



Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church

The Sermon on the Mount - Part 2 • Fasting • Matthew 6:16-18; Matthew 4:1-11 • 08/26/2018

Main Point

When we fast, then, we position ourselves to feast on the grace of Jesus.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the hungriest you have ever been?

How do you typically respond when you are hungry? Why?

Why do you think Jesus wants fasting to become one of the rhythms of our walk with God?

We have a natural tendency to be drawn in and disappointed by small pleasures that promise great satisfaction. They always fail us. To help us battle this tendency, the Bible directs us to fast. When we fast we feel the weakness that leads us to seek false satisfaction and we remember that true satisfaction is feasting with Jesus.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

How do you think non-Christians would look at fasting? How do you explain it to a non-Christian?

| Have a volunteer read Matthew 6:16-18.

Notice that Jesus says “when” you fast. Why is that detail important?

What was wrong with the way the Pharisees were fasting?

Are you ever tempted to “show off” how spiritual you are in front of other people? If so, what does that show about your heart?

What is different about the way Jesus tells us to fast?

The temptation when you fast is pride. Jesus condemned that kind of fasting; they only wanted others to be impressed with their spirituality, and that's the reward they received. But when Jesus commands us to fast, He is moving us toward something better than the praise of men.

Why is fasting an opportunity for confession of sin?

Why is feeling our weakness in fasting so important? How have you experienced this?

When we fast, we might find ourselves to be irritable or easily angered; that's not because of our hunger—it's because we are weak and frail. The fast reveals the weakness that's been inside us all along. As we empty ourselves, though, we must also take Jesus' invitation to fill us with something that truly satisfies.

| Have a volunteer read Matthew 4:1-11.

What do we learn about fasting from the example of Jesus?

Why do you think the devil came to tempt Jesus during this time?

What does Jesus' response to these temptations teach us about how we should fill ourselves when we are emptied during a fast?

As He was getting ready to begin His ministry, Jesus took an opportunity to bring focus to His life through engaging in this fast. But as He was depriving Himself of food, He was feasting on the Word of God. Because He was full of the Word, that's what came out when He was pressured by the devil.

Why is important for you to fill yourself with God's Word during your fast?

What is one practical way you can do that as you fast?

Though Jesus' stomach might have been empty, His soul was full. This is the reward He told us about in Matthew 6; when we fast, we can have a greater experience of and focus on God's grace in our lives as we are reminded of where our true strength and true sustenance lies.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Is there anything else besides food that you are attempting to feast on right now that you need to fast from?

What is the small pleasure you are most drawn to? Why does it disappoint you? How will depriving yourself of that help your orient your heart toward Jesus?

What are some ways we can hold each other accountable to fast?

How might you prepare to fast?

Pray

Ask God to bless lead the group to fast and use that time powerfully. Pray that He would bring repentance and focus to our lives as we empty ourselves to be filled by His grace. Pray also for any specific other false pleasures your group is drawn to right now.

Commentary

| Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting is the spiritual discipline of refraining from normal routines of eating and drinking in order to focus on repentance or prayer. The Bible mentions fasting in the Old and New Testaments, but only on the Day of Atonement were the Israelites required in the law to fast (Lev. 16:29). Jesus anticipated His followers would fast (Matt. 9:15). However, the only specific New Testament references to later Christian fasting occur in Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.

Just as Jesus assumed His followers would give to the poor (Matt. 6:2) and pray (v. 5), He also assumed they would fast. He began each of these discourses in the same way: “when you give to the needy” (v. 2); “when you pray” (v. 5); “when you fast” (v. 16).

Why fast? For some, it is an antidote to the influence of materialism in our culture. For others, it is a means to demonstrate to the Father their earnestness concerning special needs. The approach of the hypocrites in fasting, however, was again to draw attention to themselves. By looking sad-faced and unattractive they insured others noticed they were fasting. Jesus ridiculed such theatrics as achieving the attention the hypocrites craved but missing the purpose of fasting. Don’t fast for the wrong reason, He cautioned.

Jesus instructed His hearers to hide their fasting by grooming their hair with oil and washing the face. Keep your fast a secret, He advised. The spiritual discipline of fasting is essentially a private experience between the worshiper and God. The obvious way to safeguard fasting from hypocrisy is to keep it a secret. Then God will reward you.

Self-denial of any sort is countercultural in our day. Choosing to give up pleasure of any kind certainly gains notice. Our motives to live a life of purity and sobriety and simplicity may be genuine at the start, but we all are vulnerable to enjoying the praise of others for these motives. Remembering Jesus’ teaching in this passage will help us avoid our own temptation to do good things merely for others’ approval.