

Remembering & Helping the Poor

If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor in training here. When I was in college, I lived in a 3 bedroom house with 6 guys. It was just as clean and organized as you're picturing in your head right now. It came complete with an art deco style tower of recycling that never got taken out and about 8 couches in the living room. Truly a sight to behold. And we had a lot of great times there and came up with weird traditions and the like. More than I have time to share this morning. And much more than you'd care to hear.

There was one relatively short-lived practice however that we implemented for a bit. We talked about how we felt like selfishness and materialism were far too prevalent in our lives, and in response we made a rule. We decided there would be a price to pay any time someone used the word "mine." It was like we were trying to teach toddlers how to share. Except we were the toddlers. But we were all broke and also were stereotypical college guys, so the penalty was 10 push-ups. So any time one of us said something was "mine," it was aggressively pointed out, and you owed the house 10 push-ups. And the goal was to help us become more selfless and less materialistic and hopefully *totally jacked* along the way. Alas, none of those things were accomplished in the week or so it lasted. But we tried. Sort of.

And I know that's a bit of a ridiculous story, but it is true. And underneath the silliness of it, there really was at least a little bit of a desire to think more intentionally *outside* of ourselves. But I think one of the biggest reasons it didn't work was that we weren't really all that concerned with much that existed outside of our house. We thought it would be a fun thing to try, but in reality there wasn't really an understanding of *what* we were supposed to be concerned about. There wasn't really a desire to change much about our own lives. And I think if we're really honest, our society today is really similar.

We're big fans of talking about change. Societal change or administrative change or legislative change. We love to see change *happen*, especially when it aligns with our own agendas, and someone else does the work. But a lot of us don't get all that excited about the effort and sacrifice needed on a *personal level* for change. Because why would it matter on an individual level? Surely *my* day to day life isn't going to make or break an entire wave of change, right? I'm not a big enough deal for *my* change to matter in the grand scheme.

Over the past few weeks, we've talked a little bit about what it looks like for us to change over time to look more and more like Jesus. And we've been talking specifically about

the practice of fasting. We've talked about some of the individual and personal implications of fasting and what it does to us over time. And we are wrapping up our series today talking about something we haven't discussed yet, and that's how to make fasting matter for things *outside* of ourselves. How fasting actually can and *should* change us in ways that extend beyond just ourselves. So I would love to pray for us then we can hop in.

Pray.

I've mentioned this a couple times before, but I grew up in Kathmandu, Nepal. For those who aren't aware, Nepal is quite an impoverished nation. Depending on which reports you look at, the average household income in Nepal is between about \$800-\$1300 per year, or \$2-\$4 a day. Not per person, per household, for an entire year. So for the majority of my youth, I was acutely aware of *extreme* poverty. It wasn't hard for me to imagine the effects of a family living each day on less than the cost of one Happy Meal. All I had to do was look around. But as of last year, I've now lived in America longer than I lived in Nepal. And to be completely honest with you all, after I moved to America, the painful realities of extreme poverty was one of the first things to leave my mind. And the longer I've lived here, the easier it has been for me to not only forget, but to ignore the plight of the impoverished in our world.

And I think at least one reason is because we live in a country that, historically speaking, is one of the wealthiest countries to have ever existed. Certainly, not even almost everyone in America lives a "wealthy lifestyle." We just live in a society that does *everything possible* to make sure you think about you and your own success or your own thriving or your own life above all else.

And I think one *positive* impact of the age of the internet and social media is that it is easier and easier for us to get an immediate look at what is happening around the globe. We at least now can easily see that poverty and social injustice exist. But I think many of us don't actually know how to *care* about those things. And not just "care" in that it bothers us that people live in poverty. I'm not saying we should think about it when something prompts us and we feel some *pity* for people in that situation. I mean "care" in the way God of the Bible cares by having our hearts *break* over its reality, and feel compelled to do something about it.

