

## 2022.01.16 - The Way Of Jesus – Fasting

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**So What?** Jesus invites us into regular rhythms of fasting

**Feel What?** Hunger

**Now What?** Engage with fasting over the next 21 days.

### VISION CASTING

**The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.**

### INTRODUCTION

The Way of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the way of the world. We're accustomed to the hoarding of riches and power and shows of strength. We're used to mantras such as "only the strong survive."

But the Way of Jesus welcomes us to follow him by embracing a different outlook. It's a way where we don't cover up our weakness with bravado. It's a way where we set aside our strengths and embrace the grace that's extended to us. As we'll see today, it often means getting in touch with the weaknesses and limitations that make us human and in need of that very grace Jesus offers.

**Mark 2:13-14 (NIV): Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house,**

**many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

A brief recap from last week may help us understand the dynamics of this narrative. Jesus is known to the people as a Rabbi, or a Master Teacher of the Torah. We see him often in the gospels sitting, as rabbis did, fielding questions about the Law, and asking questions back to probe deeper into the hearts of his listeners. He's an unusual Rabbi, though, as he extends a call to those who are past the supposed prime of learning and he invites those who their culture has rejected as beyond God's grace. Levi, or Matthew as he will later be known, is an example here. We also see evidence of women apprentices, such as Mary of Bethany who sat at the feet of Jesus and learned from him.

Apprentices to Rabbi Jesus would commit to three things, and so set a model for us:

- Being with Jesus
- Being like Jesus
- Doing what Jesus does

Again, Jesus was a controversial Rabbi and under constant suspicion because the religious leaders of his day disagreed with his eating habits, which were significant in the first century Ancient Near East. In this chapter of Mark, they don't agree with what he eats, when he eats, and, here, who he eats with. In Israel, who you ate with signified deep friendship and unity, even making a way for strained relationships to be reconciled. For Jesus to eat with those he did--tax collectors, prostitutes, and other known sinners--was scandalous and has led some scholars to speculate this was a major contribution to his condemnation and death. The Pharisees belonged to a religious sect that believed only strict adherence to the Law would lead to God's restorative blessing on the nation. There was even a belief that if everyone in Israel living exactly according to the Law for just one day, this would trigger the arrival of Israel's King, the Messiah, and all of her enemies would be vanquished. This meant that every sin needed to be purged and every jot and tittle needed to be obeyed and people like tax collectors who were perpetually unclean from their dealings with the Romans were at the top of the list of people in need of reformation. For a Rabbi such as Jesus to sit down at a meal not only upset their understanding of Scripture, but in their minds would delay blessing and invite further chastisement from God.

**Transition:** This background also helps us understand the next interaction Jesus has with those in the broader society and their questions about when he eats his meals.

## **SOLUTION**

**Mark 2:18-21 (NIV):** Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

We should acknowledge that Jesus here is not fasting at the moment, but he is giving instructions for fasting in the future. But is Jesus saying, "Out with the old, in with the new?" Has he fallen victim to what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery--everything newer is better, youth trumps age, and we're much wiser than our elders because of all the advancements in science and technology. Is Jesus pushing us towards this dichotomy?

In a word, no. Remember, we follow a 2000-year old Rabbi who is eternal. The Way of Jesus is grounded in ancient practices, passed down to us from those who have gone before. Not that they've always gotten things right, but that time has tested and preserved the most vital truths of our faith. Jesus is teaching us through the

example of the wineskin that **when God does a new thing, don't have your expectations wrapped so tightly around what he's done that you miss it.** And, you can expect when old rubs against the new, there will be heat produced. It's uncomfortable.

**NT Wright, *Mark For Everyone*:** "The main times when Jews of Jesus' day fasted were days that reminded them of the great disasters of old, like the time when the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Surely Jesus, as a devout Jew, would want to keep holy days like that? No. Jesus was bringing the time of restoration, of new life, of the new start for which Israel had longed. Jesus was bringing into being the reality for which the Temple had been one of the great advance signposts: God's sovereign and saving presence in the midst of his people. This was a time for looking forwards to the great things God was beginning to do, not backwards to the times when Israel had been punished for her failures and infidelities."

Jews in Jesus' day were familiar with fasting as a way of mourning national tragedies and even averting future one. The Prophet Joel had instructed them during times of emergency,

**Joel 2:1, 12-14 (NIV):** Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. ... "Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he

**is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.**

But, too often, the act of fasting existed on the surface level of their lives, and didn't penetrate in who they were so it changed the behavior that brought on the emergency. We all know how easy it is to think there's a formula that if I expend this amount of energy, then this affect will happen for me--we treat God as a cosmic gum ball machine. But, again, God reminds them through Isaiah:

**Isaiah 58:3-8 (NIV): "‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ...Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear...."**

When the Jews of Isaiah's time treated God transactionally, they were simultaneously neglecting the work of justice and mercy around them. They were hoping

their spirituality would cover over their impropriety in behavior. And God is saying, do both. Tend to your hearts and your behaviors and watch over each other to do justly.

