

Spiritual Disciplines: Fasting

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

- [0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to our online service for Sunday, January 31st, 2021. It's hard to believe how fast the year is going by already, isn't it?
- And even in this pandemic, we recognize that time is passing and opportunities are coming before us and there is light at the end of the tunnel with vaccines and things.
- So we continue to seek God in this time. We continue to really do things to protect our own health and safety as well as others.
- And it's a time of caring for one another that we're in right now, perhaps now more than ever. So in reflecting on this time, I've talked to so many people who have said, and friends who are much older than I am saying, you know, this is the, I've never experienced anything like this in my life.
- And so this is unprecedented, but God is still with us. That's the ongoing reality and the ongoing theme of our lives, isn't it? Well, my name is Kent Dixon and I'm the lead pastor of Bramard Baptist Church here in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- [1 : 08] And so welcome this morning, whether you're joining us live this morning or tuning in later in the week or however you connect with us, welcome. You are welcome here.
- Um, and while I can't see you face to face and welcome you with eyes to eyes, um, I am, I am looking at you and I am seeing you, um, in the way that, that we're able to do that.
- So, um, people from our church who I know, uh, your, your faces and, um, your stories are in my head and in my heart. So, um, as I pray for each of you over days and weeks and months, um, yeah, you're, you're on my mind.
- So, and in my heart. So please, please know that, that I'm thinking of you and, uh, I care for you and I love you very much. So let's pray this morning. Lord Jesus Christ, you tell us not to be afraid of what the future holds, not to worry about tomorrow.
- Your word tells us that, but Lord, you know how difficult we, we find it to heed those words in our lives. Sometimes Lord, we worry, we get anxious.
- [2 : 17] Lord, we worry about so many things, our families, our friends, our circumstances, and some of our worries are truly big, but some are also very small.
- And we recognize that we come before you today, Lord, with both these big and the small worries. And we come with confidence that we can lay them at your feet.
- Lord, we bring our big worries about health and happiness and security for ourselves and for our loved ones. We bring our big worries about the world we live in and its future.
- We continue to fail in many ways to address so many ecological problems. Lord, we bring our big worries about the way people in our world are treated as less than human.
- People who are exploited and tortured. People who are helpless and abused. And Lord, we cry out for them. Father God, we know that you are concerned with every aspect of our lives.
- [3 : 22] So we also bring the little things that concern us, the small things, or they may seem to be small. Lord, the worries that keep us awake at night.

The worries that may only be in our own minds and our own hearts. The worries that only you know. Living God, reach out to all those for whom the future brings fears and uncertainties.

Lord, assure them that you are with them, even when the future seems dark and when their circumstances feel like they're spiraling out of control.

Lord, remind each one of us that you are able to transform even the bleakest of situations, bringing healing and wholeness. And we know, as your word says, Father, that you will work all things together, ultimately for our good, according to your will.

Lord, we make our prayers in faith. For we know that your spirit is at work in the world, making all things, making even us, Lord, new.

[4 : 32] And we pray all these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Well, let's join together this morning singing three worship songs.

And those songs are Before the Throne, Grace Greater Than Our Sin, and All Creatures. And some of these will be familiar. Maybe not all of them will be.

But the lyrics are on the screen and the worship leader will lead us. So may you be encouraged and blessed by the words and music of these songs as we sing them now together in this way.

God bless you. Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea.

A great-eyed priest whose name is Lord. Whoever lives in peace for me.

[5 : 41] My name is graven on its hands. My name is written on its heart.

I know the world. I know the world in heavenly sounds. No tongue can bid me this deep heart.

No tongue can bid me this deep heart. When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of my guilt within.

Upward I look and see him there. Upward I look and see him there. Who made an end to all my sin.

Because I sinless. Because I sinless see your time. My sinful soul is counted free.

[6 : 44] For God the just is satisfied. To look and see him there. To look and see him there.

To look and see him there. To look and see him there. To look and see him there. Behold him there. Behold him there. Behold him there.

Behold him there. Behold him there. The risen Lamb. My perfect spotless righteousness. The great unchangeable I am.

The king of glory. The Lord of grace. One with himself I cannot die.

My soul is purchased. By his blood. My life is dead with Christ all night.

[7 : 42] With Christ my Savior and my God. With Christ my Savior and my God. Before the throne of God above.

I have a strong, perfect plea. A great-eyed priest whose name is love.

Whoever lives and pleads for me. All is grace of our loving Lord.

Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt. Yonder on Calvary's mount outpour. There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

Grace, grace, grace, God's grace. Grace that will pardon and end with him. Grace, grace, grace. Grace that will pardon and end with him. Grace, grace, grace.

[9 : 11] Grace, grace, grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Grace, grace, grace. Grace, grace, grace. Grace, grace, grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Talk is a stain that we cannot hide What can avail to wash it away The bird is going a crimson tight Wild and slow you may be today Grace, grace, God's grace Grace that will pardon and cleanse with Him Grace, grace, God's grace Grace that He's greater than all our sin Grace, grace, God's grace Love is infinite matchless grace

Freely bestowed on all who believe You that are longing to see His face Will you this moment His grace receive?

Grace, grace, God's grace Grace that will pardon and cleanse with Him Grace, grace, God's grace Grace that is greater than all our sin All creatures are forgotten King Lift up your voice and lift us sing

[12 : 14] Oh praise Him Hallelujah Thou burning sun and golden beam Thou still a moon is so to be Oh praise Him Oh praise Him Oh praise Him Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia Love is infinite To love you Do that Love rushing with so strong Thank you.

Thank you.

Let all things that create a bless And worship Him in humbleness Oh Christ, Alleluia Praise, praise the Father Praise the Son And praise the Spirit We are Oh praise Oh praise Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia I hope you were encouraged by those songs this morning.

It gave you a chance to reflect, a chance to hear the truth that was spoken in those words. As I've said many times over the past few years since I've been at Braemar, I'm a music person.

And so music and worship music in particular really helps me connect with God. So I hope you're able to engage in it in that way.

[15 : 45] And I hope that you're blessed by it. Well, we're continuing this morning in our sermon series titled Spiritual Disciplines Exercise Your Faith.

And if you've missed previous sermons in this series and you'd like to catch up, you can find them here on Facebook if you're on Facebook. Or just check us out, Braemar Baptist.

My microphone is a little hot, so I'm going to turn that down. There we go. I'm just going to turn that down a little bit. Sorry. Yeah, so you can find previous sermons on Facebook or visit our website at BraemarBaptist.com and you'll find us on there as well.

And if you're checking us out on Facebook, I encourage you to follow us or like us on Facebook. And that's not a self-serving thing, but it is a way for you to stay connected and be aware of when we post new things, when we go live with the service and so on.

So I'd also like to encourage you to, if you tune in and listen to a sermon and you're encouraged by what we learn together, or you're encouraged by the way God speaks to you through our time together.

[16 : 56] I'd like to encourage you to share the sermons with people. Share these Sunday morning services. Share them during the week with friends and family.

People who you think might be encouraged by what God and His Word have to say about the topics that we're looking at together. Because as we explore God's truth every week, this is God's truth.

And it's not just meant for us, it's meant for everyone. So it's meant to be shared. That's the greatest thing about it is that it is a gift. God's truth for us, God's love for us, God's saving amazing grace for us is a gift that is meant to be shared.

And so I encourage you to do that. We're recognizing through our series, this is just the short recap that I do every week, Spiritual Disciplines Exercise Your Faith is our series.

And we're recognizing that as followers of Jesus Christ, as His disciples, we can benefit from some tools and skills that will help us on our journey. And these skills and tools are known as spiritual disciplines.

[18 : 05] And Christian spiritual disciplines have existed since the very earliest days of the church. These tools and skills are intended to help us put ourselves before God.

Put ourselves in a state of mind and heart where we can best interact with Him. So this morning we're continuing to explore the inward spiritual disciplines.

These are the most personal, the most directly between ourselves and God. And this morning we're going to consider the discipline of fasting. And as many of you know, when we gather in person in church, I often open things up for audience participation, I like to call it.

Moments when I engage the congregation to think about something and respond out loud. And I miss these moments when we're online. I truly do.

But these are moments when I ask for your input as a congregation. So even this morning on Facebook, if you want to post something as you're watching, do that. Post a comment on this video about something.

[19 : 13] And I actually encourage you to comment anytime because I do like to see people engaging and people giving their feedback, asking questions and so on. So during audience participation, I get some people to reflect on what something means to you.

What your personal connection is with it. What your understanding may be about what we're talking about at that moment. So we can't obviously do that in the usual way right now.

But I want you to still consider what comes to mind when you hear the word fasting. Fasting. Fasting. And I'll give you a moment to think about that.

