

One Desire Fast 2023: "Hunger for God"

Various Passages

Pastor John Eom

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone, Happy New Year! I hope you had meaningful times closing 2022 with family and friends, as well as in personal reflection on God's goodness and faithfulness in your life, especially through any valleys and storms you faced, or continue to face.

Sermon Series & Scripture Introduction

Now, how will you start this new year? We begin this new year, we are preparing for our annual fasting effort we have as a church. It is called the One Desire Fast.

Sermon Introduction

So, today's sermon is titled, "Hunger for God," and we are on the topic of fasting. Fasting is generally not something we are excited about. It's usually seen in a negative way because we're just not happy about the idea of abstaining from food. The thought of willingly getting hungry and staying hungry for some time doesn't sound appealing at all. Fasting is also seen as self-inflicted suffering, and we don't see any purpose or gain in making ourselves suffer by removing good things, like food, from our lives. I honestly confess, these are some reasons why I don't like fasting at all and why I am so bad at it.

What is fasting? Fasting is temporarily and voluntarily not eating food. And there are various purposes and reasons why people will fast, even those outside the church. A popular fast nowadays is fasting for health purposes, whether it's fasting for detox or increasing metabolism or weight loss. It is generally accepted now that it is part of a physically-healthy lifestyle. And though the secular world will feel the same hunger pains as Christians will feel when they fast, they are motivated by the physical gains of a healthier physical body. For the gain of health, they will try and endure fasting.

Christian fasting is distinct because of its purpose, as we willingly choose to abstain from food for glorifying God and realizing how good and how great he is compared to anything else in the world.

Show this text:

Definition: Christian fasting is willingly and temporarily abstaining from food (and other good things) to intensify our hunger and desire for God.

This is why fasting is a spiritual discipline for Christians, because it is a way of experiencing God's grace. It is a biblical way, and a blessed way, God has ordained for us to grow in our relationship with Him, just like Bible study and prayer.

So my argument today is simple a "how much more?"-argument. Because God himself is our purpose, our reason and our reward for our fasting, how much more should we strive to fast compared to the world? As Christians, how much more should we choose to fast and persevere in fasting so that we deepen our desire for God? To increase our soul's satisfaction in God? To be that much more hungry for God than anything else in the world? The heart of fasting is hungering for God. So, as we look at some of the biblical purposes and spiritual benefits of fasting, I pray that we will be properly persuaded by God's Word to pursue him in fasting and prayer as we start this new year. So, the One Thing for us today is this:

The One Thing

Fast from food willingly to hunger for God deeply.

Overview

There are several biblical purposes of fasting but today we'll just look at three ways that fasting helps us grow our hunger for God:

1. Fasting tests our hearts

2. Fasting deepens our dependence
3. Fasting fuels our prayers

Prayer for the Preaching of the Word

We're hungry for so many things so help us now to deepen our appetite for Your Word, and grow our hunger for You.