**Transition:** So what does fasting look like for us now as we follow Jesus?

## **APPLICATION**

Let's return to his response to the original question about fasting:

**Mark 2:19-20 (NIV):** Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

Jesus isn't negating the practice of fasting to avert emergency or for mourning. But to this he is adding another dimension to it: **Jesus is inviting his apprentices to fast so they can be attuned to their deep desire to be connected to him.** He welcomes us to imagine a wedding feast where he is the groom and the wedding party is there celebrating with him. It's silly that when Jesus is throwing a party, his friends would abstain and fast. Then he says that there will be a day soon when he will go away and then they will fast--like some kind of disruption to the celebration. But this kind of fasting is different. **It's one borne out of a desire to be with God, to experience spiritual closeness and breakthrough.**

It's the kind of fast where anything we're praying to experience or see happen is an important motivator, but



secondary to the longing to be close with Jesus and to experience his presence. The kind of closeness that the disciples experienced when they walked and talked with him. Through God's Spirit, that kind of closeness is available to us who apprentice Jesus now in this age.

**Scot McKnight, *Fasting*:** "At the very core of fasting is empathy with the divine or participation in God's perception of a sacred moment. When someone dies, God is grieved; when someone sins, particularly egregiously, God is grieved; when a nation is threatened, God is grieved. We could provide more examples. The point is this: fasting identifies with God's perspective and grief in a sacred moment. Fasting enables us to identify with how God views a given event; fasting empowers us to empathize with God. Fasting is about pathos, taking on the emotions of God in a given event."

Connected to this is another reason we fast, which is **to create space in our lives for what God is doing**. We take our hands off of the controls and we open them up to surrender and receiving whatever God wants to place in them. This ties back to the idea of wineskins and the warning to not get caught in being tied too tightly to the past or faulty expectations of what we anticipate God doing.

In light of this, the question we might ask of ourselves is this: **What old things are we trying to mix with the new? What are we trying to hang on to that God is inviting us to let go of?**



- Hurt and betrayal
- Unforgiveness and bitterness
- Unmet expectations, letdown, and failure
- Relationships
- Old paradigms about God, inferior ways of thinking
- Negative self-talk or self-hatred

Jesus invites every one of us to stop hiding and to allow this pain to be brought to him so he can bring healing to it. Fasting is an invitation to hit pause on our regularly scheduled programming, to create space for encounter, and allow the Spirit to bring us closer to God.

### **Methods Of Fasting:**

- Partial Fast
  - Daniel fast
  - Intermittent fasting
- Complete Fast
  - Water or liquids only
- Digital Fast
  - Social Media
  - Streaming Services
  - Gaming

I am increasingly convinced that a legitimate form of fasting includes our digital life as a consideration.

**Cal Newport, Digital Minimalism:** “Almost everyone I spoke to believed in the power of the internet, and recognized that it can and should be a force that improves their lives. They didn’t necessarily want to

give up Google Maps, or abandon Instagram, but they also felt as though their current relationship with technology was unsustainable—to the point that if something didn't change soon, they'd break, too. A common term I heard in these conversations about modern digital life was exhaustion. It's not that any one app or website was particularly bad when considered in isolation. As many people clarified, the issue was the overall impact of having so many different shiny baubles pulling so insistently at their attention and manipulating their mood. Their problem with this frenzied activity is less about its details than the fact that it's increasingly beyond their control. Few want to spend so much time online, but these tools have a way of cultivating behavioral addictions. The urge to check Twitter or refresh Reddit becomes a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life.”

Taking time away from the devices that demand more and more of our attention and giving that time to God in prayer is a reasonable way to fast.

## **OBJECTIONS**

If you know or suspect you may medical reasons you're unable to fast, please consult a doctor. And know that you're not a second-class Kingdom citizen if you choose to fast in a different way. But for the vast majority of moderately healthy Americans, fasting is not only possible, its even beneficial to your overall health and well-being.

## INSPIRATION

Today is the first day of our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. We're inviting our church community to set aside intentional time to be with Jesus so we can learn to be like him and do what he does. If you remember, this is something we also did in August, so we're implementing this as a part of our spiritual rhythms for the year.

We want to make the practices of fasting and prayer accessible to you, no matter what you're starting from. To find resources and details, visit **[tallgrassatthewell.church](http://tallgrassatthewell.church)** and click the **21 Days** link at the top. On our site you'll find resources and helps so we can do this together as a church community.

**Transition:** In addition, I'd like to offer three ways you might consider fasting, just as we did last week, so you can begin where

## CONCLUSION

### Next Step:

#### .Fasting

- **Beginning:** Abstain from one meal per day throughout and/or digital media usage and use the time for prayer
- **Baseline:** Choose one day a week to abstain from food and/or digital media
- **Stretch:** Abstain from food and/or digital media throughout the next 21 days

## **Prayer - Increased hunger for God Invitation**