

To Reset Our Relationship with Food
Fasting - CityKnox
Ephesians 2
1/15/22

Introduction

Ephesians 2.

This past summer I was spending time with two of your pastors – Kent and Jeff – in the mountains of NC. We do a retreat every other year for the Grassroots Network - which is a network of churches that connect us together - us meaning City Church and Citizens Church, the community I lead in CLT.

And Kent was telling me about this next practice you all were stepping into together for 2023 and about kind of where they wanted to head with the series and all of that, and I'm gonna be honest – I can't really remember if he invited me or if I invited myself – but when he mentioned wanting to do a week on fasting and our relationship to food and our bodies I was so excited. Because this topic for me is something I care so deeply about. It is something that is near and dear to my heart.

Fasting and our relationship to food and our bodies is sort of an intertwining of my own story both as a follower of Jesus and as a pastor.

PASTOR. I have a deep pastoral burden to help lead followers of Jesus into a flourishing life with God through the spiritual practices – rhythms of their lives such as Scripture, prayer, silence and solitude, sabbath, hospitality – these sort of core practices of discipleship to Jesus. As we've been planting our church over the past 2 years we've just decided as a pastoral team to give ourselves fully to this work of helping people know and follow Jesus. We've architected our whole church around these core practices of spiritual formation – learning to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did such that we are formed more into the image of Christ – including fasting.

PERSONAL. But I also have a deep burden in this space of unhealthy relationships to food and our bodies because of my own story. I have spent most of my life in the categories of overweight or obese. I have memories of struggling with how I think about my body as young as 8 or 9 years old. Stories I could tell of the way I treated myself or was treated by others.

In **high school** my relationship with food primarily took the form of **binging and overeating**. My eating habits were compulsive and emotionally unhealthy. I spent the vast majority of my day thinking about food - whether that be what I wanted to eat, or feeling bad over what I did eat. I ate for comfort and security, not to keep my body running with the nutrients it needed. I overate often for breakfast, and for lunch. I would stop at a favorite fast food place on the way home for an afternoon snack, overeat for dinner, then have another large snack or a full meal at waffle house with friends before bed.

In **college**, however, that started to shift. For a number of different reasons, sort of without trying I lost 75 lbs my first semester. I remember going to put my jeans on the first cold day in South Carolina, so like mid-December, and them literally falling straight off. And I remember that feeling like it was yesterday, but a part of me just felt whole. It wasn't just a difference in my body, it was like my entire view of self worth had changed.

Until the weight loss stopped and I stalled out. Now what was I going to do? My new value of self-worth had been wrapped up in my new projected self-image, but what was I going to do now that I wasn't losing anymore weight? What was I supposed to do now that I was physically skinnier - but still felt just as insecure about my body and just as obsessive towards food?

And that began for me what I would really say was a multi-year battle with what clinicians would define as **anorexia nervosa** - self starvation with the goal of weight loss. I simply stopped eating any meaningful amount of calories. I became obsessive. I tested my body to see how much cardio I could do in a day and how little I could eat without having any repercussions on my school or work.

At my lowest point over the course of those couple of years I was spending upwards of 3-4 hours in the gym and would limit myself to a granola bar or two per day.

And while the Lord has brought tremendous amounts of healing and redemption to my story (which I'll get into near the end) – I'd be lying if I said an unhealthy relationship with my body or with food doesn't still plague me today. A few weeks ago our church moved into a new facility for our Sunday Gatherings. And I was watching back the sermon video recording (which I don't normally do, because it just feels strange to watch myself preach) but I wanted to see how the new set up looked. And I remember the video started and my first exact thought was - man I do not like how my body looks.

And so I say all of that to say this – **I'm here as someone very passionate about this spiritual practice of fasting from food and finding a place for it in our lives as followers of Jesus and yet very much on this journey of struggle and redemption and healing in my own relationship with food and my body.**

So maybe you're here and you're trying to wrestle with how to step into this practice yourself.

- Maybe anorexia or bulimia is a part of your present or past reality and you're trying to figure out what fasting means for you as a follower of Jesus.
- Maybe you're struggling with the opposite - compulsive or emotional overeating or binging - and you're not even sure fasting is possible for you.

But I also think it's worth noting that you don't have to have a clinical diagnosis or be limiting yourself to 200 calories a day or eating 10,000 calories a day to struggle with an unhealthy relationship to food. I think a lot of us, maybe even more than are willing to admit, struggle in some way, shape, or form with our relationship to our food and our bodies.

This is not just a "female" issue. This is not just a clinical issue for extreme cases. There's a whole spectrum you can be on in this.

