**Series Road Map**

Fasting

**Series Overview:** All of us have a theology. As the Christian Church, we proclaim Jesus as Lord and strive to live a life modeled after him and surrendered to him. But how do we do that? How do we model the practices of Jesus in 2022 and beyond? This series of one-off messages, “Practices of Jesus”, will take us through how Jesus lived his life on earth and focus specifically on a variety of practices of Jesus.

**Week Overview:** This message unpacks the practice of fasting. The focus of the message is on the temporary rewards that the world offers compared to the eternal rewards of God. By walking through Matthew 6, we will unpack what is fasting, why is it important, and what reward does God offer to those who choose to seek Him as sustenance.

***Outline:***

**Grab the Room (intro): Chuck E. Cheese /Arcade Game Prizes**

* Choose a personal story or add your personal thoughts on arcades and the prizes you can win at the end.

**Tension (what’s the struggle):** The world tries to convince us that Christianity is a lot of work for very little reward.

**Text:**

* Matthew 6:16-18
* Luke 4

**Truth:**

* Fasting has deep meaning and purpose in the life of a believer.

**THP**:

* Fasting is Feasting ?

**Supporting Points:**

* Your choice to fast and be in communion with God is not a flashy, obvious, glamorous task.
* You are leaning not on your flesh to sustain you but you are asking God that in your fasting that He would be the one to provide not only the strength and nourishment physically, but to meet the needs of your soul as well.

**Application (call to action)**:

* Pick a day of the week you will fast (24 hours). Try it for three weeks straight.
* Pick a focus for your time of fasting.
* Push yourself, but know your boundaries.

Allow students time to commit, on paper, to a fasting practice.

*Red – Scripture*

*Blue – Personal Story*

*Green – Prop*

***THP/Main Points – Bold***

***INTRO***

I am going to show you a series of pictures, tell me if any of these look familiar to you. Maybe they bring back some memories (2-3 photos of the inside of Chuck E. Cheese). Yes, that is Chuck E. Cheese. I don’t know if you guys ever went to Chuck E. Cheese when you were younger but my family MESSED with some arcade games and cheap pizza back in the day. My Grandma used to take us all the time. I remember going with my Grandma because she would always give us these lectures at the end of the day about making sure we got the prize we realllllly wanted.

On this one particular trip, I remember getting to the prize counter at the end of the day and this was maybe the most tokens I had ever won in the arcade so I was pumped to pick my best prize yet. I zeroed in on this microphone headset ([photo](https://www.ubuy.co.id/en/product/1BOSU6OG-artcreativity-toy-microphone-headsets-for-kids-pack-of-12-toy-mic-headphone-set-for-pretend-play-and)) as I was still in my Hannah Montana era. I was about to tell the man behind the counter to grab it for me when my Grandma started to give her famous lecture and proceed to tell me that the microphone was not great quality and was probably going to break. She was 100% right. But at the time, I thought she was trying to squash my popstar dreams so I got it anyway. Except for the fact that she was definitely right and it broke within minutes of getting home from Chuck E. Cheese that day.

\*\* Swap with your own arcade story or personal thoughts on arcades in general.

Here’s the thing that I have realized about arcades. Yes, they are fun and great to be with friends and keep you entertained on the weekends. But what is the deal with the prizes? I am curious to know how, for so long, we have continued to spend a lot of money to play some games only to leave with prizes that are easily less than half the value of what we spent to play the games in the first place. Arcades are essentially - a lot of work for very little reward.

It’s not just arcades though. There are a lot of things in life that require a lot of work and for very little reward. You might work the entire school year practicing with your team everyday and still come out with a losing record. You might work for weeks on a project or a paper for your teacher to still give you a bad grade. And I think sometimes people look at Christianity and think - man that’s a lot of work for not a lot of reward. They see people who believe in God putting in effort, getting in the Word, praying, attending multiple church services a week, waiting until marriage to have sex, not going to parties and drinking, and think to themselves man those Christians do a lot of work and don’t get much reward.

But I’m here to tell you, that’s not true. Far from it, in fact. Today, I want to prove to you that the reward for all your hard work when it comes to Jesus, is 100% worth it. Let me show you what I mean.

If you have a Bible, you can open with me to the book of Matthew, chapter 6. In this particular section of Scripture Jesus is teaching His disciples, His followers, and is warning them about the corrupt doctrines and opinions of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a group of Jewish believers that were so concerned about following the Law and doing everything right when it came to religion that they were often strict and prideful. Jesus didn’t want His followers to live that kind of life so He spent a great amount of time leaning in and caring for His disciples and leading them down the correct path.

Here’s what it says:

“When you fast, 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. 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.” Matthew 6:18-18 (NIV)

The way that Jesus starts this section of teaching sets up the entire rest of what He wants the disciples to learn. He says, “When you fast..” Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “if you fast”. He is sharing with His followers that fasting is something he expects them to do as a part of their spiritual journey. He made it clear that, even though this is not a direct command, he believed in the power of fasting and anticipated that His followers would do it. Not just the ones He was speaking to directly in this moment, but all followers for all of eternity.