Sermon Outline

I. Fasting tests our hearts

- Fasting tests what is in our hearts, revealing to ourselves what our true desires are.
- We might naturally understand this first purpose of fasting if we have already tried fasting before. Because even in the process of deciding if we should fast or not to the actual act of fasting is a refining and sanctifying experience. And like other spiritual disciplines, that are all meant to help us grow in God's grace, it is easy to approach fasting with the wrong perspective and wrong motivations.
 - One wrong way is legalism. Because of our sinful nature, we struggle with taking spiritual disciplines which are given for receiving grace and turning them into acts of legalism, where we try to earn God's favor or try to make him do what we desire. We saw last week that our righteousness, our right standing with God, is a gift He has given us through Jesus Christ. But because of our legalistic tendencies, our default is to try to earn what we cannot work for. We cannot work for salvation. We cannot work for a new heart. We cannot work for God's righteousness or for adoption into his family. All these are gifts by which God our Heavenly Father worked out in giving his Son, Jesus Christ. And Jesus, as the Son of God, paid the cost for our sins that we could not pay as he died on the cross in our place, as our substitute. So, our entire relationship with God has been established by God's grace. We receive it by faith. From there, we live out our faith in this relationship of grace, not working for salvation, but working out our salvation in dependence upon God (Philippians 2:12). Legalism comes into play in our fasting when our focus is on ourselves, and how hungry we are during fasting and how we might look to others as we fast (Matthew 6:16).
 - However, our faith and living out our faith won't be perfect as long as we are in these fleshly bodies; until we are glorified and give new resurrection bodies when Jesus returns. So, until our glorification comes, God will continue us in the process of sanctification. And in God's grace and wisdom, he has provided for us various spiritual disciplines where our faith can be purified and strengthened through spiritual training (1 Timothy 4:7).
 - On the other side from legalism, we have licentiousness, which is misunderstanding God's grace and thinking we don't have to live according to God's law and standard of righteousness. It's thinking that somehow, because God loves us and forgives us, we are free to live out our sinful desires. This is also a distortion of God's grace where we use our freedom to serve ourselves (Galatians 5:13). It's a way of abusing grace and taking it for granted, to excuse ourselves from pursuing God and to avoid surrendering our lives to God when it gets difficult to do. In this perspective, we won't even consider fasting because we see it as unnecessary suffering that we are free to avoid.
 - To be clear, Jesus expects his disciples to fast as part of our regular devotion to him. As much as he expects us to give to the needy, as much as he expects us to pray, he expects us to fast. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "when you give," "when you pray," and "when you fast" not "if" for any of these disciplines (Matthew 6:1-18).
 - But, in God's grace, we fast not because we are simply expected to. And just by fasting, we won't just automatically become more holy or more spiritual. But, we fast because we already have a real relationship with God established by his grace. God has already given us a desire for him and we are willing to purify and strengthen and increase this desire, this hunger for God in the ways he has ordained for us.

- So why do we fast? We fast because it is part of our worship to God. We fast because it is a spiritual discipline that is meant to purify our worship through the testing of our hearts. We come into a position in fasting where we can be exposed of our legalism and our licentiousness. And it is one of the means to experience more of God's grace. It is one of the means to help us grow in our relationship with him that he has already made possible only through Jesus Christ.
- So, let's look to Jesus' own example and experience of fasting. As Jesus expected his disciples to fast, he himself was willing to fast before doing anything else in his ministry on earth. It says in...

Matthew 4:1-4 (ESV)

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

- The first act of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' ministry was to lead him in the wilderness. The wilderness would be a desert place where there was no food and little water. But not only is the Holy Spirit leading Jesus into a time of fasting, but he is also leading Jesus into a time of testing. And we cannot overlook the fact that the first temptation that the devil brings to Jesus, is basically for Jesus to stop his fasting. Jesus, in his humanity, felt the extreme hunger pains of not eating for 40 days. Yet still, he refused to give in. As the Son of God who created all things and commands storms and sicknesses, he could easily command stones to become bread, but Jesus fights temptations with God's Word. And he continues to do so until he withstands his testing and the devil leaves him.
 - Here is our hope of what our fasting can be. We want our fasting to reveal that our true desires, by God's grace, are ultimately for God, even over our desire for food. We want our fasting to teach us that more than food, it is God's Word that sustains our souls. Even when we are tempted with food to give up our fasting, we want to grow a deeper faith that we need God for our spiritual lives more than we need food for our physical health. Our testing in fasting can prove that our ultimate desire is in God and our fasting and testing will be like Jesus' fasting and testing as we are found in Christ. But for sinners like you and me, our fasting will not always look like this. We must also realize that fasting will also reveal and expose our sinfulness, and that's when our hope in Christ is further strengthened.
 - There is something about food that represents how our sinfulness works. We see this in the first sin of the first human beings. I don't think it's a coincidence that Adam and Eve's sin had to do with eating food. They were given all the good food they needed and yet when they were tempted by the devil, they ate what was forbidden. They ate what they thought was good according to their own sinful desires. Like this, food can represent pleasures of this life (Luke 8:14) and desires for other things (Mark 4:19) that tempt us to put our hope and trust in them.
 - This is why food can become like a drug, like medication for us. There is such a thing like stress-eating that we do without even realizing, and I can personally testify for this. When we go through dissatisfaction in our financial situations, or our frustration in our relational conflicts, or our pain and in grief in situations that are outside our control, there is something about food that comforts us. So, it makes sense that when we remove food for a certain period of time, even though the pain and unhappiness are still very real in our lives, our hearts will be tested and exposed. We will see what desires control us; what desires are our masters.
 - Fasting is a way of testing ourselves to see what will master us: Will it be myself, my stomach or my true Savior, Jesus Christ? (Adapted from John Owen)
 - See what one theologian says about fasting:

Show this quote:

"More than any other single Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately... Anger, bitterness,

jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first, we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger, then we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.” [Richard Foster]¹

- This is why I don't like fasting. I don't like seeing the ugly parts of my heart come to the surface. Not only do I not like fasting, my wife, Ester, hates when I am fasting.
 - I become so impatient with my kids. My words are not as gentle. So Ester understandably gets annoyed and gives me a plate of her delicious cooking and tells me to stop fasting. And she has a good point. Because if I fast as an excuse to be angry and harsh with my family, it's not right fasting. In those moments, I am quickly moved to repent, ask for forgiveness from God and ask for forgiveness from my family.
- But to encourage us, we need to remember, that in Christ, hope for change comes after testing and seeing the sin that remains in us. In Christ, what comes after testing is healing of our hearts in his power. We can rejoice that healing for our wrong desires is available through the power of Jesus. He is our sinless Savior who persevered through his fasting, who fought and withstood testing and temptation on our behalf. He overcame the power and work of the devil to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins, defeating sin and death for us, once and for all.
 - Practically, this is why fasting with prayer helps us make certain decisions in our lives or approach a major transition. Because fasting tests our motives. It exposes any self-centered, self-glorifying desires so that we can confess them to God and return our heart's desire for God alone in repentance.
 - So, we also fast can express repentance (1 Samuel 7:6; Joel 2:12)
- Like in all things we must do for God and His glory, so we must fast for God. As we fast, God will ask us, “Is it really for me that you fasted?” (Zechariah 7:5). By God's grace, may we be able to answer wholeheartedly, “Yes, God, with all my might, in my love for You, I am trying to fast for more of you.”
- So first, we saw that fasting tests our hearts. Next we will see that...

II. Fasting deepens our dependence

- Fasting helps us humble ourselves with hunger and teaches us to be deeply dependent on God and His Word.
- To be clear, food is good. God created our bodies to not only eat and drink but also to enjoy what we eat and drink. And the activity of eating is also good as it brings people together. So, we fast, not because food is evil or anything like that. We fast because food is good. We fast because food is a basic need. We fast because we are learning to say, even more than food, a good thing, a basic thing, even more than food, we need God. Through fasting, we humble our souls with hunger before God (Ps. 69:10).
 - We see this in the verse that Jesus quoted in his fasting and testing. See what it says in...

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 (NIV)

² Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³ He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

- These are the words of Moses speaking to God's people of Israel as they were just about to enter the Promised Land. God had poured out his love and mercy to them. God chose them out of all the powerful nations of the earth and made them fruitful and grow in great number. God

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper Collins, 1978), 57.

saved them from slavery in Egypt and led them by his presence, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He was always with them. Israel was thankful for at times, yet, they also grumbled so much against the Lord throughout the wilderness. By his grace, God faithfully continued to purify their faith. And the way he chose to do it was by humbling them with hunger. In their hunger, God fed them with a miraculous food from heaven, called manna to teach them to stop their grumbling and learn to depend on God for their lives.