- Maybe it's that sort of underlying feeling of guilt after that meal out with friends.
- Maybe it's that overarching experience of shame after "eating more than I should have over the holidays."
- Maybe it's the grimace when the first thing you look at in the group photo is your body.
- Maybe it's reaching for the ice cream carton or the McDonalds burger when you're sad and just want a pick me up.

All of these can be evidences of an unhealthy relationship with food in various ways and in varying amounts.

So wherever you're at with this, whether you are clinically diagnosed, struggle in some way shape or form, or odds are that someone in your LG or family or friend circle struggles with this, I want to be helpful to us this morning and ask for a lot of grace from you as we wade into the Scriptures together.

Why Fasting From Food Matters

My goal for us today is to answer this very simple and yet wondrously complex question – **How do I fast as a follower of Jesus if I struggle with an unhealthy relationship to food?**

Now let me just be straightforward and direct about what I don't think the answer is – ***The answer is not simply - fast from something besides food.***

Kent said this week 1 - but **the biblical idea of fasting, everytime it is spelled out in the scriptures, is intentionally going without food and non-water drink for a determined length of time for spiritual purposes.**

So we can't just have a theology of fasting that says - "pick something else to fast from and call it good." There's more for us here as followers of Jesus – have to wrestle with this...

Ephesians 2

And I think **Ephesians 2** provides an excellent blueprint for doing so. Hopefully you're there by now. I want to give us, from the passage and from my own life, **3 guiding principles** to how to step into this practice for those of us who struggle in the areas of food and body image, and then I'll land with some application at the end.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Alright pause there.

3 Guiding Principles for Fasting When you Struggle with Food and Body Image:

1. Recognize Your Enemies.

Paul says - before you met Jesus, before He saved you, changed you, gave you a new heart, all of those incredible beautiful realities we have in the gospel - you were dead in your sin and enslaved by three particular things – what theologians throughout church history have called **the 3 enemies of the soul.**

There are 3 consistent and constant enemies to you before you are and now currently a Christian to keep you from walking closely with Christ. Paul explicitly names them in this passage - the world, the flesh, and the devil.

All of them are working against you to lead to an unhealthy relationship with food.

Stick with me, let me show you what I mean.

The Devil

The devil, or satan, is not like the pitchfork and horns guy from disney cartoons. The Scriptures call him the angel of light who first and foremost is a liar or deceiver. Satan in the original Hebrew means accuser - he lives to lie to you and accuse you and convince you of unrealities. Jesus in John 8 says the devil is the father of lies and a liar from the beginning.

And his goal in his lying is not just to get you to believe stupid things. His goal is to deceive you into not believing the goodness and kindness of God towards.

How? Through deceptive questions.

Think about Genesis 3. Devil shows up, with deceptive questions to Adam and Eve getting them to question the goodness and kindness of God – “Did God really say? Don’t you think he’s withholding from you?”

And he does the same thing today when it comes to food and our bodies:

- Shouldn’t you feel bad about that pizza you ate last night?
- Do you see how you look in that picture?
- Don’t you think the reason you’re not dating anyone is because of your size?
- Aren’t you kind of sad right now? Don’t you think pizza sounds better than prayer? You don’t really need community right, you need cake.

Ok, he doesn’t necessarily alliterate like that, but you get my point. Those are deceptive questions to get you to doubt what God has declared over you in Christ Jesus.

But the power in lies is that there’s a part of us that wants to believe them. If a lie is not believable, it will have no power over you.

For example – if you were to come to me and – Tim, don’t you think your life would be better and you would be happier as a Tennessee Football Fan? That question does not deceive me because it’s just simply unbelievable. Easy answer...no. never.

But if you were to say - don’t you think your life would be better and you would be happier if you could actually grow a beard like Kent? Well then now we’re talking.

Listen here’s my point – The deceptive questions of the devil have power because they are compelling. And they’re compelling because they speak to a part of us called “the flesh”, our second enemy.

The Flesh

Kent hit on this last week - The flesh is not like your skin. The flesh in the Scriptures is the operating system within you that defaults to life without God.

It’s that carnal pull within you that makes you want to operate independently from God and opposed to God.

What the flesh is shown to do, time and time again in the Scriptures, is pull you to find your identity, value, meaning, forgiveness, peace, joy and life - apart from God.

So you’ve got the devil with deceptive questions - Don’t you think you’re defined by what you look like and how you eat or don’t eat? Your flesh grabs onto this - yes! A way to justify and save myself and find peace and life apart from God.

And then all of this is rehearsed and reinforced by...

The World

The prevailing narratives of the society around you.