So, if it is an expectation that we as followers of Jesus would fast, we need to answer the question: what is fasting? If you want a formal definition: Fasting is abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. In the Old Testament, the word “fast” means “covering the mouth”. In the New Testament, the word “fast” means “not to eat”. Fasting has been practiced for centuries among many religions, not just Christianity. We see biblical heroes like Moses, David, Nehemiah, Paul, Jesus, and others fasting regularly as part of the spiritual rhythms of their lives.

It’s not just a hobby to not eat and call it a spiritual practice. Fasting has deep meaning and purpose in the life of a believer. Our definition says that it is abstaining from food for *spiritual purposes.* We are choosing to say no to something that we want for the sake of saying yes to something that God wants for us. When you choose to fast, we are denying ourselves a basic human need, a basic human pleasure for the sake of growing in intimacy and dependency on God. Fasting as a part of Christianity is radically different from the fasting that we see in our world today. It is not a diet trend like intermittent fasting. Or a cleanse that an influencer recommends. It’s not just to help our pants fit better for a night with friends, or to look better in our homecoming dress is not the same kind of fasting as what God calls us to.

Now, hear me for a minute. I know that talking about something like fasting can bring up a lot of mixed emotions. The goal of today’s talk is not to trigger, or shame, or judge anyone that has experienced struggles related to their eating habits. I am very aware that there are people in the room tonight that have overcome or are in the midst of overcoming habits associated with disordered eating. Know that if you have ever faced an eating disorder or body dysmorphia, of if those are current things you are facing. I share this message with love and deep respect for what you are walking through. When we talk about fasting from a biblical perspective, I am referring to a spiritual practice that breaks down the idol of our wants, our needs, and our flesh in favor of what God wants for our lives. This is not a message about changing our appearance, or making a physical effort to alter the way that God created our bodies to function.

The truth behind this message is this: **Fasting is Feasting.** We live in a world that is constantly telling us that more is more. That there is no good thing we should deprive ourselves of because we have the world at our finger tips. We have made idols out of consuming things in mass. We have made idols out of getting what we want at the touch of button. We have all you can eat buffets, and can have access to food without even getting out of our car. We don’t have to slave for hours over a hot stove to have dinner when it could be ready in an instant. We are able to satisfy our needs and our desires in instant if we want. Fasting is choosing to deny ourselves of all of the things that make us human, in favor of feasting on the fullness and richness of God. Fasting from the things of this world is opening a door to feast on the overflow of who God is. **Fasting is Feasting.**

So when we look at the radically different meaning that fasting has for the life of a Christian, it’s easy to see how the world might look at the way that we do life and see very little reward. The world tries to convince us that if we do not have three large meals a day with snacks in between, or we’re not allowing ourselves the pleasure of enjoying good food, there is no reward in fasting.

But, Jesus addresses that very idea in the next section of this passage. He says,

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.”

This is where Jesus really leans in and talks about how the way that we live life should be radically different from the lives of those around us. He uses the Pharisees as an example. The Pharisees practiced fasting as part of their religion. It wasn’t uncommon that on their fasting days, Monday and Thursdays, they would venture out into the busy market place looking disheveled and starved in a way to make their fasting known to all people. They wanted the people around them to look at the way they practiced their religion and praise them for how holy and pious they were. They wanted the admiration and the awe of the people around them. They wanted the world to look at the way they lived and pour out compliments and high regards because of how noble they were.

And Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.” The reward that the Pharisees were looking for was recognition and fame from the world. They were looking to feed their pride, to feed their egos, to be looked at by others and seen as holy and righteous. And their actions got them exactly the reward what they wanted.

When we think about what the world has to offer us, it’s all temporary. The praise, adoration, accomplishments, pleasures, it’s all fading with time. The world looks at the way that Christians live their lives and they don’t see any pleasure, any personal gain, any selfishness and they think that all the efforts that we put into loving and creating an intimate relationship with God are worthless because we have gained nothing. The world would look at an ancient practice like fasting and see people that are so devoted to a God they can’t see that they would be willing to deny themselves a basic necessity such as food and call us foolish.

I guess the bigger question we need to be asking ourselves is, are we willing to seem foolish?

Because, if the answer to that question is yes, God has already promised us an incredible reward.

He tells His disciples…

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.”

Notice that language again, “But, when you fast”. He puts the word “But” in front of it because He

is about to draw a really stark comparison between how the hypocrites, or the Pharisees, chose to fast and how He was calling His followers to practice fasting. He says, to put oil on their heads and wash their faces. At first you might think, wow that must be some really holy and meaningful practice. But actually, it wasn’t. Putting oil on your head and washing your face was part of the normal cleanliness and bathing routines of the time when Jesus was saying this. He says this to make the point that - your fasting shouldn’t be obvious to anyone around you. Your choice to fast and be in communion with God is not a flashy, obvious, glamorous task.