What does fasting mean to you when you hear that word? Well, as people maybe consider responding here, I'm going to continue on.

Maybe you think of words like pious, holy, godly, focused, or faithful. Or maybe you think of words like hungry, deprived, difficult.

[20 : 26] Maybe even words like irrelevant, archaic, possibly even sandwich. Well, I'd suggest that of all the spiritual disciplines, fasting may be one of the most challenging for people to wrap their heads around.

Is that maybe the case for you? As with every spiritual discipline, fasting is a practice that's familiar to many Christians. And it's maybe part of their regular routine in seeking to grow closer to God.

But for others, it may be unfamiliar. It may be something they've never even considered. Or perhaps they've even written it off already out of hand without ever having given it a chance.

Well, perhaps the concept of fasting is wholly and completely unfamiliar to you. A church bulletin, not our church of course, but a church bulletin listed an announcement about a national prayer and fasting conference.

And the details in the announcement, the details of the registration fee noted that all meals were included in a fasting conference.

[21 : 43] Well, this morning we're going to spend some time focusing on, let's suggest it as Fasting 101. My hope is that those who already incorporate this discipline of fasting in their lives will be encouraged.

And also perhaps learn something new. And for those of us who perhaps have never considered fasting beyond a passing thought, might return to it, consider it, perhaps even be willing to give it a try.

In a very basic sense, I think we'd all agree that most people relate to fasting, relate fasting to food.

The conscious decision to miss a meal or perhaps even several meals. Well, skipping meals with the goal of losing weight or because you don't feel like cooking, that's not fasting.

Fasting is not something that we do by accident or merely for its own sake. It's not a coincidence that the first meal of the day has for us, most of us, has come to be known as breakfast.

[23 : 00] Take a moment to consider it. Break. Fast. Breakfast. You've gone for an extended period of time without eating. So that first meal involves literally breaking a fast of sorts.

But again, this is not fasting in the way that we're going to explore it together. It's fitting that we're considering the spiritual discipline of fasting so close to the beginning of the year.

Because at this time, I believe more than any other time in the year for lots of people, they're in the mindset of losing weight. They're in the mindset of living more healthy lives.

Have you heard of intermittent fasting? Well, it's an eating pattern that alternates times of fasting or abstaining from eating with times when it's okay for you to eat.

You're even directed to eat. All with the ultimate goal of losing weight and developing a more healthy lifestyle. Well, as I was preparing for this sermon, I wasn't all that surprised to see a commercial on TV for an intermittent fasting app.

[24 : 15] Your smartphone can track when, what, and how you can eat. Boy, that sure sounds fun, doesn't it? Well, that's just, again, one other perspective on fasting.

That perspective is solely about our relationship with food, solely with the goal of improving our health. And that's a somewhat noble goal, I think we'd agree.

We should all prioritize our health. But there's more to fasting than simply watching our weight or eating better. Just as we considered when we explored the discipline of meditation earlier in this series, there's much more to fasting than what we may perceive on the surface, particularly as Christians.

But what's the point of fasting? How does consciously and intentionally depriving ourselves of food for extended periods of time help us in our relationship with God?

How does it help us grow closer to God? Well, did you catch how I worded that? Depriving ourselves? Food?

[25 : 32] Help us? Our relationship? Does any of that resonate with your personal perspective on fasting? It's not surprising to me that in a society that's driven by and focused on what's in it for me, our perspective on spiritual disciplines becomes about us first.

What am I going to get out of this? When spiritual disciplines are actually about God, they're about putting God first in our lives.

It's fascinating to me how quickly we may realize, myself included, that we have a seemingly hardwired sense of self-entitlement, a sense of entitlement, don't we?

And that any effort to control or correct that is somehow bad for us, somehow a hardship for us. And it shouldn't surprise us, particularly given the fact that it's a spiritual discipline, that fasting, the idea of fasting, the discipline of fasting is highlighted in many places in Scripture.

Let's consider some of the ways people fasted in the Bible. In Exodus 34, verse 28, we learn that Moses fasted as he waited for God to deliver the Ten Commandments.

[26 : 59] This passage says, Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

In 2 Chronicles 20, verses 2 and 3, we learn that the Israelites fasted before God led them to a victory.

The passage says, Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar, that is, En Gedi.

Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all of Judah. In Daniel 9, verse 3, we learn that Daniel fasted for guidance from God.

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. Then continuing in verses 21 and 22, it says, While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice.