Which in case you haven’t noticed, the world is incredibly confusing in how it talks about food and bodies. Our culture is an incredibly difficult one to live in and develop a healthy relationship to food and our bodies.

Our culture incredibly values good and delicious food. And incredibly values a certain standard of beauty and fitness.

Pastor Josh Porter, who has written and taught a ton on fasting and spiritual formation, says - **“Bodily idolatry in America is a monster with two heads.”**

Think about your experience of checking out at a grocery store (I know we all do instacart delivery or pickup now but try to remember 2019 ok?). Two magazine covers right next to each other. The first - “5-ingredient cheesecake recipe to wow your friends and family this holiday season!”. Right next to it - “6 steps to Chris Hemsworth abs.” Which, just for the record - those two things don’t coexist in my world.

And I don’t know about Knoxville, but Charlotte is full of these two competing messages. We love our food. New restaurants every single day - steak houses, taco joints, brunch. Everyone in Charlotte is ridiculously obsessed with bottomless mimosas, it’s a problem. AND gym culture is HUGE in my city. Eat wonderful, delicious foods AND look a particular way with a particular body.

And this is all normal and it’s all setting you up for an unhealthy relationship with food - where you’re both missing out if you don’t try the latest and greatest or always eat the most incredible food every day and missing out if you don’t look a particular way, size, or shape. So feel shame and guilt because that will keep you coming back for more gym memberships and more dinners out.

Here’s how I would summarize all of this for us:

Deceitful ideas (the devil speaking over you - you are as valuable as the number on the scale or the reflection in the mirror - food or lack thereof is where salvation - aka peace, joy, and hope is found) **that play to disordered desires** (how do I have value and worth apart from God), **normalized by a sinful society** (guilt and shame for the ways you’re not quite literally measuring up).

Here’s my point – recognize your enemies. Your enemy in your struggle with food is not food. Your enemy your struggle with your body is not your body. Your enemy is not the stubborn pounds you can’t seem to get rid of you. Your enemy is not your inability to resist cravings. Your enemy is not your eating disorder.

The lies that get perpetuated in our struggles with food is that if we lose the pounds or if we get our eating under control, then we won’t struggle anymore. But that’s not true, because that’s not what’s truly attacking us underneath the surface.

You have other enemies - the world, the flesh, the devil – All of which are enemies to your soul to keep you from a flourishing life with Jesus and the ability to fast in a way that honors God, honors your humanity, and honors your body.

So what do we do with that? Keep reading Ephesians 4...Notice the very specific verb tense... that is who Paul says you were...not who you are now in Christ...

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

2. Identify your false gospel.

Paul lays the gospel out before the church at Ephesus - you have been saved by grace through faith. This is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. You cannot save yourself! Which is a message that if you read through the NT he feels the need to repeat over and over and over again.

He says this in **Galatians 5:**

1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

These people had received the good news of Jesus - this gospel that they are forgiven of their sins, justified before God, declared righteous and holy and welcomed and loved and accepted by God, not because of anything they have done or could do but only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But now, these false teachers have entered into the church and they're preaching a Jesus-and message. That it's not Jesus that saves you but Jesus-and something else. Specifically for these people Jesus-and circumcision. Which is a whole issue that is way more than we have time to deal with but the crucial point was this – false teachers were telling this church they must add something onto their faith to make them right with God. To give them salvation. And the Galatians bought it hook, line, and sinker.

Yes! Give us something we can do. Give us something we can control. Give us a way to justify ourselves. These people were seeking salvation. Seeking to find a way to prove themselves worthy of God's love. To satisfy the gnawings of their conscience, to silence their shame and guilt. To **be ok + good enough** – these universal longings of the human heart.

And Paul says – that is a yoke of slavery. You were never meant to carry the burden of justifying yourself. That is not a weight you can or should carry.

Which we can do in a whole host of ways besides food, right?

- You are what you do for work.
- You are the family that you have.
- You are your relationship status.
- If you had more money you'd be more at peace.
- If you were married you'd be content.
- If you could just live into your carnal pleasures, you'd find happiness.

And it works the exact same way in our disordered relationship with food and our bodies.

So much of our unhealthy relationship to food involves the creating, and following or breaking of rules we have created to gain acceptance, approval, joy, peace, and worth outside of the gospel.

For example:

- When we starve ourselves or severely limit our caloric intake - that is us creating and following rules we have created around how much we can or can't eat, and how much we can or can't weigh to gain acceptance, or approval or worth - whether that be from ourselves and our own standards, based on the standards of others, or whatever the case may be.
- When we grimace at our bodies in that photo, that is us creating and following rules we have created around how we are supposed to look or not look to gain acceptance, or approval or worth - whether that be from ourselves and our own standards, based on the standards of others, or whatever the case may be.