And God *cares* about it. A huge emphasis of God's economic system for his people in the Old Testament consists of caring for the poor. In Deuteronomy 15, God commands his people to cancel all personal debts every 7 years. No questions asked. It's a system that is concerned for the poor. In fact, there are over 2000 references in Scripture that

talk about the poor. And the emphasis isn't just on caring for the poor. There's passages like Proverbs 14:31 that say, "whoever oppresses the poor shows *contempt* for his maker." And it's not just an Old Testament thing, Jesus follows through on this emphasis in places like Matthew 25 when says people make it to eternal reward or eternal punishment, at least in part, by how well they loved and cared for under-resourced people.¹ God doesn't just want to do nice things for the poor, God is *deeply concerned* for the poor. So I'm not trying to push any kind of agenda or make any political statements or anything of the sort. I'm just telling you what the Bible says.

But we don't create much space to consider poverty for long. We don't like thinking about those things. We'd much rather just think about our own lives and our own resources and our own struggles. And even when we *do* think about poverty, often it's still rooted in thinking about ourselves. Let me show you what I mean: **When you were a kid, did you ever have an adult say something to you along the lines of, "you know, there are kids in (insert your country of choice) who are starving."? And that's the reason you shouldn't be picky and should eat whatever was on your plate. A lot of the time it seems like we teach people to only think about poverty insofar as it makes *us* thankful for what we have. Not to actually do something about it.** Also, there are people in Knoxville who are starving. You don't even have to go across the world, you can look across the street.

But we are so deeply ingrained with a sense of individualism and insular thinking. And interestingly, that's a really similar problem to what the Israelites were feeling when Isaiah brought God's word to them in Isaiah 58. Go ahead and turn there if you've got a bible. While you're turning there, let me give you a little context for what's going on at the time. Isaiah is having a conversation with God's people about fasting. They come to him basically saying, "this whole fasting thing we've been doing doesn't work. We're not really seeing a whole lot of payoff." They were going through the motions, checking the "fasting" box, and essentially were annoyed because they felt like God didn't seem to be showering them with favor in response to their efforts.

Maybe during this series as we've been fasting, you might have felt some of those same things. You might be thinking, "I'm doing the whole fasting thing, and it doesn't seem like it's having much of an impact. I don't feel much different. My life circumstances don't seem any different, I don't feel any closer to God." And some of that could be that it takes time for some of those things. But some of it could also be for similar reasons to the Israelites in this passage.

¹ Matthew 25:31-46

So Isaiah comes with some input, directly from God himself, about their fasting and the issues with it. Take a look with me at Isaiah 58 starting in verse 3 and we'll unpack more as we go:

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you [God] 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. [Let me just say as an aside, if you feel like you're having a hard time with fasting, or you feel easily frustrated like you're too hangry, if you aren't "exploiting all your workers" and punching people as a result, it sounds to me like you're doing pretty well compared to the Israelites in this passage. So way to go—you're doing something right, at least comparatively.] You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? "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?"
Isaiah 58:3-7

So, like we've talked about earlier in this series, the *assumption* is that fasting is taking place. So there's no instruction here on *if* God's people should fast or not, but *how* they are fasting. In fact, the people he's talking to are very *familiar* with fasting. They are regularly participating in it. But they had become dangerously *inward-focused* in their practice. Isaiah is rebuking God's people because they've lost sight of God's heart in their practice. They had taken the *practice* of fasting, but they had made it into something that completely missed the point.

Think with me about a child who is playing with another kid their age. Maybe it's your child, maybe it's your niece or nephew, maybe it's a moment of self-reflection from your youth, but there's a child. And they get frustrated with their friend and decide to give them a shove. Then the friend decides to cheat in the disagreement, and they start crying. Parents come to try to sort things out. "Tell them you're sorry," they say. "SORRY." Not exactly what they meant, right? *Technically*, they did the thing. In the strictest form of the definition, they completed the task. But it totally missed the point. It's not about the *word* itself. It's about something deeper. It's about a change in attitude, a change in

actions, an opportunity to reflect on the realities of the situation, to experience remorse, and choose to do something about it in response.