[28 : 21] He instructed me and said to me, Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. In the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1, verse 4, we read that Nehemiah fasted before a major building project.

When I heard these things, Nehemiah says, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

You might also remember that Jesus himself fasted when Satan tempted him in the desert. We read about that in Luke chapter 4, verse 2.

And I'm going to read from the message translation for this one because it speaks so powerfully about it. For 40 wilderness days and nights, he was tested by the devil.

He ate nothing during those days. And when the time was up, he was hungry. We also read in Acts 13, verses 2 and 3 that the people of the early church fasted during times when they faced important decisions.

[29 : 33] While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Bible says, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them.

So after they have fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Fasting before a powerful and important decision.

And folks, those are just some of the examples of fasting that we read about in the Bible. We recognize that people fasted for different reasons.

They fasted when they were in mourning for something. They fasted as an act of humility before God. Or as a means of focusing on God for guidance and preparation.

Jesus himself set an expectation for his followers that we read in Matthew 6, verse 16. Jesus said, When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do.

[30 : 35] For they disfigure their faces and show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.

So that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting. But only, hear this, to your Father who is unseen. And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

First, does that passage sound familiar? Well, Jesus' words about fasting there are remarkably similar to his words on prayer that we considered in this series.

Jesus admonished us, challenged us to not do things for show. Not do things to impress other people. Jesus recognized that the human tendency is to look for recognition.

To put on a show, as I said. And those are not the goals of prayer or fasting or, I would argue, any spiritual discipline. Fasting is not about drawing attention to yourself.

[31 : 55] Or adopting some sort of air of, oh, poor me. And Jesus cautions us about that perspective. Just as with prayer, the decision to fast is a private matter between ourselves and God.

It can even become a corporate matter if, as a group of believers, as a church, we decide to take time in fasting and prayer to seek God's direction for us.

Fasting should never be treated as an opportunity to gain attention or recognition from others. Perhaps most importantly in what Jesus says here are the words, When you fast.

Did you catch that? Jesus doesn't say if you fast or when you get around to fasting, but when. While fasting is not something that's commanded in the Bible, Jesus clearly made the assumption that his followers would do it.

And when we see fasting as a highlighted spiritual practice throughout Scripture, people got it. It was part of their life. It was part of their seeking after God.

[33 : 11] Part of that process. When Jesus was being tempted by Satan in the desert, he quoted the words of Deuteronomy and said, It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

By fasting from food, we'll be physically reminded of our physical dependence and as well on our spiritual need for God.

As we considered when we explored the discipline of meditation, the idea of clearing our minds from the clutter of day-to-day worries and busyness, we put ourselves before God and create space to allow that to happen.

The same is true with fasting. By giving up food for a dedicated period of time, we create space. We free up the time that would have been used for planning, for preparing, for eating a meal, to focus on God.

A friend of mine recently posted on Facebook, she said, If I had known being an adult was going to be largely occupied with meal planning and preparation, I think I would have stayed young.

[34 : 32] So true. I love to cook. I enjoy the process. I love to make food for other people. It's a way that I love to serve. But at the same time, there are many times I have said, Oh, and I wouldn't give for a food pill that I could just eat and not have to worry about any of the other time that's taken up.

Fasting is not about depriving ourselves as a means of somehow forcing God to do our bidding. It's important to recognize that.

It's not a way to strong arm God. We don't, we aren't, by fasting, we're not going on some kind of hunger strike. So God will pay more attention to us or hear our prayers more clearly or better.

That's not the point. It's about abstaining from something that's generally good for us so that we can concentrate more fully on time spent with God, on time in God's presence, putting ourselves before God.

And just as with meditation, meditation, we're not looking to free up space and time for its own sake. When you consider fasting, you need to fill the time you create by fasting, by stepping away from preparation and planning and eating to fill that time with time that is intentionally spent with God.

[36 : 00] I have another challenge for you. When you set aside time to fast, I said when as well, by the way, give some thought to the other things in your life that tend to be priorities over your time with God.

Maybe that's watching TV, or spending time surfing the internet, or doing puzzles, or any other kinds of things like that.

Checking your Facebook page, checking Instagram, Twitter, other social media feeds. You might be shocked, folks, to realize just how much time you spend on some of those things.

And this is not about making you feel guilty. It's about reminding us of where our true priorities should be focused. Food, watching TV, depending on what kinds of things you're watching, social media, none of these things are necessarily bad in and of themselves.

