something we feel *compelled* to do in response to a moment or a situation *profound enough* for it.

An analogy might help here. Imagine I came up to you one day and asked, “hey, when do I put a spare tire on my car?” You might be a little confused by the question. Because the obvious answer to “when do you put a spare tire on a car?” is “...when you *need* to.” Spare tires are an *as-needed* type of item. You don’t just wake up one day and go “you know what...I need a little adventure in my life; it might be fun to put a spare tire on my car today.” No, you use a spare tire when the situation you’re in is *deserving* of a spare tire. It’s *similar* with fasting.

And just personally, I wonder if **this could explain the lack of biblical instruction** around *when* we should fast. We don’t get that instruction. In fact, I think if you asked a New Testament disciple of Jesus, “when should I fast?” or “how often should I fast?” I wonder if they would look at you a little confused. Because I think they would tell us that we should fast...when we *need* to *fast*. We should fast when a situation arises in our life or in our world that *prompts* that sort of response.

Now *obviously*, **right now, probably the majority of us** *don’t ever* feel that need. So let’s ask what types of situations *should* prompt us to fast. According to the bible, there are quite a few of them. So I put together a list. I’m gonna go through these pretty quickly, so there may not be time to write them down. But the slides will be posted online later today with the teaching if you want to go back and look at them more. But here we go.

Situations that prompt fasting in the bible:

- **When we’re grieved by our sin.** 1 Samuel 7:6, Joel 2:12, 1 Kings 21:27, Nehemiah 9:1.
- **When we’re grieved by the sin of others.** Deuteronomy 9:9, 1 Samuel 20:34, Ezra 10:6, Daniel 9:3.
- **When we encounter God in profound ways.** Acts 9:9, Jonah 3:5.
- **When we are in mourning.** Psalm 69:10, Matthew 9:15, Joel 1:14
- **When we want to worship.** Luke 2:36-37, Acts 13:2.
- **When God seems absent.** Psalm 109:24.
- **When we know temptation is coming.** Matthew 4:1-2.
- **When we need God’s help.** Ezra 8:21, Esther 4:16.
- **When we witness injustice.** Isaiah 58:6.
- **When we need clarity or wisdom.** Exodus 34:28, Judges 20:26-28.
- **When making important decisions.** Acts 13:2, 14:23.
- **When someone is sick.** 2 Samuel 12:16, Psalm 35:13, Mark 9:29.
- **When someone dies.** 2 Samuel 1:12, 2 Samuel 3:35, 1 Samuel 31:13.
- **When we want to change God’s mind.** Jonah 3:9, 1 Kings 21:20-29, Joel 2:12-16.
- **When we are fearful.** 2 Chronicles 20:3.
- **When we want to humble ourselves.** 1 Kings 21:27, Psalm 35:13.

That list, I think, gives you a picture of the **comprehensive nature of fasting** in the bible. So while fasting is *indeed* “a response to a situation that is deserving of fasting,” there are evidently quite a few situations that *fit* in that category, according to the bible. In fact, based on that list, I would go so far as to say that **at any given moment in our lives, there is probably at least one good reason for us to fast.**

So **what if** the next time you became aware of **sin in your own heart**, instead of just going “wow, that’s ugly and uncomfortable,” and continuing about your life...what if you chose to *fast* instead, and express your *conviction* over that sin? What if the next time we witnessed **sin in the life of a friend or a family member**, and were grieved by it, instead of going “wow that’s awful. Oh well,”...you instead chose to *fast* in response to that situation, and pray for the people involved? What if the next time **a friend of yours was sick** or received terrible *news* of some sort, instead of going “gosh that’s terrible,” and going about life as usual...we instead chose to *fast* and ask God to do something about the situation? And the list could go on. But **I wonder if the practice of fasting doesn’t actually open up some categories for what it looks like to respond in these “deserving” types of situations.** I wonder if it gives us a new way of *relating* to God that we weren’t aware of before. I think that’s part of what fasting is.

Now, that said:, I *do* think we **have to be cautious about asking one very common question.** Here’s the question: *what am I getting out of it?* That’s a very *natural* question to ask, especially when we’re considering doing something *new*. And *especially* when doing something new that asks something difficult *of* us, like fasting does. The thing we want to know, sometimes before we’ll even consider *starting* something like fasting, is “what do I get out of it?” And *if* we fast, we might even be inclined to ask that question after *each time* we *fast*: did I get anything out of *that* fast (I just finished)?

And it’s **not a bad question**, per se. **All of the spiritual disciplines and practices have tangible benefits to them: benefits we will likely reap if we persist in them over the long haul.** In fact, the next three weeks of this series, we’re actually going to talk, in *depth*, about several of those benefits when it comes to fasting. So the benefits do exist. // **But**, when the most pressing thing on our minds is the *benefits*—**when that is the first and most important question we ask—it risks making fasting into a transaction with God, rather than a means of relationship with him.** We must understand that the primary *motivation* for these practices is not the *benefits* we might reap *from* them; that’s icing on the cake. **The motivation for these practices is the God we have a relationship with. The motivation is that we want more of him, and so we will pursue whatever we need to pursue to experience that.** Does that make sense?

So **if you choose to practice fasting** with us during this series: do your best to *resist* the urge to constantly ask, *what am I getting out of this?* And for that matter, avoid asking that question when you participate in *any* of the spiritual disciplines—bible reading, prayer, sabbath, generosity, etc. It's not that it's *wrong* to ask, but it does risk misunderstanding what these practices are about.