- So the connection for us today is that the hunger we feel in our fasting will help us to learn how to depend on God, even more than food. The weakness of physical hunger that leads to death reminds us of our spiritual need, that without God, we will die. And we can come to personally realize that even more than physical food, we need God's power to save us and sustain us with true life.² The danger of being full with food is that it numbs our spiritual hunger for the things of God. We see how easily we can replace our times with God with feeding on other things to satisfy us, whether it indulging on food or binging on Netflix and social media. (We might need to count how many snacks we've been eating and how many episodes we have been watching and how many hours we spend on our phones).
- But God lovingly wants us to see that our souls are truly satisfied with Him alone. When we are spending time in devotion with God, our flesh will remain hungry and unsatisfied. But our souls come alive in the power of his Word and in his presence as we fast and pray.
- In fasting, we strive to be absolutely convinced that we are in desperate need of God. Even as we are tested and tempted, may we be able to wholeheartedly say to God in the words of the Psalmist: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:25-26).
- This is how fasting is like the gospel. To be clear, fasting is not for those who are self-sufficient, as the gospel is not for the self-sufficient. Fasting is not for those who think their lives are in order. Fasting is for the weak and broken, as the gospel is for the weak and broken. Fasting is for those in desperate need of God.³
 - I see this in myself in how I fail in fasting. I have given up many times during fasting. I started off strong but I just couldn't go on. But my failure is still within God's grace. By God's grace, even when I have failed in fasting, I realize how much I am driven by my physical hunger. God exposes me how my desire for God is so weak in that moment that I cannot do anything else other than ask God for grace. And ask him to teach me how to want Him more than I want food.
 - So, here's the logic that I have come to realize: If I can learn to depend on God even when I give up on fasting like this, how much more will I learn to desperately depend on Him when I persevere in fasting?
- This is important for us because there is a fasting that is displeasing to God and counts for nothing. This is a quick warning before we move on from this point. Jesus told this parable/story about two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, meaning that he was a renowned, religious teacher, and the other was a tax collector, meaning that he was a sinner in the eyes of the Jews. Jesus explains how only one man went home being right with God. See what it says in...

Luke 18:11-13 (NIV)

¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

- The man who God accepted is the one who humbled himself, even though outwardly he was clearly a sinner. The religious person who fasts out of pride, to exalt himself, God rejected him.

² Adapted from Joseph F. Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament: A Biblical Theology* (Paulist Press, 1982), 119.

³ Adapted from David Mathis, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/sharpen-your-affections-with-fasting>

So this is a warning for us that as we fast, we seek to humble ourselves. Fasting is an expression of our humility before God.

- This is why proper fasting facilitates prayer as we humble ourselves to seek God in prayer. This brings us to our last purpose of fasting which is...

III. Fasting fuels our prayers

- Fasting fuels our prayer with desperation for God as we pray for biblical priorities and for needs in our broken world.
- As we look to the connection between fasting and prayer, we first need to address a serious disclaimer. We need to be clear that fasting is not a hunger strike that we put on for God. It's not a hunger strike to try to force or persuade God to do what we ask. "If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying" (Don Whitney). Rather, fasting aligns us to God, to God's heart and His will on this earth.
 - Jesus was perfectly united and in line with God's desires. We see this when Jesus was out doing ministry, reaching out to a group of people everyone would avoid (Samaritans). His disciples had gone into the town to get lunch for Jesus and they urged him to eat (John 4:8, 31). This was Jesus' response in...

John 4:32-34 (NIV)

³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" ³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

- The disciples were confused but we can see that Jesus had deep purpose and satisfaction in doing the will of God and to finish his work. And we know that Jesus faithfully accomplished all that he was sent to do on earth: living the perfect life we should have lived and dying the death that we should have died. As the God the Son, he was aligned to the priorities of God the Father.
- For us on the other hand, we are still in process of learning God's heart. We are learning to be aligned to the Father's will and faithfully carry out his work. And we are learning from what it revealed to us in God's Word what his priorities are. And prayer is our response to what God has already communicated to us in scripture. And fasting fixes our eyes all the more on God and his priorities. Fasting intensifies our desire for God, saying: "God, I long to see your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I am so hungry to see God receive all the glory, honor and praise."
- As we become more and more desperate for God in fasting and prayer, we become more aligned to what is on his heart, to his priorities that are revealed to us in God's Word. We know with great confidence that these things that are important to God are therefore important to us. And the things of God are important enough to us that we would abstain from food to create dedicated time and space to seek him in desperate prayer. So fasting helps focus our attention on desperate needs on God's heart. This is the kind of fasting we know God desires. See what it says in...