They may, in fact, enrich your life, keep you connected, help you relax. But when our attention is primarily focused on them, we may be spending time on things that ultimately have little, if any, value, especially if they are the priorities in our lives.

[37 : 25] It's not a coincidence that fasting is almost always prayer, prepared, sorry, with prayer or Bible reading. In scripture, it's an intentional exchange of one activity, such as eating or preparing food, as I said before, for focused time spent with God.

As we prepare to close our time together this morning, I want to, this morning or whenever you're tuning in, I want to leave you with some suggestions for fasting, especially if you've never tried it, because I encourage you to do that.

More of our fasting 101 here. Start slowly, especially if you've never fasted before. Don't set yourself up for failure, saying, I will fast for the next 40 days and 40 nights.

It's biblical, but don't set yourself up that big right away. Start by or consider fasting from one meal. It's important to be aware of health risks that may be associated with missing a meal.

If your health is already compromised in some way, perhaps consider fasting from something other than food. And again, if you've never fasted before, from food before, start slow.

[38 : 52] Be sure to drink water so you're well hydrated. Don't eat a big meal before you go swimming. No, don't eat a big meal either before or after you fast.

Eat smaller, healthier meals. Remember, your time of fasting is primarily between you and God. But if your fast affects others who might be eating with you or preparing a meal that would have normally included you, it is considerate to let them know.

You don't have to go on and on about, well, I can't eat tonight because I'm fasting. You don't need to go on and on about it. But it's good to let people know and be considerate.

Be committed in your decision to try fasting. Seek God. Ask him if that's what he wants you to do. And commit your plan to fast in prayer.

Ask God for the strength, for the resolve, for the endurance to go through with it. And ask him for a desire to connect with him more deeply in the way that he most wants you to.

[40 : 04] As I said before, our society has trained us, and we've also trained ourselves in many ways, that abstaining from anything is unnecessarily denying ourselves somehow.

Right? Recognize that perspective when it comes during your fasting time. When you begin to feel the poor me syndrome coming on, give it back to God.

While you're fasting, recognize the physical responses you experience, such as hunger. Acknowledge them.

Don't try to ignore them. But at the same time, don't focus on them or allow them to pull you away from your goal of connecting with God. When your time of fasting is done, reflect back on what God has shown you.

Maybe you're a journaling kind of person. And if you're not, jot down some notes so you don't forget. How has God spoken to you? How has he used the time of study or prayer that you engaged in during your fast to enrich your relationship, to speak to you, to point out things that he wants you to focus on?

[41 : 25] Recognize ways in which your time of fasting has deepened your relationship with God. I have yet to meet someone for whom fasting is a discipline that they use where they don't say that it makes a difference for them.

Recognize how God has changed your sense of dependence on things from which you chose to fast. Perhaps you're dependent on, I hate to use the word, but addicted to certain things that you fasted from.

Addictions can be to things like TV and social media and the internet, believe it or not. So recognize how God may have changed your perspective on those things.

My friends, fasting is a spiritual discipline. It's a skill that we can learn to help deepen our relationship with God.

Fasting is not about depriving ourselves. It's about, it's not about what we're giving up, what we're losing out on. Fasting creates an opportunity to return our focus to God, recognizing that it's ultimately God alone who meets all our needs.

[42 : 43] Fasting is about removing distractions and creating space. Space for God to move in our lives and move in response to our prayers.

Fasting should also remind us that God has provided and he will again. It is God who provides for our needs. Fasting is about remembering that God comes first in our lives.

It helps us to practice saying no to desires and yes to Jesus. Fasting also provides us with an opportunity to place, to declare our complete dependence on God.

friends, friends, we have so many luxuries in our lives and ultimately none of them have any eternal value.

In fasting, we can intentionally step away from something we usually enjoy to gain perspective on our lives, to help us remember that ultimately only God provides for all our needs and ultimately he is in control over our lives and over our destiny.

[44 : 08] If you've never tried the discipline of fasting, I encourage you to try it. Perhaps you know someone, a friend or a family member who is familiar with fasting and can mentor you in it.

That's a good thing. I encourage you to try it. Our God is a giving and generous God and fasting reminds us of how true that can be in our own lives.

Amen. My friends, our benediction this morning. May your days be blessed by the presence of God.

bringing moments of quietness, light in your darkness, strength in your weakness, grace in your meekness, joy in your gladness, peace in your stillness.

May you be blessed. My dear friends, go in peace. for you. Let's do it.

[45 : 34] Here, is your grace of God.