And that's really similar to what the Israelites did with fasting. They *were* doing it. But not how God intended. Sure, the action was there, but they missed the point. They viewed it "only as a day to humble themselves." It was completely inward-focused. A day to sulk around and be hangry. Only about themselves. Only about their personal, private relationship with God and their personal spiritual lives. No impact on their society or how they treated other people at all. Which means, in God's eyes, it's completely missing the point.

Now, you may be thinking, "didn't we just spend a couple weeks talking about fasting and *self-control* and *our own* bodies? Those *feel* personal." And you would be correct. We've been talking about different elements of *one* practice though. So while there are *individual and personal* things associated with fasting, and some personal aspects of what we're talking about today, biblically there should also be an *external* impact of our *internal* efforts. It has to *start* with you as an individual, but it can't stop there. If it stops with you, it misses the point. The hope is that all the different facets of fasting we've talked about will be happening in conjunction with each other. As we deprive our bodies through fasting, we're practicing focusing more on God. We're practicing self-control. We're practicing not being self-focused. Through that, we can shift our focus to others. I heard Scot McKnight who is a New Testament scholar frame fasting this way and I found it super helpful:

"Fasting that does not lead to the consideration of others misses the point."
Scot McKnight

So in light of that, I want to spend our time today talking about 3 things that fasting can do in and through us, as it relates to our interactions with others.

First...

Fasting helps us relate to God's heart

Fasting helps us enter into a mindset where we can start to understand God more tangibly. We get to start feeling and experiencing things that help us relate more closely to how God feels about injustices in our world. It's a really interesting phenomenon. Choosing to go without food for an extended period of time is not a *pleasant* experience. And that's part of the point. **When we feel that discomfort and the pain, it can be a**

means by which we start to grow in our understanding of how God feels in response to things in his world not being as they should be.

Look back at the beginning of verse 6. It says, “*is not this the kind of fasting [who?] I have chosen?*” Remember, this is Isaiah speaking God’s words to his people. So *who* chose this kind of fasting for people? *God*. And what is it meant to accomplish? “*To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke.*”

Fasting, like other spiritual practices, helps shape and change us over time. It causes us to intentionally think and to act differently, and it moves us more and more in the direction of caring about things that God cares about. Earlier we talked about God’s heart for the oppressed, the poor, the victims of injustice. We mentioned a passage in Proverbs and Matthew, but there’s literally hundreds of references in Scripture. God is *concerned* for the poor and oppressed. He wants justice for them, and the passage we just read from Isaiah tells us that fasting is one way we can meditate on God’s heart, and over time, be moved more and more in that direction.

This concept is true in so many areas of life too, not just our spiritual lives. *I was vegetarian for many years. Not vegan because I have a thriving relationship with dairy. And I was a big fan of finding delicious vegetarian recipes. Creative ways to use all kinds of different legumes and vegetables and soy based meat replacements. I enjoyed being creative in the ways I cooked without meat and really enjoyed the process and the experience of learning. But I couldn’t tell you the first thing about meat. When is a steak done? Who knows. How would you like your burger? Black bean. What do you season different meats with or how long do you cook them? I don’t know because I don’t care.*

*Fast forward a few years. I was approaching 30 so I needed to adopt a personality, so I bought a smoker. And things started to change. I started eating meat again, which also meant I started *cooking* meat. So I started simple. I found a chicken marinade recipe, I liked it, so I stuck with it. Then I started researching a little more and I gave pork tenderloin a try. It was so easy, and so wonderful. So I took the next step and started smoking pork shoulder. I tried out different combinations and methods and experimented until I found a system I liked. I was learning more and more because meat was quickly becoming a staple in my meal rotation. I’ve gotten so into it at this point, that I have a multi step system zeroed in down to the *minute* and I am fully convinced I make the best wings and ribs in Knoxville. Maybe not a helpful illustration for a fasting series, but here’s my point with all of that: because I was participating in it repeatedly over time, I started to care more and more about the details and the process. I went from having a cursory understanding of how it worked to caring enough to plan entire days around it.*