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NIV)

⁶ "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? ⁷ 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?"

- One biblical priority he has is for us to meet the real needs that God brings our attention to in our broken world. Yes, we could go out to learn about the various needs. But I'm pretty sure that some of the needs of society are already within the regular areas of your life that you enter on a weekly basis. We can start by fasting and praying for the needs that we see.

- There are people in desperate situations all around us. And by God's grace, these desperate situations lead people to pray. Even those who do not believe in Jesus will resort to prayer or ask for prayer when they are in a desperate situation that is unplanned and out of their control and abilities to solve. All the more, knowing that our God is good and he is loving and sovereign, we can learn to fast and pray for those struggling immensely in our lives.
 - We learn to fast and pray for family and friends in desperate situations, who are struggling with health conditions. Cancer and Covid has been bringing me to my knees in desperate prayer.
 - We learn to fast and pray for people suffering in desperate situations like from war and unjust killings.
 - We learn to fast and prayer for refugees in desperate situations who have no earthly home and basic needs like food.

- So all the more we can fast and pray together as God's people for the important matters on God's heart, that He has made known to us through His Word.
 - May we be fueled to fast and pray for missions: a plentiful wave of missionaries who will go to reach the plentiful harvest of lost souls among unreached people groups (Matthew 9:37–38; Acts 13:3)
 - May we be fueled to fast and pray for bold, faithful gospel preaching and new salvations (lives transformed by the gospel, spiritual birth.
 - May we be fueled to fast and pray for local churches and godly leaders: for healthy gathering of God's people throughout our broken cities, who covenant with one another to love God, to love one another and to love their enemies and neighbors; and for faithful elders to shepherd these churches (Acts 14:23), deacons who would serve the needs of the churches and for members who make membership meaningful as they love one another with the love of Christ.
- All these things are items we pray for as a church in our congregational prayer and all the more we can bring into our corporate fasting.
 - May we be a church hungry for God and his priorities, that his will be done and that his glory be known throughout our city and in every nation in the world.

Conclusion:

For those of us here who have not yet trusted in Jesus Christ, I hope that you see that Jesus is our ultimate desire because he is our ultimate satisfaction for our souls.

Jesus is the Bread of Life who offers Living Water

After feeding five thousand people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus said:

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Jn 6:35.

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 14:6.

Here is a final call and challenge in the words of one pastor to join our corporate fasting next week as we close:

"If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and to say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you." [John Piper] ⁴

⁴ John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, 23.

Amen, may this be true of us as we express our desire and hunger for God through fasting next week during our One Desire Fast.

As we close, here are a few ways we can apply God's Word this week as our...

Life Application:

1) Review: Which reason for fasting stands out to me?

- Fasting tests our hearts
- Fasting deepens our dependence on God
- Fasting fuels our prayers to God

2) Reflect: Do I have any fears or excuses in my heart about fasting? Do I believe Jesus is the Bread of Life?

3) Repent: What are the ways I have tried to force God to do my desires?

4) (Re)commit: What biblical priorities will I pray for as I join the One Desire Fast?

- Remember the heart of fasting is to hunger for God. Don't get so caught up in all the details legalistically. We can fast from food in different ways with the right heart, but please do not be so quick to turn down fasting. Speak with your doctor if you do have health conditions about the possibility of fasting. Your doctor probably will ask you what's your purpose to fast. And you can still try to ease into fasting by having smaller meals or removing certain food items from your regular meals for these two weeks.
- Abstain from food to create dedicated time and space to be with the Lord, in the Word and in prayer. Learning to hunger for God while dulling our desires of everything else through fasting.

As we strive to apply God's Word this week, remember...

The One Thing:

Fast from food willingly to hunger for God deeply.