You are choosing to engage in a spiritual practice that as this passage says, is between you and God alone. Only your Father in heaven, who is unseen, will know. There’s something powerful in going about your day knowing that the inner attitude and focus of your heart is on God as you are denying yourself your basic human needs. But at the same time, you are outwardly performing the regular duties and tasks of life. You are leaning not on your flesh to sustain you but you are asking God that in your fasting that He would be the one to provide not only the strength and nourishment physically, but to meet the needs of your soul as well. Outwardly you are just a human, just a Christian choosing not to eat. But on the inside, you are in deep communion with God. Your soul is singing songs of praise and adoration and worship as you pray and seek God. Self-denial is not boring. It is not without reward. Self-denial is character forming. It is encouraging us as believers to see the Lord as our complete source of sufficiency.

And Jesus assures us that God sees what is done in secret and He rewards us. The difference between the rewards of God and the rewards of the world are that God’s rewards are eternal. In choosing to fast we are actually feasting on God. We are drawing everything we need from the deep well of who He is. The world doesn’t have that option. The world is all about independence, control, self-assurance, self-sufficiency, but what happens when you fail yourself? What happens when you realize that your efforts might not be enough? As Christians, we have the everlasting, eternal resources of God that He pours out on us day after day simply because He loves us. That is our reward.

Jesus doesn’t teach this to His disciples just because God would want Him to. Jesus teaches this to His disciples because He has experienced the power of relying on God to sustain Him first hand. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to wander for 40 days. The Holy Spirit led Him there not to torture Him but to reveal God’s power. It says in Luke 4…

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.” Luke 4:1-2 (NIV)

When you look at the words “he was hungry” in the original language it literally means that he was beginning to starve to death. But it says that even though his body was hungry, his energy was depleted, he was beginning to physically waste away, He was full of the Holy Spirit. He was **feasting** on the power of the Spirit, on God the Father as He wandered and waited. The devil took him to overlook the highest points in the city offering all the rewards a man could dream of like food, fame, and power. BUT He was able to stand strong because He knew that what the Devil, the world had to offer, was temporary. But the power of God inside Him was eternal.

Fasting was a Practice of Jesus. It was something that Jesus used to remind Himself of the power of God in His life and remain anchored to Him. He didn’t care that He was giving up the rewards and the pleasure of this world because He knew that the reward God was offering Him was far, far greater.

I have also experienced the power of fasting in my own life...(insert personal story or a story of someone you know on how fasting has made an impact.

Today, the challenge to you is the same. Yes, we talked about fasting and I am going to challenge you to find a practice of fasting in your spiritual walk with God. But this is so much more than just denying yourself food. This is choosing to identify yourself with the Kingdom of God and give up the pleasures of this world that are only temporary.

Now, before I offer some practical steps that you can take to start fasting, it’s important to note that all of this talk about “rewards” can make it feel like fasting is work. Yes, fasting is hard sometimes. It’s not easy to be the person who doesn’t eat at a gathering and doesn’t explain why to their friends. It’s not easy to get your homework done when your stomach is growling and you’re trying to focus on thanking and praising God. It’s not easy to fast and sometimes it makes it feel like work. But a reminder that we all need to hear. There is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, and nothing you can achieve that would make God love you more, or make you more worthy of receiving Him as a reward. When Jesus died on the cross for your sins, that was enough. So yes, while this practice is hard and it does come with great reward. Jesus sees you, He is proud of you, and nothing that you can do, good or bad, would ever make Him love you more or less.

With that said, here are three different ways that you can introduce the idea of fasting into your life.

1. Pick a day of the week you will fast (24 hours). Try it for three weeks straight.

Fasting on the same day of every week can help you build a rhythm and better prepare your heart and your mind to encounter God more than sporadic times of fasting. Pick a day of the week, plan it ahead of time. Go from sunrise to sundown or from breakfast to breakfast or from lunch one day to lunch the next. Commit during that time to only drinking water and abstain from all food. During your normal meal times find a place to be alone with the Lord and remember why you are fasting.

1. Pick a focus for your time of fasting.

It’s really easy to start strong when you begin a fast. You are excited, you skip breakfast pretty frequently so it doesn’t feel that odd, and you're optimistic. However, come 3PM, your stomach is growling, you haven’t had caffeine, and you’re starting to question why you ever decided to do this in the first place. Before you begin your fast, pick a focus. Find a verse or a passage of Scripture to meditate on throughout the day. Pick a person or cause to pray for and ask for God to intercede.. Choose a worship song with words that have meaning to your life and play it multiple times throughout the day. Find ways to remind yourself that this is not just a physical practice, it’s spiritual.

1. Push yourself, but know your boundaries.

Yes, fasting is relying on God to fulfill your every need. But don’t forget to drink water, get plenty of sleep, and talk to your doctor if you have any concerns. While this is a spiritual practice, it is also a physical one and we need to care for ourselves well.

My encouragement for you today, fast from food. It’s a practice that not many people are used to and it is one we see modeled over and over again in the Bible. If you have struggled with disordered eating or are in a season of life (sports, medical issues, etc.) where fasting is not a safe practice, talk with me or your life group leader about other ways you can engage in a practice similar to this.

I don’t want us to leave this room promising that we will do something and not take any action. So I want to challenge you right now. Take a few moments to reflect and plan out your fasting practice that you are going to try for 3 weeks.

Provide prompts on the screen

Paper and pen to write with