Over time, the things we pursue and engage in shape us and change us. They change the things we *care about*. So when we engage in *spiritual* practices, like fasting, it helps us become more and more like Jesus in the process. We talked earlier in the series about how fasting helps us grow in self-control and the practice of denying ourselves. And when we grow in those areas and we spend intentional time meditating on and looking towards Jesus, we begin to look more like him. And when we become more like Jesus, it causes us to become *troubled* by the things that *trouble* him. The things that break his heart become the things that break our hearts. The things he wants to see changed in the world become the things *we* want to see changed in the world. And when we understand more about those things, we can then *act* on those things through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We *act* on the desires of God's heart. Following Jesus is not just mental. It's not just emotional. It's our *whole person*, which means it's also physical. So we can physically respond through fasting, *and* as his followers, we should be taking up the yoke of action and taking up his work in the world. Which points us directly towards the next element of fasting I want to talk about today, and it's that...

Fasting is a means to pursue solidarity with the poor

Solidarity is the pursuit of unity with another person or group by voluntarily entering into parts of their experience. So when we choose to fast, we are voluntarily going without. And in doing so, we can join in *solidarity* with those who *have* to live without. Like I said earlier, it is all too easy to end up in a place where we can just tune out the realities of poverty or hunger or injustice in our world if it's not something that is a regular part of our lives. And the practice of fasting is an incredibly tangible way to willfully enter that space. Fasting helps us show solidarity with the poor.

Now, you may hear me say fasting helps show solidarity with the poor and think, "that seems pretty silly. How on earth does *me* not eating when I have the ability to solve anything?" Just because I leave *my* food in the fridge, that doesn't mean someone across town or on the other side of the world suddenly *has* food. Fasting doesn't turn my pantry into a teleporter. It feels like the "kids are starving in other countries" argument. But here's the reality: solidarity can be a *very* powerful thing, even if it doesn't immediately *solve* anything.

Has anyone ever seen those videos that go around of someone who is going through chemotherapy, and they're shaving their head preemptively? And there's another person who's a part of their life who is not experiencing chemo, and they choose to shave their

head alongside them? There was a video recently making the rounds of someone's hairdresser doing this while their client was in the chair. Hits me right in the feels. Maybe you've even been a part of a situation like that yourself.

Let me ask you something: does that healthy person choosing to shave their head cure cancer? Does shaving your head keep your friend or family member from having to go through the physical brutality of chemotherapy? And if you have cancer, do your friends or family members *have* to shave their head to show you that they care? Does it make chemo easier for you? The answer to all of those things is "no." In the strictest sense, does it "solve" anything about the cancer? No.

But at the same time, is it *meaningful* when a friend shaves their head in solidarity? Absolutely. Tell me the last time you've seen a video of something like that without feeling a tug on your heartstrings or tearing up. It is an opportunity to put yourself through something that helps you at least catch a glimpse of what someone else is going through. That's *solidarity*. It puts you in a position where you willfully sit in and experience some small aspect of someone else's struggle. The same thing goes for fasting and identifying with the poor and the hungry.

But it shouldn't *only* be a gesture of solidarity. When we choose to go without repeatedly over time, it becomes a recurring opportunity to not only spend time thinking about and trying to relate to those who don't have enough, but a consistent reminder to pursue justice for those people. Here's our last point before we wrap up today:

Fasting is a means to pursue justice

See, fasting in and of itself doesn't provide *relief* for others unless we go a step further. One way we can do that is by *directing* what we're depriving ourselves of to someone else.

It doesn't just stop at *thinking* about people in need. Look back at Isaiah and the last thing God says about the purpose of *his* fasting: "*is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:...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.*" A lot of people look at our world and see some of the injustices and ask, "God, why haven't you done something about this?" And sometimes his answer is, "I have done something, I made you."

If we go in prayer to the God who wants to see justice, we should also be willing to spend our time and energy working for that same justice. We've talked about it before in different contexts, but we are God's means of pursuing justice in our world a lot of the

time. Now, Scripture does tell us justice belongs to the Lord, and that is true. We are not judge and jury in our world, but we are vessels for God's love and pursuing justice for others.