- When we run to food after a break up, or a hard day, or as a little midday pick me up, that is us creating and following our own rules for how to find joy, peace, and life outside of God.

Or if I could put it another way, the question we must wrestle with at the base level of our issues with food is - **How are we trying to save ourselves and find peace through our eating habits?"**

Counselor Ed Welch - "Every time you starve, every time you binge, you are saying something. What is it?"

All of it is an attempt to do what humanity has tried to do from the very beginning - **restore a right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with each other.**

It's a false gospel we must identify and work to root out with the true reality - that we are saved by grace through faith.

- No number on the scale or clothing size can save us.
- No perfect day of caloric intake and macro nutrients can save us.
- No Cruze Farm ice cream cone can bring us lasting peace.
- No Stock & Barrel burger can numb your shame and guilt forever.

Jesus saves us. Jesus gives us identity.

Which is point 3.

3. Live into your identity and position in Christ.

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This is a present reality. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places - meaning even right now, we share in everything that belongs to Jesus.

- We are children of God, with Jesus.
- We are recipients of an eternal inheritance, with Jesus.
- We are secure and never going to be outside of the family or hand of God ever again, with Jesus.

Can you see the freedom offered to you in this reality?

- Yeah, the number on the scale isn't what I wish it was – but I'm seated in the heavenly places with Christ!
- Yeah, I ate way more than I should have last night - but I'm seated in the heavenly places with Christ!
- I'm so tempted to run to food for comfort right now, but I don't have to - I'm seated in the heavenly places with Christ!
- This disorder is trying to lay a claim on my identity - but I'm seated in the heavenly places with Christ.

This is not ultimate for me. This is not the final story for me. I'm in Christ!

Fasting

Now, all of that I hope is helpful for how to process through and begin to see our struggles with food through the lens of Christ and His gospel.

But what does that have to do with fasting? How do I then begin to step into this practice even on this long journey of healing?

We'll think back to week 1, when Kent answered the question *when do we fast* by saying the answer to that question in the Scriptures is *when a situation in life is deserving of it*. He said - "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."

And we saw that some of the situations in Scripture that prompt fasting include:

- Being grieved by sin.
- Living in a time of mourning.
- When we need strength to fight temptation.
- When we are afraid.

I wonder – do any of those sound like the state of your soul when you're struggling with food and body image? I know it does for me. Grief, temptation, fear, mourning - what does the Bible say to do? *To fast and pray and see what God might do.*

So here's the key:

Rather than - NOT fasting because of your unhealthy relationship with food OR Fasting DESPITE your unhealthy relationship with food.

May it be possible to see fasting as A MEANS by which God might continue to sanctify you in your relationship with food.

Because fasting is not actually about food, it's about God. It's learning and being shaped and molded, through a physical act of restraint, to gaze on Christ more fully in prayer.

Might fasting actually be a tool in the hand of our mighty God and His Sanctifying Holy Spirit to form you more and more into health in how you relate to food and your body.

A means by which you learn to fight for more and more health in your daily relationship to food and your body.

Practicals

So practically, how do we begin to take this step? Let me close with just a few brief action steps I've seen be fruitful in my life.

1. Bring your struggle to others.

Don't walk this journey alone. I kept my own struggles with anorexia hidden for 2 years. I was convinced it wasn't a "guy issue", it was manageable, it wasn't going to continue. Those are all lies and lies grow in the darkness.

We're invited time and time again in the Scriptures to bring it into the light. James says when we confess our sins and struggles to one another and pray for one another – healing is on the other side.

You don't have to walk this alone.

2. Fast in community.

I love that one of the things y'all are doing in this series is fasting as Lifegroups. Once you bring folks into the struggle, make a plan to either fast together on the same day, or at least let them know when you're fasting. This is so that they can check up on you, see how you're doing emotionally and spiritually in fasting, pray for you, etc.

3. Take small steps in fasting.

Don't be afraid to start small. Maybe start by just fasting from breakfast, and then get with a friend or your LG or LG leader - how did it go? How was your thought life during it? Were you focused on the right things? Were you finding self worth in not eating or validation of some sort? All of those things.

And then try to stretch from there. Do 12 hours, then 16 hours, then 20 hours. Spiritual practices are often like training - a little bit added on at a time.

4. Keep Christ as the focus.

It's easy to make fasting about the food, instead about our relationships to Christ. It's not about the food. It's about seeking God.

Conclusion

Time of Prayer. Invite to open palms to heaven.

Communion.