It also risks misunderstanding **how they create change** in our lives. **So compare the spiritual disciplines to something like *working out*.** Imagine you go to the gym one day after not going for a while, going up to the owner of the gym, and saying “Well, I worked out once and I don't feel any different. In fact, I think I feel *worse*. So I'd like my money back—this isn't working.” The gym owner, if they're a patient type of person, would explain to you that that isn't how working out, *works*. It's not that you work out *once* and immediately see all the benefits; it's that you *persist* in working out, day-in and day-out, over the long haul. **And over *time*, you start to see results.**

It's **very similar** with any of the spiritual disciplines, including fasting. So when it comes to all the practices of Jesus—this one included—maybe we shouldn't ask after every time we do it: “did I get anything out of that?” Maybe it's better to *first* ask “is this something God expects of his people? Something God invites his people to participate in?” And if so, “how and when makes the most sense for *me* to participate *in* it?” Choose to persist in it over time, and see if God doesn't make us more like Jesus, little-by-little, as we do. Make sense?

Okay. So **before we wrap up** this morning, for those interested: here's *how* we're going to participate in *fasting* during this series as a church family. We've put together a PDF with some Frequently Asked Questions about fasting online at citychurchknox.com/fasting. We know fasting is likely a new concept for at least a lot of us, so we want to try to help with that as much as possible by answering your questions. We also know there are specific considerations for those struggling with body image or eating disorders—and even some other medical conditions. So we've put some about all of that in the PDF. I'd strongly suggest looking through that document before you begin fasting with us.

But for the next three weeks during this series, we're going to ask those interested to pick **one day each week** to fast. So that's no food or drink, other than water, for somewhere between *twelve* and *twenty-four* hours that day. **Now, I will say: you probably need to pick the time frame *before* starting the fast. Don't be like “well I got hungry at hour twelve today, so looks like I'm doing a twelve hour fast!” Set the time frame *beforehand*, and do it.** If you've pretty much *never* gone without eating for twelve hours, for as far back as you can remember, you might want to *start* with twelve hours. On the *other* hand, if you fairly regularly skip meals and it doesn't have much of an effect on

you, you might start with a *longer* period of time. But pick whatever time frame seems to make the most sense, and fast for that set length of time.

One thing we're **suggesting for those of you in LifeGroups** is that it might be meaningful to *fast* for the twelve or twenty-four hours leading *up to* your LifeGroup night, and then "break" your fast at LifeGroup by enjoying a meal together with each other. You could even *discuss* some of what you felt like you felt, learned, or experienced *during* your fast. I think that could be a really helpful way to synchronize an *individual* practice like fasting with your *community*.

Now: just in case you **heard that and had this lingering thought** in the back of your mind: *isn't that what Jesus says not to do: tell other people that you're fasting?* And the answer is *not really*. Jesus says not to fast for the purpose of being seen by other people, so that they'll recognize and praise you for fasting. So if *that* is why you want to fast together with your LifeGroup, then yeah—maybe fast a different day and do it in secret. But if that's *not* your motive, it can be fine to participate in this practice *together*, with other followers of Jesus. For instance, *many* of the fasts we see in the Old Testament were *communal* fasts—even fasts where entire *cities and nations* fasted together at the same time for a common purpose. So Jesus isn't saying that your whole fast has to be a complete secret or else it doesn't count. He's saying not to fast for the purpose of being recognized for fasting. Make sense?

But during the time you *are* fasting, devote the time that you would normally spend *eating* to some type of intentional Godward focus. So that could be **prayer**, if you've got a setting at work or home that will allow for that. It could be spending time in the **Scriptures**. If you're the type that struggles to block out time to read the bible on a typical day, here's what's interesting: by not eating 2-3 meals, you probably just created anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour in your day that you could spend doing that. You could **go on a walk, put your AirPods in,** listen to some worship music, or a podcast for followers of Jesus, and engage with the Spirit. You could **call a friend or a LifeGroup member** and use that time to encourage them, check in with them, speak life into them. If you're a **stay-at-home parent**, you could use the time you're not eating to be really *intentional* with your kids, care for their souls, or even just reflect on the gift that children are and express gratitude for them.

You might even want to pick **one of our bulletpoints from earlier** as a focus for each fast. If there's **sin you need to acknowledge** and repent of, talk to God about it during the time you would be eating. If there's a particular grievous **injustice in our world** that is troubling you, use the time you would be eating to lament it and ask God to intervene. If you're deliberating on a **big decision, seek God's guidance**. If there's someone you know who is

sick or struggling, pray for them or go and visit them. The possibilities, truly, are wide open to you. But if you're motivated, join us in fasting one day a week during this series. Who knows what God might accomplish through it.

So all the resources are up now at citychurchknox.com/fasting. Take a look there, and then, if you're willing, join us in this ancient practice from the way of Jesus.

We're going to conclude our time this morning—somewhat ironically, I guess—with a *meal*. **In the Scriptures, there are times that we remember Jesus by *not* eating, and there are times that we remember Jesus *by* eating.** During the next few songs, you are invited to come to the tables together and take of the bread and the cup. This meal is a reminder of what makes a relationship with God possible in the *first* place: the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus on the cross. So any and all followers of Jesus in the room are invited to participate with us in remembering that as an act of worship.

Let me pray for us and we'll do that.