So where does fasting come in? The first, and most obvious, thing we can do is pray. Faithfully and continually pray for those who are in need. But it doesn't stop there. Maybe during your time of fasting when you would normally be eating, you can spend that time researching organizations in our city that work with underserved populations. Or maybe you can spend some of that time volunteering somewhere you can serve people in need.

Another great thing can be redirecting your resources from fasting, *towards* helping those in need. Maybe you can intentionally choose to fast on days when you normally go out to eat. Let's say you start like Kent mentioned earlier in the series and you fast for 12 waking hours. At that point, you've skipped 2 meals (and for some of us, maybe even a couple coffee breaks and/or snacks). Calculate how much you *would have* spent on food for that time, and give that money away. Instead of going to Dunkin on the way to work and going out to eat for lunch, you set aside that \$20-\$30 and commit to use it for someone in need. Maybe you save it up over time and give a lump sum. Maybe every time you fast you go get a \$25 Kroger gift card, and when you see someone in your daily life who needs help, you're ready to give them something.

And the list can go on and on. We don't have anywhere near enough time, nor do I think I could even manage to talk about all of the potential outworkings of this in your life. But I want to offer some final input on it before I wrap up. I want to caution you against comparison when it comes to generosity. I think that applies to all of life, but here's what I mean in regards to what we're talking about today: if you think about the archetype of generosity in your mind, whoever that may be for you, and compare your life to their life, it will be crushing and paralyzing for you. If I think to myself, "I should be generous and give money away," but then think I have to compare myself to Bill Gates, I'll never measure up. Why bother giving away a few thousand dollars when he gave \$5 billion in 2022 alone. Don't do that. Don't compare your life to someone else's and then use it as a reason to check out.

Don't look at the entire scope of poverty and injustice in the world and think, "there's too much out there for me to make a difference. The task is too large." God has called his followers to different things in life. Some people will work in full time ministry their whole lives. Some people will work in finance, some people will work in insurance, some people will be teachers, some people will raise families, some people will work in tech, we are called to different things! But we are *all* called to grow in holy concern for those

who have little. Will the specific outworkings of that look different? Of course. But we are all called to enter into brokenness and pursue God's justice.

I want to end today looking at what a beautiful example we have. God in Heaven looked at the brokenness of our world; he looked at where we were and the destructive effects sin had on his beautiful creation, and he wanted to make a way for us to be restored into right relationship with him. Could he have done that from a distance? He could have. Could he have changed the course of the world from the comfort of Heaven? Yes. But what did he *choose* to do instead? Jesus entered our world. God incarnate, in the flesh, voluntarily entered into brokenness. *Voluntarily* subjected himself to the realities of a fallen world.

The incarnation was *the most profound* act of solidarity there has ever been. God entered into the brokenness of humanity, voluntarily, for the purpose of unity with humanity. We pursue justice and solidarity for *that* reason. As followers of Jesus, we don't do this because it's popular. We don't do this because it's trendy. We don't do this because some of our favorite celebrities do something similar. We do this because it's what *Jesus* did.

I think Kent said it really well in week 1 when he said, **“the goal of becoming a Christian isn't just to punch our ticket to heaven and wait around until we go there. It's to become more *like Jesus* in every single facet of our lives.”** To become more like Jesus in every single facet of our lives. Jesus chose to humble himself to share in our experience as he pursued holy justice. And he invites us to do the same in our world.

So as we wrap up this series I'd love to invite you to do a few things. First, I hope this was a helpful introduction to fasting for you. Or maybe it was a helpful reminder. But regardless, I would ask you to consider not letting it fall to the wayside. A couple years ago we did a Formation series all about reading Scripture. My sincere hope is that people continued reading the bible after that. We did another on *prayer*, and I hope people didn't stop praying when we finished the series. Our hope is that we can continue to learn and grow in our walks with Jesus, and that we would continue to grow in becoming people who live in a way that puts Christ on display and works to see his kingdom grow.

Intro and connect communion.

